A SEMBLANCE OF THINGS UNSEEN: DAMAGED EXPERIENCE AND AESTHETIC RECOVERY
IN THEODOR ADORNO AND HANS URS VON BALTHASAR

Dissertation

Submitted to

The College of Arts and Sciences of the

UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

The Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Theology

By

Wesley James Arblaster, MDiv.

UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON

Dayton, Ohio

August, 2017
A SEMBLANCE OF THINGS UNSEEN: DAMAGED EXPERIENCE AND AESTHETIC RECOVERY
IN THEODOR ADORNO AND HANS URS VON BALTHASAR

Name: Arblaster, Wesley J.

APPROVED BY:

____________________________________
John A. Inglis, Ph.D.
Faculty Advisor

____________________________________
Kelly S. Johnson, Ph.D.
Faculty Reader

____________________________________
Brad J. Kallenberg, Ph.D.
Faculty Reader

____________________________________
William L. Portier, Ph.D.
Faculty Reader

____________________________________
Anthony J. Godzieba, Ph.D.
Outside Faculty Reader

____________________________________
Daniel S. Thompson, Ph.D.
Chairperson
ABSTRACT

A SEMBLANCE OF THINGS UNSEEN: DAMAGED EXPERIENCE AND AESTHETIC RECOVERY
IN THEODOR ADORNO AND HANS URS VON BALTHASAR

Name: Arblaster, Wesley James
University of Dayton

Advisor: Dr. John Inglis

Hans Urs von Balthasar and Theodor Adorno are not often mentioned in the same company. While undoubtedly different, I argue that their overarching diagnoses of present phenomenological conditions are strongly corroborative. Both see present experience as damaged and that this damage is manifest in the loss of our recognition of veiled presence, or semblance. This has been made possible by a kind of ‘forgetting’ not understood in predominantly psychological terms, but historically, witnessed through the emergence of distinctly modern notions of art and aesthetics. Through exploring these connections in relation to their notions of ‘aura’ and ‘glory’ I suggest that not only can theology and critical theory be mutually supportive, but that a Christologically-centered theological aesthetics presents possibilities for a critical recovery of genuine experience.
Dedicated to my father and mother, Paul and Carol Arblaster
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks to Dr. John Inglis, who provided the insight and encouragement necessary to accomplish this project. Thank you also for your patience through the various seasons of its life and development.

I would also like to express my appreciation to everyone who helped along the way, including my advisors, William Portier, Kelly Johnson, Brad Kallenberg, and Anthony Godzieba. I’d especially like to thank Ethan Smith for his insight, encouragement, and friendship. Most of all, I’d like to thank Chrissie, my wife and friend, for her great sacrifice and support in helping me see this project through to its completion.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT........................................................................................................................................... iii
DEDICATION........................................................................................................................................ iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS....................................................................................................................... v
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS................................................................................................................... viii
INTRODUCTION..................................................................................................................................... 1

CHAPTER 1 ADORNO AND DAMAGED EXPERIENCE......................................................................... 22

Benjamin, Baudelaire, and the Destruction of Experience................................................................. 26
Adorno’s Challenge............................................................................................................................... 34
Benjamin on Semblance and Aura........................................................................................................ 41
Adorno on Semblance and Aura........................................................................................................... 51

CHAPTER 2 ADORNO AND THE WOUND OF ART........................................................................... 58

Autonomous Art: “It is and is not”....................................................................................................... 60
Autonomous Art and Disenchantment................................................................................................. 72
Autonomous Art as Oppositional........................................................................................................... 79

CHAPTER 3 BALTHASAR AND BEAUTY DISMEMBERED............................................................... 99

The Eclipse of Glory............................................................................................................................ 102
*Ars Memoria*...................................................................................................................................... 116
The *Transcendalia*............................................................................................................................ 127
Kant and the birth of the Modern Aesthetic......................................................................................... 139

CHAPTER 4 BALTHASAR AND RECOVERING SEMBLANCE......................................................... 152

Critical Recovery: Aquinas on Form.................................................................................................. 157
Balthasar and *Gestalt*...................................................................................................................... 171
The Problem of Perception.................................................................................................................. 191
CONCLUSION: ‘INVERSE THEOLOGY’ AND THE GLORY OF CHRIST .................................................197
Inverse Theology ..................................................................................................................... 198
The Glory of Christ ................................................................................................................... 212

BIBLIOGRAPHY ..........................................................................................................................233
# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AT</td>
<td>Aesthetic Theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CoJ</td>
<td>Critique of Judgment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DoE</td>
<td>Dialectic of Enlightenment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GL4</td>
<td>The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics. Vol. 4 The Realm of Metaphysics in Antiquity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GL5</td>
<td>The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics. Vol. 5 The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iLL</td>
<td>Illuminations: Essays and Reflections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OGT D</td>
<td>The Origin of German Tragic Drama</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MM</td>
<td>Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” John 1:5

One afternoon, while attending a conference in Leuven, I found myself exploring Sint-Pieterskerk in the heart of the old city. While wandering through the structure I noticed, rather curiously, that an utterly transparent cube had been erected in its chancel. In this cube, which was about the size of a large room, religious paintings and sacred objects had been put on public display. For a small fee one could gain entrance and view these objects for their artistic and historical significance. The works were originally commissioned for personal piety or public rites and ceremonies, and several were described as originally having been part of the ritual life of the community of St. Pieter’s itself. As I paid admission and wandered the cube it struck me that these objects, which were now appreciated for their artistic value, had once served in this very place to draw the faithful to adoration of God. Images of Christ, now displayed for their aesthetic value were once gazed upon or prayed before that one might be drawn into the presence of Christ. Eucharistic chalices which were now presented as objects of beauty were once believed to carry something inestimably greater, the very blood of the Lord. Every sacred object now displayed as art was once understood to evoke in its
own way an unseen presence, manifest only through a veil, darkly. Transposed from their sacred context and presented within this glass cube each of these sacred objects had in turn become “aesthetic.” Each had been transformed from being signs and vessels of unseen grace to signifying the skill and genius of their human makers.

In this place I found myself wondering, is there any qualitative difference between my experience of these objects as aesthetic and the experiences of those who had viewed them as sacred? Is the artistic beauty that I now appreciated much like the sacred beauty they were once believed to manifest? For the objects themselves, obviously, not much had changed. They had been moved perhaps only a few feet from where they had originally served their functions in ceremonial life. If there was any difference it was between the character of my experience and those of centuries ago.

What struck me most as I wandered about, however, was the entire tableau: At the heart of this massive gothic structure, originally constructed to house the faithful and manifest in glass and stone the unseen glory of God, there had been erected an utterly transparent cube wherein once consecrated objects were now housed as art objects. The striking contrast between the two structures themselves seem to represent something of nature of the transformation in experience that had transpired between mine and those of ages past. The distinguishing feature of the gothic style is its structural emphasis on light. Hulking shafts of stone frame massive stained glass windows through which sunlight is refracted by an array of colors and images which bathe the faithful in soft light. These Gothic structures were originally constructed as symbols of the Christian cosmos. They bore witness to the Immaterial Light which was
believed to shine through the material world, transforming matter into a luminous foil, a presentation of divine glory. Within this edifice, however, we had erected another which is perfectly geometrical and transparent. Instead of a hulking structure supporting stained glass, which while translucent was also refractory and obstructive, another had been erected which was nothing but uninterrupted surface. In this structure, color and refraction had been substituted for absolute unobstructed vision. While the outer structure evokes something of pre-modern Christian cosmos, the inner structure can be seen to represent the aspirations of Enlightenment, which involved the search for unobstructed knowledge of the world by means of the uninterrupted ‘light’ of reason. The light which passes through medieval stained glass illuminates it from within. Material becomes itself luminous radiance. Light which passes through the glass cube is itself no longer visible because illumination has been exchanged for perspicacity.

These two structures signal, by striking contrast, the philosophical and social differences between the Pre- and Post-Enlightened world. And in these differences, it seemed to me, one finds expressed the qualitative change in our experience of those objects contained within. In the medieval Christian world things were believed to both disclose and conceal an unseen glory. They signified a certain spiritual light which while always present was never fully unveiled.\(^1\) Divine Being was both revealed and partially

\(^1\) As Augustine wrote, “God is not only the truth in, by, and through whom all things are true. He is not only the wisdom in, by, and through whom all humans are made wise.. He is also the light, in, by, and through whom all intelligible things are illumined.” (\textit{Sol.} 1.1.3)
obscured behind the rood screen of material form. After the epoch of Enlightenment this illuminating veil had been torn away and objects were increasingly seen not as illuminated from within by a divine Logos, but as made transparent by means of human reason. Their material form, as such, would no longer appear luminous from within, but as essentially visible and transparent. Whatever is currently unknown is only hidden by a veil of ignorance, that is, the present limitations and errors of human understanding. No longer would things be understood to disclose the glory of that which is essentially unseen and unknown. They would point to no higher light, but only to their own essential functions in relation to the operations of the human intellect.

The story of the fading of one light and the dawning of another has been attempted many times. Most often it is told as a story of secularization. Countless investigations have been undertaken to analyze the precipitating conditions surrounding the eclipse of the sacred cosmos, the rise of “the secular,” and the way this has transformed our experience of the world. From the time of the first foundational accounts of secularization produced by those such as Comte, Weber, and Frazer, secularization has been understood as the recession of religion and with it the eclipse of the sacred. According to the most influential narratives, the light of perspicacity produced by the freeing of rationality from its moorings in faith has produced a world where humans now stand at the center and in which they rule. This, so the story goes, is progress, but it has been exchanged for the demystification of experience, famously called by Weber the “disenchantment of the world.” The world no longer “invokes”
transcendence. It is no longer luminous with an unseen presence. It fails, in other words, to appear as a semblance of things unseen.

This, according to Weber, was the result of increasing rationalization and with it the fundamental conviction that, in his words, “if one but wished one could learn [the general conditions of the world] at any time... [for] there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play.”² Here all things are understood as open to the light of reason. There is nothing, in principle, that dwells beyond it. In this situation, religion, which depends not principally upon the knowledge of what one can demonstrate through reason, but upon faith in the unseen, must retreat. As Weber notes, “Every increase of rationalism in empirical science increasingly pushes religion from the rational into the irrational realm... only today does religion become the irrational or anti-rational supra-human power.”³ This process, as it is social and historical, has had a profound influence on our understanding and experience of the world. In Weber’s language, it becomes increasingly “disenchanted.” Under the light of calculating reason all the specters of unseen powers within a spiritual cosmos dwindle and fade. The world no longer evokes essential mysteries, but shows itself to be ultimately perspicuous to human rationality. In the light of empirical science, for example, the world becomes, in principle, fully open to view. There can be within this world no essentially “other-worldly” realities, at least ones that aren’t demonstrable by rational inquiry. All appeals


³Ibid., 351.
to things which lie beyond the light of reason must be regarded as essentially irrational, and suspect. One may continue to hold beliefs in other-worldly realities only through a kind of *sacrificium intellectus*, a surrender to naivety, and an ultimate denial of the world which has flowed from rational achievement.\(^4\)

This, in turn, has affected on our view of the nature of objects of experience, a transformation which can be witnessed, among other things, in art. As Weber suggests, [U]nder these conditions, art becomes a cosmos of more and more consciously grasped independent values which exist in their own right. Art takes over the function of a this-worldly salvation, no matter how this may be interpreted. It provides a *salvation* from the routines of everyday life, and especially from the increasing pressures of theoretical and practical rationalism.\(^5\)

Within a disenchantment world, in other words, art can no longer point to anything beyond this one as it had done, for instance, through sacred artifacts and ceremonial objects. It can only provide a this-worldly salvation from everyday life. Art, we might say, becomes “aesthetic” in the sense that it conveys a certain richness of experience defined by the fact that such experience is not bound to the practical and rational necessities which dominate much of ordinary life. It, however, can no longer evoke anything “other-worldly.” Art objects can be beautiful, sublime, wonderful, terrifying, all that, but what they can no longer be is “holy,” or to use the classic language of Rudolf

\(^4\) Ibid., 350.

\(^5\) Ibid., 394.
Otto, “numinous.” They no longer disclose presences that are in themselves essentially beyond explanation by human rational inquiry. As such objects lose the luminous light of holy mystery. This is one price paid for a world which is now properly open to view and thus freed from the unseen powers of angels, demons, and gods.

Not all have read this story in quite the same way, however. Rationalization may have indeed left things ‘in principle’ fully open to view, but do we indeed now see things more clearly? Does the light of rationalized reason show things to be as they truly are, lacking semblance? Or has Enlightened perspicacity produced a new form of blindness? Theodor Adorno, opening his renowned work *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, contends, “Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters. Yet the whole earth is radiant with triumphant calamity.” For Adorno, the radiance Enlightened reason has indeed been successful in eclipsing the old myths of gods and demons. It has usurped “fantasy with knowledge” (DoE, 2). Within this light our world is finally “controlled without the illusion of immanent powers or hidden properties” (DoE, 3). And yet this light is not benignly ordered toward the goal of understanding and truth. It is one of domination. “Power and knowledge have become synonymous”

---


(DoE, 2). In the light of modern catastrophes we can now see that that Enlightened reason is not a torch. It is a hammer. For “What human beings seek to learn from nature is how to use it to dominate wholly both it and human beings” (DoE, 4). Under this power “the seeds of the new barbarism are germinating” (DoE, 25).

For Adorno, Enlightened reason as domination has not only manifest itself in the fundamental social, political, economic, and environmental crises which define so much of modern life, it has worked itself into the very marrow of experience. In attempting to achieve absolute perspicacity by means of reason, the intellect has become autocratic in its relationship to objects of experience. Reason has detached itself from experience “in order to subjugate it” (DoE, 28). The effect of this is an “impoverishment of thought no less than of experience; the separation of the two leaves both damaged” (DoE, 28).

Subjectivity has separated itself from its objects in order to dominate them, the result of which is the tearing asunder of reason and sensuous experience. One image Adorno provides of this tearing of subject and object is that of Francis Bacon, one of the Fathers of experimental science, who by experimenting on nature sought to “command her by action” (DoE, 2). His scientific method was rational mastery by vivisection. The animal object was opened up on the table, becoming fully open to view. In the process, however has become a dead thing. It is no longer a ‘representative’ of essentially unseen powers. It had become a specimen, an exemplar of those laws, principles, and concepts which are essentially rational and wholly open to view. The living and sensuous being suffers as an object-for-knowledge and in turn has become a vivisected corpse, a means by which reason masters its object by grasping in the object what is
essentially itself. The cruel irony of this dialectic between the man of science and his object of study is that this vivisection has occurred in both directions (DoE, 191). In order to command nature subjectivity has turned upon its object, making it a victim of representational knowing. In turn, ‘the man of science’ has cut himself off from nature, and from the knowledge of his own self as member of the natural world. He has forfeited a place of participation and continues his advance “under compulsion, in despair, with [his] senses forcibly stopped” (DoE, 27). This urge to make all things utterly transparent to reason in effect degrades everything that is not wholly subjugated to the intellect as irrational. Personal experience, in this light, becomes conformed by this urge. Objects of experience now appear as rigid ossified artifacts of an unobstructed vision which has produced them. “Disenchantment” names the phenomenological effect this violence inflicted by reason upon self and world. In the wake of Enlightenment things have been stripped of ‘semblance.’ That is, they no longer manifest the presence of things essentially unseen.

Like Weber, Adorno also holds that the character of this transformation is manifest in art. He notes, “Perhaps nowhere else is the desiccation of everything not totally ruled by the subject more apparent... than in the aesthetic.”8 In this context art emerges as an array of objects and activities which in their peculiar forms resist the Enlightenment urge toward total perspicacity. Art objects and practices take on distinct status as things which resist the domination of object by subject. As such they exist as

possible harbingers of semblance. As ‘appearances’ which irreducibly enigmatic art
resists Enlightenment, even if they are also a product of it (AT, 104). As such, art plays
an important role in modern life of holding up to “the world of everything-for-
something-else images of what it itself would be if it were emancipated from the
schemata of imposed identification” (AT, 83).

For Adorno, this relationship between art and rationalization, needless to say, is
not a felicitous one. “Art is modern” Adorno states, “when, by its mode of experience
and as the expression of the crisis of experience, it absorbs what industrialization has
developed under the given relations of production. This involves... what the modern has
disavowed in experience...” (AT, 34). As such, he describes art as a ‘wound,’ one which
manifests in its very existence the disfigurement of experience. It is thus the
connections between art, societal organization, and the conditions of experience which
remains a central to his analysis of modernity. His *Aesthetic Theory* focused intently on
these relations, and through them sought to identify the manner in which art mediates,
inflects, and reveals the experiential character of life in the modern age. Both art and
experience, he believed, were crippling under an excessive concatenation of modern
social processes, institutions, and cultural practices. As such, in our age, “life does not
live.”

Art he believed both suffers and manifests these wounds. Indeed, as we shall

---

epigraph to Part One (Hereafter cited in text as MM).
see itself is this wound. Bound by the necessities of knowledge-cum-domination, a force which has taken such forms as endless capital expansion, bureaucratization, and global conflict, experience itself has become “dragged along as an appendage of the process of material production, without autonomy or substance of its own” (MM, 15). Adorno’s greatest intellectual labors, as found in Negative Dialectics and Aesthetic Theory, thus seek to draw attention to damaged experience principally in the realms of philosophy and art, with the hope through rigorous critique we might find ways to break out our self-inflicted myopia.

This diagnosis of damaged experience and the relation of art to it echoes that of Hans Urs von Balthasar. For Balthasar, aesthetic notions, and most particularly beauty lie at the center of experience, generally conceived. As Balthasar states, “The beautiful is without doubt ‘appearance’ (Erscheinung), or epiphany (epiphaneia).” Aesthetic experience involves the perception being wherein one both arrests and is arrested by an other. In genuine experience, attention to an object does not involve its subjugation to

---

10 Adorno draws this concern, along with the ‘destruction of aura’ from his friend Walter Benjamin. See for instance, Benjamin’s “The Storyteller,” and “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in Walter Benjamin’s Illuminations trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schoken Books, 1969). It is not my interest to trace in what ways Adorno differs from Benjamin on these terms. For now it is important to note only that over his many years of correspondence with Benjamin these concerns remain his own. See Henri Lonitz, ed. and Nicholas Walker trans. Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin: The Complete Correspondence: 1928-1940. (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1999).

one’s own concepts and categories. It involves a movement outward toward it. Any genuine experience requires, on a basic intellectual and sensory level, a harmonization of one’s self to the object one experiences. This involves a kind of rapture. One is drawn outward toward the self-expression of an object which shows itself in both its manifest and hidden dimensions to be expressive of wholeness and fullness. Experience involves as ‘conversation’ between subject and object such that each is drawn into relation with the other. For Balthasar, each mutually disclose the another and the integrity of each is maintained in delight, value, and illumination. The light of knowledge unfolds through a harmony of indissoluble difference and otherness.

For Balthasar, prior to the advance of Enlightenment reason this form of experience, had not be relegated to the “aesthetic.” It was something which permeated all of life and found itself inflected in countless forms. Phenomenologically, such experience was structured by two forms of hiddenness which were inflected within experience. The first was the appearing of the thing itself, the manifest surface of the object which as surface implied also concealment. Surface pointed to a depth which while manifest by the surface, also lay hidden within it. The second, was the relation between the one who perceived and the object of perception itself. Here there was manifest a dialogical structure, an ‘otherness,’ the source of which remained unseen. In this way all things were experienced as participating in and pointing to an invisible, unfathomable mystery; the ‘forms’ of things were the apparition of this mystery, revealing it while, naturally, at the same time protecting and veiling it. All things were semblances of the unseen because they disclosed presence which could never be wholly
brought into view. In such a way experience was essentially relational and subject was not something which dominated the object by making utterly transparent to view. The subject, rather, came to knowledge objects by attuning itself to what was manifesting itself in experience. While Balthasar expounds this dynamic in many places and in great length, it was his primary concern to establish this dialogical form of experience as a necessary condition for the classical ‘experience of glory.’

It is this dialogical mode of perception which Balthasar believes has been eclipsed with the rise of Enlightenment perspicacity. The urge for absolute perspicacity expelled dialogical encounter into the sphere of a now alienated realm of the “aesthetic.” His fifteen volume *Trilogy*, begins by attending to the condition of contemporary experience which he sees as fundamentally constrained and distorted by this situation. Our experience has been damaged and through this things have been transformed into matter without ‘life,’ ‘light,’ and ‘expression.’ (GL1, 18) Understanding the historical conditions which brought about this damage occupies much of his foundational labors in *Herrlichkeit*, and rescuing the experience of glory remains his abiding concern. The recognition of glory, which for Balthasar remains the *sin qua non* of all genuine theology, cannot be seen if the conditions within which we perceive this glory have been eclipsed. Since all intellectual, sensory and spiritual perception is mediated by the possibilities and the limitations of perception the problem of the conditions of experience remain central to any theology which seeks to speak as a genuine receptive response to the revelation of God in the world and in history. As
such, questions of the nature of experience and its relation to theology permeate his theological aesthetics.

While Balthasar and Adorno have largely been considered unrelated contemporaries, by bringing them into dialogical engagement concerning the conditions of damaged experience I hope to foreground how much they share. Both recognize that something like a wounding of experience has occurred, an event which separates modernity from prior ages. Both believe that this damage can be traced dialectically through the historical emergence of the ‘aesthetic’ as a distinct sphere of practice, reflection, and affectation. And both believe that a critical diagnosis of the conditions of experience, as a kind of palimpsest, provides a way forward. The strength of their arguments, I argue, is suggested through their mutual corroboration.

The character of this investigation into the possibility of semblance is thus largely descriptive and synthetic. I begin by investigating Adorno’s understanding of damaged experience vis-à-vis his friend and colleague Walter Benjamin. Here I suggest that Adorno draws much from Benjamin’s insights on the damaging of experience but resists Benjamin’s psychological interpretation of this damage. For Adorno, damaged experience must be understood as primarily historical and social. The term often invoked here is ‘reification.’ In speaking of reified experience, he lays emphasis upon the fact that damaged experience ought not be understood as primarily a shift from one psychological state to another but as a condition whereby we lose sight of something of objects themselves. Here I attempt to show that Benjamin and Adorno’s differences regarding the nature of experience, forgetting, aura, and reification are central to how
one understands the nature of damaged experience. Here I emphasize that Adorno’s challenge to Benjamin is important because it places an emphasis on the rationality of semblance, that is on the manner in which semblance is not merely a psychological projection, but involves a more truthful recognition of objects. The loss of aura, which results from our inability to recognize semblance, is both a source for reification and a condition for the recognition of truth. This, for Adorno, must of course be understood in a largely negative fashion, as truth of things revealed through the veil of untruth. However, I Adorno’s understanding of damaged experience, reification, aura, and semblance is decidedly against common forms of relativism, constructivism, subjectivism, and psychologism which suggest that semblance, or the lack thereof, is the product of our own psychological, cultural, and discursive conditions.

From there I will turn, in chapter two, to Adorno’s account of the rise of autonomous art. Here I will suggest that for Adorno modern ideas of art and aesthetics serve to articulate a wound which was forming and which manifests historically the rise of damaged experience. The rise of art conceived of as something essentially “autonomous” marks the rise of an epoch of damaged experience. This can be seen in both the existence and qualitative character of autonomous art. In this way, autonomous art is a wound because it is both the result of damaged experience, and is a form of resistance to it. Art resists damaged experience through serving as a harbinger of semblance. Art is thus a form of immanent critique of rationalized society, one which manifests, proleptically, the possibility of a recovery of experience. Throughout my study of Adorno I will focus upon the concepts of aura and distance to show that art
provides a site for intra-mundane transcendence, a moment which speaks to the possibility of truth of semblance as a breakout from atrophied experience.

From here I will turn to the works of Hans Urs von Balthasar, focusing specifically on his account of the ‘loss of Glory’ in *Glory of the Lord I, IV, and V*. Balthasar begins his theological *Trilogy* by describing contemporary life as the result of the rending of the *Transcendalia* - the beautiful from the good and the true. This sets the context for his argument that it is specifically the fragmentation of truth, goodness, and beauty which *defines* the conditions of contemporary experience. This he traces in *epochal* fashion as a history of the eclipse of glory. Prior to the modern age experience was conditioned by modes of perception granted by mythic, philosophical, and religious accounts of being. Each of these bore a fundamentally ‘dialogical’ structure. For Balthasar, however, the rise of Enlightened reason precipitated a shift away from dialogical to a monological forms. It was the shift in these structures that instigated the fragmentation of the *Transcendalia*. As the beautiful is torn free from the good and the true ‘aesthetics’ becomes something divorced from morality and science and becomes its own distinct sphere. Thus, like Adorno, Balthasar argues that damaged experience is manifest in the rise of the aesthetic as a distinct domain. This occupies the bulk on my concerns in chapter three.

In chapter four I turn to Balthasar’s attempt to recover *Gestalt* as an object of perception. Here I argue that *Gestalt* is vital for the recovery of experience because of its inherent semematic character. When persons lose the ability to perceive *Gestalt* they fail to grasp something which is essentially true of things. Semblance, which has in
modern times be relegated to the sphere of the aesthetic, is integral to recognizing things as a semblance of things unseen. For Balthasar, ‘seeing the form’ requires a recognition that things are not understood clearly according to the urge for complete transparency, but in recognizing things as beautiful that is, as disclosing unseen depths.

In this, it will be suggested that Balthasar’s invocation of form (Gestalt) is not regression to some kind of Platonic idealism. This will be argued through demonstrating his ‘phenomenological’ account of Gestalt is essentially an interpretation of Thomas Aquinas’ account of form, which presents the value and rational necessity of things as irreducibly sensuous and particular. It is thus by way of an ‘aesthetic’ investigation into the conditions of experience that the possibility of perceiving objects in their rightful dignity comes into view.

This attempt to draw together questions of art and the conditions of experience is, of course, nothing new. Art is repeatedly considered a kind of native language for experience just as experience has regularly been regarded as the seedbed for art. Many philosophers, for example, have regarded art as bound to, and serving as a medium for experience, by reflecting, articulating, and expressing it in objective form. Modern aesthetics can in fact be seen as principally preoccupied with this relationship, particularly in the manner in which works of art provide insight into the relationship between acts of cognition and non-discursive, pre-conceptual sense-experience. Art has been commissioned for this task for many good reasons arising from its own native characteristics, from its dependence upon form, to its analogous relationship to language, its unique claims to significance, and its irreducible concreteness and
immediacy. All these are significant and worthy of exploration. For Balthasar and Adorno, however, relationship between art and experience runs even deeper. Not only do certain defining characteristics of art speak to the nature of experience but our very idea of art, that is our basic presumptions about its character, province, and purpose, has its origin in the shifting conditions of experience. For both thinkers it is the very existence of autonomous art and aesthetics which marks broader historical transformations in the conditions of experience. The emergence of art as an autonomous sphere of human activity and class of objects itself serves as an objective manifestation this epochal shift. In this way art can reveal the damage suffered by experience through its subjugation to those pre-reflective webs of material, social, intellectual, and spiritual life which have come to define the present.

This, in nuce, is what this dissertation explores, with the purpose of demonstrating that what Adorno understands as damaged experience can be understood in Balthasarian terms as an eclipse of glory. The Enlightenment urge for utter perspicacity, and the modern social forms that emerged from it, have left us suffering from a condition which fails to recognize within objects of experience any veiled presence of an inapproachable other. This ‘phenomenological myopia’ has stripped objects of experience of this semblance-character and left them as reified artifacts. Responding to damaged experience requires the recovery forms of perception that can break through our reified stance in order to reveal what has been lost. Adorno and Balthasar both try attempt this in the analysis of art and aesthetics. Ultimately it is
the conclusion of this work that one way forward can be found in a distinctly theological aesthetics which is rooted in practices surrounding the form of Christ.

Drawing Adorno and Balthasar in this way, of course, has its challenges. Each works by different theoretical presumptions and concepts and is guided by different ultimate goals. Rather than attempting to subsume the concepts of methods one of these thinkers under the other I have decided to expound each on their own terms, as best I can, drawing direct connections only minimally. This presents their analyses as corroborative while also respecting the enduring distinctness of each thinker. It is my belief that presenting their arguments side by side will strengthen the claims of each through mutual corroboration. It is also my attempt to show that if a Marxist materialist and a Catholic of the Nouvelle Théologie are presenting in their own distinct methods and concepts a similar diagnosis of the present then perhaps they should be listen to.

Of course, addressing the concept of experience itself is exceedingly difficult.\(^\text{12}\) This term is undeniably far-reaching and enigmatic. Undeniably, its enigmaticalness

---

\(^{12}\) The principal concern of these two thinkers is not, however, our cultural presumptions about art, or the potential role of art in society (although these are important), but rather on the conditions of contemporary experience itself. Reflection on art and various aesthetic theories take prime place in the œuvre of each thinker because the concepts, presumptions, and forms of object-relation that are contained explicit within these domains are implicitly present elsewhere. In their various attempts to understand art and the nature of sensory experience, aesthetic theories draw to consciousness the latent conditions upon which experience is made possible. In this way, art and aesthetic theory becomes a way of addressing political, metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, and theological concerns. Each thinker attends to aesthetic concepts and theories because it is in the domain of aesthetical reflection that each believes these can be trenchantly assessed. As such, even when Balthasar and Adorno seek to argue something like the history of autonomous art, they are not concerned with establishing a
results from its resistance to any separation of objectivity and subjectivity. Experience is not a object to be studied, nor is it a mere subjective posture of intuition and action. Even the most basic and unreflective uses of the term experience suggest a complex entwinement of objective and subjective life. The study of experience only continues to open out onto evermore difficult and problematic horizons. It is interwoven with endlessly broadening social, historical, and spiritual horizons. Despite this acknowledged difficulty, however, the question of experience remains unavoidable, and reflection upon its conditions absolutely necessary. This, as we shall see, is not the case despite its irreducible enigmaticalness and its persistent resistance to conceptual systemization, but because of it. Tracing the development of art and aesthetics in the emergence of modern life is thus helpful in treating these questions because one can identify more clearly the complex transformations which have given rise to the conditions of experience through them. Such an analysis is therefore unavoidably dialectical, for it is in the objective history of art and aesthetics that the changing conditions of experience are manifest. This in turn “feeds back” on our understanding of those social and historical processes which we can recognize as having conditioned our modes of perception and which have qualitatively effected our experience. Their

---

13 As we shall see, neither thinker assumes in experience anything like “unmediated presence.” Both recognize that experience is something irreducibly historical, linguistic, and embodied. In fact, this is crucial to their account that in some manner experience has been “wounded” in modern life.
analytical and hermeneutical tools of each thinker in tracing this do vary. As I said before, however, if two thinkers as manifestly unlike as Balthasar and Adorno corroborate each other on the relationship between art and experience this is noteworthy. If such diagnoses shed light on the nature of contemporary experience then this becomes significant.
 CHAPTER 1

ADORNO AND DAMAGED EXPERIENCE

“All reification is a forgetting.” –Theodor Adorno

In his 2005 Tanner Lectures, Axel Honneth suggested that present social concerns should prompt us return to the now largely neglected notion of reification.14 Theories of reification which had begun with Georg Lukács’ History of Class Consciousness in 1923, and which were further developed by thinkers such as Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, place the conditions of experience at the center of social and political concern. While Honneth asserts that these earlier formulations remain helpful in bringing to light how we may come to reify others, that is perceive them as thing-like, or as mere objects, he suggests they must be freed from the confines of their ‘normative social ontologies’ to be considered plausible in our contemporary context. Burdened as they are by the failed political agendas of Western Marxism, and outmoded forms of philosophical presentation, reification theory requires revision if it is to be revived.15 In response to this problem, Honneth offers his own now widely


15 Ibid.
appreciated recognitive theory of social interaction.¹⁶ When cast within a recognitive framework, Honneth suggests the theory of reification can be employed principally on epistemic and ethical grounds. Those forms of social interaction which inhibit persons from being able to take up another’s perspective, or cultivate emotional sensitivity, for example, can be challenged as ‘misrecognition.’¹⁷ Since recognitive theory suggests that inter-subjective processes of mutual recognition provide the cognitive basis for abstract theoretical and ethical reasoning, reifying processes can be understood to undermine the intersubjective bases for reason itself. Reification as such is a process which inhibits our ability to make proper judgments as how to properly value others or establish those goods which orient daily life. It is thus injurious because it warps those pre-reflective intersubjective associations that make practical reasoning possible.

In developing this argument, Honneth suggests that it would be helpful to also consider treating reification as a form of ‘forgetting,’ a notion which was present in those earlier accounts. His recommendations here are largely gestural, but he proposes Adorno’s notion of reification as ‘forgetting’ as holding perhaps the greatest promise.¹⁸ This is because Adorno had argued that all ethical and normative judgments rest upon primal acts of imitation, the forgetting of which is fundamental to the treatment of others as thing-like. Adorno’s account is also fruitful, according to Honneth, because it


¹⁸ Ibid.
includes the possibility that reification may affect even to our interactions with non-human and non-animal beings.¹⁹

I mention Honneth’s appeal because it draws attention not only to a returning interest in reification theory, but because it points specifically to Adorno’s work on the subject. Adorno’s investigation is indeed important for any rehabilitation of reification as a critical concept. And Honneth is also correct that Adorno’s account ought to be investigated as it assumes a more diverse range of concerns, including our relations to non-human others. I suggest, however, that Adorno’s approach is particularly informative not because it might be assumed into another more contemporary theoretical matrix, but because Adorno’s account of reification as a whole reaches farther than most present investigations of the issue.²⁰ Reification is, for Adorno, not one possible and lamentable posture of our age. It the sin qua non of life in modern society, a virtually inescapable ‘atmosphere’ which not only limits the imaginative and conceptual abilities of our epoch, but saturates our most ordinary encounters and intimate relations. For Adorno, we live and move and have our being in a world that has been reified, and while this condition is undoubtedly due to the overarching structural forms modern society takes, it is also one that penetrates the very marrow of everyday

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Consider the opening section of Honneth’s work for a summary of the recent appropriations and employments of the notion of reification. Ibid.
life. It is reification that has produced what Adorno calls “wrong life” which he suggests is inescapable, and which he relentlessly seeks to make us aware. Because of this, Adorno’s analysis remains radical in the quite literal sense of grasping the root of what has made us moderns what we are. It is this radical approach reification that I suggest leads him beyond the bounds of mainstream contemporary social theory altogether and into the thicket of history, phenomenology, and even theology. It is my contention that it is his willingness to tread this precarious path that makes his work more than a conceptual resource but an insightful guide into the conditions of experience which define our age. This is especially true as concerns the question that animates this dissertation, namely the question of the changing conditions of experience and the relationship of aesthetics and theology to it. It is in Adorno’s relentless probing of that damage that has been inflicted by reification that makes his account vital. Since Adorno’s account is exceeding complex and was developed over several decades in dialogue with others, principally Walter Benjamin, we shall begin our investigation here. Investigating how Adorno develops his account of reification vis-à-vis Benjamin, specifically his critical reception of Benjamin’s ideas, demonstrates most clearly how reification can be said to be a defining feature of our age and worthy of theological and aesthetic consideration.

---

Benjamin, Baudelaire, and the Destruction of Experience

Adorno’s understanding of reification as ‘damaged experience’ took form gradually through his ongoing dialogue with Walter Benjamin, culminating in their written correspondences of 1939-1940. The letters exchanged between them in the seasons leading up to Benjamin’s tragic death highlight just how they believed reification, or what they often called the ‘decay’ ‘withering’ or ‘destruction’ of experience, stands as one of the defining features of modern life. In part through the early influence of Georg Lukács and Siegfried Kracauer, Adorno and Benjamin had come to share the conviction that the transition to modern forms of life had precipitated a crisis in experience. This crisis could be diagnosed through close analysis of the emerging forms of social organization and technology in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and how individuals had been forced to navigate them. Both had come to believe ordinary experience had become damaged not only because it was leading to distressing forms of socio-political order, but also because it was the result of harm

---

22 Walter Benjamin died on September 26, 1940 attempting to flee then German-occupied France for Spain. These letters between Benjamin and Adorno transpired in the final months prior to Benjamin’s his death.

done to the character of experience itself. As Adorno would lament with Horkheimer in 1947, "The regression of the masses today lies in their inability to hear with their own ears what has not already been heard, to touch with their hands what has not previously been grasped; it is the new form of blindness..." (DoE, 28-29). It is the nature of those conditions which precipitates this blindness, and the kind of injury it ultimately entails which occupied so much of Benjamin and Adorno’s thinking.

Much of their dialogue on these issues, particularly in 1939 and 1940, revolved around Benjamin's well-known essay, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire.”24 Here Benjamin explored Baudelaire’s late work Les Fleurs du Mal as an expression of the changing conditions of experience in nineteenth century Parisian life. It includes some of Benjamin’s final employments of his most engaging and enigmatic ideas, such as the transformation of memory by technology and the decay of aura.25 It is Benjamin’s central argument that one may glimpse in Baudelaire’s lyrical ruminations on urban life something of the destruction of experience itself (iLL, 158). His poetic expressions of the city’s mass and fury was not, Benjamin suggests, just a recurring theme but the ‘agitated veil’ under which his poems actually came to expression. It is from within the crisis of


25 For a helpful exploration of Benjamin’s notion of aura as a developing concept see Miriam Bratu Hansen, “Benjamin’s Aura” Critical Inquiry vol 34, 2008.
experience that Baudelaire expressed himself as a subject and in this way the work gives voice to ‘the fugitive content of experience’ at the very moment it is passing away.\(^{26}\)

But what does it mean to speak of Baudelaire as giving voice to the destruction of experience? To explain Benjamin employs two colloquial terms, \textit{Erfahrung} and \textit{Erlebnis}, each of which can be translated “experience,” contrasting \textit{Erfahrung}, or “experience in the strict sense,” with \textit{Erlebnis} or “a mere happening.” \textit{Erfahrung} is a form of experience wherein individuals ‘read’ the contents of passing moments in such a way that events “combine in the memory with material from the collective past” (iLL, 159). As such it is a form of experience immanently shaped by tradition where the structure of perception is conditioned by a dynamic play of phenomenological, linguistic, and social correspondences (iLL, 188).\(^{27}\) By contrast, \textit{Erlebnis} is a form of experience characterized not by entwinement, but disjuncture. It involves the sequestration of particular events into discrete heterogeneous ‘moments,’ such that the contents of experience move from relations played out in lived time toward chronological sequentiality (iLL, 163). For \textit{Erlebnis}, memory and perception are isolatable such that events are increasingly understood in distinction from others. In this way, Benjamin suggests, events become robbed of their ability to “affect the

\(^{26}\) It is important to make clear at this point that Benjamin understands that, far from being an immediate connection between “pure” consciousness and given “sense data,” experience is at its very root the result of mediation. Drawing from Freud and Proust, he argues that experience takes form only through the entwinement of perception and consciousness, and consciousness is conditioned by social, psychological, and historical factors. We shall see this below.

\(^{27}\) Or ‘perceptibility,’ to use Benjamin’s language.
experience of the reader” (iLL, 158). The ‘destruction of experience’ is essentially a transformation in the conditions of experience from *Erfahrung* to *Erlebnis* which cuts present experience off from the past and the self from the larger tapestry of relations that constitute one’s tradition (iLL, 159).

_Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*, Benjamin suggests, are each produced by the way in which perception is synesthetically conditioned by memory. To explain Benjamin enlists Proust’s notions of *mémoire volonatire* and *mémoire involontaire*.

*Mémoire volonatire* are those forms of remembrance prompted by conscious acts of recollection. *Mémoire involontaire*, by contrast, is a form of remembrance which manifests ‘spontaneously’ or ‘unconsciously’ through sensuous encounter with objects of experience. Drawing from one of Proust’s own most celebrated illustrations, Benjamin relays that much the town of Combray, in which Proust had been reared as a child had been lost to his conscious recollection. Yet, one afternoon with the taste of a pastry called _madeleine_ much of what had been forgotten was suddenly before him. What had been previously inaccessible by a conscious act of recollection was unexpectedly and powerfully present through a seemingly random sensuous encounter (iLL, 160). As such, Proust suggests that there are forms of memory available “somewhere beyond the

---

28. This characterization is taken from Benjamin’s on journalistic form as typifying this new condition.

29. Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time, or À la Recherche du Temps Perdu.* 1913.

30. As Hansen relays, Benjamin’s study writings on Proust range from 1929 through this second Essay on Baudelaire. See “Benjamin’s Aura,” 344, ftnt.
reach of the intellect, and unmistakably present in some material object (or in the sensation which such an object arouses in us) though we have no idea which one it is” (iLL, 160).

What Benjamin wishes to highlight here is that those forms of remembrance elicited by mémoire involontaire do not tend to take the form of distinct isolatable memories such as those prompted by willed acts of recollection (iLL, 161). They take the form, rather, of echoes and associations, marriages between past and present intimately entwined with those objects perceived. The taste of madeleine prompts not an isolatable memory in the form of a distinct event recalled, but a panoply of correspondences born out of the various associations woven by way of conscious life. This in turn awards objects of perception with traces of one’s own past as “handprints of the potter cling to the vessel” 32 (iLL, 158). What is important to recognize here is that mémoire involontaire is not isolatable from the perceptible character of objects of experience. Moments and things are rife with echoes and traces because they evoke not only distinct meanings, memories, and sensations, but memory correspondences between sense and memory borne out by lived experience. It is through such correspondences that the present is saturated by traces of the past. Sensation

31 Quoting Proust Benjamin states that memory fragments are “often most powerful and most enduring when the incident which left them behind was one that never entered consciousness.”

32 In contrast to mémoire involontaire, the characteristic of mémoire volontaire “is that the information which it gives about the past retains no trace of it.”
manifests presences not immediately grasped, but perceptibly present from behind the veil of memory and time (iLL, 158).

It is because of this that Benjamin couples the notion of trace with what appears to be a contrary idea, that of distance (iLL, 188). In ‘bringing close’ what was past, objects bear echoes of significance beyond what is supplied by their immediate context. They evoke a surplus of meaning which flows from lost memory. Such traces are, however, the presence of that which is essentially inapproachable. Like the traces on the vessel left by the potter’s hand the marks of memory reveal the (non-spatial) distance between what is present and what is absent. As with an echo, madeline, for instance, manifests both nearness and distance. As the contents of mémoire involontaire “are lost to the memory that seeks to retain them” Erfahrung manifests presences only at an unapproachable distance. It only manifests traces of what has been forever lost across the unbridgeable chasm of time.

It is important to note that for Benjamin mémoire involontaire is not the psychological shading of a more fundamental and purely anatomical sense perception, or ‘raw experience’ as such. If that were the case, Erfahrung could be dismissed as merely the distortion of perception by personal biography. In contrast to common empiricist assumptions which suppose a categorical distinction of perception and

33 This will become increasingly important in the next chapter as we begin to grasp the nature of semblance as ‘veiled presence’ or ‘the appearance of the inapproachable.’

memory, Benjamin suggests that what might be called bare sense-perception, as found for example in the science of optics, is not in any way more fundamental than *Erfahrung*, conditioned as it is by *mémoire involontaire*. Sense-perception is, rather, only the result of an artificial separation of perception and memory. As such, what one might call sense-perception is a conditioned form of experience analogous to what he classifies as *Erlebnis*. This is because, *Erlebnis* is that form of experience conditioned by the active dissociation of memory from perception. It is the result of a need by consciousness to buffer itself against the promptings of *mémoire involontaire*. As Benjamin states, “Man’s inner concerns do not have their issueless private character by nature. They do so only when he is increasingly unable to assimilate the data of the world around him by way of experience” (iLL, 160).

This is exactly the agitated veil of Paris, the mass and fury which Benjamin suggests is the very atmosphere of Baudelaire’s poetry. The constant exposure to endless shocks and collisions in the streets, the ceaseless stream of anonymous others, the bombardment of disjointed information, are all ingredients of an unfolding modern social environment which prompts consciousness to recoil. Unable to assimilate the shock of such experiences consciousness must suppress *mémoire involontaire* as a protective measure (iLL, 163). This results in a shift in the psychological interaction between perception and memory and a correlative transformation in the conditions of experience. The more consciousness is required to insulate itself against the barrage of

---

35 Benjamin’s essay was published in 1939, the year the bustle and life of Paris was itself drowned out by sound of Hitler’s advancing armies.
stimuli the more it must suppress those correspondences prompted by mémoire involontaire. It is the erection of this psychological buffer which reduces Erfahrung to Erlebnis, that is discrete moments or hours in one’s life (iLL, 165). Psychological integrity is preserved at the cost of the qualitative form of experience borne by tradition (iLL, 159).

This Benjamin suggests, epitomizes the emergent conditions of 19th century life generally. The shocks encountered in the emergence of modern Paris were akin the monotonous bombardment of the industrial worker at his machine, the gambler at the table, or the solider in modern warfare (iLL, 178). The aggregate result of such exposure is the inevitable dis-integration of practiced duration into a series univocal punctiliar moments, the contents of which are cut off each from the other, bearing neither trace nor distance. Stripped of those correlations borne by remembrance, he suggests modern subjects become unable to weave life into a coherent tale of meaning. This theme, explored more deeply in Benjamin’s The Storyteller, illustrates this condition by attending to those soldiers who had returned from the First World War. In it he asks,

Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent – not richer, but poorer in communicable experience? ... A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remains unchanged but the clouds and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosion, was the tiny, fragile human body (iLL, 84).
Those symptoms which are today diagnosed as disorders in veterans of war Benjamin suggests are emblematic of that more pervasive and subtle trauma which conditions modern subjectivity generally. The new forms of urban life emerging in Baudelaire’s Paris present only a few of the innumerable shifts and transitions which would precipitate this loss of experience on a comprehensive scale.

Although Benjamin rarely invokes the term reification directly, (only once in this essay) it is evident that the condition which reification seeks to name, that is damaged experience, remains his central concern.\textsuperscript{36} If, as Lukács famously stated, reification is an experience of objects “retained for us without the continued presence of their other aspects,” that is, if reification cuts off objects from their constitutive relations, then Benjamin’s account of the destruction of experience presents an insightful approach of what exactly has been cut off. As present encounters are severed from their correspondences with the past, and the continuity of life is dismembered into discrete moments, experience itself begins to atrophy.

\textbf{Adorno’s Challenge}

As part of their ongoing correspondence Adorno exchanged a series of letters with Benjamin about his account of damaged experience in the Baudelaire essay.\textsuperscript{37}

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{36} For example, Benjamin only invokes the term ‘reification’ once in his Baudelaire essay: “In spleen, time is reified: the minutes cover a man like snowflakes.” Ibid.

\textsuperscript{37} Documents indicate the heart of the exchange occurred between August 6, 1939 and February 29, 1940. See Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, \textit{The Complete Correspondence 1928-1940} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001) 321 (hereafter cited in text as CC)
\end{quote}
While Adorno expressed enthusiasm, he also noted several concerns, among them Benjamin’s attempt to explain damaged experience by invoking psychological theory. In a brief but important passage Adorno suggests his hesitancy about this and gestures in an alternative direction, stating:

Is it not the case that the real task here is to bring the entire opposition between sensory experience \textit{[Erlebnis]} and experience proper \textit{[Erfahrung]} into relation with a dialectical theory of forgetting? Or one could equally say, into relation with a theory of reification. For all reification is a forgetting: objects become purely thing-like the moment they are retained for us without the continued presence of their other aspects: when something of them has been forgotten. This raises the question as to how far this forgetting is one that is capable of shaping experience, which I would almost call epochal forgetting, and how far it is a reflex forgetting (CC 321).

These brief interrogatory lines are significant for several reasons. First, they indicate that Adorno understands the shift from \textit{Erfahrung} to \textit{Erlebnis} to be a form of reification. Second, they explicitly suggest reified experience involves a kind of forgetting. And finally, they touch on how Adorno viewed the difference between Benjamin’s and his own approach to the issue.\footnote{This can be corroborated by Benjamin’s response to Adorno in the following letter where he shares the original memories which prompted his theory to begin with. “There is no reason to conceal from you the fact that the roots of my ‘theory of experience’ can be traced back to childhood memory.”} While Adorno concurs with Benjamin
that the decay of experience can be described as a kind of forgetting, he contrasts what he calls reflex forgetting (which seems to be an allusion to Benjamin’s idea of the suppression of *mémoire involontaire*) and his own epochal forgetting. As we shall see, it is specifically Benjamin’s psychological account of the suppression of *mémoire involontaire* as an explanation for reification which is a concern for Adorno.

Why does Adorno resist accounting for reification psychologically? The answer to this question is not found in the lettered exchange itself. It is necessary to turn to comments he makes some years later in a series of lectures he presents on Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. While these comments arise in a different context they are insightful because they lay out the connection Adorno sees between subjectivist accounts of experience, of which he regards psychology as one form, and the process of

---

39 For those familiar with Adorno’s work, including his common invocations of Freud and others, this may seem surprising. One must distinguish between Adorno’s provisional adoption of psychological concepts to illustrate a point and his view concerning the fundamental assumptions that undergird psychological theory as a whole. Adorno is intentionally asystematic in his writing and quite freely takes up language and theoretical concepts from a wide array of cultural and historical phenomena. One must not assume such use entails any wide-spread acceptance of such systems or methods. As we shall see, despite Adorno’s frequent but always occasional invocation of psychological terms he held deep concerns about psychological accounts of subjectivity as such, especially as they pertain to the issue of reification.

40 Adorno pressed this point with Benjamin further but was cut short by Benjamin’s own hand “I will not discuss this further” and then finally sealed with his own tragic death.

reification.\textsuperscript{42} It becomes evident that for Adorno reification is, in part, connected with the emergence and ascendance of subjectivist theories of self. If reification is a process wherein objects become purely thing-like, Adorno sees this process theoretically expressed \textit{in and justified by} subjectivist counts of experience such as that of Kant. As such Adorno believes, Kant’s \textit{Critique} expresses something of the emerging crisis of modernity in the process of reification.

How is this? Kant established an account of reason’s relation to experience wherein the apprehension of objects of experience is given by way of the transcendental structures of cognition. The relation which Kant suggests constitutes acts of cognition is cast as that between a determinate subject and a given object of understanding, conceived in and through the structures of the subject. In this, Adorno suggests, there emerges a “peculiar interaction between the concept of a unified consciousness and that of the unity of the object” (LoK, 107). Each “mutually condition the other” (LoK, 107-108). Central to this structure is that each is established as a ‘thing’ in and through the process of cognition. The result of this is that subjectivization and reification are intimately linked. He states,

\begin{quote}
We have these two concepts, namely, subjectivization, the dissolving of the world into the activity of the subject, on the one hand, and the reification, objectification of the world as something contrasted with the subject on the other. It appears to me – and this is intimately bound up with the phenomenon
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{42} The connection between psychological theories and subjectivism will be discussed below.
of reification – that these two concepts have grown in magnitude and have become quite unstoppable (LoK, 114).

What is important here is that Adorno recognizes the subjectivization of experience and the objectification of consciousness as mirror images of each other. Objects of experience become stable unities through being subsumed by the cogitating subject as their stable locus. As such, experience is understood as the product of consciousness as a thing processing the dissociated material of its contents. In this structure the stable subject, “has priority” for it is that through which the object is brought “into being” (LoK, 107). Experience is here not only divided between subjective and objective poles, but the subject is deemed active, universal, determinative, immediate, and dominant, in opposition to objects which are rendered passive, particular, determined, mediated and subordinate (LoK, 115). As such, there is, Adorno suggests, “a reifying quality in the very attempt to relate all phenomena, everything we encounter, to a unified reference point and to subsume it under a self-identical, rigid unity, thus removing it from its dynamic context” (LoK, 114).43

At this point Adorno is considering Kant’s theory explicitly, but it is apparent that he takes Kant’s subjectivist account of experience as an emblematic moment in an emerging epoch of reification, one which will in turn lead to numerous philosophical and

43 With the growth of subjectivity there is a corresponding growth of reification because thanks to this process of subjectivization the poles of knowledge are drawn further and further apart. To put it another way, the more that is inserted into the subject, the more the subject comes to constitute knowledge as such, then the more that determining factors are withdrawn from the object, and the more the two realms diverge.
psychological depictions of the subject. The common thread is that consciousness is constituted (paradoxically) as an objective ‘interior’ actively processing the contents of experience according to psychological needs. To suggest this does not mean that subjectivism or psychological theories are wholly false. If they are in key respects inflections of reification it means that they are rather, both true and false: true in the sense that they may represent what is happening to experience through progressive reification, but false in the sense that they portray experience as being in essence what is experience only in its damaged form. In this way, such accounts of experience fail to provide an accurate account of reification because they are symptoms of it. The imagination of consciousness as an interior actively processing objective contents of experience has become one of the most pervasive and widely regarded assumptions regarding self and world. It is an assumption that belies reification.

It should be pointed out that Adorno had urged caution on Benjamin in 1935 regarding this very problem. Benjamin’s attempt to psychologize modern artifacts as materializations of collective ‘dream image’ ran the risk of reflecting the 19th century conception of the self. According to Adorno, Benjamin failed to see that the immanence

---

44 In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno writes, “The confrontation of these two heterogeneous thinkers – Kant not only rejected philosophical psychologism but in his old age increasingly rejected all psychology – is nevertheless permitted by commonality that outweighs the apparently absolute difference between the Kantian construction of the transcendental subject, on the one hand, and the Freudian recourse to the empirically psychological on the other: Both are in principle subjectively oriented by the power of desire, whether it is interpreted negatively or positively. For both, the artwork exists only in relation to its observer or maker.” (AT, 11). What he says here of artwork he applies more generally in relation to objects of experience. See also *LoK*, 220 ff).
of consciousness as an *intérieure* is the dialectical image for the nineteenth century as alienation. As such Benjamin’s approach was ‘not dialectical enough.’ Instead of artifacts being cast as ‘dream images’ of a collective unconscious, the notion of the ‘dream image’ should be ‘externalized’ through its relation with history. Failing to do so leaves the reified psychological construction of the self intact.

Without doubt, Adorno’s perspective on this matter is not unrelated to his commitment to historical materialism. However, it is crucial that one not dismiss these observations as mere Marxist dogmatism. This would be to gravely misunderstand Adorno and fail to grasp the full breadth of what is at stake in his approach to damaged experience. Any account of reification that accounts for the

---

45 It is helpful to see this in larger context. Adorno writes, “I am myself the last person to be unaware of the relevance of the immanence of the consciousness for the nineteenth century, but the concept of the dialectical image cannot simply be derived from it; rather, the immanence of consciousness itself as *intérieure*, is the dialectical image for the nineteenth century as alienation... The dialectical image must therefore not be transferred into consciousness as a dream, but rather the dream should be externalized through dialectical interpretation and the immanence of consciousness itself understood as a constellation of reality...” Letter to Benjamin, August 2-4, 1935., found in *Walter Benjamin: Selected writings, Volume 3: 1935-1938*. Ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Belknap, 2004).


47 See for example, Rebecca Comay, “Perverse History: Fetishism and Dialectic in Walter Benjamin.” *Research in Phenomenology* August 1, 1999. 56.

48 One should not ignore that Adorno confronts many forms of ‘objectivism’ (e.g. scientific and historical materialism, positivism, etc.) for their similar failure to recognize their own assumptions, governing framework, and logic as a moment presented in dynamic relation to a more comprehensive phenomenological-historical process. Consider “Not Dialectical Enough:
conditions of experience through the structure of a reified psyche which is seen to process the contents of experience runs the risk of inflecting the reifying stance it seeks to diagnose. Concepts such as mémoire involontaire are compelling and insightful, but when expounded upon by means of psychological architectonics they tend to reinforce the already established diremption of subject and object. Such theories which presume an ontological (or at least methodological) separation of subject and object cannot but continue to reify consciousness, even in their attempt to account for reification. True, by adopting the notion of mémoire involontaire Benjamin attempts to identify a mediating link between objects of experience and psychic conditions of subjectivity, and his account is free of the error of positing a given objectivity free from subjective mediation, but his account of “reflex forgetting” which trades on psychological depictions of the self, risks reinforcing the very disjuncture he is seeking to critique.

Benjamin on Semblance and Aura

Thus far we have seen that Benjamin and Adorno’s differences on the issue of reification revolve around how to properly read experience; that is, what terms ought to be privileged in the construction of its interpretation. Benjamin explained damaged experience in primarily psychological terms, understanding our current condition as


49 For a helpful presentation of this in explicating Adorno notion of ‘diremption’ see Roger Foster’s Recovery of Experience (Albany: State University of New York Press) 70ff.
brought on through the psychic event of shock.\textsuperscript{50} Adorno supports Benjamin’s analysis, but with the hesitation that his invocation of insufficiently dialectical psychological accounts of self runs the risk of inflecting this reified stance. It is now important to say something about how these differences shape their respective phenomenological readings of damaged experience. That is to say, how they account for the ways in which things appear within the conditions of reification. Here two terms, ‘semblance’ and ‘aura,’ are central. As I hope to show, how each reads aura and semblance affects how they understand the nature of damaged experience. Benjamin’s psychological account of experience leads him toward reading the semblance-character of aura as the result of what I will call ‘transposition.’ That is, aura is manifest when one ‘invests’ objects with ‘meanings’ which belong principally to psychic structures and intersubjective relations. Aura is as such a form of veiled psychological projection. Adorno’s more vigorously dialectical approach, by contrast, tends toward understanding the semblance-character of aura not predominantly as transposition but as ‘disclosure.’ That is, the semblance-character of aura does not essentially originate in the psyche, nor is it reducible to the immanent context of intersubjective relations. For Adorno, the semblance-character of aura originates in the ‘non-identical’ that is in what breaks out from beyond the subjective strictures of damaged experience.

In turning to the question of aura and semblance let us begin again with Benjamin’s essay, \textit{On Some Motifs on Baudelaire}. Benjamin notes that rituals,

\textsuperscript{50} “He named the price for which the sensation of modernity could be had: the disintegration of the aura in immediate shock experience \textit{[Chockerlebnis]}...” (ILL, 166).
ceremonies, and festivals were necessary for the maintenance of Erfahrung, a fact that was not lost to Baudelaire himself. His sonnet “Correspondences” invokes such images in lamenting the loss of experience. Baudelaire writes:

Nature is a temple whose living pillars
Sometimes give forth a babel of words;
Man wends his way through forests of symbols
Which look at him with familiar glances.
As long-resounding echoes from afar
Are mingling in a deep dark unity,
Vast as the night or the orb of day,
Perfumes, colors, and sounds commingle (iLL, 183).

It is the “commingling of perfumes, colors, and sounds,” the “long echoes from afar” which Benjamin suggests express the fading character of Erfahrung. Thus, he proposes, this sonnet is a kind of lament and must be read as a “confession of failure,” even “longing and rage,” for one who is “past experiencing” (iLL, 186).51 And yet, Benjamin suggests that these words are more than a personal lament. Baudelaire’s grief speaks artfully to a historical passing of ages. It is important, to note that in expressing this loss

51 As Benjamin states, “the cycle of poems that opens the volume probably shows this passage is one to be lamented. Baudelaire’s work is thus devoted to something irretrievably lost.” (iLL, 170). As opposed to those which begin “The deafening street was screaming all about me...” Ibid.
the sonnet turns to images of temples and myth. This invocation of ritual images is more than illustrative, these images recall forms of life that were integral to maintaining Erfahrung. As Benjamin puts it, “The important thing is that Correspondances encompass a concept of experience which includes ritual elements. Only by appropriating these elements was Baudelaire able to fathom the full meaning of the breakdown which he, as a modern man, was witnessing” (ILL, 170). In ages past, ceremonies and festivals organized life as a passing of seasons that correspond with images from the natural and supernatural world. These produced forms of socially inscribed remembrance which remained available throughout one’s life and which saturated experience. It was the dissolution of ritual forms of life through the advent of industrial capitalism, the rise of new forms of mechanical reproduction, and the like that precipitates the passage from Erfahrung to Erlebnis. As the cultural forms that cultivate the correspondences necessary for Erfahrung disintegrate so the conditions of experience are transformed.

That this has happened can be identified phenomenologically in what Benjamin calls ‘the decay of aura’ (iLL, 188, 222) Aura is a term that he uses sporadically and for which he gives multiple definitions. In an earlier formulation of aura found in “The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility” he writes, “We define the aura

52 He quotes Baudelaire, “The breakers, tumbling the images of the heavens / Blended, in a solemn and mystical way / The all-powerful chords of their rich music / With the colors of the sunset reflected in my eyes. / There is where I lived. (Ibid)

as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it might be” (iLL, 222). In the Baudelaire essay he returns to that definition and ties it to mémoire involontaire. Aura is identified as the appearance of that distance which is manifest in mémoire involontaire. As he suggests, it results from the ‘clustering of those associations’ around objects of perception (iLL, 186). Objects are imbued with aura when they evoke correspondences with the past. They are invested with traces of meaning the essential character of which, as we have seen, remains veiled by the subject’s own pre-history. These traces – as the nearness of that which lies inaccessible, and thus essentially distant - are manifest, phenomenologically, in the auratic character of objects. Here, in the first place, aura is understood as a phenomenological manifestation of distance irrespective of physical proximity, which is manifest in certain objects. Later, in this essay he expands upon the definition and identifies something of its cause, writing:

To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return. This experience corresponds to the data of the mémoire involontaire. These data, incidentally, are unique: they are lost to the memory that seeks to retain them. Thus they lend support to a concept of the aura that comprises the ‘unique manifestation of a distance.’ This designation has the advantage of clarifying the ceremonial character of the phenomenon. The essentially distant is the inapproachable: inapproachability is in fact the primary quality of the ceremonial image (iLL, 190).

Here Benjamin elaborates his notion of aura by explicitly drawing together his earlier conception of aura as a ‘manifestation of distance’ with the notion of ‘investing objects
with the ability to look at us in return.’ To perceive someone to be looking at us in return involves the recognition of not just an object, but another subject, or point of perspective different from our own. This other perspective presents a distance that is essentially insurmountable. To gaze into another’s eyes is to be confronted with another self, and no matter how responsive or controlling I may become, this other subjectivity itself remains essentially inapproachable. The gaze makes visible this unbridgeable distance which is intrinsic to intersubjective relations. This sense of distance and gaze, is epitomized in non-human relations, Benjamin suggests, in ceremonial images. In ritual practice inert objects are seen to be vested with a kind of veiled presence. They possess a peculiar preponderance, even autonomy and agency which in our age is ascribed to human beings and interpersonal relationships alone. The inapproachability of such objects may of course be enacted socially through ritual prohibitions, the exercise of taboos, and the like, but coupled with such social proscriptions there remains a phenomenological or experiential distance. This distance, Benjamin explains, is a trace of human subjectivity in the non-human. This can be explained, he suggests, as the transposition of that which is characteristic to intersubjective relations onto non-human objects.

As one can see, in both cases aura is understood to be prompted psychologically, in the distance which remains between, on the one hand the perception of an object and the contents of mémoire involontaire, and on the other the transposition of the

---

gaze onto non-human objects. As discussed earlier, it is the peculiar character of *mém\'oire involontaire* that it manifests both trace and distance psychologically through the relation of perception and memory.\(^{55}\) The auratic character of ritual objects is in this way rooted in one’s own psychological response to objects of perception and involves the transposition onto the object one’s own forgotten history.\(^{56}\) Since aura is explained here in psychological terms as the product of *mém\'oire involontaire* it can be understood as essentially anthropomorphic (iLL, 338). It depends on our ability to “invest” (*belehnen*) such objects with this sense of distance by transposing (*Übertragung*) onto inanimate objects what is essential to human relationality.\(^{57}\) Ritual life may provide for experience in the full *Erfahrung* sense, but it requires projecting that which is proper to human relations onto the non-human. The experience of aura is thus rendered as a kind of psychological and indeed anthropomorphic projection onto objects of experience, the character of which he explains in terms of the psycho-perceptual experience of dreaming.\(^{58}\) This in some ways clarifies Benjamin’s ambivalent posture towards aura, his welcoming the end of art’s marriage with auratic experience,

\(^{55}\) Miriam Bratu Hansen makes this observation herself in “Benjamin’s Aura” Critical Inquiry, Winter 2008, 245.

\(^{56}\) See Benjamin’s footnote to the above quote (iLL, 190).

\(^{57}\) “To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to *invest* it with the ability to look at us in return.” Italics mine. (iLL, 338).

\(^{58}\) See also, “Benjamin’s Aura” Critical Inquiry, Winter 2008, 245.
as one finds in his most famous essay (iLL, 338). If aura is the result of psychological projection then it carries with it an undeniable moment of dissimulation.

This is seen further by turning to Benjamin’s comments on semblance. Benjamin seeks to trace the decay of aura by means of the secularization of ritual into art. Commenting further on the aforementioned sonnet Benjamin states,

What Baudelaire meant by *correspondances* may be described as an experience which seeks to establish itself in crisis-proof form. This is possible only within the realm of the ritual. If it transcends the realm of ritual it presents itself in the beautiful. It is in the beautiful that the ritual value of art appears (iLL, 183ff).

At home in ritual life, *Erfahrung* abides in ‘crisis-proof form.’ Once stripped of those ritual practices which both sustain and feed *mémoire involuntaire*, the aura of these objects begins to fade. It is, however, rescued in the art-form. Outside ritual life, Benjamin suggests, aura is harbored through the arts.⁵⁹ That beauty which was celebrated in, for example, early modern painting can thus be understood as a trace of ritual aura in an emerging secular age. The modern practices surrounding art exhibition as such bear striking analogies to certain practices which sustained ritual life.⁶⁰ In the wake of secularization, however, art objects become progressively liberated from these cultic functions. The auratic character of ceremonial images is thus slowly transposed

---

⁵⁹ See the next chapter for further elaboration upon this theme.

⁶⁰ We will explore this further in the following chapter.
into other forms, for example in practices of aesthetic appreciation and the ideal of beauty. 61

In an important footnote to the above passage Benjamin draws together his account of aura and the beauty-character of art (iLL, 198). The traditional aesthetic assertion of beauty as semblance or "veiled appearance," he suggests, can be accounted for in two ways: through art's relationship to history and to nature. Concerning art's relationship to history, what is experienced as semblance in beautiful artworks is the veiled appearance of “what other generations have admired in it.” That is, artworks uphold as “objects of admiration” what was appreciated collectively and sustained by the shared memory of tradition. The mysterious allure and attractive power of the beautiful in art originates in those correspondences that emerge between its own material form and the celebrated practices of the past. Here again, mémoire involontaire is invoked to explain the beautiful as semblance. He then turns to the beautiful in nature. Here Beauty is the semblance, or veiled appearance of what cannot be wholly articulated. Quoting Valéry he writes: “We recognize a work of art by the fact that no idea it inspires in us, no mode of behavior that it suggests we adopt could exhaust it or dispose of it... no recollection, no thought, no mode of behavior can obliterate its effect or release us from the hold it has on us” (iLL, 198). Artworks present veiled appearance because there remains in aesthetic experience an unbridgeable distance between experience and understanding. Art invokes what cannot be fully
recalled in description, reflection, or explanation. They always can say more than can be understood. The inability to close the gap between our experience of art and our understanding of it presents its meaning as inapproachably distant. Their beauty manifests something seemingly beyond us. The way in which artworks invoke ever-new meanings, and surpass our explanations, invests them with aura.

If aura is the phenomenological manifestation of distance, and semblance a mark of veiled appearance or the presence of the inapproachable then aura and semblance are the same. Or more precisely, aura is the phenomenological manifestation of the semblicmatic character of objects of experience. As such, the secularization of ritual, the decay of aura, and shift away from the semblance–character of art signals something of the shift toward damaged experience. With the advance of those conditions which produced aesthetic semblance art itself begins to lose its cultic character, slowly transforming into mass art whose key leitmotiv is not semblance but “distraction.” He notes, “The desire of contemporary masses to bring things ‘closer’ spatially and humanly” is the death of aura (iLL, 223). What I wish to highlight here is that his account of aura as transposition leads him to identify semblance in its various historical transformations as essentially the result of psychological projection, or anthropomorphism. Aura results from our investing the non-human with what belongs properly to human tradition (via mémoire involontaire) and intersubjective relations

62 “Experience is a matter of tradition, in collective existence as well as private life.” (iLL, 159).

63 See “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (iLL, 240).
(the gaze). This helps explain why Benjamin seems more willing to accept the decay of aura, and why he is markedly less critical of mass art, as well as why he advocates for deaestheticized politics. As we shall see, however, since Adorno does not explain aura principally as psychological projection, he does not assume it to involve transposition. Not only is aura not dissimulation, it may in fact be disclosure, and semblance a manifestation of truth.

Adorno on Semblance and Aura

As we have seen, exactly how to approach the issue of damaged experience was a matter of debate between these two great thinkers. While Adorno praised Benjamin’s work, he also held reservations which, once grasped, reveal something of what is at issue with the problem of reification. While Adorno agrees with Benjamin that a diagnosis of damaged experience requires a critique of the subject, he is emphatic that any such approach must not seek to explain experience as the result of psychological mechanisms (i.e. reflex forgetting). This only reiterates the diremption of subject and object which leads to reification. Instead, one must approach experience in a more dialectical manner. The urge to hypostasize subjectivity must be resisted (ND, 64

---

64 See the final section of “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (iLL, 240ff.)

65 Their ongoing exchange regarding the nature of the “dialectical image” is precisely on this question.

66 This was an abiding matter of concern of Adorno which tainted his overwhelming esteem for his friend and interlocutor. As he wrote later in Negative Dialectics “Benjamin’s defeatism about his own thought was conditioned by the undialectical positivity of which he carried a formally unchanged remnant from his theological phase into his materialistic phase.” Theodor
154). To do this he suggests one must approach any experience as a historical sediment, a moving constellation of more diffuse phenomenological-historical processes. When one does so auratic experience, for instance, need not be traced back to the subject, either as a transposition of what belongs to the sphere of intersubjectivity or as a projection of contents of mémoire involontaire onto non-human objects. Doing this privileges subjectivity as the active partner and assumes objects of experience to be essentially passive - a posture which is inevitably reifying. He explains this powerfully in Negative Dialectics:

... [S]ubjectivization and reification do not merely diverge. They are correlates. The more knowledge is functionalized and made a product of cognition, the more perfectly will its moment of motion be credited to the subject as its activity, while the object becomes the result of the labor that has congealed in it – a dead thing. The reduction of the object to pure material, which precedes all subjective synthesis as its necessary condition, sucks the objects own dynamics out of it: it is disqualified, immobilized, and robbed of whatever would allow motion to be predicted at all. Life becomes polarized, wholly abstract and wholly concrete, although it would be only the tension between them. The two poles are equally reified, and what is left of the spontaneous subject... is covered by an all-controlling rigidity (ND, 91).

Benjamin’s account of aura as transposition itself renders auratic experience a by-product of subjective processes. By ascribing those dynamics which might be accorded to objects back to the subject auratic experience is “brought close.” They are made essentially transparent to reason, but they also are reified as the products of human projection. By ascribing those dynamics which might be accorded to objects back to the subject auratic experience is “brought close.” They are made essentially transparent to reason, but they also are reified as the products of human projection. The subject is endowed with singular significance at the cost of those objects of experience, which have been transformed into pure material and left “mute” and “dead.” This dynamic Adorno underscores continually in Negative Dialectics, Aesthetic Theory, and Dialectic of Enlightenment. It is the “The happy match between understanding and the nature of things” which is in reality “a patriarchal one: the mind, conquering superstition, is to rule over disenchanted nature” (DoE, 2). Reification is as such immanently wed to the “disenchantment of the world.” What leads from reification to disenchantment is the evaporation of distance. The apparent dynamism of objects of experience, both revealed and hidden, are in the end reducible to, or made utterly transparent by, the subject. Turning again to Adorno’s critique of Kant as emblematic,

Behind [Kant’s theory] stands the idea that our world, the world of experience, really has become a world familiar to us; the world in which we live has ceased to be ruled by mysterious unexplained powers. Instead, it is something we

67 What is lost is the possibility that “What the objects communicate... is the trace of the object’s definition in themselves, which Kant denied and Hegel, against Kant, sought to restore through the subject.” (ND, 25)

68 The theme of disenchantment will be touched on throughout this dissertation. Adorno’s use of Weberian themes will be explored in greater depth in the next chapter.
experience as our world in the sense that we encounter nothing that is incompatible with our own rationality (LoK, 110-111).

What I wish to suggest is that Adorno’s concern with Benjamin’s account of aura as transposition is that it takes the same trajectory as found in Kant’s *Critique*. Both suggest that appearances are to be understood in terms of the structures of consciousness. Both are ultimately forms of subjectivization, though Benjamin’s much less explicitly so. It should be said that Adorno treats these accounts not principally as theories which produce reified postures, but as symptomatic expressions of it. Kant’s especially, as one which has been crystalized in the form of a philosophical system. It as philosophical literature is an artifact of social life which expresses the changing conditions of experience even if, on the surface, it argues for something quite different. In the case of Kant’s work specifically, it serves as an expression of a growing experience that “in this world we stand on our own two feet” that we need not dread “the intervention of demons” or “magical and mythical anxieties” (LoK, 110-11). It expresses the loss of the *mysterium tremendum* which is produced by the Enlightenment urge toward perspicacity and the emergence of the modern epoch. It understands experience to be governed by the subject and the knowable world as coextensive with our own categories, concepts, and processes of thought. What is lost in such experience is that distance which makes semblance possible. As objects possess no remainder

---

69 More of this will be discussed in the next chapter.

70 The question of the ‘Thing-in-itself,’ of course, remains. Adorno’s response here is insightful enough that it deserves to be quoted at length. “We might we ask what it means to know
beyond what is ultimately assumed by the subject their appearance is one of essential identity – actual or possible - with the subject. The trace of the non-identical is eclipsed.

Paradoxically, Adorno suggests that it is precisely in such a world that we find ourselves “locked out.” Modernity’s iron cage of which Weber speaks is not merely one of bureaucratic paralysis, but phenomenological diremption. In a world where objects are not seen to bear “traces of the inapproachable” we find ourselves at the center, masters and arbitrators of our own life. At the same time, as with Kant’s noumena, we find ourselves utterly cut off from anything which is beyond us, any connection to an Absolute (LoK, 111) The more securely objects of experience are organized such that they are rendered fully transparent to and identical with the subject, the more the world becomes our world. Paradoxically, it is right here in the

something if that something is completely indeterminate and if knowledge is no more than the quintessence of subjectivity, taking this in the fairly strong sense. This contradiction survives the translation of objectivity into subjectivity and is not explicitly addressed by Kant. Perhaps the good old things-in-themselves provided him with a sufficient consolation. It may have fulfilled the function of the other that knowledge ultimately refers to. The only trouble is that this consolation is of the kind we generally feel at funerals. That is to say, we assert that all our knowledge ultimately refers to the thing-in-itself, since the appearances that I constitute, that I organize are ultimately caused by the thing-in-itself. But since the process of cognition and its content are radically separated from these absolutely unknowable things-in-themselves by a chorismos, a rupture, in the Platonic sense, the idea of a thing-in-itself adds nothing to my actual knowledge. This means that what I recognize as an object is just that, an object in the sense that we have discussed at length; it is not a thing in itself, and always remains something constituted by a subject…. It is the problem that at bottom the subject can only know itself” (LoK, 129).

71 “The more the world experience, the world in which we live is commensurate with us, the less commensurate, the obscure and the more threatening the Absolute, of which we know that this world of experience is only a detail, becomes” (LoK, 111).
mastery of nature that nihilism knocks on the door. The triumph of subjectivity, for Adorno, is thus “purchased at the price of metaphysical despair” (LoK, 111). This is juxtaposition of mastery and despair, *phenomena* and *noumena*, identity and the void, is the effect of reification. “Aware that the conceptual totality is mere appearance, I have no way but to break immanently, in its own measure, through the appearance of total identity” (ND, 5).

Ultimately, however, what Adorno is concerned with is that this loss of distance forecloses on the possibility of truth. If truth is arrived at by explanation, that is subsuming objects of experience under our own concepts, categories, and methods then no ‘truth-content’ which is not isomorphic with our own subjective structures can be recognized. As objects are experienced as being (actually or possibly) under the sway of the subject, they become bereft of the trace of any other not ultimately traceable back to the subject. This, as Adorno sees it, banishes any “knowledge which really apprehends the object” (DoE, 10). If truly knowing things involves not the achievement of identity but the disclosure of what lies beyond the subject, then the appearance of a genuine knowledge of the other will not culminate of ‘explanation’ but of the disclosure of distance. That is, things of experience will manifest semblance. They will bear witness to that which is essentially inapproachable. The inability to recognize this forecloses the possibility of experience involving encounter with what is not other. This is the effect of reification. The subject dominates its object and yet in the process becomes essentially locked out from any genuine encounter with it. In the wake of this condition what must be found are forms of relation which resist this mode of
domination which leaves objects essentially dead and we ourselves as cut off from them. As we shall see in the next chapter, Adorno believes this to be found in autonomous art.
I now turn to Adorno’s account of autonomous art as an objective manifestation of, and form of resistance to, damaged experience. Anyone familiar with Adorno knows that art and music were for him of persistent interest, and not merely due to his own accomplished engagement in them. It’s also often noted that Adorno considered true art a form of resistance to the bland vagaries of the culture industry. What is not so commonly recognized is that he saw art not only as a resource for those suffering the depredations of capitalism, but as a wound. That is, autonomous art exists as a manifestation of injury and a persistent site of innervation for those suffering the atrophy of damaged experience. As I shall suggest, Adorno believes autonomous art is

72 Adorno’s accomplishments in art and music are well known and need not be discussed here. It is enough to simply draw from a self-description presented in his open letter to Max Horkheimer, “In contrast [to Horkheimer], I was an artist, a musician, by both origin and early training, but I was inspired by a desire to give an account of art and its possibilities today that should include objective factors, a sense of the naively aesthetic stance in the face of social tendencies.” Quoted from Detlev Claussen’s Theodor Adorno: One Last Genius, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008).

something that has *come into being along with reification*, and as such its history is entwined with the rise of our modern epoch. The very existence of autonomous art in its countless configurations, movements, developments, regressions, and reformulations thus manifests something of the character of our epochal forgetting.\(^7\)

Adorno’s posthumous work, *Aesthetic Theory*, which amounts to his most comprehensive reflection on the meaning of autonomous art, is attempt to diagnose the conditions of damaged experience by philosophically probing this wound. This chapter will focus specifically on how this wound was opened, that is, it will consider those conditions under which art became autonomous. From there it will consider the way in which art, as a harbinger of semblance, opposes reification. The seeming obscurantism and marginality of modern art, we shall see, stems not from its alliance with the upper classes, but its alienation from rationalized life. It is precisely through this alienation, however, that art presents as through a ‘reverse negative image,’ a genuine reflection of our current condition as damaged. It shows us that even as we are the progeny of triumphal reason we remain also her wounded orphaned children. In this way autonomous art can bring us to “healing awareness” of our damaged condition.

Autonomous Art: “It is and is not.”

Classical philosophical aesthetics, that is, aesthetic theory stemming from Alexander Baumgarten through Kant and to Hegel and Schiller, has been dominated by two general approaches to the question “What is art?” The first, presented in most compelling form by Kant, treats it primarily on grounds of its autonomy; that is, by the way in which aesthetic experience constitutes a distinct domain of reflection and understanding. As J.M. Bernstein notes, Kant’s aesthetic theory “attempts to generate, to carve out and constitute, the domain of the aesthetic in its wholly modern signification.” Aesthetics in Kant’s sense concerns judgments of beauty and the sublime, each which involves modes of rational reflection that, he suggests, are formally distinct from scientific and moral reason. As such the aesthetic is constituted by its separation from these spheres. When art is approached this way it is understood to include distinct practices, norms, and modes of reflection that provide their own unique contribution to human life. The preeminent aesthetic category for Kant is beauty, which he understands to be an experience of pleasure manifest in the recognition of

75 Kant’s Critique of Judgment obviously concerns more than reflection on art. It contains a lengthy exposition on nature as well. As we shall see below, however, it is in the new discipline of aesthetics that natural beauty and other ‘aesthetic phenomena’ are treated ‘under the aspect’ of art.

76 His work opens with precisely these concerns as to the need for a special aesthetic realm replete with its own distinct modes of judgement. For an in depth exploration of Kant’s Third Critique as reflection upon the autonomy of art see J.M Bernstein, The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno. (Pennsylvania: Penn State Press, 1992) 3-7.

77 Ibid.
“purposiveness without purpose.” ⁷⁸ Objects are reckoned as beautiful because they appear to manifest intrinsic meaning which is not attributed to them by any external value, say, their utilitarian function. ⁷⁹ The apparent purposiveness of art originates solely out of the nexus of their own elements, while their purposelessness stems from the fact that their significance does not depend in any way upon what they may accomplish, for example, in the acquisition of scientific knowledge or in the cultivation of moral character. It lies wholly within the “disinterested pleasure” generated by the work itself. ⁸⁰ Art objects are judged properly when they are recognized as microcosms, independent wholes, beholden to no law outside their own aesthetic form. ⁸¹ Proper aesthetic judgment indeed requires the conception of art as autonomous in the sense

---


⁷⁹ Ibid, 73.

⁸⁰ Undoubtedly, ‘purposefulness’ is understood in a manner analogous to the character of living beings as living. This is not unimportant, and as we shall see reappears within Adorno’s own thought.

⁸¹ This assessment does not ignore Kant’s recognition that aesthetic judgement arises from a sensus communis, and as such judgments of taste are grounded by communicability and agreement. Aesthetic judgement, according to Kant is indeed “social” in this sense as it is dependent upon rational community. Art is be considered ‘autonomous’ in a methodological or ‘epistemological’ sense. It is this methodological independence that structures the three *Critiques*. Aesthetic judgment is formally distinct from pure or practical reason in its recognition of autonomy. CoJ §172.
that aesthetic judgement must remain categorically distinct from other modes of understanding.\textsuperscript{82}

In an analogous way, great artists are distinguished not by their obedience to strictly enforced rules of aesthetic practice but by their capacity to operate free of outside interests and constraints. They are marked by their ability to create novel forms undetermined by established convention. The term classically employed here is, of course, artistic “genius” which Kant dubbed the very “rule of art.”\textsuperscript{83} For those who hold this view genuine artists and artworks are essentially \textit{sui generis}. Almost a hundred years later Oscar Wilde expressed something of this sentiment when he wrote,

A work of art is the unique result of a unique temperament. Its beauty comes from the fact that the author is what he is. It has nothing to do with the fact that other people want what they want. Indeed, the moment that an artist takes notice of what other people want, and tries to supply the demand, he ceases to be an artist, and becomes a dull or an amusing craftsman, an honest or a dishonest tradesman. He has no further claim to be considered as an artist.\textsuperscript{84}

\textsuperscript{82} Critique of Judgment, 66. This is also the manner in which judgments of beauty shows themselves to be categorically distinct from either judgments of the ‘good’ (practical reason) or the ‘true’ (pure reason). For an exploration of this \textit{The Fate of Art}. 7.

\textsuperscript{83} Critique of Judgment. §46.

This general approach understands the autonomy of art and artist as essentially definitive in that they exist independent of any rule or interest outside the activities and works themselves.

The other approach, often attributed to Hegel, understands art not first and foremost as separated from other modes of practice and reflection, but as expressing more diffuse cultural life. “The task and aim of art,” writes Hegel, “is to bring to home our sense, our feeling, and our inspiration everything which has a place in the human spirit.” Art serves to “awaken” our “slumbering feelings, inclination, and passions of every kind…” in this way it serves “to deliver to feeling and contemplation for its enjoyment whatever the spirit possesses of the essential and lofty….” Art thus completes “the natural experience of our external existence.” Art may be a unique practice with a cultural history of its own, but artworks can only be fully understood by grasping them in their essential relation to Spirit, that is, as an expression of the broader cultural forms and ways of life out of which they arise and to which they speak. While one may agree, as Hegel did with Kant, that aesthetic judgment requires an assessment of art in its own distinct mode of presentation, both aesthetic content and form is generated out of the larger sphere of the life of Spirit. As such, Hegel agrees with Kant

86 Ibid.
87 Ibid 13.
88 Even aesthetic judgement of nature is produced by, and given shape through the cultural life of human beings. As he states “... the beauty of nature appears only as a reflection of the
that the beauty experienced in great art, for instance, is a manifestation of freedom, but this freedom is conceived not as independence from external influences so much as an expansion of Spirit beyond its present limitations. 89 In short, artworks exist in and through other expressions of Spirit which give them rise, but great art moves beyond present limitations and towards less restrictive horizons. In this way art, as an expressive moment of Spirit, manifests freedom not simply as independence from, but as the expansion of, present life. 90

There have been numerous aesthetic thinkers that have drawn together these two approaches. Even before Hegel, Schiller in The Aesthetic Education of Man suggested art is of great social significance precisely because it shows itself to be a unique cultural activity which is not bound by pre-determined norms or ends. Beauty, as the epitome of art, “gives no separate, single result, either for the understanding or the will... it discovers no truth, does not help us to fulfill a single duty” but it is precisely by this freedom from these demands “that something infinite is attained.” 91 Art harmonizes the historical antagonisms between the individual and society, universal and beauty that belongs to spirit, as in complete mode [of beauty], a mode which in its substance is contained in the spirit itself.” Hegel, Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art, 2.

89 “Art by means of its representations, while remaining within the sensuous sphere, liberates man at the same time from the power of sensuousness.” Ibid. 49. See also, Martin Seel, “Active Passivity: On the Aesthetic Variant of Freedom.” Ethetika: The Central European Journal of Aesthetics. LI/VII, 2014, No.2 50th Anniversary Issue, 269-270.


particular, freedom and necessity. It is thus precisely as its own distinct activity that art prompts us toward “the possibility of becoming human beings.” Art is of august cultural value precisely because it does not serve as a means toward some external end, but presents genuine freedom as the manifestation of intrinsic human dignity. In being an end-onto-itself art is thus upheld as a model for humane culture more generally. This general approach is also shared by later philosophers of art such as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche.

In like fashion, Adorno draws together both ‘Kantian’ and ‘Hegelian’ approaches by suggesting that art bears unique significance precisely because it is free from external strictures and demands. In keeping with the Kantian tradition, for example, Adorno asserts that “Art acquires its specificity by separating itself from what it developed out of...” (AT, 3). And yet, in the same breath he declares that, “[Art] is defined by what it is not... [it] is a product of history” (AT, 3). Holding both these claims entails the dialectical assertion that, “Art is autonomous and it is not; without what is heterogeneous to it, its autonomy eludes it” (AT, 6). Adorno is not here suggesting that certain elements within artworks can be explained as the result of historical factors while other (perhaps

________________________

92 Ibid. Letter XXI

93 Ibid. Letter XX.

94 Take for example Arthur’s Schopenhauer’s account of ‘works of genius’ taken from The World as Will and Representation, “All other human works exist only for the maintenance and relief of our existence; only those here discussed do not; they alone exist for their own sake, and are to be regarded in this sense as the flower... of existence.” Arthur Schopenhauer, The World as Will and Representation, Vol 2. (Courier Corporation, 2012) 77.
‘higher’) moments transcend these historical conditions to become truly autonomous. Quite to the contrary, he asserts all art is social and historical. In every way, art exists through its relationship to society and history.\textsuperscript{95} The autonomy that art enjoys is in fact the \textit{product} of its dependence, for “[Art’s] double character as both autonomous and \textit{fait social} is incessantly reproduced at the level of its autonomy.”\textsuperscript{96} As such, “Art perceived strictly aesthetically is art aesthetically misperceived” (AT, 6) What follows from this conviction is that art’s autonomy is not a timeless truth of its essence but a contingent historical fact. It is the result of social conditions. Art, in other words, \textit{has become autonomous}, and remains autonomous precisely through the governing structures, assumptions, and practices of social life.\textsuperscript{97} All art “is located in a historically changing constellation of elements;” (AT 2) and it is those changing constellations that remain critical to grasping the meaning of art.

For Adorno, art’s autonomy is something which occurs gradually, as a distinct sphere of objects and practices becomes separated out from practical, religious, 

\textsuperscript{95} “History is the content of artworks. To analyze artworks means no less than to become conscious of the history immanently sedimented in them” (AT, 116).

\textsuperscript{96} “The artwork is related to the world by the principle that contrasts it with the world, and that is the same principle by which spirit organized the world” (AT, 5).

\textsuperscript{97} Philosophers as diverse as John Dewey, Martin Heidegger, and Arthur Danto have claimed as much. These have been corroborated by historical studies of art such as Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz’s now nearly classic work, \textit{A History of Six Ideas: An Essay in Aesthetics} (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers Group, 1980). See also Or Arthur Danto, \textit{After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History} (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1997).
scientific, and political life. It is one of the major effects of those cultural transformations of the 17th and 18th centuries which gave rise to modern society.

98 Adorno points at different times to such transformations as the emergence of the bourgeois class, industrialization, market exchange, The Enlightenment, and others. Consider, for example, (AT, 225). Such assertions should not be pigeon-holed as merely Marxist reductions of culture to economy. For other accounts of this same process that do not carry Marxist presuppositions see Steven Davies, The Philosophy of Art, (Malden MA: Blackwell, 2006) 6. and Larry Shiner, The Invention of Art: A cultural history. (University of Chicago Press, 2001).

99 For those unfamiliar with such accounts it is helpful to keep in mind the way in which the very notion of art has undergone fundamental transformation. Throughout the Greek and Latin traditions of the West the term ‘art’ (Latin ‘ars,’ and Greek ‘techne’) was not used to designate a distinct set of activities and objects but the possession of ‘skill,’ and in general the skill required to make such practical things as houses, ships, pots, and clothing. Architects, geometricians, blacksmiths, and generals were all considered ‘artists.’ What was strikingly absent from this view of the artisan was any emphasis on imagination, originality, and creativity, and especially freedom from ‘external’ demands. (Larry Shiner, The Invention of Art: A cultural history. P 23) When art was used in its nominative form its application was quite broad, and referred to objects only in order to contrast them those which are produced by nature. Art was ‘artifact’ in designating only that certain objects were the result of human production. (See Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, 73 ff.) It is only in the mid-seventeenth century in France, for instance, that the category of “the beaux-arts” or “fine arts” was brought into common usage. By the 1750s something of our modern fixed usage had come to take prominence. By the middle to late 18th century the idea of art as tied to “genius” “imagination” “pleasure” and “taste” begins to take form. (Shiner, 82) For example, since the Renaissance it had been commonplace to suggest the arts existed to “instruct and please.” It wasn’t until the middle of the 18th century, as Shiner suggests, that these two notions were seen in contrast to one another. Art became the purview of an emerging bourgeois class, who cultivated the ‘finer pleasures’ and dignified themselves by the collection and accumulation of ‘art,’ in contrast to the uncultured rabble. (Shiner, 88) In summary, it might be said with the well-known historian of art, Paul Kristeller, that, “We have to admit the conclusion, distasteful to many historians of aesthetics but grudgingly admitted by most of them, that ancient writers and thinkers though confronted with excellent works of art and quite susceptible to their charm were neither able nor eager to detach the aesthetic quality of these works from their intellectual, moral, religious, and practical function or content, or to use such an aesthetic quality as a standard for grouping the fine arts together or for making them the subject of a comprehensive philosophical interpretation.” Paul Kristeller, Renaissance Thought and the Arts. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990.) 174
Indeed, prior to the social, economic, and political transformations which birthed modernity he suggests the idea of essentially autonomous art was “inconceivable.” (AT, 225) The precipitate conditions of this are many and varied, including revolutions in the means of production and class structure, the rise of the natural sciences, the ascendency of Enlightenment notions of subjectivity and freedom, and others (AT, 1). What is significant for our purposes is the effect of these transformations, which was the generation of a cultural imagination that would understand art as defined by its independence from other spheres. Art came to be imagined as a domain essentially distinct from empirical life.

Art’s emerging autonomy was entwined with the rise of the modern ‘science’ of aesthetics. Indeed, a distinct discipline of philosophical reflection called by that name doesn’t even appear until the 18th century. What many consider the first distinctly modern concept of aesthetics, for example, was first articulated by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten in 1739. Prior to Baumgarten, aethesis and aestheticus had been used to designate forms of sensory knowledge which had never been aimed specifically toward

---

100 For others who also point in this direction see, Arthur Danto, After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History. (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1997). 3-20.

101 The term ‘empirical life’ is Adorno’s own, and is used to describe experience of the everyday in its damaged form. It is juxtaposed to non-reified ‘aesthetic’ or ‘spiritual’ experience. AT 6. This autonomy is summed up aptly in that famous 19th century slogan “l’art pour l’art.”

102 Umberto Eco, Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages. (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1986) 1-10.
discussions of beauty or the sublime, or any class of objects known as art.\textsuperscript{103} Aesthetics had been understood to denote modes of understanding which were derived from bodily sensations (e.g. touching, seeing, etc.) in contradistinction to the purely noetic powers of intellect.\textsuperscript{104} As such, aesthetics was under the province of science and metaphysics. In Baumgarten’s own \textit{Metaphysics}, and then later in his \textit{Aesthetics}, however, he begins to redeploy the term “aesthetic” to designate “sensitive cognition” the distinct orientation of which is beauty, and whose result is the feeling of pleasure.\textsuperscript{105} This systematic redefinition he believed was necessary in order to establish a theoretical science of taste, which concerned particular objects which could not be wholly grasped by metaphysical concepts.\textsuperscript{106} After receiving only limited acceptance, Baumgarten’s use of aesthetics was eventually adopted and adapted by other philosophers in an emerging philosophical discourse concerning somatic apprehension and affectual understanding, particularly in relation to the cultural domain of art.\textsuperscript{107} Aesthetics was concerned with modes of sensation, evaluation, and understanding of objects in order to provide

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid. 5.


\textsuperscript{106} For instance, see Kant’s discussion of Baumgarten’s redefinition in \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}, A 21, note.

rational accounts for experiences of pleasure and judgments of beauty.\textsuperscript{108} Aesthetics became that domain of philosophy concerned with developing theories of beauty, the sublime, etc., the paradigmatic object of which was either artworks, or objects conceived in the manner of artworks, that is as understood independently from the dictates of scientific or moral reasoning.\textsuperscript{109} Aesthetics became a formal discipline which, in a manner analogous to art, sought to understand objects divorced from ‘external’ moral, practical, or theological ends.\textsuperscript{110} It became the seemingly paradoxical science of human appreciation.\textsuperscript{111} For a time it would gain academic and social significance precisely by providing a kind of synthesis of the universal and categorical demands of science with the irreducible unrepeatability of experience. Over time, the possibility of sensuous significance itself became a kind of utopian ideal of aesthetics, a promise of reconciliation between scientific universality and the unique dignity of art and aesthetic experience.

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid. 22 ff.

\textsuperscript{109} Bernstein, The Fate of Art, 3 ff.

\textsuperscript{110} Kant’s Third Critique is one monumental example of this. Take for instance his introductory discussion, where he seeks to establish the necessity for a mediating space for cognition between pure and practical reason. Discursive reason and normative principles to guide human action. “Judgment” becomes a sphere of cognitive activity distinct from either scientific or moral reasoning.

\textsuperscript{111} Terry Eagleton states, “Aesthetics is born of the recognition that the world of perception and experience cannot simply be derived from abstract universal laws, but demands its own appropriate discourse and displays its own inner, if inferior, logic.” Terry Eagleton, The Ideology of the Aesthetic (Malden: Blackwell, 1990) 16.
As aesthetics became the principal theoretical discipline which drew from this esteemed realm it would uphold the intellectual significance of art objects precisely because of their noble remoteness from the vagaries economic, political, and scientific necessity. In its attention to such things as beauty, form, genius, and the sublime, philosophical aesthetics suggested that in experience something could be found that is ineradicably unique and free, which could be made available to reason. It was thus due more to the role of aesthetics as the intellectual mediator of autonomous art and society than to any single discovery that aesthetics enjoyed its intellectual stature. It could be said philosophical aesthetics owed its very existence to the perceived need for mediating art and the scientific, ethical, practical, and political orientations of modern life. By late modernity, however, Adorno suggests that this possibility was brought into serious doubt. (AT, 342) Along with the domain of art its very “right to exist” has been called into question. (AT, 1) Against this ‘science of aesthetics,’ Adorno suggests art remains autonomous not because it possesses its own unique substance. Art remains only as that which has been “separated out from empirical reality” by serving “no aim that is useful for preservation and life.” (AT, 152) While philosophical aesthetics owed its existence to a need for grasping the meaning of autonomous art, it is only that autonomy which offers any substantive concept of art. Nevertheless, it is art’s abiding purposelessness vis-à-vis the dominant spheres of social life that makes it so necessary in our age of reification.

---

112 Terry Eagleton, The Ideology of the Aesthetic, 4-12.
Autonomous Art and Disenchantment

As was touched upon in the introduction, Adorno’s account of art’s autonomy resonates strongly with the classical interpretation of the emergence of modern society established by Max Weber.\(^{113}\) Indeed, Adorno’s general conception of modernity can be understood as a critical synthesis of the analyses of Marx and Weber.\(^{114}\) In Weber’s well-known account, modern social order results from a gradual transformation of pre-modern social life by ‘means-ends’ or ‘instrumental’ (Zweckrationalität) modes of discursive practice. In a growing range of contexts the goal of manipulation, control, and predictability replaces the ‘value-rationality’ (Wertrationalität) which had organized activities according to deeply held beliefs, or transcendent purposes.\(^{115}\) The historical triumph of this process is seen in the advent of political bureaucracy, capitalist systems

\(^{113}\) Ibid 293. That Adorno and others at the Frankfurt school have drawn from Weber’s assessment has been established, and is evident in, for example, the opening chapters of Dialectic of Enlightenment which impugn the professed humanistic ideals of Enlightenment as inseparable from the trajectory of rationalization. See, for example, Harvey C. Greisman, George Ritzer “Max Weber, critical theory, and the administered world” Qualitative Sociology, March 1981, Vol. 4 Issue 1 34-55. See also DoE, Chapter 1.


of exchange, and institutionalized scientific practice.\footnote{116}{See “Science as a Vocation” in \textit{From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology}, Trans. And ed. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (London, Routledge, 1948). 129-156} Central to the ascendency of such systems, Weber suggests, is the differentiation of social practices into their own discrete domains, each which is ordered by its own immanent norms and ends which are severed from any comprehensive or “transcendent” beliefs as to the ends of human life.\footnote{117}{Ibid 139.} Those “transcendent value” which had ordered society as a whole thus give way to a multiplicity of independent spheres which are guided by their own purely functional ends, such as efficiency, productivity, and predictive control.\footnote{118}{In the words of Weber, instrumental rationality seeks, “methodological attainment of a definitely given and practical end by means of an increasingly precise calculation of adequate means.” Max Weber, \textit{The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism}. (New York, Scribners 1958) 293.} Capitalism, for example, became an economic system which depends upon the accumulation, storing, investment, and disposition of wealth in ways that are not directly related to individual pleasure or the attainment of higher goods. In order to sustain one’s wellbeing money and goods have to be procured \textit{in the abstract}, in the forms of labor-value, income, and profit. In turn money takes on abstract \textit{economic value} which as such is severed from issues concerning moral or spiritual character. Economic and ethical principles \textit{diverge}. Individuals also are required to conform to an instrumentalist demand for capital accumulation \textit{in the abstract} in order to survive.
What Weber ultimately saw in the shift from transcendent to instrumental values and the differentiation of spheres was an alteration in the way in which meaning is attached to human actions, persons, and their environment. Its widespread accumulative effect being a fundamental transformation in the way everyday life is experienced. As the modern social institutions of government, education, and economy have increasingly taken a Zweckrational form they have become unrelenting mechanisms which bear no reference to higher values or purposes. The individual is likewise pressed to commit to pursue the means of life in a way that is severed from the possibility of attaining any ultimately meaningful ends. These social conditions, Weber suggests, results in nothing other than “the disenchantment of the world.” As Weber describes it, disenchantment is both a manifestation of triumph and tragedy. It is triumph because the modern individual has come to see “that if one but wished one could learn [the general conditions of the world] at any time.” Scientific reason has given moderns incredible control over nature and have rid us of fear by demonstrating that “there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play,” and that “one can, in principle, master all things by calculation.” At the same time, Weber suggests, we find ourselves locked in an “iron cage” because our pursuits and commitments

---


120 Ibid.

121 Ibid.
“cannot directly be related to the highest spiritual values.” The great institutions of modern life go on their way irrespective of individuals and their beliefs. In this way, Weber saw the blazing triumph of modernity becomes at the same time a passage into “the polar night of icy darkness.”

Adorno agrees with the general assessment of modern life provided by Weber. As Adorno and Horkheimer argue in Dialectic of Enlightenment, “the inexorable pursuit of liberation from, and mastery over, nature has taken the path, discursive, calculating, instrumental reason” (DoE, 4) This is what Adorno calls in Negative Dialectics “identity thinking” which he suggests has become for moderns virtually irresistible (ND, 358). As we saw in the last chapter, the paradoxical character of disenchantment was adumbrated in Kant’s dual sense that “we are at home in the world” and yet haunted by “metaphysical despair.” Weber’s iron cage, Adorno believes, is prefigured in “the Kantian Block.” Our reflexive belief that in principle all things are transparent to human rationality involves that closure of distance wherein rational methods are believed to present the world as fully open to view. Calculating reason and the world become in principle identical. There remain no essentially mysterious or hidden powers because in principle “all things are mastered by calculation.” At the same time, Adorno

122 Ibid. 137,138.


124 See last chapter.

suggests that this mastery leaves us cut off from any sources of meaning that transcend the self. What is not in principle accounted for by rationalized methods is deemed incoherent, or inadequate for justifying our practical orientations. There is as such no ultimate reason or motive for pursuing one way of life over another, no highest value which transcends one’s own self. This is the nihilistic apogee of rationalization. Adorno goes beyond Weber, however, by presenting a philosophical critique of rationalization. In doing so he hopes to demonstrate that the phenomenological condition of present society – disenchantment, reification - is neither complete nor irreversible. The way things appear are an appearance.

Which leads us back to the phenomenon of autonomous art. As has been suggested, the transformation of social life into instrumentally oriented social spheres produces autonomous art as a sphere of activity separate from, for example, science, morality, and politics; but it also leaves art as a repository for what was is expelled by these other spheres. As such, the domain of autonomous art and aesthetic reflection contains modes of thought, language, frameworks, and postures that continue within modern societies. By the mere fact of their continued existence as this repository they

---

126 This is the problem of “vocation” which Weber brings to the fore in his lecture. One can see here the shadow of nihilism here, one which Adorno suggests is implicit in Kant and which becomes explicit in Nietzsche and Heidegger. For a thorough investigation of these themes read J.M. Bernstein’s Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 1-30.

127 “What art, notably the art decried as nihilistic, says in refraining from judgments is that everything is not just nothing.” (AT, 404).
show rationalization to be incomplete and resist the totalizing reifying trajectory of rationalization. As social life becomes dominated by an instrumentalist logic the natural world will increasingly appear to be a causally determined nexus that is in principle transparent to reason, yet void of higher values. Autonomous art, however, will remain as a domain of creativity, freedom, and expression. What is important is that, for Adorno, such characteristics of art will prove, on careful consideration, not to be fundamentally irrational. Aesthetic theory, when illuminated by a critique of identity thinking, will demonstrate that the dis-integrated character of art, science, economics, politics, amounts to their distortion. It will demonstrate, for instance that the cleavage between art and science to be the result of an unnatural rending apart of these domains which distorts each. Aesthetic reflection uncovers the wound of art which in turn exposes experience as damaged. Thus, even though art has become autonomous by means of rationalization it will at the same time stand opposed to it. This amounts to an inversion of traditional philosophical aesthetics because reflection on autonomous art becomes not reflection on the esteemed sphere of art and aesthetic experience but insight into the conditions of empirical life as in a reverse negative image. For, as he puts it, “everything that artworks contain with regard to form and materials spirit and

---

128 I understand Adorno to take aesthetic reflection to be nothing other critical attention toward objects as if they are art.

129 “The separation of the aesthetic sphere from the empirical constitutes art” (AT, 122).

130 “The prevailing antithesis between art and, for instance, science, which rends the two apart as areas of culture,” he suggests, “finally causes them, through their internal tendencies as exact opposites to converge” (DoE, 13).
subject matter, has emigrated from reality into the artworks and in them has divested itself of its reality.” (AT, 103)

From all this it should be clear that Adorno does not principally understand art’s autonomy to have been accomplished by new artistic methods or materials, or by a shift of themes which occupy its content. Nor is it the result of the birth of new purposes for art, as it finds freedom from externally imposed ends. Art, emerges as a domain unto itself precisely because it contains what has been expelled by the dominant spheres of culture. It exists as “the determinate negation of a determinate society” to use dialectical parlance (AT, 226). It is this which leads Adorno to regard autonomous art as a ‘wound,’ for it exists as an objective domain of practice, experience, and reflection which runs against the conditions which have produced rationalized life. Adorno’s hope is that this wound may awaken individuals to the realization that our experience of life is at least incomplete and possibly in a state of positive suffering. In this way it may lead us to “healing awareness.”

131 “There is nothing pure, nothing structured strictly according to its own immanent law, that does not implicitly criticize the debasement of a situation evolving in the direction of a total exchange society in which everything is heteronomously defined.” AT 226.

132 Since any genuine reflection upon human life must take account of its vulnerable bodily nature, Adorno remains convinced that a central demand placed upon philosophy, and indeed all reflection, must be concern with the ways in which living beings (human and otherwise) are being made to suffer. Adorno language of “damage” “injury” and “wound” prompt us to consider this, and draws the presence of fleshly, living, vulnerable bodies into proximity with his concerns as to the nature of experience itself. Since it is Adorno’s conviction that the predominant social mechanisms which have made modern life possible inevitably tend towards the reification of experience, reducing living beings to brute ‘dead’ objects, speaking of ‘wounds’ runs against the grain of reified experience. It prompts us to consider how the dominant
Autonomous Art as Oppositional

How, precisely, does autonomous art oppose reification? To understand this we must first grasp more specifically what he understands identity thinking to be and how it results in damaged experience. Once this is made clear we can then turn to three ways in which autonomous art resists identity thinking. As Adorno sees it, there is a certain homology between rationalized life and those forms of thought and experience which are now available to us. One of these he describes as the dominance of the universal over the particular. “Logical universality tends to predominate in individual experience,” He avers (ND, 46). This involves a relation between language in the form of rational concepts, laws, and categories, and the sensuous particulars which belong to individual experience. In rationalized life, universals are taken to be active, immaterial, and constitutive while somatic particulars are taken to be passive, material, and constituted. The nature of this relation is one of domination and coercion and is imagery of social life as fundamentally incorporeal may itself share in this process. It is not difficult to see how the predominant social imaginations of both the political Left and Right fail to reckon with the bodily character of social life. For example, the predominance of the notion of social ‘systems’ rather than ‘social bodies’ (conceived in either in collectivist or liberal terms) betrays an imagination of social life increasingly stripped of any recognition that it is comprised of, and thus an extension of, the life of living fleshly persons. On a similar note, J.M Bernstein has argued that it is Adorno’s concern about the predominance of formal, systemic, or contractual depictions of social harm that leads him to avoid terms such as ‘injustice,’ preferring instead terms such as ‘harm.’ For the term ‘injustice’ in its current usages within moral discourse only tends to underwrite formal and procedural conceptions of ethical demand. This inevitably silences the cries of actual living persons. Rectification of injustice tends to be imagined as the restoration of a system of procedurally defined rights and duties rather than a response to the actual cries of suffering creatures. See J.M. Bernstein’s “Suffering Injustice: Misrecognition as Moral Injury in Critical Theory” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* Vol. 13(3), 304ff.
pervasive in rationalized life (ND, 316). It is something that defines experience (ND, 300).

Assertions such as these require some explanation. How is that reason in the form of concepts, for example, is a form of the coercion of the universal? To grasp this we must look closer at the use of grammar to speak of, and reason to understand, experience. Consider, for example, that in such basic judgements as “The dog is white” the syntactical structure provides for the possibility of identifying a manifold of particulars by means of general terms (e.g. ‘dog’ or ‘white’). It is the general nature of these terms, that is, that they refer to particulars by way of generalizations, which enables communication. Their reiterability is based upon the fact that such terms are taken to cover multiple instantiations (ND, 56). Language, we might say, involves an implicit movement away from particulars since it is by way of common general terms, which are used to “cover” multiple particular instances, that contingent and variable moments of experience become communicable. This is a process that is both unavoidable and necessary for the development of language and, in greater refinement, reason (DoE, 18-19). Reasoning about colors and dogs requires this same movement away from particulars since reasoning about experience is only possible by the employment of abstract terms. Every explanandum requires an explanans, and this explanans is of necessity more universal in form. Even basic statements of predication such as “The dog is white” involve an assertion which identifies a particular by means of a term which is by necessity more universal. Predication involves the identification of particulars by universals. Adorno notes, “The copula says: It is so, not otherwise... the
will to identity works in every synthesis” (ND, 151). It is important to recognize that 
Adorno is not rejecting this movement towards universality per se, nor should one 
assume his eventual challenge to this process is beholden to any metaphysical 
nominalism, irrationalism, or nihilism (DoE, 31-32). What he does suggest is that there 
underlies in this linguistic dependence on generality a danger, one that is implicit in 
predicative grammar itself and which comes to fruition in identity thinking. This is the 
assumption that in some way the general terms which provide the explanandum 
“cover” the explans “without remainder” (ND, 105). On the surface this concern of 
Adorno’s seems like an obvious case of overreaching. Who, for instance, actually 
believes the general terms ‘dog’ and ‘white’ in any way ‘exhaust’ the furry white animal 
that sits before me? Taken in isolation Adorno’s claim that “objects do not go into 
concepts without leaving a remainder” seems both obvious and trivial (ND, 5). What is 
often missed in understanding Adorno’s treatment of these matters (which his own 
language can encourage, unfortunately) is that what is discussed in terms of singularities 
such as “the concept” concerns problems that become clear only when treated 
accumulatively. Statements such as “The dog is white” may be perfectly adequate as an 
employment of ordinary predicative grammar (as a statement that is to be judged true 
or false) or as an effort to locate a lost pet (as a statement given its sense by its ‘use’). It 
is quite another thing to say that since individual statements like “The dog is white” 
“The dog is 50 lbs.” and “The dog is furry” are each true of that particular furry white 
creature before me, then the contents of individual experience, taken accumulatively,
must *in principle* be equivalent to all “properties put into words.”\(^{133}\) Certainly this is not the case, since no accumulation of truth statements about the dog before me can ever be identical to the individual experience of this particular creature. But if this is not the case what precisely *is* the difference? What is ‘the remainder,’ the ‘non-identity’ that cannot be spoken? Whatever it is, by necessity it would be ‘unutterable.’\(^{134}\) What Adorno wishes us to see in challenging identity thinking is that there is something essentially ‘non-identical’ about the experience of this particular furry creature. In other words, there remains a non-identical character to objects of experience which opposes the claim that judgments which are made possible by universals are true because they grasp the essential nature of particular things. There must be something true of objects, that is something of their objectivity that cannot be “covered” by universals. Concepts are unable to “exhaust the thing conceived” (ND, 5). As such, he suggests, “No object is wholly known” (ND, 14).

What would lead one to even suppose that reason or language and objects of experience are in principle identical? The answer Adorno suggests is *the conditions of experience brought on by disenchantment*. As Weber had asserted, disenchantment is a condition of experience which presents the world as not beholden to any mysterious or hidden powers, since “in principle all things can be mastered by calculation.”


\(^{134}\) This is the question Adorno suggests when revising Wittgenstein’s well known concluding line from the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, “Wherof one cannot speak, therof one must remain silent.” Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus* (Harcourt, Brace: 1922) 189. Adorno suggests negative dialectics is a way in which can “uttering the unutterable.” (ND 9)
Adorno sees here is that the disenchanted vision, which presents the world as in principle able to be mastered by instrumental means, produces a generalized notion that the contents of individual experience must be, in principle, identical with reason. All things must be essentially transparent and fully open to view. As such, “It is the identity of mind and its correlative, the unity of nature” which represses the non-identical. (DoE, 6) It is by means of rationalization that the “The manifold affinities between existing things are supplanted by the single relationship between the subject who confers meaning and the meaningless object, between rational significance and its accidental bearer.” (DoE, 7) The universal as such dominates particulars and objects become reified, thing-like, and dead.

Another way of addressing this is to say, disenchantedment produces a shift in the way objects of experience appear. Let’s return to the furry white dog. It is the case that for the statement “The dog is white” to be true there must be some sort of relation or association between the words “dog” or “white” and the particular furry creature before me; the question is of course what exactly is this relation? We might ask, in other words, what do concepts do when referring to particulars of experience? It is Adorno’s contention that Identity thinking operates upon the assumption that the relation of subject and object is constituted in a certain way. The statement “The dog is white” works as a form of knowledge about objects of experience by identifying a distinct universal property (the color white). This work is possible because appearances are ultimately explainable as properties which adhere in objects. Such properties can be effectively taken up by concepts like “dog” and “white” because they are essentially of
the same form. Experience, in other words, is constituted as the appearance of those properties which exist as essentially universal, abstract, and immaterial. Because of this, for example, the property ‘white’ might be one that happens to be possessed by this particular dog, but it can, in principle, be possessed by any number of other particular objects. This leads to the experience of this particular furry creature as essentially one of an aggregation of abstract universals.

One should not treat this example of identity thinking as primarily concerning the proper logic of predicative statements. What is important for Adorno is how experience appears to reason. The experience of the “homogeneity of the general and the particular” is built upon the kind of work that the rational employment of concepts are assumed to accomplish. The act of “deducing the particular from the universal” is based upon the notion that if predicative statements share the same syntactical and logical form they must all be doing the same work, that is, identifying a certain identical property, in the same way, by the same term (DoE, 64). If this is assumed, then all predicative statements that are formally identical could be applied such that that those things to which they refer become exchangeable. To say this somewhat differently, the universality of concepts is taken as guaranteed by the fungibility of their referents. Thought here has taken a certain form; which conceives conceptual universality in terms of formal consistency, logical coherence, and equal exchange. What Adorno wants us to see is that this particular form of the universal is an

135 “The citizen see the world as made a priori of the stuff from which he himself constructs it.” (DoE, 65)
appearance conditioned by experience. There is a curious homology between the work reason is assumed to do, how objects of experience appear, and the rationalized structures within which everyday life has been organized. In this case, the homology is one between reason and the abstract principles of exchange.

[T]he reduction of human labor to the abstract universal concept of average working hours is fundamentally akin to the principle of identification. Barter is the social model of the principle and without the principle there would be no barter (ND, 146).

Adorno is not here suggesting that labor ‘produces’ logic, that would be a crude over-simplification and ‘vulgar Marxism’ (ND, 379). What Adorno is trying to address, again, is the way experience appears to reason. That is, what concepts, rules, laws, methods, and the like are taken to be and do. That the concept is taken to be ‘universal’ precisely on the grounds of exchange serves as a representation of the form of experience which dominates our age and which has resulted in disenchantment. To those convinced that reason is something essentially immutable and unhistorical these claims may appear dubious. It would be Adorno’s rejoinder to remind us that such claims

---

136 “In thought, human beings distance themselves from nature in order to arrange it in such a way that it can be mastered. Like the material tool which, as a thing, is held fast as that thing in different situations and thereby separates the world, as something chaotic, multiple, and disparate, from that which is known, single and identical, the concept is the idea-tool which fits into things at the very point from which one can take hold of them. Though thus becomes illusory whenever it seeks to deny its function of separating, distancing, and objectifying” (DoE, 31).
assumptions about reason are not themselves necessarily rational but grounded in *an appearance*, one which largely remains unquestioned by the already enacted diremption of subject and object, universal and particular. It is an assumption rooted in a belief, confirmed again and again by the institutionalized practices of modern society that reason is something that belongs essentially to consciousness and through its universal replicability and power shows itself to be stable and impervious to change. This again is an issue of how reason appears. It concerns an experience of self and world wherein universality is seen to be guaranteed by fungibility. This in turn produces certain assumptions as to the kind of work reason accomplishes. As Adorno notes, “An atom is not smashed as a representative but as a specimen of matter, and the rabbit suffering the torment of the laboratory is seen not as a representative, but mistakenly, as a mere exemplar” (DoE, 7). In this situation the “The semblance and the truth of thought entwine” as reification (ND, 5).

What is important for us to consider about this phenomenological condition is that it denies any semematic character to objects of experience. If semblance is understood as veiled appearance or the trace of the inapproachable, its disappearance would amount to an experience of objects appearing to be utterly transparent to reason.\(^\text{137}\) That is, objects of experience would be regarded as in principle isomorphic

---

\(^\text{137}\) Following Kant (*Critique of Judgement, part 1*) and Hegel (LoK Introduction) Adorno links semblance (*Schein*) with beauty (*Schöne*) understanding by this that the beautiful can be understood as that which pleases without having before us any concept or interest, such as the purpose or utility of the object portrayed. What is experienced as beautiful is thus counted as the ‘appearance’ (*Schein*) of the object apart from any scientific-rational determination as it what it is or practical account of what it is for. Semblance (*Schein*) is precisely the object
with reason (in the form of categories, concepts, and laws) and reason itself would be understood as purely a function of consciousness. If these are assumed, then the contents of experience would be regarded as in principle identical with the subject. Identity thinking is based upon a presumption as to an exhaustive correspondence between universals and those to which they are applied. The universal, in other words, is taken to say everything there is to say about a particular in that certain respect, and objects of experience are taken to be passive instantiations or examples of that universal. What is denied here is the possibility that objects of experience are more

---

138 Hegel, “In pressing forward to its true existence, consciousness will arrive at a point at which it gets rid of its semblance of being burdened with something alien, with what is only for it, and some sort of ‘other’ at a point where appearance becomes identical with essence, so that its exposition will coincide at just this point with the authentic Science of Spirit.” G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* Trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977) 57.

than what we can say of them. How then might art resist this condition by bringing damaged experience to healing awareness? Adorno considers this by exploring the manner in which art remains a harbinger of semblance in a disenchanted age.

(1) The Semblance of Particularity: As Adorno sees it, the domination of the particular by the universal is a condition of experience enforced by the governing institutions and practices of economic, political, and social life. In the face of this situation autonomous art stands opposed, as a sphere governed by the primacy of the particular. If rationalized life upholds the principle of ‘being-for-other,’ guaranteed by universals which serve as principles of identification, autonomous art presents objects as essentially constituted by the particular and cannot be exchanged. “If in empirical reality everything has become fungible, art holds up to the world of everything-for-something-else images of what it itself would be if it were emancipated from the schemata of imposed identification” (AT, 83). Art always takes the form of this poem, this painting, or that musical piece. Each piece is unique unto itself and presents itself as its own whole. Reflection on art objects as such cannot be maintained through any systematic employment of abstract universals (e.g. quantitative methods, algorithms, laws, and the like). Artworks appear in this way as idiosyncratic (AT, 42). They resist explication by any pre-reflective employment of ready-made concepts (ND, 14). Art “does not reveal itself to interpretation with a single stroke” (AT, 124). It refuses “to let itself be nailed down either as an entity or as a universal concept.” As such, when taken seriously, they gain preponderance in relation to subjects. “The subject wants to fall silent by way of the work” (AT, 73). As such they “epitomize the unsubsumable” (AT,
If ready-made universals are shown to be inadequate in comprehending artworks, then they serve to challenge “the prevailing principle of reality” (AT, 83).

Adorno is not here claiming that artworks present ‘particulars as such’ in some unmediated form. Conceptual mediation in aesthetic reflection demands the employment of concepts and other such universals. Aesthetic reflection’s claim to such objects is belied, however, if it seeks to treat artworks instantiations of, or dictated by, those universals (AT, 351). Universals, in other words, are understood as beholden to their objects. Aesthetic reflection ultimately requires a skill of reading objects and activities in a way that concepts, understanding, and explanation are configured according to the work’s own specific form and content. As such “Art holds up to the world of everything-for-something-else images of what it itself would be if it were emancipated from the schemata of imposed identification” (AT, 83). They resist fungibility. This is in part guaranteed by the material character of art not as a passive or inert substratum, that is as material without any intrinsic quality, but as voice, paint, bodily rhythm and so forth. In contrast to mass produced art, autonomous art is inextricably attached to particular sensuous objects and activities, which are presented as intrinsically meaningful. That is, they invite forms of attention, reflection, and response that pursue understanding through attention and receptivity. Language and concepts as such are pressed to accomplish other kinds of work. Undoubtedly, “art at every point participates in concepts” but these concepts must be, reversed in that they are employed towards the “telos of the particular” (AT, 336). Subjects are consequently
lead to treat them as “qualitatively other than collections of characteristics shared by empirical objects” (AT, 96).

It is in artwork’s adherence to the authority of the particular, that is, their resistance to the pre-reflective application of universals, that they manifest semblance (AT, 100). If semblance presents a “trace of the inapproachable” then artworks bear semblance because something in them manifests at a distance. It is indeed the non-identical that appears, not as an additional substance, but as “more” indicated by the limits of identity thinking itself. The need to adapt and strain, to reflect, reconsider, and respond manifests another possibility for the way in which objects may appear. Semblance appears as the disclosure of truth in revealing the untruth of reified experience. He notes, “The untruth attacked by art” as such “is not rationality but rationality’s rigid opposition to the particular” (AT, 98). This untruth is exposed for what it is by the manner in which artworks always appear say “more” (AT, 78). In this way “Artworks are plenipotentiaries of things that are no longer distorted by exchange, profit, and the false needs of a degraded humanity. In the context of total semblance, art’s semblance of being-in-itself is the mask of truth” (AT, 227). As particulars that resist identification with universals artworks also manifest their semblance-character through their indeterminacy.

(2) The Semblance of indeterminacy. As we have seen, Adorno takes identity thinking to be the mastery of sensuous particulars through their being brought under universals. What is gained through this process is determinacy in that what is scattered and variable, qualitative and temporal, is made intelligible and communicable by means
of clearly defined replicable terms. He sees here again a certain homology between the work that concepts are believed to accomplish (the proper determination of their contents) and the way in which rationalized forms of social life have been organized.

“At the heart of the economy is a process of concentration and centralization that has the power to absorb what is scattered” (AT 31). This is made possible by abstract units of equivalence aimed toward the end of “manipulation and administration” (AT, 65). The “administered world” is one wherein everything has been clearly delimited, situated, and brought under effective control. As a result our world appears as one wherein there are in principle no mysteries, nothing that is hidden essentially to reason. In this situation autonomous art emerges as a repository of objects and activities that are irreducibly indeterminate and enigmatical in character.

“Artworks,” Adorno notes, “share with enigmas the duality of being determinate and indeterminate. They are question marks, not univocal even through synthesis” (AT, 124). The questions they pose are not just questions of composition but of ‘truth content’ (AT, 127). That is, they pose ultimate questions of meaning and truth. These are questions, however, for which no discursive answer can be given (AT, 127). What is often suggested as the ‘irrationality’ of artworks is simply their resistance to being explained by scientific, psychological, or historical methods. This, however, derives not from their irrationality, but from the indeterminacy of their medium of expression. “Art

---

140 “For the sake of universal equivalence and comparability this principle depreciates qualitative definitions everywhere; its tendency is to bring all things down to one level” (ND, 94).
becomes enigma,” Adorno writes, “because it appears to have solved what is enigmatical in existence, while the enigma in the merely existing is forgotten as a result of its overwhelming ossification” (AT, 126). Artworks present “purpose” in that they are objects which are the products of intent, and yet their “meaning” as objects eludes us. What they are and what they mean cannot be wholly put into words. As such they speak to the possibility that genuine reflection and judgement entail attention to what is beyond determination of particulars by generalizable procedures. If it has become impossible for to present itself in ways explicable to science this may not be an indictment upon art, but manifestation of the insufficiency of our current modes of apprehending objects of experience. The more administered our world has become, that is the more that things have been given their predetermined place “the more impoverished are the experiences of which the body is capable” (DoE, 28). As such the qualitative character of experience, the recognition of its richness and depths, has sacrificed by conversion into highly determined functions of situated by social demand. It is the enigmatic character of art that resists this. The semematic character is manifest in the manner in which such artworks appear to pose these questions. That is they are bound to art as works of expression. “The enigmatic quality prompts art to articulate itself immanently, acquiring meaning by giving expression to its glaring lack of meaning” (AT 185). This in turn leads to the phenomenon of expression.

(3) The Semblance of expression: Autonomous art communicates through expression, that is, by way of its particular material objects are presented as possessing intrinsic meaning. Aesthetic form is implicitly a mode of communication. Artworks, he
suggest, ‘are alive in that they speak in a fashion that is denied to natural objects and the subjects who make them. They speak by virtue of the communication of everything particular in them’ (AT, 5). To say this somewhat differently, what is meant by the artwork cannot be grasped independently of what the work is. If expression means literally to ‘press-out’ the meaning of artworks is only a direct extension, and intimately tied to the work itself. Art ‘speaks’ through its form, and as such it ‘meaning’ cannot be separated and affixed and then reduced to independent discursive structures. Art’s ability to speak in a manner that is recognized not as reducible to subject, but as irreducibly object, and object-as-speech Adorno calls ‘eloquence.’ Herein meaning is perceived as manifest intrinsically, as a dynamic movement of form and content within the shifting nexus of the work’s own elements (AT, 110). Autonomous art has no voice apart from this intrinsic nexus, and as such there is no ‘meaning’ that can be ultimately abstracted into formal principles or rules. Unlike dominant modes of communication which guarantee meaning by pre-established discursive patterns (e.g. intersubjective agreement, ‘use,’ logical coherency etc.) autonomous art is grasped only by focusing one’s attention upon the forms which arise in the particular work itself. Artworks as such cannot be reduced to exemplars, signs, or symbols of some universal which they instantiate. Another way of putting this is that in autonomous art form and content are

141 “Through expression art closes itself off to being-for-another, which always threatens to engulf it, and becomes eloquent in itself: This is art’s mimetic consummation. Its expression is the antithesis of expressing something” (AT, 112).
ultimately inextricable. Form determines content and content form in a nexus of expression (AT, 335). This requires aesthetic reflection to adopt modes of understanding which attend to the specific character of the elements of each artwork as its own exemplar. There is no ‘meaning’ to music, or painting, or dance which is ultimately separable from the particular existence of the work as expression. Expression as such is a presentation of meaning, a communication, which resists abstraction. If aesthetic reflection requires invocation of universals, as something which is required for rational understanding and reflection, the universals invoked by aesthetic reflection remain bound to the particular character of the artwork as a nexus of meaning.

This resistance to separation and abstraction is crucial, because as we have seen it is precisely separation and abstraction which leaves objects mute (AT, 79). As art is the presentation of meaning by way expression, that is by a presentation of objects and activities as if they bear intrinsic meaning, aesthetic reflection is bound to return again and again to artworks, judging its own understanding against that nexus of elements which had made possible its expression. As such, Adorno suggests that autonomous art

142 “Semblance is not the characteristic formalis of artworks but rather materialis, the trace of the damage artworks want to revoke” (AT, 107).

143 “meaning summons into appearance what appearance otherwise obstructs. This is the purpose of the organization of an artwork, of bringing its elements together into an eloquent relation. Yet it is difficult through critical examination to distinguish this aim from the affirmative semblance of the actuality of meaning in a fashion that would be definitive enough to satisfy the philosophical construction of concepts” (AT, 105).

144 “Art is imitation exclusively as the imitation of an objective expression, remote from psychology, which the sensorium was perhaps once conscious in the world and which now subsists only in artworks” (AT, 112).
presents, as far as possible, what has been denied of damage experience: a site of encounter with *expressive particulars*. If reification has rendered the objects of experience mute, “art seeks to make this muteness eloquent” (AT, 78). It seeks to present objects of experience as if they might communicate in and of themselves. In this way art parodies theology, for objects are seen to participate in a divine language. “With human means art wants to realize the language of what is not human” (AT, 78). Artworks suggest a world wherein each thing communicates its own divine name.  

What is reflected in this non-discursive language is the possibility of expression as an index of truth. Communication as expression consummates not in ‘understanding’ or intersubjective ‘recognition’ but in the full self-expression of the object and reception by the subject. This, in turn, manifests semblance because the object’s appearance is understood as a sensuous manifestation something hidden, something which belongs to the depths of the thing. As such artworks “produce their own transcendence” (AT, 78). This transcendence he describes as their “eloquence, their script,” which he admits must be “a script with a broken or veiled meaning” (AT, 78).

For Adorno this oppositional character of autonomous art is always fragile, in flux and prone to losing itself by the overriding pressures of rationalized society. Artworks can “awaken” subjects to this damaged condition but their ability to do so stands in direct proportionate to their ability to resist being assumed into the culture

---

145 “The total subjective elaboration of art as a non-conceptual language is the only figure, at the contemporary stage of rationality, in which something like the language of divine creation is reflected, qualified by the paradox that what is reflected is blocked.” (AT, 78). 

95
industry, consumed as commodities, or reduced to kitsch. Autonomous art is always in danger of degenerating into entertainment, the difference between these two entirely bearing on their “truth content,” that is, by their ability to break through the reifying conditions of experience. This ability to awaken us to the truth of things is predicated on the primacy of the particular, the willingness to encounter the enigmatic, and allow expression to give voice to our own suffering.\textsuperscript{146}

Adorno saw this fragility played out repeatedly, for instance with short and unfortunate life of the Surrealist movement, through painters such as André Breton, Salvador Dali, André Masson. Breton, ‘the father of surrealism,’ sought in his work to unleash the power of the unconscious as a means of freeing persons from the deadening restrictions and taboos of society. Drawing from the Romantic tradition and Freud he emphasized the power of imagination, believing that it could be unlocked through bypassing reason’s dominant forms of representation. This could be accomplished by the power of images and words to “shock” consciousness, interrupting the homogenous character of everyday life.\textsuperscript{147} The works of Breton and Masson present the stuff of life as only a deadened husk. Once recognized this husk might be properly tossed away. Adorno recognized in the surrealist movement a genuine effort to resist the dominant social mechanisms which had produced reified experience. Their works

\textsuperscript{146}“The need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth. For suffering is objectivity that weighs upon the subject; its most subjective experience, its expression, is objectively conveyed” (ND, 18)

\textsuperscript{147} Consider \textit{Martinique: Snake Charmer}, by André Breton and André Masson. 1941. (University of Texas Press, 2008).
present an occasion for genuine disclosure through disrupting the ‘system’ of modern life. He writes,

The tension in Surrealism that is discharged in shock is the tension between schizophrenia and reification; hence it is specifically not a tension of psychological inspiration. In the face of total reification… a subject that has become absolute, that has full control of itself and is free of all consideration of the empirical world, reveals itself to be inanimate, something virtually dead...

In resisting the psychological account of their work Adorno presses the point, “These images are not images of something inward... they are historical images in which the subject’s innermost core becomes aware that it is something external, an imitation of something social and historical” (NtL, 88-89). Adorno sees in the Surrealist movement a genuine attempt to resist reification by in effect ‘turning the subject inside out.’ That is they awaken subjects to the realization that their current modes of life, practiced habits, and ordinary experience is not only the only conceivable alternative, but that in this condition one’s own life appears “inanimate, something virtually dead.” To gaze upon Masson’s The Labyrinth presumably reveals the mundane repetition and hum-drum quality of our administered life for what it is. In this way disclosure can occur through the works themselves. They hold out promises of another form of life and thus serve as “protests” against the present (AT, 229).

---

Before continuing further we must move now to the works of Hans Urs von Balthasar. As we shall see Adorno’s account of the ‘decay of aura’ is echoed in Balthasar’s understanding of the ‘eclipse of glory.’ He also follows Adorno in reading this eclipse in an *epochal* fashion, suggesting damaged experience is manifest in an ‘alienated aesthetic.’ As we shall see, while their accounts presume different methods, language and guiding concerns, they remain strongly corroborative.
CHAPTER 3

BALTHASAR AND BEAUTY DISMEMBERED

“She will not allow herself to be separated and banned from her two sisters without taking them along with herself in an act of mysterious vengeance.”

— Hans Urs von Balthasar

Adorno finds reification, or damaged experience, to be an effect of the rending of art and life as they are embodied in the dominant spheres of society. The existence of autonomous art is thus counted a ‘wound’ marking the injuring of experience; a wound which was made possible by societal rationalization and the twisting of those forms of life and practice which serve to condition experience. Since, in this situation, art has become a repository of those forms of experience that have expelled from dominant (rationalized) domains of social life it continues to exist largely as a form of fragile opposition to rationalized society. Now that this has been established we can turn to a diagnosis of our present conditions of experience provided by Hans Urs von Balthasar. While Balthasar’s theoretical approach, terminology, and underlying concerns are undoubtedly different than Adorno’s, we shall find that between them substantial agreement in their overarching diagnoses of our present condition. To list them: (1) Both understand present experience to be damaged in some form. Adorno understands this in terms of reification, and Balthasar in terms of a failure of perception
but as we shall see there are strong resonances between them. (2) Both believe this damage has been made possible by a kind of forgetting. Both also understand this forgetting not in predominantly psychological, but socio-historical terms. For Adorno this forgetting is constituted by failing to consider the presence of the other aspects which constitutes objects of experience, and for Balthasar this forgetting is constituted by a failure of *traditio*, but Adorno’s language of epochal forgetting would be an appropriate term covering both his and Balthasar’s understanding of this. (3) Both see this damage as traceable historically by the emergence of the peculiarly modern notion of art and the aesthetic as autonomous domains. Their accounts of damaged experience thus trace the course of the development of art and aesthetic in their gradual alienation from other spheres, practices, and modes of life. (4) Both also see this damage as manifest ‘phenomenologically’ in the loss of the semblematic character of objects of experience. The experience of aura, for Adorno, is semblance in that it presents objects as bearing a trace of the inapproachable, or the veiled presence of a genuine other which presents itself in the very contours of experience. For Balthasar semblance will be regarded as the appearance of depths and the disclosure of Being, but we shall see that in these various conceptions there is significant overlap. (5) Both suggest that it is only by way of non-alienated, non-eviscerated aesthetics, (that is, by way of modes, terms, and practices of subjective comportment toward objects of experience as potentially bearing truth in their sensuous and imaging forms) that a genuine recovery of experience is possible.
This chapter will focus primarily upon the first three of these agreements while the next will be concerned with the latter two. We shall begin by briefly treating Balthasar’s account of present experience and those conditions which have made it possible. Unlike Adorno, Balthasar’s account does not take into his investigation the organizational structures of present society. Instead he chooses to approach the problem of the conditions of experience by reading contemporary modes of life and practice by means of the medieval scholastic language of the Transcendalia. Through this he seeks to account for what he calls the ‘banishment’ of beauty from transcendental its application. This is what produces aesthetics in its modern form and also makes possible the eclipse of glory in contemporary experience. Any direct investigation into the phenomenological character of the Transcendalia will be postponed until the next chapter. This chapter will instead be concerned with the manner in which the Transcendalia (and their eventual fragmentation) provides Balthasar with a way in which to remember the relationship of present and past showing the present to be an age defined by the eclipse of glory. In exploring this I shall turn specifically to Balthasar’s reading of critical philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Here it will be shown that Balthasar, like Adorno, understands Kant to be an important figure for rightly telling what has become of the conditions of experience. According to Balthasar’s memoria Kant’s importance lies in his being symptomatic, that is, in making explicit what happens to the Transcendalia in the birth of the modern aesthetic. While Balthasar’s memoria takes different routes as Adorno’s it is an implicit goal of this chapter to show that they are corroborative. Through our investigation it will be
implied that Adorno’s decay of aura and Balthasar’s eclipse of glory are in fact two ways of speaking of the same thing: the loss of semblance as veiled presence, the manifest trace of the inapproachable. As we shall see, central to this story is the erasure of that distance that presents beauty as expression, a manifest appearance of that which is remains unseen.

The Eclipse of Glory

Balthasar begins his monumental theological Trilogy by bearing witness to tragic loss. “The world,” he declares, “formerly penetrated by God’s light, has become an appearance and a dream,” an “echoless void,” an “indigestible symbol of fear and anguish.”149 The radiant light of Being falling upon our “dimmed eyes” now appears only as “naked matter,” a mere “lump of existence” (GL1, 18). Equipped with the instruments of syllogism and mechanism, and driven by the twin impulses of materialism and abstraction, we have effectively “broken off all association with the world” (GL1, 29). Turning against it we have dissolved its multitudinous forms into ‘facts’ and ‘material’ (GL1, 174, 421). Echoing Goethe, Balthasar laments, “How hollow and empty the world has become in [this] gloomy atheistic twilight” (GL5, 339). In the descending night of our present all things have become “indifferent” and “fragmentary”

In such darkness, we have been forced, like Rilke’s ‘Panther,’ to pace the cage of existence growing weary from “counting its bars” (GL1, 29).  

It is upon this depiction of our present that Balthasar levels his appeal for the retrieval of theological aesthetics as both a return to the epiphany of God in Christ and as a defense against the current crisis of experience. Undoubtedly echoing Benjamin, Adorno, and Heidegger, Balthasar’s present is one of effaced glory, disenchantment, and the alienation of subjects from a world that has been drained of its own voice and meaning. This situation, Balthasar urges, has not always been. There have been ages of representation wherein it was natural to experience beings, life, and the order of nature as enfolded within and expressive of a deeper meaning that showed itself to be both good and true (GL1, 25). To recognize such a light, however “eyes are needed that are able to perceive the spiritual form” (GL1, 24). Without such eyes Being does not

150 This depiction is undoubtedly critical, and it cannot be ignored that it was delivered by a man living amidst the tumult and violence of mid-twentieth century Europe. However, it would be too hasty to dismiss such remarks as the reactions of someone living in predacious circumstances. While Balthasar was not immune to the broader crisis embroiling Europe (He, for example, felt compelled to leave Munich in 1940 due to the restrictions placed upon Catholic journalists by the Nazi Regime. Fergus Kerr, Twentieth Century Catholic Theologians: From Neoscholasticism to Nuptial Mystery, (Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), p122.) He understood his immediate hostile climate not the cause but as symptom of such “blindness.” This conclusion he believed was evident by a recognizing the general “intuition” that pervaded Western literature up through early modernity, in contrast to the present.

151 It is evident that Balthasar was familiar with Adorno’s work, at least Adorno’s writing on Kierkegaard. (GL1, 51) Theodor Adorno, Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic. (Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1989). Heidegger’s influence is undoubtedly much more apparent. Heidegger himself uses the language of “night” “blindness” and the “shining” of Being in the world. Heidegger, Poetry, Language Thought, (Harper Perennial Modern Thought, 2013) 91.
possess any radiance (GL1, 431, 597). Balthasar’s fifteen volume Trilogy thus begins with an attempt to retrieve those forms of ‘sight’ that would make our “seeing the form” again possible. 

This language of vision (e.g. light, seeing, eyes, appearance, etc.) pervades Balthasar’s writing. Undoubtedly, in speaking this way he draws from the deep wells of Platonic philosophy, Christian spiritual literature, and Biblical revelation. Such language should, however, be understood in its particularly Balthasarian valence. Seeing, he explains, is a comprehensive act which includes the entirety of the person expressing himself in a form of life. Quoting Romano Guardini, he asserts, “The eye is not only an instrument that the living man can use; it is man’s life itself. Man lives in his seeing... No theory of sight can be constructed which does not take into account the existence of man” (GL1, 391). Vision is continually shot through by “a process of thinking that compares, distinguishes, orders, and illumines” (GL1, 392). It may even be described as

152 Balthasar readily grants that there have been different ages and expressions of this ‘intuition,’ which were anything but felicitous. Some ancient traditions and forms of practice were even corrosive or contradictory to this original experience.

153 “Schau der Gestalt” is the title of his first volume of the Theological Aesthetics. Cyril O’Regan, The Anatomy of Misremembering: On Von Balthasar’s Response to Philosophical Modernity Vol. 1. (New York: Crossroads, 2014). It should be noted here that Balthasar does not draw a hard line between “conceptual” “linguistic” and “phenomenological” approaches to the questions concerning the conditions of experience. As he converses primarily the Kantian, Hegelian, and phenomenological traditions, he most often speaks in these terms, but it is also evident from his drawing upon historical, literary, and poetic resources that these notions are strongly shaped by linguistic and hermeneutical approaches. See, Oleg Bychkov, Aesthetic Revelation: Reading Ancient and Medieval Texts After Hans Urs Von Balthasar (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010) 78 ff.
the “drawing of conclusions.” (GL1, 392) The word Balthasar chooses to highlight this dynamic is ‘perception’ [wahrnehmen] (GL1, 24).\textsuperscript{154} Wahrnehmen, which includes the verb ‘nehmen’ or ‘taking,’ denotes not only a receiving of what is, but also an activity of ‘grasping’ what is outside oneself (GL1, 394). This ‘grasping’ is one moment in a more comprehensive process wherein the object seen ‘manifests’ itself, or ‘makes an appearance.’\textsuperscript{155} This two-fold dynamic, Balthasar suggests, is ‘all-encompassing,’ and incorporates seeing, hearing, and understanding in a comprehensive process that ‘takes hold of’ what ‘gives itself’ as true (GL1, 120). When one perceives one enters ‘a field of forces’ and both encounters and interacts with what has made its appearance. This interaction includes the grasping of “laws of proportion, a functional context, a developmental form, an essential image, value-figure – and all of this both spiritually and materially.”\textsuperscript{156} Perception, as such, is not the accomplishment of one faculty in isolation, nor is it a single event which can be separated from a larger whole. There are, for Balthasar, no “isolated little ‘acts’” (GL1, 24). Perception depends upon (and takes shape within) a comprehensive life-form (GL1, 24). In this way Balthasar’s view of

\textsuperscript{154} He writes, “What a word: ‘Perception’ [Wahr-nehmung]! And philosophy has twisted it to mean precisely the opposite of what it says: ‘the seeing of what is true!’ (GL1, 24).

\textsuperscript{155} For a more a helpful account of Balthasar on the two-fold movement of perception, and knowledge as encounter and dramatic tension see D.C. Schindler, \textit{Balthasar on the Dramatic Structure of Truth} (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004) 16.

\textsuperscript{156} This again is a quote from Romano Guardini (GL1, 390).
perception is not unrelated to those of Gestalt Psychology or even the late-Wittgenstein’s notions of ‘aspect perception.’\textsuperscript{157}

Balthasar’s polemic against modernity and his accusation that we suffer from a kind of myopia is as such an indictment upon a form of life which has made our myopic condition possible (GL1, 25).\textsuperscript{158} As Balthasar understands it, the primary cause of modern myopia is the misrecognition of beauty, and its theological analogate glory (GL1, 18).\textsuperscript{159} While our current age is “perhaps not wholly without beauty” Balthasar suggests “we can no longer see it or reckon with it” (GL1, 18). One might say somewhat clumsily that for Balthasar we see beauty but fail to perceive it as beauty. This claim


\textsuperscript{159} Balthasar does not clearly differentiate ‘beauty’ and ‘glory’ phenomenologically, although he does so theologically. The relation between beauty and glory, he suggests, is an analogical one which correlates to the analogical relation between nature and grace constitutive of the dynamism of God and Being itself. His account of this is worked out in his account of the \textit{analogia entis}. The dimensions of this issue are vast and cannot be explored here. For several helpful works on the subject see Hans Urs Von Balthasar, \textit{The Theology of Karl Barth: Exposition and Interpretation}. (Ignatius Press, 1992) Cynthia Peters Anderson, \textit{Reclaiming Participation: Christ as God’s Life for All} (Fortress Press, 2014). \textit{Richard Vildesau, Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty, and Art}, (Oxford University Press, 1999). For present purposes we shall most often speak of ‘beauty,’ as Balthasar tends to do when drawing from non-Biblical sources, while also at times speaking of ‘glory,’ when appropriate. One should understand that Balthasar sees there to be fluidity and continuity between them. As he states, “The form of the beautiful appeared to us to be so transcendent in itself that it glided with perfect continuity from the natural into the supernatural world… [c]rossing these boundaries so forgetfully, however, belongs to the essence of the beautiful and of aesthetics almost as a necessity” (GL1, 34).
becomes clear once his account of beauty is more fully understood. Drawing from such diverse figures as Thomas Aquinas, Goethe, and Gustav Siewerth, Balthasar suggests: “Only the apprehension of an expressive form in the thing can give it that depth-dimension between its ground and its manifestation which is the real locus of beauty (GL1, 152).”\textsuperscript{160} In other words, beauty is “appearance” [\textit{Erscheinung}] but this appearance will only be “beautiful” inasmuch as it is recognized as an “expression” or “manifestation” of depths. Beauty is made possible through the taking-of-what-is-true [\textit{wahrnehmung}] but this ‘truth’ is that of a genuine \textit{other} that expresses itself in a particular form [\textit{Gestalt}]. It is the integral relation between appearance and depth connoted in the language of “expression” and “manifestation” that is here vital. Beauty is the manifestation of what does not appear.\textsuperscript{161} It’s life unfolds in a play of concealment and disclosure, surface and depth, nearness and distance, that draws the beholder out of herself and ‘enraptures’ her in the delight of the object. As Balthasar puts it, beauty “frees the striver allowing him to achieve the spiritual distance that makes a beauty rich in form and desirable in its being-in-itself (and not only in its being-

\textsuperscript{160} Balthasar and Thomas will be explored at somewhat greater length next chapter. For Balthasar’s appropriation of Goethe see Balthasar, “Personality and Form” \textit{Gloria Dei} 7 (1952): 1-15. For Balthasar’s unfolding intellectual relationship with Gustav Siewerth see, \textit{Between Friends: Hans Urs von Balthasar and Gustav Siewerth Correspondence} (Verlag Gustav Siewerth Gesellschaft, 2005).

\textsuperscript{161} Undoubtedly Balthasar’s attention on disclosure and manifestation is strong family resemblances with Heidegger, and his attempt to recover the pre-Platonic notion of truth as \textit{alethia}. (See Heidegger, \textit{Early Greek Thinking}, trans. David Farrell Krell and Frank A. Capuzzi (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), 114. For a comparative study between Balthasar and Heidegger on the question of disclosure see D.C. Schindler, \textit{Balthasar and the Dramatic Structure of Truth}. 5ff.
for-me), and only thus worth striving after” (GL1, 152). This delight, as we shall see, has a formal dimension, traceable in terms of proportion, complexion, harmony, and the like, but beauty also occasions delight because it discloses Being, that is, it is an occasion of truth. This is why Balthasar turns to the language of Thomas Aquinas who describes beauty as objectively located at the intersection of two moments he called species and lumen (‘form’ and ‘splendor’) (GL1, Foreword). Form (manifest in proportion, order, harmony, and complexion) is also disclosing appearance (‘light,’ ‘radiance,’ or ‘splendor,’), an outward shining of depths (GL1, Foreword).

It is because of this that Balthasar asserts that when beauty is perceived as a ‘mere appearance,’ that is as a surface with no depth, or a form which discloses no truth, it ceases to become beauty altogether and is reduced to something merely pleasant or appealing. In his words, when beauty is “lifted from its face as a mask” it can only bear “features on that face which threaten to become incomprehensible” (GL1, 18). Treating beauty as ‘mere appearance,’ renders beauty-as-disclosure imperceptible because it is dissolved into a phenomenon explainable in terms of, say, our own interests, prejudices, or psychological needs. Beauty without depth is, in short, dissemblance (GL1, 18, 45-79). It may seem that Balthasar’s concern with the nature of beauty is far too narrow to account for the pervasive conditions of experience touched on at the beginning of this chapter, but as we shall see, it is precisely this

---

162 Balthasar traces the elimination of aesthetics from theology in both Protestant and Catholic traditions. This he finds as representative of a more diffuse ‘fracturing’ of the transcendalia in the imagination and experience of Western Christendom.
reduction of beauty to mere appearance that has narrowed its range of significance to that of the aesthetic in its peculiarly modern iteration. The reduction of beauty to surface and the truncation of aesthetics in modern social life are, in other words, correlative. His account of what beauty and aesthetics has become thus presents an implicit critique and challenge to those conditions of modern life that made the dissolution of beauty and the truncation of aesthetics possible.

According to Balthasar, this reduction of beauty and the birth of the modern aesthetic was the consequence of the reduction of that distance between appearance and depth made possible by the fragmentation of the Transcendalia (the good, the beautiful, and the true) as conditions of experience. The present, in other words, is the result of those forms of language, practice, and life that effectively dis-integrated these modalities within the dynamic of perception itself, foreclosing the necessary distance for beauty to manifest itself (GL1, 18). Since this is a broad and bold claim, before addressing his account specifically we shall begin with a brief depiction of what it might mean to say that our present is defined by the fragmentation of the Transcendalia. This depiction presents the Transcendalia not as technical language confined to largely forgotten medieval philosophical texts, but as ways of considering the tensions that comprise present forms of life. This, admittedly, is not an enterprise that Balthasar himself develops at length, but it does surface regularly in evaluative comments he makes regarding the present and thus seems to be something of a backdrop for his thinking (see Glory of the Lord Vol. 1. 17-29, 31, 50, 52, 62, 70, 72, 74, 79, for example).
“Beauty,” Balthasar writes, “dances as an uncontained splendor around the double constellation of the true and the good and in their inseparable relation to one another” (GL1, 18). Yet he suggests in the first pages of The Glory of the Lord that this “inseparable relation” has somehow been separated. What kind of world would it be where experience is defined by the fragmentation of the good, the true, and the beautiful? Let us consider, in a broad sketches, how such a world might appear. First, if beauty, goodness, and truth were perceived as essentially distinct from each other the predominant modes of discursive practice which articulate each of these loci would be understood as more or less comprehensible, justifiable, and practicable without appeal to the others. “Truth-only” discursive practice, say, in the form of institutional natural science, would be considered as able to account fully for what is by means of its own methods (i.e. the invocation of scientific laws, theories, mathematical proofs, and the like) and without treating questions of how things ought to be, or what might motivate or attract individuals toward certain ends.\footnote{This problem is laid out in Weber’s lecture, concerning the intrinsic problem of living out a “vocation” in modern disenchanted society. See “Science as a Vocation” in From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology, Trans. And ed. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (London, Routledge, 1948). 129-156. For a helpful investigation of these themes as they concern Weber’s account for the problems surrounding ‘vocation’ read J.M. Bernstein’s Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics (Cambridge University Press, 2001) 8-20. One might also approach this issue somewhat differently, in terms of displacement of the “Aristotelian” language of formal and final causality in the emergence of modern science. For a brief but insightful account of this see, David Bentley Hart, The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013) 46-86.} Appeals to aesthetic or ethical goals within “truth-only” discourse would appear as inappropriate importations of notions that
ought to be considered separately from those that are concerns with the objective nature of things. In principle, “truth-only” discourse would likewise be able to comprehend ‘what is’ in a manner that is completely independent of questions of morality and aesthetic experience. On the other hand, those demands currently placed upon scientific rationality for securing a true understanding of what is, when applied to art (beauty) and ethics (goodness) would appear improper and stifling. Suggesting that objects and activities concerned with ‘expression’ and ‘creativity’ (art) or actions and norms concerned with how to live (ethics) ought to adhere to the strictures demanded by scientific investigation (truth) would appear dogmatic and arbitrary. Discourses surrounding the nature and practice of art (beauty) on the other hand, would be considered largely incommensurable with those of science (truth) and ethical judgment (good).\(^{164}\)

Moral, scientific, and aesthetic forms of discursive practice as domains concerned with the good, the true, and the beautiful would, in short, be considered autonomous domains. Each of their goals, normative presuppositions, and range of activities would be understood as appropriately self-contained. These distinctions would likely be expressed in the institutionalized compartmentalization of these programs which orient their (essentially divergent) discursive practices, and these in turn would be governed by presuppositions as to the fundamental incommensurability

\(^{164}\) For a compelling account of this see J.M Bernstein’s, *The Fate of Art*. 1-20.
of their ends. In short, art, science, and ethics would each be understood as essentially
distinct and concerned with their own particular ends which are essentially unrelated to
the others. As such, the pursuit and justification of knowledge would, for instance, be
restricted to those disciplines which are methodologically set apart from questions
regarding what ought to be done. Likewise, the pursuit of ethical norms would not be
concerned with establishing rules for guiding private affective states and experiences.
These fundamental disjunctions would likely be culturally reinforced such that that a
fundamental disjunction between ‘ethics’ ‘science’ and ‘art’ would seem natural and
obvious.

Such a world may provide for, and indeed make possible, enormous advances
within these domains, but if this separation was in fact the fragmentation of what is
properly integral it would be at the cost of a more fundamental disorientation of each of
these practices. For example, forms of ethical justification, in as much as they appear to
be rationally compelling, would lack the ability to actually motivate individuals toward
what it conceives as good.\textsuperscript{165} The means by which ethical discourse must seek to justify
its principles for guiding ethical action would, in other words, essentially undermine
those same principles’ intrinsic motivating force. “In such a world,” to use Balthasar’s
words, the Good would lose “its attractiveness, the self-evidence of why it must be

\textsuperscript{165} Our becoming blind to character of beauty as true and good, severs our pursuit of the good
from pleasure and restricts it to forms of ethical procedure which seek moral legitimation
through abstract formal principles lacking intrinsic motivational content. This is problematic is
made clear in J.M. Bernstein’s \textit{Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics}, \textit{(Cambridge University Press,
2001) 10-18.}
carried out. Man [would stand] before the good and ask himself why it must be done and not rather its alternative, evil (GL1, 19).” Likewise, ethical models and theories, in as much as they provide reasons for how one ought to act would find it difficult to present reasons why their claims are true. They might, for instance, proffer themselves as ‘good’ for society or for the attainment of individual flourishing, or the like, but the possibility of their having authority to establish the nature of things would be foreclosed. In a similar way those scientific discourses which are concerned with understanding ‘what is’ would be lack any ability to speak authoritatively regarding how one ought to act. It’s methods would also tend to render its objects of investigation

166 J.M. Bernstein dubs this “affective skepticism.” Noting “Affective skepticism specifies a situation in which agents can find no good reason, no motive, for pursuing a particular form of practice (intellectual or practical) that can be separated, at least in principle, from the question of the internal coherence of the practice.” Such a position “dissolve[s] the ethical meaningfulness of human existence simultaneously, in so doing, undermine[s] the condition of rational agency, of goal-directed meaningful action as such.” J.M. Bernstein’s Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics, (Cambridge University Press, 2001) 6.

167 This, of course, is played out in ethical discourse around certain intractable meta-ethical aporia, such as the recurring problems of ‘fact’ and ‘value,’ ‘subjective’ and ‘objective,’ conceptions of ethical norms, and the seeming incompatibility between justifying and motivating reasons for ethical action. For an overview of some of these problems see Tim Chappell, Ethics and Experience: Life Beyond Moral Theory, (Routledge, 2014) 49 ff. Some of these problems are also addressed in Morality and Objectivity: A Tribute to J.L. Mackie. Ed. Ted Honderich (Routledge, 1985) Again see, J.M. Bernstein’s Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics, (Cambridge University Press, 2001) 6-38.

168 This, of course, is famously expounded upon by David Hume. For a present exploration of the problem see, Stanley Tweyman, David Hume: Ethics, Passions, Sympathy, Is and Ought. (Taylor & Francis, 1995)
as lacking any intrinsic meaning or purpose. In the words of Balthasar “proofs of the truth” would lose “their cogency... syllogisms may still dutifully clatter away like rotary presses... but the logic of these answers [would] itself be a mechanism which no longer captivates anyone” (GL1, 19). Those practices concerned with beauty, also, would be understood to be essentially free from any burden of ethical demand or truth. There would be no perceived relationship, for example, between artistic and moral value. Discursive practices which are concerned with beauty would be cut off from any serious hearing regarding their ability to attain knowledge of what is or how one should live. In such an age of fragmentation practices of artistic expression, inquiry into the nature of the physical universe, and questions regarding how one ought to live would appear to be fundamentally unrelated, and perhaps even incommensurable.

For Balthasar this world is ours and the consequences, he believes, are damaging. Since “[t]he transcendentals are inseparable, neglecting one can only have a devastating effect on the others.” Without their integration, or in Balthasar’s

---


170 These themes are insightfully expressed in the exploration of Heidegger in Christopher Kul-Want Philosophers on Art from Kant to the Postmodernists: A Critical Reader, (Columbia University Press, 2010) 118 ff.

171 Balthasar is not alone in sharing the concern regarding the separation of art from science, beauty from truth. One can see this same concern shared by such diverse figures as Lessing, Moritz, Schiller, Hölderin, Novalis, Schlegel, Goethe, Nietzsche, Keats, Schopenhauer, Dewey, Morris, and many others.

172 (GL1, Foreword).
language, their *circumincession*, the *Transcendalia* lose their cogency and inner orientation. The wounds go even deeper, however. In a world defined by the fragmentation of the good, true, and beautiful the conditions of perception [*wahrnehmen*] which make possible the apprehension of truth, beauty, and goodness would themselves suffer distortion. If beauty, truth, and goodness are one, but somehow have been ‘fractured’ by forms of life that have socially torn them asunder, this would lead to a fundamental misrecognition of each of their natures, and that of experience itself. Objects and events, works and moments of expression which are said to be beautiful would not necessarily bear any orientation toward, or trace of truth or goodness. Their radiance, that is, their power to captivate our attention and prompt our desire would not be so because of their inner orientation toward the fulfillment of a genuine and fulfilling desire (the good) or in some way as a disclosure of what may not be immediately apparent, but true. Beauty in its separation from goodness or truth would be wholly ‘aestheticized.’ It would concern experience as the play of surface ‘stimuli’ and affective (subjective) responses, and nothing more. Likewise, the recognition of truth or goodness apart from beauty (or each other) would leave ‘explanations’ of events, objects, and activities divided between ‘brute facts’ and ‘subjective interpretations.’ Things ‘in themselves’ would increasingly be understood in such a way that they become ‘mute’ and expressionless. In the language of Balthasar, Being would only be recognized only in terms of ‘facts’ and ‘material’ (GL1, 174, 421). The world as described by ‘truth-only’ discursive practice would appear devoid of
meaning and as lacking intrinsic value.\textsuperscript{173} Such a world would appear ‘expressionless,’ and void of its own dignity and purpose. Questions pertaining to the ‘meaning’ ‘value’ and ‘purpose’ for life and universe would appear wholly arbitrary or even unanswerable.

Obviously, there are many questions one might raise about how the ‘fragmentation of the Transcendalia’ might ultimately prove itself as salient account of the conditions which define our age. Doubtless, much more would need to be said to make this depiction of the present a thoroughly convincing one. The brief depiction sketched here is only to demonstrate that Balthasar’s attempt to address the present as one defined by the dis-integration of the \textit{Transcendalia} is not just a reversion to past language which lacks any real relevance to present concerns. For now it must be enough to say that Balthasar’s account of experience as defined by the fragmentation of the \textit{Transcendalia} has the potential to speak to present concerns. By following this route it also demonstrates that this condition has not always been. Turning to the past will demonstrate that this condition has been brought on by an act of ‘forgetting.’ It thus shall be by ‘remembrance’ that he will present his case.

\textit{Ars Memoria}

The perception of beauty as mere appearance has, for Balthasar, been made possible by a kind of ‘forgetting. “Will this light not necessarily die out,” he queries,

\textsuperscript{173} This will be explored in greater length in the next chapter.
“where the language of light has been forgotten and the mystery of Being is no longer allowed to express itself?” (GL1, 19). As this question implies, what has been forgotten for Balthasar are those forms of language, practice, and ‘modes of perception’ which made possible the original recognition of beings as ultimately good, true, and beautiful. Balthasar would thus concur with Adorno that any adequate response to the present condition cannot remain preoccupied by psychological accounts of experience, but must wrestle with history (GL1, 366). To borrow Adorno’s language, the forgetting which makes possible the loss of beauty is not merely reflexive but epochal. That is, it must investigate the present conditions of experience not as statically given, or as the manifestation of certain fixed subjective structures, but as taking historical form which can be recognized only by attending to them vis-à-vis the past. Such Balthasarian concerns with memory and forgetting have been emphasized of late by Cyril O’Regan, who has argued at length that central to Balthasar’s diagnosis of modernity is what he sees as its “amnesiastic” character. This is an age, O’Regan explains, “whose

174 Balthasar’s use of psychological concepts and terms carry similar characteristics as Adorno. Both at times use ‘psychological’ terms appropriate to their own concerns, but in the process almost always fundamentally revise the meaning of these terms by the way in which they are used, and in connection with their more fundamental purposes. This can be seen clearly in Balthasar’s small book The Christian and Anxiety, (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2016). Which can be interpreted as involving a theological ‘redefinition’ of the notion of anxiety around metaphysical and theological premises.

175 Understanding Balthasar as responding to the condition of “amnesia” is behind Cyril O’Regan’s recent work on Balthasar. Cyril O’Regan, The Anatomy of Misremembering: On Von Balthasar’s Response to Philosophical Modernity Vol. 1. (Herder & Herder, 2014). O’Regan focuses primarily on the notion of ‘misremembering’ arguing that has been initially provided for by an pervasive ‘forgetting’ of Christian faith and practice. He writes, “[Balthasar’s] lamentation particularly concerns cultural amnesia and the loss of Christian tradition, defined for him by the
tendency to pronounce on the historicity of all discourse is only matched by the
tendency to deny it in its own case.”176 This, for O'Regan, is the legacy of Enlightenment
that has insinuated itself into the modern imagination.177 If this is true, and our present
situation is in part the result of widespread cultural amnesia, reinforced by a certain way
of reading the present as a disjuncture, or overturning of history, *ars memoria*, or the
art of memory, becomes an indispensable skill of resistance. Balthasar’s lifelong labors
as a theological historian in this way might be read as an attempt to revitalize Christian
memory in order that it may oppose the widespread cultural amnesia that has, in part,
made the present ‘forgetfulness’ possible. *Ars memoria* in this way stands as a means
for recovering a tradition that might perceive ‘the form of glory’ as in its appearing.

______________________________

history of the memory of the glory of God in Jesus Christ...” (O'Regan, 7) Those modern thinkers
who have sought to understand modernity not simply in contrast to, or isolation from, the
Christian tradition have unfortunately done so selectively and in a way that distorts the memory
of that tradition. Balthasar’s work, according to O'Regan is thus set towards developing a
theological response to such thinkers (Hegel and Heidegger) through an attempt to provide
a faithful memory of that tradition. What ought to be added for our purposes (which is a point in
fundamental accordance with O’Regan’s own exposition) is that present circumstances stem
from not only a ‘misremembering’ of past forms faith and practice, but a pervasive failure to
sustain those forms through which the light of Being could be recognized as divine glory. The
conditions of experience which presently deflect the light of Being are a direct result of failing to
properly pass on those ways in which the original light was received and expressed.

176 O'Regan, 31.

177 In O'Regan’s reading both Hegel and Heidegger sought to combat this ‘amnesia’ with acts of
philosophical remembrance. In doing so, however, they ‘misremember’ Christian revelation and
tradition. To this Balthasar offers a corrective reading of history and a retrieval of Christian
relevance for the present. 25.
It would seem that Balthasar’s *ars memoria* can serve in this capacity in two ways. First, it can encourage a recovery of past modes of language, practice, and life that sustained the original recognition of the beautiful-good-and-true. If myopia is indeed the consequence of our ‘forgetfulness,’ of their unity then *memoria* is vital to the critical recovery of those discourses, practices, and forms of life that have been left behind. In a word, *ars memoria* prompts a turn toward tradition, especially the tradition of Christian theology. This is, in part, because much of the blame for present amnesia, Balthasar believes, was the result of the forgetfulness of Christian theology itself. If theology constitutes a tradition of active reception and expression of the ‘light’ of the *Transcendalia* then it has aided in its eclipse through its own failure to retain those modes whereby the original light was received (GL1, Foreword). This can be seen clearly in the prevailing forms of modern theological method which suffer from deep forgetfulness of the tradition’s own spiritual and aesthetic dimensions (GL5, 9-47). This contemporary theological amnesia Balthasar regards as largely the consequence of theological attempts to follow the lead of the modern sciences in becoming increasing ‘exact,’ or specialized (GL1, 17). As he understands it, theological specialization resulted in, among other things, a substantial divide between abstract theological systemization

178 O’Regan, 30.

179 *Traditio* meaning, quite literally, the ‘handing on’ of what is, strictly speaking, not our possession. O’Regan, 31.

180 “This task seems to be made more difficult by the fact that the form of modern life is clearly influenced by the one-sidedness of a metaphysics which has forgotten Being (with which Christians too have collaborated, not without incurring blame.” (GL5, 652)
on one side (taking such forms in Catholic theology as the Manualist tradition, and 20th century Neoscholasticism) and on the other side, a thoroughly historicizing ‘biblical scientism,’ which dissolved ‘any and every possible form of revelation which is objectivized and historically perceptible (GL1, 52). This was a history tied with the fundamental separation of theology from aesthetics, made possible by the rise of the modern aesthetic. What was left is an amnesiastic theology in fragments, dismembered to such a degree that theological rationality and the practices of ‘perception’ become dis-integrated and perhaps even mutually exclusive (GL1, 131-199). This theology as a necessary tradition of reception and expression unable to recognize (and thus communicate) any unified form of God’s historical epiphany (GL1, 145).

This history Balthasar believes is central to, and entwined with the more pervasive fragmentation that made possible the eventual eclipse of glory. Because of

---

181 This charge stems not only from his reading of theological texts but from his own experience as a Jesuit novice studying at Fourvière in the mid 1930s. He would later describe himself in these years as languishing in a “desert of Neo-Scholasticism,” a tradition that had disregarded almost completely the contemplative and affective dimensions of theology and as such had reduced the glory of Christian revelation to the ‘clatter’ syllogistic proofs. (Hans Urs von Balthasar, My Work in Retrospect, Ignatius Press, 1993) 89. Suffering in such an intellectual environment, Balthasar later admitted he had resorted to stuffing his ears during lectures so that he could read the almost entirely neglected writings of the Church Fathers. (Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work. Ed. David L. Schindler (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991) 34. Balthasar’s turn toward theological ressourcement, can thus be understood as an attempt to regain something of the ars memoria required to resist the ‘present darkness.’. This climaxed in his own constructive theological work, sought to broaden the field of theological inquiry into conversing with an ever-widening range of literary, spiritual, philosophical, and mythic texts, always in relation to its own past.

182 This will be discussed further below.
this, Balthasar believes *ars memoria* must remain theological. This is to say that it must be concerned with than tracing those historical movements that have precipitated the current crisis. In and through this, however, it must also seek to catch ‘the form and light’ of that glory which has expressed itself in these forms.\(^{183}\) To accomplish this, however, it must resist its own fragmentation into specialized discourses of historical, metaphysical, biblical, and spiritual inquiry.\(^{184}\) This attempt to resist compartmentalization is in part what makes Balthasar’s work so difficult and so fruitful. *The Glory of the Lord*, in all seven volumes, presents *ars memoria* not merely as a historical investigation, theological *apologia*, or a peculiar project at re-invigorating philosophical ‘aesthetics’; it presents an attempt to re-integrate theological reflection, *memoria*, and those practices of perception which the tradition has made available so that we might once again recognize the divine light.\(^{185}\) In other words, Balthasar’s act of remembrance is neither exclusively historical retrieval nor a form of theological reflection, but an integral ‘historical vision’ which he believes will aid in the recovery of

\(^{183}\) This is the rationale of GL2 and GL3, particularly.

\(^{184}\) Balthasar writes, “The Christians of today, living in a night which is deeper than that of the later Middle Ages, are given the task of performing the act of affirming Being, unperturbed by the darkness and the distortion, in a way that is vicarious and representative for all humanity... [I]n so far as they are to shine “like the stars in the sky”, they are also entrusted with the task of bringing light to those areas of Being which are in darkness so that its primal light may shine anew not only upon them but also upon the whole world; for it is only in this light that man can walk in accordance with what he is truly called to be. (GL5, 648)

\(^{185}\) In this way it could be said that Balthasar’s *Trilogy* is as much a “hermeneutical theology” as a “systematic theology.” For a helpful guide to understanding Balthasar’s approach as hermeneutical see Oleg V. Bychkov, *Aesthetic Revelation: Reading Ancient and Medieval Texts after Hans Urs von Balthasar* (CUA Press, 2010)
The attempt to retrieve long-neglected and misappropriated forms of speech and practice is not without its difficulties, however. Having “lost the background against which they could be understood” these forms appear arbitrary and often less than compelling. They leave the “impression of something in a museum, guarded by antiquarians and unseeingly photographed by tourists” (GL4, 35). In our age any effort at ressourcement will risk appearing ‘dilettantish’ (GL1, 77). Despite inevitable disapprobation, Balthasar believes that tracing this difficult path of “sighting the obscured and lost beauty” is necessary if one is to challenge those conditions that have effectively deflected the glory of God (GL5, 35).

Some of these efforts have been highlighted in recent studies on Balthasar as a hermeneutic theologian. It is important for now merely to recognize that for

---

186 Balthasar writes “There is in the time of the Church no historically influential theology which is not itself a reflection of the glory of God; only beautiful theology, that is, only theology which, grasped by the glory of God, is able itself to transmit its rays, has the chance of making any impact in human history by conviction and transformation.” (GL2, 13-14).

187 Balthasar does not primarily approach the question of the relationship between ‘language’ and ‘experience’ by any explicit ‘philosophy of language.’ However, his careful reading of texts, his attempt to show the ways in which key notions in Western metaphysical and spiritual traditions were transposed according to various cultural and intellectual demands, his assiduous care with the ways in which certain fundamental terms were used according to the demands of their users all demonstrate a substantial interest in the ways in which language and the conditions of experience are mutually formative. Again Oleg V. Bychkov, Aesthetic Revelation: Reading Ancient and Medieval Texts after Hans Urs von Balthasar (Washington DC: CUA Press, 2010) is helpful on this point.

Balthasar historical recovery is different than nostalgic longing for things past or the uncritical repetition of what has gone before. If experiential myopia is rooted in historical amnesia recovery must take the form of an assiduous investigation and critical appropriation of past forms as they pertain to the present crisis. *Ars memoria* must be a *critical act* in search of those forms of life and practice that may recover our perception of that original glory. This mode of *memoria* will be explored in greater length in the next chapter as we turn to Balthasar’s critical recovery of earlier accounts of beauty as ‘form’ and ‘splendor.’ For the time being we must attend to the second form of Balthasar’s *ars memoria*.

While a critical recovery of past forms may serve to open present horizons to what is presently eclipsed, this effort is only intelligible if one can first articulate the present in a way that makes it present condition visible, or conceptually available, as a *problem*. This prompts the second mode of *memoria*, that of genealogical critique. While the relationship between Balthasar and genealogy has just begun to be explored,

---

189 I use O’Regan’s term here because it is particularly instructive. O’Regan sates “I suggest that the complementary to Balthasar’s massive articulation of the specifically Christian *ars memoria* is his meeting the challenge of two powerful acts of remembering wrongly, or misremembering, which he associates with the names of Heidegger and Hegel. (O’Regan, 14). What O’Regan seeks to show in this is that Balthasar’s primary challenge to “Enlightenment,” the precursor to modernity, is that it presents either a mis-remembering or outright forgetting of the Christian tradition in its relationship to various other spiritual, philosophical, and cultural traditions. This is particularly true concerning Christianity’s relationship to Enlightened modernity itself. O’Regan’s argument, which focuses on Balthasar’s response to Hegel and Heidegger particularly, is a comprehensive and persuasive one. What I wish to highlight, however, is that this ‘amnesia’ and/or mis-remembering also has a role the rise in the predominating conditions of our age.

190 O’Regan 153.
his engagement in a genealogical critique of the present has been suggested defended
at length (by O'Regan particularly) and bears directly on his concerns regarding the
conditions of experience.\(^{191}\) In summarizing the objectives of genealogical method Colin
Koopman shows them to bear directly on questions pertaining to the conditions of
experience. He states,

The problems of genealogy are those problems found below the surface of our
lives-the problems whose itches feel impenetrable, whose remedies are ever just
beyond our grasp, and whose very articulations require a severe work of thought. These
submerged problems are those that condition us without our fully understanding why or
how. They are depth problems in that they are lodged deep inside of us all as the
historical conditions of the possibility of our present ways of doing, being, and thinking.
Yet despite their depth, these problems are also right at the surface insofar as they
condition us in our every action, our every quality, our every thought, our every sadness
and smile.\(^{192}\)

\(^{191}\) Cyril O'Regan, “Balthasar and Gnostic Genealogy” Source: Modern Theology, 22 no 4 Oct
2006, p 609-650. See also O’Regan’s defense of Balthasar as a genealogist in “Response to
Readers of The Anatomy of Misremembering, Volume 1 (Hegel).” Nova et Vetera (English
Edition) July 1, 2016. He writes, “To think of Balthasar as a genealogist is to deny neither that he
is a great retrievalist of the length and breadth of the Catholic tradition nor that the putting into
play of the riches of the pre-modern Christian tradition in terms of (1) its reading of scripture,
(2) its unification of theology, spirituality, and contemplative action, (3) the practice of prayer
and Eucharist, and (4) forms of life both religious and lay given over to finding a unique vocation
is not ultimately far more important than recovering the equivocalness of Hegel… .” (1017-1018)
And yet, O’Regan’s claims are well substantiated in his works.

\(^{192}\) Colin Koopman, Genealogy as Critique: Foucault and the Problems of Modernity
Genealogical critique exposes present conditions by treating them as historical phenomena.\(^{193}\) It involves a turn toward history and temporality in order to grasp who, where, and what we have become. It does not in this way grant present experience any status of necessity or inevitability but treats it as historical, that is, as a moment located within ongoing temporal processes of change.\(^{194}\) For Balthasar, *ars memoria* takes a genealogical path in his critical assessment of our present as the result of various transfigurations of language and practice within the traditions of reception and expression of that original light (GL2, 11-17). His act of remembrance, in other words, treats the present situation not as a resolution, consummation, or overturning of the past, but as one eventuality made possible by contingent past movements (GL5, 17). In this way he renders the present something both identifiably historical and as open to other possibilities. Read from this perspective it becomes evident that genealogy orients a substantial portion of his *memoria* which in terms of mere quantity comprises the lion’s share of Balthasar’s *Theological Aesthetics*.\(^{195}\) For our present purposes it is unnecessary to draw hard lines between these two forms of *memoria*. They are complementary and mutually supportive in the sense that they both serve the goal of

\(^{193}\) Ibid. 24.

\(^{194}\) For Balthasar’s treatment of the problems of history see his short work *A Theology of History* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004).

\(^{195}\) Much of Vol 1 takes the form of genealogical critique and hermeneutical appropriation. *Glory of the Lord* Vols. II-V are almost entirely dedicated toward this end. Volumes VI-VII involve attempts to ‘read’ the form in scripture, something that is made credible and necessary by Vols. I-V.
‘awakening’ those of present to their current state. Critical recovery is, however, a project that is made more pressing by genealogical critique, and thus we shall turn here.

Specifically, we turn to trace Balthasar’s genealogy of the forgetfulness of glory resulting from the fragmentation of the *Transcendalia* (the True, Good, and Beautiful). It shall be suggested that for Balthasar it is the dis-integration of these ‘universal modalities of Being’ in the closure of ‘distance’ that reduces beauty to ‘mere appearance,’ and which gives rise to the modern aesthetic. After a brief survey of how Balthasar reads the *Transcendalia* as naming a widespread reception and interpretation of the ‘*kalon*’ in Western tradition we shall turn specifically to his investigation of Immanuel Kant’s critical system as an important marker signaling its fragmentation. Through this it will be shown that Kant is an important figure in the story of the eclipse of glory by making explicit in his critical philosophy what was occurring more diffusely, the fragmentation of the *Transcendalia* through the closure of distance. Since Balthasar’s *memoria* of the transcendental character of beauty in its inner relation to truth and goodness covers several thousand pages, over multiple volumes, our investigation must remain satisfied with sketching only its most universal characteristics. We shall focus upon Balthasar’s claim that the *Transcendalia* are not only technical terms of scholastic philosophy, but expressions of an overarching dialogical experience of the world. It is this ‘dialogical experience’ which presents the distance necessary for beauty to be recognized in its transcendental aspect (that is one with the good and the true). Once this has been sketched we shall turn to his account of their fragmentation as expressed by the critical philosophy of Immanuel Kant.
The Transcendalia

“There have been ages of representation,” Balthasar writes, “in which it was natural to experience the kalokagathon (the ‘beautiful-good-true’)” (GL1, 25). Ages, that is, in which language, practices, and forms of life predisposed individuals towards perceiving the world as saturated by a universal kalon (beauty), which was itself expressive of being as both true and good. Indeed, it was a ‘common intuition’ from the age of ancient myth through the early modern period that, “[t]he beauty that blazes forth in single acts of appearing was anchored in an absolute beauty that does not pass away, a beauty that dwells in the whole arhai of being – with the ‘gods,’ with the ‘divine’, with ‘God’” (GL5, 19). All beings were enfolded within, and each in their own way expressed a glory before which one ought to pay homage (GL5, 12). In Platonic terms the cosmos was kalos because it expressed the One who is agathos. While Balthasar does not disregard various historical stages, epochs, and individual colorings (and by no means does he suggest this vision unperturbed by historical circumstance)

196 While this ‘intuition’ was expressed in various ‘modes of representation’ it survived “from Homer and Pindar through Plato and Aristotle, Plotinus, the Christian early medieval period and high Middle Ages, up to the Renaissance and the Baroque period.” (GL5, 19)

197 Timaeus 29c. Found in (GL5, 21). Even the supposed tension between the true and the beautiful dramatized in Plato’s expulsion of the poets from his republic was an effort to preserve their ultimate integrity. Balthasar writes, “Plato criticizes the poets, because they do not push forward to the area where the true is tied down but remain floating in undefined and undefining images.” In other words, according to Balthasar it’s the unwillingness of the poets to plunge into the depths of beauty in its relation to truth that draws his suspicion and concern. (GL5, 23)
the literary evidence for this he finds convincing (GL5, 21). 198 Amidst the threats, tensions, and limitations of individual figures, periods, and modes of representation there remained an abiding recognition that life expressed an intrinsic dignity and meaning, and manifest a certain abiding value which was both desirable and true (GL5, 19). 199

To explore this, Balthasar, turns first to its mythopoetic form found in Homer, Hesiod, Pindar, Aeschylus, and Sophocles. (GL4, 43-154) Here the kalon manifests itself through the dramatic, heroic, and tragic interactions between the heroes and the gods, who related to each other freely, manifesting their glory to each other by way of an unfolding drama (GL4, 50ff.). He notes,

To understand the beautiful... we must not take the external as our starting-point – the flashing, glittering, shining gold and other vessels and equipment; nor can we take the abstract definition of light in the sun, and thereby of what shines, as our starting point; for each the external object and the definition, is rooted more deeply in the much more essential relationship between the god

198 The primary volume Balthasar dedicates to this is GL, 4, which traces the reception of the kalokagathon (the beautiful, good, and true) through its ‘mythic’ ‘philosophical’ and ‘religious’ forms. This culminates in the age of Christian ‘revelation’ and theology, which ‘sublimes’ these past forms into a new and higher synthesis. (GL4, 11-39)

199 The man of Antiquity would never for a moment have thought of marking a boundary between the transcendentally beautiful and the transcendentally true and good for between these there is a circuminessio, so that that which is beautiful and whole never lacks that which is morally sound or the radiance of truth in its work of reconciliation and healing by grace. (GL5, 21)
(who of course is in himself shining and light) and the man who is raised up into the light of god’s favor and becomes able to see his own independent value, his eminence and dignity for himself and for all others: light out of darkness, life in death (GL4, 51-52).

This kalon of ‘dignity,’ and ‘value,’ he argues, expressed itself between gods and men. In this way, he suggests, the “world of myth was fundamentally dialogical: glory streamed forth from the personally divine on to mankind who dared to interpret his temporal existence in this light” (GL4, 155). Within the kalon of myth heroes became themselves glorious by the favor of the gods who bestowed upon them victory, charis, and arête (GL4, 90 ff.). Thus, “When the young Greeks step naked into the stadium, their bodies exceed the limits of their form and they receive, as victors, a radiance which, breaking out both from within and without, envelops and transcends them” (GL4, 95).

This kalon was expressed also through mythopoetic acts, which were essentially dialogical as well. Prayer, praise, drama, poetry, sacrifice, all share a ‘dramatic structure’ of human spirit acting within a free and unfolding conversation with divine beings. The kalon the expressed itself in the manifestation of each to the other. It was this that “inspires the poet to song, enables him to sing, and opens the way for him...drawing inspiration from the heart’s ground” (GL4, 99). The kalon which manifests itself in fame, complexion, obedience, victory, and even tragedy and death, is one manifest by one to an-other within a fundamentally free dyadic relationship (GL4, 155). The kalon in myth was thus not conceived abstractly, as ‘a property’ of any being, but was manifest
directly through the forms of the dramatic myth itself; and the drama as a whole
constituted the beauty of a free dynamic of disclosure and concealment between
heroes and gods (GL4, 155, 122 ff.). The *kalon* which enfolded being and life was thus
the manifestation of that distance between the human and the divine, which was played
out in the dialogical character of mythic life. As Zeus cries in the *Danaidae*:

The pure heavens yearn to wound the earth,

The yearning of earth is to wed itself to heaven,

Rain runs from the amorous heavens, fructifying the earth.

Now the earth brings forth for mortals food for pasture

Demeter’s gifts, and from the moist marriage rite the grove

Stands in glorious bloom. Of all this I am the cause (GL4, 118).

Both gods and men are actors on a kind of ‘stage,’ which is itself constituted by the
dramatic distance between its characters. In this ‘light’ the other is endowed with a
glory that ‘shines forth as a ray into the heart’ (GL4, 155).

As the age of myth gives way to that of philosophy the *kalon* is transposed into
the ‘drama’ of *philos-sophia*, that is, that journey of the lover of wisdom across the
darkness of error toward the light of truth itself. The philosopher is the one who
‘reaches out’ toward the ‘divine world’ in an ‘ecstatic’ movement (GL4, 155 ff.). Like the
poet in prayer and praise, the philosopher ‘yearns for’ that light and truth, which
prompts him to “break through to Being” (GL4, 158). In the pre-Socratics (*Xenophanes*,
Parmenides, Heraclitus, etc.) this dialogical dynamic between the philosopher-seeker and Being finds expression in the philosopher’s turn away from appearance and dream in order to lay hold of the ‘untraceable and unapproachable’ which is Being itself (GL1, 158-162). Here Balthasar recognizes in the philosophical journey presupposed “distance” necessary for the light of the kalon to shine as a manifestation of Being. Philosophical knowledge recognizes truth as a-lethia, the ‘un-concealing’ of an other. The philosopher is humbled by their understanding of what is, and is simultaneously propelled outward by eros, a desire for ‘splendor’ of that other which is good and true. The search for wisdom is an act in response to wisdom which expresses herself in being as good and true. The radiant light of intelligence and understanding which illuminates the thinker on his long groping investigation, “is a participation in the Absolute of Unity, Truth, Goodness, and Beauty” (GL4, 179). The philosophical kalon is in this way the reflected splendor of the understanding which is itself turned toward and enfolded by a higher Light (GL4, 179). This light draws the lover ever outward. This was embodied most augustly in Socrates, who understood that, “All true knowledge is determined by its object: the one who understands is the one who understands something...” (GL4, 176). Underlying this notion is that all wisdom requires “an open

---

200 Balthasar sees this expressed most clearly in Socrates’ dialogue with Diotima in the Symposium (GL4, 188 ff).
readiness, service and submission before ‘things,’ ‘reality’, and should precisely be defined from that perspective” (GL4, 177).\footnote{201}

At the same time, Balthasar recognizes in the philosophical journey a danger. For it is premised upon an urge to overcome or collapse that ‘distance’ which constitutes knowledge as relation (i.e. between subject and object, knower and known, truth and understanding, goodness and desire) (GL4, 223-225). All dialogical forms of ‘perception’ manifest kalon as the appearance of depths because there lies within this appearance a ‘distance’ which kalon (as making visible the good and true) requires. Thus, the philosopher recognizes in the light of his own understanding a comprehension of that greater light. By identifying his own wisdom, his own understanding as ‘one’ with that original wisdom and truth, there exists a movement towards ‘identification’ which collapses that distance altogether (GL4, 155). As Balthasar puts it, in a commitment toward “a substantial identity between the soul and God” love as ‘eros for something’ (philosophia) may be reduced into “the identity of being-in-general as love (pure Sophia and arête)... .” When this occurs “the philosophy that sets itself over against myth reaches its consummation: it conceives all differentiation in terms of the ultimate and ungraspable unity, even the difference between God and the human; as it conceives the dialogical element in their relation in terms of their identity (GL4, 225-226. Italics mine.) Philosophy thus carries implicit within it the risk of transfiguring the

\footnote{201 This Balthasar notes “is sustained by Plato even where he deals with the highest forms of reality and thus prevents any interpretation of his thought in terms of Kantian transcendentalism.” (GL4, 177) That this is important will be seen in the pages below.}
dialogical relationship that constitutes knowing as an understanding of the truth, or character seeking the good, into a monological identification of subject and object. Does the philosopher conceive her journey as a ‘outward’ or only as ultimately a self-movement toward the ‘identity of an encounter with itself?’ (GL4, 295). If this is so, the philosophical eros becomes only the ‘inner dynamic of thinking itself’ (GL4, 295). And as such the kalon which is a disclosure of depths of truth and goodness will become identical with the light of reason itself. While, the dialogical mode of perception was shared by “the Greeks, Plato, the Stoa, Plotinus and, after them, the great aesthetic theologies of the Middle Ages” because they recognized “the world’s ‘beauty’ to be the appearance of the One who does not appear, and who shows His transcendence in the unitive ordering of the Multifold” this recognition was not secure. (GL5, 599) One finds in this tension between dialogical and monological forms throughout philosophical history.

For Balthasar, this tension remains suspended by the age of ‘religion’ (i.e. Vergil, Plotinus) which exalted above both mythic figures, and philosophical concepts a greater ‘mystery’ which they saw as sustaining and enfolding them both (GL4, 300 ff.) The philosophical journey (most expressly in Plotinus) approached a philosophy of identity

---

202 This presents what Balthasar sees as a crucial question of all philosophy. He writes, “The one, unique, fundamental question of all philosophy remains this: Has the act of transcendence already found the transcendent object? Is it, as an act, therefore one with its object or not? Is the light in which we accomplish the act of transcendence identical with the illumination of transcendence?” This tension he understands as being played out from the outset, “At the point where philosophy becomes historically observable the dialogical act of prayer is cut off at a stroke. This break indicates the line of separation.” (GL4, 156)
by casting the movement of *nous* as one that was essentially circular. The philosophical contemplative journeyed ‘outward’ from self which ultimately a revealed itself as return to self. The ‘distance’ between knower and known thus closed in on itself in the identification of Being with form (GL4, 299). For, as Balthasar puts it, even when that reality that stirs us is unknown we discover that we are “like a man who catches sight of his own reflection, and reaches out in search of it, not knowing where it comes from” (GL4, 299). In Plotinus, the dialogical encounter that constitutes the journey of the soul has become one of reflection and return “as the soul is itself the reflexivity of *nous* and.. to the degree that it turns back to its origin [it] finds itself” (GL4, 299).

Yet for Balthasar the danger of the circularity of this speculative-religious journey toward eclipsing the *kalon* in an overarching identity is held back another, more profoundly “religious” insight. That is, that this movement, and indeed all knowledge and being is ultimately enfolded by a “higher glory” which embraces it all. It is the movement of the intellect itself that suddenly “perceives beyond its own being something marvelous, a *thauma*, something sublimely worthy of veneration, something at whose ‘blinding light’ we can as little stare as we can at the sun’s brightness, amazed dread seizes whoever beholds this” (GL4, 303). That is, within the speculative logic of the contemplative Plotinus there remained a recognition of a higher mysterious light, a sublime glory which is itself was ‘beyond beauty,’ but which makes all things beautiful (GL4, 307). If the *kalon* is manifest in the distance between disclosure and concealment, known and unknown, subject and object, then within Plotinus there emerges within all the forms and ‘energies’ of life, thought, and being, a beauty revealed between Being in
all its forms of the One which is wholly beyond it. In this way, “[t]he structure of the beautiful inscribes itself within the formal structure of a doctrine of God. The ‘in’ here is not voided of pure force by the ‘beyond’; there is no reduction to ‘pure appearance’” (GL4, 307).

Through all these forms one finds the kalokagathon as that radiance concealment and disclosure made possible by the recognition of distance between self and other, heroes and gods, philosophical eros and wisdom. In mythopoetic representation this radiance was expressed in dramatic ‘images;’ in the age of philosophy it was by means of ‘concepts’ and the journey of the philosophical eros; while in the age of religion both these forms were ‘relativized’ by a higher more encompassing mystery which relativized both ‘images’ and ‘concepts’ by an ultimate and ultimately incomprehensible higher Light (GL5, 12). None of these modes of representation were, of course, exclusive and often all three were manifest in individual writers by their entwinement, tensions, and harmonies. (GL4, 155-159). What makes them all able to be considered by Balthasar a ‘common intuition’ is that they all recognize beauty because each being is perceived to disclose itself in a fundamental conversation with that which is good and true. All things, in other words, were beautiful because they semblances of the unseen. As such, they were perceived to communicate traces of the inapproachable.

Central to this memoria is the way in which the kalokagathon was transformed by Christian revelation. This will be considered in greater depth in the next chapter. What is important at this juncture is to recognize that within the Christian tradition this
intuition was expressed in the Christian understanding that all beings are freely created, wholly unique manifestations of God's glory (GL5, 19). Each being thus expresses in partial and imperfect form the eternal goodness, truth, and beauty of the Godhead. Through the Christian epoch the kalokagathon was progressively transformed through the proclamation that Jesus Christ, was both logos and ikon of the transcendent and radically free God (GL4, 15-39). It wasn’t until the High Middle Ages, however, that an utterly distinct Christian vision of the kalokagathon took form (G 5, 9-18). This, as Balthasar understands it, is made possible through the recognition of a certain kind of distance made possible by Christian teaching (GL4, 393). The tension between dialogical and monological modes of perception, expressed in philosophy and religion achieve “balance” in a distinctly Christian theology. This allows the Transcendalia to express themselves fully as manifest distance, traces of the unapproachable.

For Thomas Aquinas, who represents something of the consummation of Christian theological tradition’s reflections on the Transcendalia this manifest distance is made most clear. The “modalities of the One, the True, the Good, and the Beautiful

---

203 It is outside the purview of this chapter to investigate this further. It will, however, be touched on in the next chapter. To investigate Balthasar’s thorough investigation of this see (GL4, 317-412).

204 One must understand that for Balthasar these figures are often ‘representative.’ Christian teaching was articulated throughout the tradition in scripture, hymnody, spiritual literature, art, and dogma (Balthasar tends to focus on spiritual literature). For Balthasar, the language of the late Middle Ages is recognized as ‘distinct’ and worthy of specific consideration not due its intrinsic superiority, but because it serves to expression a certain theological ‘vision’ of the world that only gradually emerged. This ‘vision’ surrounds the idea of the analogia entis, which
is the unlimited abundance of reality which is beyond all comprehension, as it, in its emergence from God, attains subsistence and self-possession within finite entities.” (GL5, 12). That is, they may be affirmed of everything, transcending all genera and species. Although the scholastics attempted to distinguish a ratio of each of these Transcendalia, all were in themselves regarded as ‘One,’ and were as such understood as expressions of Being as itself the manifestation of the utterly transcendent and unknown God (GL5, 507). Being was in itself understood to be Good, True, and Beautiful, in a single ‘act’ of existence. Each particular being was as such an outward shining of an original transcendent light which was itself the glory of God (GL4, 373 ff.). Being is as such “a creaturely reality in so far as it is seen and conceived as the all-embracing manifestation of God. It is therefore theophanic being” (GL4, 374). The Transcendalia are the glorious manifestation of being and life as the expression of the One who remains unseen. The Transcendalia are thus the drawing close of an other who remains at an inapproachable distance. The communicative or expressive character of the Transcendalia Balthasar explains accordingly:

---

is important for the specifically Christian vision of the kalokagathon. This is shown most clearly in the work of Thomas Aquinas, (GL4, 393-412)

205 It is important to note that Balthasar’s invocation of the language of the Transcendalia ought to be understood in its broadest sense as appealing to the overarching manner in which beings were perceived. (GL5, 19-39) For a helpful investigation of the tradition of medieval reflection on the nature of the Transcendalia consider, Jan, Aertsen, Medieval Philosophy as Transcendental Thought: from Philip the Chancellor (ca. 1225) to Francisco Suárez (Leiden: Brill Press, 2012).
Why is beauty transcendental then? The answer begins with the fundamental identification of the beautiful with the authentically good, in order then to continue to a prescinding from it and to approximate it to the true. The authentically good is (by contrast with the useful) the good-in-itself, to aspired to for its own sake.... In communicating itself it gives participation in its own unitedness: its united-fulfilled being (unum) is manifest and approachable (verum) in such a way that it does not relate the other to itself for its own sake (utile) but leads it in its self-communication to its own unitedness and perfection... Here in the self-outpouring of the good lies the moment that reveals itself (embracing all other transcendentals) as beauty (GL4, 383, Italics mine).

These dynamics will be explored ‘phenomenologically’ in the next chapter. For now it is important to recognize that while this language may appear somewhat arcane, it constitutes merely a formal expression of a more common form of Christian experience. Consider how this vision is expressed by the medieval theologian William of Aubergne, for example, who writes in characteristic Christian doxological fashion “When you consider the order and magnificence of the universe... you will find it to be like a most beautiful canticle... and the wondrous variety of its creatures to be a symphony of joy and harmony to very excess.”206 Here creatures in their various forms express in their own beauty the essential goodness of creation which is itself a

expression and ‘disclosure’ of the nature of God. Here, beauty, truth, and goodness cannot ultimately be marked off from one another because in Balthasar’s terms, they “dwell in each other and make their voices heard in each other” (GL5, 21). In their being as expression they communicate simultaneously the ‘otherness’ of the creature from God and the nearness or ‘trace’ of God in the glory of the creature. For Balthasar, the scholastic language of the Transcendalia was, in this way a distinctly systematic Christian expression of that common experience of Being as kalokagathon. This itself stands as the crown of that general dialogical experience of being which manifests all things as a semblance of the Unseen.

Kant and the Birth of the Modern Aesthetic

The dissolution of this vision of beauty as kalon (that is the manifest ‘appearance of depths’ expressing a transcendental goodness and truth) can be traced by a reduction of ‘dialogical’ to ‘monological’ forms of perception (GL1, 19). Balthasar’s memoria of this process is a complex one, and cannot be distilled into a simple narrative that points to a single historical, intellectual, or spiritual cause. He identifies many of its seeds in the late medieval period, but recognizes that they were present much earlier and did not take full fruition until the modern period (GL5, 9). He is not so much interested in entertaining an ‘explanation’ of this fragmentation as much as engaging in memoria, that is, of presenting a story that rightly accounts for the present. Because of this he

\[^{207}\text{Consider GL5, 9-47.}\]
does not attempt to address ‘causes’ so much as trace the various permutations and configurations of the kalokagathon that made its fragmentation possible. For Balthasar, however, one decisive figure in this history is Immanuel Kant who in his critical philosophy, conceived, perhaps for the first time, the essential disjunction of the true-good-and-beautiful and, with this, gave expression to the birth of the birth of the modern aesthetic.

It should be known that in Balthasar’s memoria Kant’s critical philosophy largely plays a symptomatic role. Kant demonstrates in a flash the what was a gradual trend away from the kalon to beauty as ‘mere appearance’ (GL5, 481). Kant is thus neither an isolated figure or a watershed. In the most fundamental sense, the importance of his philosophical program lies in its making explicit those trajectories that are less clearly, consistently, and completely expressed by others (GL5, 13). He thus ought to be understood as a prominent voice within a trajectory which is recognized only accumulatively.

As Balthasar tells the story, Kant’s project was the flowering of a theosophical program that can be traced back to figures such as Eckhart and Nicholas of Cusa, through thinkers like Descartes and Leibniz and which was also represented by such diverse movements as late-medieval nominalism and Devotio Moderna (GL5, 451-452). These theosophical threads are identifiable by a shared understanding of the self (i.e. subject, finite spirit, the “I,” or ego) as in its truest sense existing in immediate and undifferentiated relationship with God, understood as Infinite spirit, the Absolute, or the not-Other. As such, this theosophical stance can be read as a kind of renaissance of
the ‘monological’ form of philosophy that had been somewhat held at bay by ‘religion’ and then ‘Christian theology.’ In this scheme, the world of beings stands at a remove from that of spirit, and lacks any positive role as mediator between finite and Infinite spirit which are conceived of as essentially one. What is important for Balthasar is that this understanding of self, diffusely but consistently represented in late-Medieval and early modern periods, is combined in Kant with an Enlightenment commitment to reason, and in particular the demand that speculative thought remain both amenable to the natural sciences and fully transparent to itself. The meeting of these demands in Kant’s critical program sets the stage for a new picture of subjectivity that is aligned with certain “Christian” theosophical trends (e.g. Echhart and Cusa) and the rise of distinctly modern forms of perception (e.g. Descartes, Leibniz, and Bacon). Together they will articulate an account of self and world that closes off any distance between self and world and thus finds the good, true, and beautiful as essentially unrelated to each other. This will make conceivable for the first time “aesthetics as a specific science in the modern sense” (GL5, 483). Let us consider each of these in the figure of Kant.

In summarizing his work Balthasar one should note that Balthasar goes to some length to demonstrate the complex longings and tensions which comprise Kant’s thinking (GL5, 481-492). He also makes a point of drawing from Kant’s lesser known writings, especially of his ‘pre-critical’ years, to show that he took seriously the world as

\[208\] It is important to note that Balthasar does not treat Kant as a foil for his own purposes, but goes to great lengths to demonstrate the tensions within Kant’s own thinking on metaphysics, aesthetics, science, and religion (GL5, 481-492).
teeming with life and pervaded by grandeur of sublimity (GL5, 485ff). It was Kant, he reminds us, who wrote “Through the contemplation of the deep wisdom of the divine creation in the smallest of things and of its majesty in the greatest” we are effected with mood both of ‘adoration’ and ‘a power which lifts the soul’, ‘so that in the face of this words must vanish like empty noise” (GL5, 501-2). At the same time, owing to Kant’s theosophical heritage (e.g. Leibniz, Newton, Wolff, Descartes) he had already come to regard human subjectivity in some way as ‘standing apart’ from the world of beings (GL5, 482). This had already been defended at length by Descartes, who found the *res cogitans* as utterly distinct from *res extensa*. This distinction, was recognized in that the finite subject is shown to exist by means of an inner-relation with God (GL5, 501).

Owing to its possession of rational and moral faculties is found utterly independent of the ‘external’ world of objects (GL5, 503). Balthasar sees this distinction as most pronounced in Kant’s reflections concerning the moral dimension of human spirit. The moral person is one who responds freely to the ‘sublime’ moral command of God, not as something exterior and mediated, but as given directly as moral command upon the rational spirit. The ‘moral’ and ‘religious’ life is thus one lived inwardly and autonomously, and cannot be founded upon either ‘pure revelation’ or ‘public religion.’

Subjectivity is thus strictly demarcated from the ‘exterior world’ not only because the subject, as rational, is absolutely free (unlike non-rational creatures who are

---

209 For Kant, however, enquiry into the inner nature of such forms of belief and experience, which constitute religion, “necessarily comes up against a mystery, that is against something sacred, which, though it is familiar *(gehalten)* to each individual, cannot be publically recognized *(bekannt)* which is to say generally proclaimed” (GL5, 502)
only acted ‘upon’ by natural laws) but because it is absolutely bound to a transcendent moral command is utterly unmediated and thus sublime (GL5, 483). Freedom expressed in obedience to an absolute and transcendent inner law manifests the singular dignified relation of finite-spirit to Infinite-spirit (GL5, 503). Here one finds “everything dependent upon the personal relationship... between the infinite spirit and the finite spirit” (GL5, 451).

Subjectivity, likewise, becomes the fulcrum upon which Kant understands reason to turn in its search for understanding (the true); and moral action (the good). Balthasar sees here a reversal of the dialogical perception of Being expressing truth, and goodness. For here, things are determined to be true, good, or beautiful as finite spirit conceives objects of experience according to its own internally ordered rational principles. Subjective consciousness is understood to be prior to and necessarily determinative of the realization of truth, goodness, or beauty. This can be seen most expressly in Kant’s account of the transcendental mode of apperception, the non-empirical “I,” which accompanies and makes possible all finite knowledge. This imperceptible “I think” is no worldly thing, no ‘substance’ (contra Descartes) but is full and self-present spirit. Here one encounters a convergence of finite and Infinite in an unmediated self-presence. In this account, finite spirit becomes something like a

210 This, Balthasar suggests, is “on the one hand the fruit of Christianity and, on the other, its greatest threat, because the material conception of the world tends, of itself, toward materialism” (GL5, 452).
“free and self-posessing Being, as the quintessence, the meaning and the reason for all forms of non- or sub-spiritual being.” (GL5, 451)

What is important to recognize is how this reconfigures Kant’s understanding of the relation between subject and its 'other' which constitutes experience. Understanding is not achieved by way of an encounter between self and an other which ‘appears,’ but by a process whereby wholly indeterminate intuitions are organized by the cognitive faculty. The synthesis between intuition and concept, not appearance and depth, becomes the manifestation of truth (GL5, 491). Truth, in other words isn’t a disclosure of beings made possible by a dialogical encounter with their manifest form. It is, rather, something made possible by the cognitive faculty acting upon ‘unformed’ material (GL5, 494). The subject engages in a categorical arrangement of the ‘stuff’ of experience which as intuition, is pure surface, with no depth. The ‘phenomenal world’ is rendered essentially indeterminate, formless, lacking intrinsic purpose (GL5, 490).

Reason, by contrast, is less understood as a form of perception, that is a movement outward toward an other, but in increasingly ‘mathematical’ form; recognized as that which is formally consistent with itself, clearly delimited, and universally applicable (GL5, 485 ff.). In an ironic reversal, reason has become “that greater light” which illuminates matter by its own inner processes and determinations. The world of itself is ‘darkness,’ in the sense that it is either sensation without intrinsic purpose.

---

211 Often even ‘sublime’ in the sense that when it resists being ‘brought under’ the conceptual powers of reason it be ‘outside’ of reason and thus incommensurable to it (GL5, 490).
form or a noumenal ‘sublime’ (GL5, 483, 491). Balthasar notes that Kant’s critical philosophy even leaves behind concern with the ‘external world’ altogether. “Everything turns on the importance of mental knowledge and the ‘objectivity’ or ‘reality’ of the concept” (GL5, 489). The unknowable an sich, as Balthasar sees it, is not even “a conceptually unresolved remnant in Being itself” but an attempt to allow for “the subjective experience of receptivity, which for the time being remains as the irreducible primal phenomenon of knowledge” (GL5, 489).

What Kant accomplishes by his scheme is a form of reason that has clearly established the limits of itself and ‘justified’ itself through its own structuring of phenomena. In this way Kant is able to continue to uphold the dignity of the subject while abjuring ‘metaphysical speculation’ and remaining in-step with the natural sciences (GL5, 494). From this vantage point, however, the subject must refrain from attempting any ‘metaphysical’ effort of moving from appearances to depths. It cannot even speculate upon ‘what’ it is that makes an appearance (the an sich) since these unseen depths are, in principle, “unrecognizable” (GL5, 491). To use the metaphor Balthasar borrows from Kant himself, reason cannot move upon a ‘plain of indeterminable dimensions,’ for if this were the case there would be no way in which to circumscribe its range of applications or to affix its limits. It “must rather be compared with a sphere whose radius can be deduced from a curve of the arc of its surface… which one can also state with certainty the content and the delimitation of the same.” (GL5, 491). Reason, as the life of finite spirit might can be depicted as an ‘illuminating sphere,’ wherein ‘purposes’ ‘meanings’ and ‘principles’ appear in accordance with its
own operations, but outside of which there is only phenomenal indeterminacy and a ‘postulated’ but utterly sublime noumena. This is “a world of reason which is enclosed within itself but which is also aware of its own indeterminate situation (GL5, 492).” In such a world Being becomes “no longer Theophanous, but anthropophanous; and man is Theophanous not in his natural being, but in his creative self-idealization” (GL5, 586). When truth is no longer disclosure of being made possible by appearance, then there is no ‘light.’ The radiance which constitutes the distance between self and other, and other as appearance and depth, is reduced to ‘objects’ are constituted by the subject, and given ‘voice,’ ‘meaning,’ and ‘purpose’ by an ‘anthropophanous’ light.

This scheme has a fundamental effect on the way in which beauty and ‘the aesthetic’ are conceived. In a world where ‘appearances’ are perceived not as a manifestation of depths, semblances of the unseen, but as the result of the reasoning faculty working upon essentially ‘imageless’ material, beauty must be cordoned off from truth. Aesthetics and metaphysics are, in principal, disjoined. The faculty of judgment which governs ‘aesthetic experience’ may perceive ‘purposes,’ ‘meanings,’ ‘forms’ and the like, but it “itself has no interest in the actual existence of objects, but

---

212 Here Balthasar certainly would echo Adorno in suggesting Kant situates the subject as utterly ‘at home in the world’ but as also suffering in deep ‘metaphysical despair.”

213 “Pure Reason” for Kant consists in the “reciprocity of perception and concept in relation to an object,” but “aesthetic knowledge is the same reciprocity but in relation to the subject.” The first concerns logical (non-aesthetic) apprehension of contents of experience (intuition) while the other concerns “knowledge” which “coincides with the subject.” (GL5, 504)
only in manifest form, which is “purely a contemplative manner” (GL5, 505).\footnote{214} What marks aesthetic judgement off from pure and practical reason, for Kant, is that it is “disinterested.” As Balthasar highlights, this requires the subject to set aside “\textit{what} the phenomenal thing is in itself (truth) and \textit{what} it is good for (goodness) or whether it corresponds in itself to its own concept (perfection)” (GL5, 506). Aesthetic judgment as such attends only to the ‘form of purposiveness,’ a purposiveness that is \textit{without purpose} that is, a purpose that is ‘felt’ but is without a concept, and thus lacking of those determinations as its truth or goodness.\footnote{215}

As Balthasar describes it, the experience of beauty may involve an experience of purpose but this purpose is purely \textit{formal}, and this in a double sense. First, as was just suggested, it is formal in that distilling ‘pure’ form (that is the ‘appearance’ without any confusions regarding what ‘it is’ and ‘what it is for’) an experience of the beautiful is made possible \textit{by its formal exclusion of what is true and good} about the appearance. Second, it is ‘formal’ in so far as aesthetic judgement abstracts ‘appearance’ from every experience of the \textit{being} of an object and every ethical interest in that object in order to “enjoy its form,” as the harmony of its own cognitive powers (GL5, 505).\footnote{216} The delight

\footnote{214} He states, “The resonating harmony of the cognitive faculty, its ‘mood’ or ‘proportion’ also stands in opposition to all forms of the ‘schematism’ of pure reason, but it derives from a deeply hidden ground of illumination in the judgment of forms which is common to all men.” (GL5, 505)

\footnote{215} Critique of Judgment §15, 227, 228.

\footnote{216} He writes, “Although the scholastics also attempted to expose the distinguishing \textit{ratio} of each transcendental (\textit{unum}, \textit{verum}, \textit{bonum}, \textit{pulchrum}) even when they viewed the \textit{pulchrum} as being \textit{realiter} one with the \textit{bonum}, its distinguishing aspect nevertheless emerged. But there all the transcendentalts shared in common being of which they are the transcendent and universal
which is felt in an experience of beauty is not the delight that is attendant upon a disclosure of depths, but in the harmony of the cognitive faculties themselves (GL5, 506). The experience of beauty for Kant is produced by a harmonious activity of both cognitive faculties [i.e., the imagination and the understanding] in their freedom. This state of the “free play” of the imagination is made possible by suspending concepts such as ‘being’ and ‘purpose.’ In this way, objects are beautiful because they appear “purposive” in their “freedom” which is fact only the freedom of the cognitive faculties.

The experience of beauty thus generates an appearance of purposiveness which possesses a compelling demand for universal assent, but this appearance is one produced by our own cognitive faculties. It is thus dissemblance.

In this way Kant’s critical system marks a new understanding of the relationship between ‘the aesthetic’ and the domains of pure and practical reason. Beauty is accorded her own domain which stands free from a de-aestheticized, both a formally schematic ‘pure reason’ and an autonomously ordered ‘practical reason’ (GL5, 507). In aesthetics so conceived beings are not regarded as expressing in themselves something of transcendent beauty, truth, and goodness which appears to reason according its perception of the object. Those determinations which comprise the aesthetic are modalities, which fact served also to distinguish them one from another. This objective communication demands within the field of artistic activity the principal of unification rather than separation. In Kant, the ‘transcendentials’ relate to the transcendental constitution of reason in its critical self-understanding, and the individual aspect emerges clearly only when we disregard the others. This is so because reason, taken in its purity, hovers indeterminately in its finitude (as interrelationship of finite perception and finite concept) and loses every anchorage in in-finite esse.” (GL5, 507)
attributed to the faculties of judgement itself. Whatever unity may be attributed to the
good, true, and beautiful must likewise traced back to the subject, and must be
regarded as extrinsic to things themselves (GL5, 507). Appearances, regarded
‘aesthetically’ are thus in principle severed from their depths and aesthetics must be
sharply distinguished from ethics and logic. Balthasar sums this up succinctly,

For the first time in intellectual history, aesthetics, now sharply distinguished
from both logic and ethics, was given a particular value of its own... this process
of insulating the aesthetic from logic and ethics (as opposed to the integration
within the one, the true, and the good in the Greeks and in earlier theology)
must always be kept in mind if we are to understand rightly the banishment of
the aesthetic from the realm of theology... (GL1, 50)

Kant stands apart in Balthasar’s memoria because his program of systematically
differentiating ‘pure’ from ‘practical’ and ‘aesthetic’ judgement, if not successful as a
philosophical system, was at least successful in adumbrating the conditions of
experience which would increasingly define the modern era. Kant, as such, is important
because he gives voice to the emergence to a new experience of the world. It should be
noted that almost from the moment that aesthetics in its modern form was conceived
there were those who resisted it. Balthasar points to such representative figures as
Hamann, Soloviev, Hopkins, and Péguy (GL4, 239-516). Romantics such as Schelling, the
early Hegel, and others themselves sought to demonstrate that beauty, owing to her
unique constitution, could heal the divide between ethics, science, and art. ‘The Oldest
System Programme of German Idealism,” a manifesto written somewhere around the year of 1797, expresses this demand clearly, stating, “I am convinced that the highest act of reason, which, in that it comprises all ideas, is an aesthetic act, and that truth and goodness, are united like sisters only in beauty.” Such efforts, however proved insufficient to adequately re-unite what was becoming increasingly fragmentary. The dis-integration of aesthetics, ethics, science and metaphysics was something that critical programs and philosophical arguments could not, seemingly, undo. Beauty was being lifted from its position “within the totality which it had enjoyed from the days of the Greeks and made into a separate ‘object’ with a separate science of its own” (GL1, 79).

By being granted its own sphere, beauty was granted a “freedom” and “dignity” unimagined in earlier epochs, but this was paid for at the price of its increasing spiritual impotence and rational superfluity. In the face of the ‘serious disciplines,’ slogans such as “l’art pour l’art” which brandish the marvels of an autonomous aesthetic cannot but appear, Balthasar suggests, “frivolous, merely curious, and self-indulgent” (GL1, 51). Art for art’s sake manifests a form of beauty that cannot disclose Being (GL5, 19).

Erscheinung, is no longer regarded as a semblance of things unseen, but as ‘mere appearance,’ that is, a form which points to nothing but the desires and projections of the subject. To use the common colloquialism, beauty “is in the eye of the beholder.”

---

217 This work was found almost a hundred years after the death of Hegel in his notebooks and has been attributed by various scholars to either Hegel or Schelling. For a reprinting of the original text see, The “Oldest System-Programme of German Idealism” reprinted in European Journal of Philosophy. Vol 3, Issue 2, August 1995 199-200. Classic and German Aesthetics. Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy. Ed. J.M Bernstein, (Cambridge University Press, 2003) viii-iv.
In this state beauty cannot but become an accoutrement of class, a play-thing of elites, and a tool for profiteers. Thus, “Beauty, banished from the transcendent dimension, is confined to a purely worldly reality where tensions and contradictions, encompassed only by univocity, still remain to be overcome” (GL5, 597).

According to Balthasar’s memoria the ‘glory’ of beauty in her original transcendent relationship to the good and true, does indeed endures, but only in moments and flashes in non-scientific, and non-ethical literature which can only express the kalokagathon largely as in the form of ‘irrationality’ and ‘foolishness.’ Glory, as the beautiful in her relation to the good and true becomes cast as a kind of holy ‘folly’ which in its alien transcendentality appears as ‘mad.’ Balthasar traces this theme through the works of Wolfram, Erasmus, Cervantes, Grimmelshausen, Dostoievsky, and Rouault (GL5, 141-204). The beauty, for instance, of Don Quixote, Prince Myshkin, and Rouault’s Tragic Clown is, according to Balthasar, a figural protest drawing attention to the radical irreconcilability of the kalokagathon with the modern world.
CHAPTER 4

BALTHASAR AND RECOVERING SEMBLANCE

“Existence is being’s most irrefutable revelation, yet because existing is such a marvel, it is at the very same time being’s most impenetrable veil.” – Hans Urs Von Balthasar

Chapter three discussed the first three ways in which Balthasar shares with Adorno a critical diagnosis of the present. Like Adorno, Balthasar finds (1) that present experience is damaged; this he understands as the eclipse of glory. For Balthasar this results from a failure of perception, and since, as we have seen, perception is a comprehensive act conditioned by all the activities and orientations of one’s life, this failure to perceive stands as an indictment upon an entire form of life. (2) Balthasar also agrees with Adorno that this failure has been made possible by a kind of forgetting. For Balthasar, this concerns principally the loss of those dialogical modes of perception that allow beauty to appear as a semblance of things unseen. Beauty can be recognized in all forms (e.g. events, figures, things, symbols, concepts, and the like) only in as much as it is recognized to disclose the truth of being. And, precisely because of each thing’s capacity to disclose truth, each is also recognized as possessing independent value and
dignity (goodness). Beauty, in this way, is recognized as one of the Transcendalia.\footnote{I here intentionally avoid scholastic language to describe beauty as a Transcendalia because I have sought to emphasize that Balthasar’s account of beauty’s relation to goodness and truth is not fixed within the scholastic scheme of representation. Balthasar argues at great length that it can be discovered in countless forms in myth, philosophy, and religion, each of which expresses its own modes of representation.}

When beauty is recognized to disclose truth and goodness it appears as radiant or luminous. To explain this Balthasar turns to Thomas’ Aquinas’ account of beauty as ‘form’ and ‘light.’ As we shall see in greater depth in this chapter, it is by means of form itself that the ‘light of Being’ can be perceived from within each thing. Without form, however, Being possesses no radiance.

According to Balthasar, it is only through dialogical modes of perception that experience remains open to this radiance. It should by now be clear that Balthasar’s account of the eclipse of glory strongly echoes Adorno’s understanding of the decay of aura since for both it is only through the recognition of things as manifestations of genuine otherness, or veiled presences, that their semblance character is visible. From antiquity through the early modern period, according to Balthasar, it was the prevalence of these dialogical forms (embodied in prayer and praise, sacrifice and song, ritual obligation, philosophical wonder, and the like) that allowed beauty as semblance to shine forth. At the same time, he admits, many of these dialogical modes were unstable and prone to dissolution. This ultimately occurred in the last few centuries as dialogical modes were gradually supplanted by monological forms. This, for Balthasar, is manifest in the historical fragmentation of the Transcendalia. When monological forms of
perception efface the depth-character of beauty it is torn from truth and goodness, and each transcendental takes on new, misshapen forms. Beauty severed from its inner-relation to truth and goodness is ‘aestheticized’ (while truth and goodness, in turn, are ‘de-aestheticized.’) In this way, the fragmentation of the Transcendalia can be understood as defining our experience of the world. This, as we saw, is exemplified in Kant’s critical philosophy. (3) Finally, we saw that Balthasar also stands with Adorno in seeing this transformation in experience to be indicated by the emergence of the peculiarly modern notion of art and the aesthetic as autonomous domains. His account of damaged experience thus follows the general course of Adorno’s in understanding the modern aesthetic as alienated from other spheres, practices, and modes of life.

It is now time to turn to the fourth and fifth ways that Balthasar concurs with Adorno. Balthasar agrees with Adorno that (4) damaged experience is manifest ‘phenomenologically’ in the loss of the semblematic character of objects of experience. This Adorno recognizes as the ‘decay of aura.’ Modernity is implicated in this decay because the contemporary conditions of experience have effectively effaced the non-identical other. In this situation, autonomous art, as the wound inflicted by identity thinking, remains a vital resource for the recovery of experience because as a repository for those modes of relation that have been expelled from modern rationalized society, art endures as a harbinger of semblance. \(^{219}\)

\(^{219}\) And this, we saw in three ways. Art manifests semblance through particularity, indeterminacy, and expression.
Balthasar, agrees also that this damage is manifest phenomenologically. And he also turns also to aesthetics in response to this situation, but unlike Adorno he does not believe that autonomous art presents us with the most promise in recovering semblance. In his view, the recovery of semblance comes only by way of faithful *memoria* which includes a critical retrieval of those forms of experience which have been lost within modernity. Central to this act of *memoria* is a return of the notion of form. Throughout much of the history of Western thinking form was understood to constitute the nature of things. It was one of the most central ideas within the history of Western physics and metaphysics. For Balthasar, however, the importance of form does not lie primarily in its history as a metaphysical concept. Form, as we shall see, is an object of experience made possible by dialogical modes of perception. In this way form can be considered not only a metaphysical concept but a ‘phenomenological object.’ Balthasar is convinced that it is only by a recovering form in this mode that glory can again be recognized. In Balthasar’s attempt to retrieve form he draws from multiple sources, both historical and contemporary. He relies most heavily, however, on Thomas Aquinas, whom he believes presents the most coherent and accurate

---

220 In this way Balthasar treats form in something like the way he treats the *Transcendalia*. Both are metaphysical terms with their own philosophical, historical, and cultural pedigree. While Balthasar does not hesitate to investigate them in these ways he does not treat them solely as metaphysical terms confined to prior ages. While these terms are undoubtedly products of history they also name forms of experience. They are, thus relevant phenomenologically. In their phenomenological register ‘form’ and ‘transcendalia’ are entwined with dialogical modes of perception and remain expressive of, and open to, forms of experience they are currently blocked. In this way he broadens their relevance and treats them as vital ways of responding to present problems.
elucidation of form. By turning to Balthasar’s phenomenological interpretation of Thomas’ account of form we shall understand most clearly what he believes form to be. In this we shall also discover that Balthasar’s recovery of form includes several dynamics that echo what Adorno saw as vital to autonomous art.

An effective recovery of form as a ‘phenomenological object’ requires more, however, than simply pulling Thomas’ language and ‘system’ into contemporary life. If our myopia has been made possible by a comprehensive life-form then merely appealing to (largely disregarded) scholastic metaphysics remains woefully inadequate. Turning to the language of form must be complemented by a recovery of those modes of perception whereby form is not only ‘understood’ but ‘seen.’ This is why we shall (5) explore several modes of perception Balthasar points to as necessary for a recovery of the semblance character of beauty. This leads us to the threshold of his theological aesthetics. This is because, for Balthasar ‘theological aesthetics’ is not merely a way of speaking or thinking about ‘the deposit of faith.’ It is a practice of attempting to perceive the glory of God. It is thus theology as a tradition of reception and expression of that original glory which can aid in the perception of form and, as such, aid in the recovery of that original glory. It is however, for Adorno, precisely this route which is blocked. As we shall see, it is on the question of the legitimacy of theology that these two figures emerge in greatest contrast. This is what we shall explore in the concluding paragraphs.

---

221 Thomas takes a central place in Balthasar’s memoria, and culminating the “theological aesthetic” in the concluding pages of GL4.
chapter. We shall begin here by exploring Balthasar’s recovery of Thomas’ conception of form.

Critical Recovery: Aquinas on Form

Last chapter suggested that Balthasar’s response to damaged experience centered on his efforts to return to beauty as semblance, that is, as an appearance of depths. This appearance of depths, he suggests, is beauty’s ‘vertical’ dimension which is met by a ‘horizontal’ dimension, manifest in the nature of form, or the Gestalt itself (GL1, 442). Beauty as semblance only ‘appears’ through the convergence of these two dimensions. He describes this as follows,

The beautiful is above all Gestalt (form), and the light does not fall on this Gestalt from above and from outside, rather it breaks forth from the Gestalt’s interior. Species and lumen in beauty are one, if the species truly merits that name (which does not designate any Gestalt whatever, but pleasing, radiant Gestalt). Visible form not only ‘points’ to an invisible, unfathomable mystery;

222 Throughout I refer to Balthasar’s account of form as ‘Gestalt’ and Aquinas’ merely as ‘form.’ Unless otherwise noted, it should not be inferred from this that I am suggesting Balthasar’s notion is fundamentally different, or ought to be seen in contrast to that of Thomas. In fact, the argument presented here suggests that Balthasar’s account of Gestalt is largely dependent upon Thomas’ notion of form. I retain the German term in Balthasar’s case merely to clarify which I am referring to. To my knowledge, Balthasar never directly criticizes Thomas’ notion of form, and seems to always portray his own account of the Gestalt as essentially in continuity with that of Thomas. He will, emphasize and develop certain characteristics of Thomas’ notion in accordance with his own concerns. Whether in the end they remain isomorphic is not a present concern.
Gestalt is the apparition of this mystery, and reveals it while, naturally, at the same time protecting and veiling it. Both natural and artistic Gestalt has an exterior which appears and an interior depth, both of which, however, are not separable in the Gestalt itself (GL1, 151).

There is here an ‘exterior’ which appears (the ‘horizontal’ structure of the Gestalt) and the ‘interior depth’ which does not (the ‘vertical’ mystery). The convergence and entwinement of these moments in Gestalt is what ‘illuminates it’ from within. While this language is not exactly the same as Thomas, as we shall see, this notion of Gestalt is essentially Balthasar’s development of Thomas’ notion of form. When Thomas speaks of form (forma) it often pertains to ontological questions, on one hand, and the acquisition of knowledge on the other. For Balthasar these are important in themselves, but they are also vital for unveiling the nature of experience and how Gestalt can be perceived as a phenomenological object. Form, for Thomas, is simultaneously at the center of knowledge acquisition and the nature of things, and for Balthasar it is this relationship that establishes it as a phenomenological object comprised of its two-fold structure. Let us begin by exploring the role of form in Aquinas’ theory of knowledge and being, and then we shall turn to Balthasar’s interpretation of it.

223 More on this will be said below.
In his *Summa Theologica* Aquinas seeks to demonstrate that everything that exists acts in accordance with its own nature. Since human beings are by nature both rational and appetitive, all their various activities are ordered according to the principles of intellect and will, which are distinct ‘powers’ of the soul.\(^{224}\) The soul is ‘moved’ by its appetites and ‘directed’ by its intellectual faculties such that all human activity can be understood by reference to knowledge and desire.\(^{225}\) For Thomas, these two movements are closely entwined. Even knowing and willing, which are logically distinct activities, themselves require both the operations of *intellect and will*.\(^{226}\) Knowing and willing can thus be understood as a kind of two-fold action, wherein the intellect grasps ‘what’ something is while the will, drawn by its desire for what it perceives as good, ‘moves’ the soul toward that good perceived. Thomas suggests that, in some sense, the intellect precedes the will in this process (at least for the human soul) since it is necessary to know what an object is in order to desire it.\(^{227}\) The will, in other words, cannot will without willing “something,” and that something is identified by the faculty

\(^{224}\) ST I-II, 27, 2

\(^{225}\) Knowledge is directed by its desire for the truth, and will is directed by its desire for goodness. This action is in response to the existence of ‘The Good’ and ‘the True’ as Transcendalia.

\(^{226}\) *De ver.*, 1, 2.

\(^{227}\) David C. Schindler in “Towards a Non-possessive Concept of Knowledge: On the Relation between Reason and Love in Aquinas and Balthasar.” *Modern Theology* 22:4, Oct. 2006). Schindler does an excellent job of making clear some ‘tensions’ in Aquinas’ thought that find illumination and development in Balthasar. One of them includes a substantial qualification of the claim just made, namely that Intellect *always precedes and directs* the will. (585-586)
of the intellect. At the same time, however, the intellect seeks to know what things are, that is, ‘knowing’ is itself a ‘movement,’ indeed one of the primary movements of rational creatures toward the attainment of their good. All voluntary human action, including knowing, involves a movement towards something, which is a power of the will in its striving toward the attainment of some perceived good. In this way knowing and desiring are entwined as intellect is moved by the will, and will directed by intellect.

For Thomas these two movements are distinguished by their ends, which are truth and goodness. The intellect is directed towards knowing the truth which is its end, while the will is directed toward attaining the good, which is the fulfillment of some desire, or lack. At this point it should be apparent one way in which, for Thomas, the good and the true as Transcendalia define experience. They are the ends toward which the intellective and appetitive movements of the soul are directed. These movements, while ‘activated’ by the powers of the soul originate in the transcendalia themselves. Remember that for Thomas the Transcendalia are convertible. “Being” “truth” and “goodness,” appear plural, but this is only a secundum divisionem, resulting from limited

---

228 ST I-II, 94, 22.

229 “The will and the intellect mutually include one another; for the intellect understands the will, and the will wills the intellect to understand. ST I Q 16, a.4. See also ST I-II, 28, 3. Again also consider Schindler 580 ff.


231 ST I Q. 16, a. 1.
and composite nature of the soul.\textsuperscript{232} The movement of the soul as “willing” and “knowing” is thus differentiated not in relation to the Transcendalia themselves but only in reference to the composite and differentiated nature of the soul. The Transcendalia in themselves are one, only appearing under different “aspects” according to the soul’s different movements. As Thomas notes,

As good has the nature of what is desirable, so truth is related to knowledge. Now everything, in as far as it has being, so far it is knowable. Wherefore it is said in De Anima iii that “the soul is in some manner all things,” through the senses and the intellect. And therefore, as good is convertible with being, so is the true. But as good adds to being the notion of the desirable, so the true adds relation to the intellect.\textsuperscript{233}

In this sense the true can be understood as the mode of being which is the proper end of the intellect, and that “aspect” of being in which the intellect is “in relation” to Being.\textsuperscript{234} The good, on the other hand, is that mode of being which draws the will and is that “aspect” of being in which the will is “in relation” to Being. In each case, the Transcendalia are not the result of these relations but their source.

\textsuperscript{232} Thomas also speaks of “One” or “Unity” as a transcendental, but we must put this aside for the time being.

\textsuperscript{233} ST I Q. 16, a. 3.

\textsuperscript{234} ST I Q. 16, a. 1.
In this way, one might say that the soul is driven by its own lack of truth and
goodness towards the attainment of knowledge and fulfillment, and in this sense, the
Transcendalia “moves” the soul, in a certain respect, from the “outside.” To use the
term “outside” is not quite accurate, however, since the soul is something that acts only
in-relation to the good and to being. As Jan Aertsen has shown, for Thomas every
being can be understood in two modes, either in itself (in se) or in relation to something
else (in ordine ad aliud); and the soul, he suggests, ought to be understood principally in
the latter mode as it is, to use the words of Aristotle, “in a sense all things.” The soul,
in other words, has “more affinity” for beings than any other substance, and is able to
assimilate itself more completely to other beings. Its ‘horizons’ are also less
constricted. This is clearly the case when considering the Transcendalia, since the
soul ‘exists’ in and through its activities which are intrinsically related to the
Transcendalia as that ‘end’ which moves the soul from “within.”

236 For Thomas Being and Truth and convertible, but the True is Being as “known” by the
intellect. Thus, it can be said that “truth resides primarily in the intellect, and secondarily in
things according as they are related to the intellect as their principle.” ST I, Q. 16 A. 1 The
intellect can be said to seek after “truth,” as long as this is understood as the seeking after the
“knowledge of being” which is a kind of relation between the intellect and Being which
terminates in the intellect in the form of “truth.”

Transcendental in Thomas Aquinas” Revue Internationale de Philosophie Vol. 52, No. 204 (2),

238 Aertsen, 262. Consider also ST, II-II, 2.3 “The rational created nature alone has an immediate
order to God, for the other creatures do not attain something universal... The rational creature,
which are universal modalities, serve as prima or the “first principles” and “ultimate horizons” for human action by drawing the intellective and appetitive powers of the soul “outward.” The soul at the same time “participates” in being as it is drawn by, and moves toward being and the good.\(^{239}\) As Jan Aertsen describes it, “the first principle of theoretical reason is reduced to the first transcendental, being, and the first principle of the practical reason to the good. Being and the good are different prima but cannot be separated from one another.”\(^{240}\) Thus, the soul’s being turned “outward” is at the same time the result of its being moved by the good and being from “within.”\(^{241}\)

What then of beauty? While there has been some debate among Thomist scholars regarding whether Thomas actually grants beauty ‘distinct status’ as a transcendental, for our purposes this is unimportant.\(^{242}\) What is important is considering the way in which beauty plays a necessary and central role in this dynamic which constitutes experience as the movement of the soul. As we shall see, Thomas

\[\text{insofar as it knows the universal ratio of good and being, has an immediate relationship to the universal principle of being.}^\]

\(^{239}\) One must remember that they are, for Thomas, ultimately One, and thus convertible with each other. That ‘they’ move the soul in different ways is determined by the nature of the soul.

\(^{240}\) Aertsen, 264,265.

\(^{241}\) ST I, 14, 2. Thomas recognizes there are different ways in which the soul can apprehend the ‘being’ (esse) of things (entia), in accordance with the different ways in which things can be said to be. See Wippel 26 ff.

\(^{242}\) For an helpful introduction to this question consider Travis Cooper, “Is Beauty a Distinct Transcendental According to St. Thomas Aquinas?” Thomas Aquinas College, from the 2013 Wes Coast Meeting of the Society for Aristotelian-Thomistic Studies. Available at: https://thomasaquinas.edu/about/beauty-distinct-transcendental-according-st-thomas-aquinas
understands beauty to serve as the means by which the true and the good converge in the soul, and it this occurs only in and through form. Consider what Thomas says about beauty in the following quote,

“Good” and “beautiful” have the same reference but differ in meaning. For the good, being what all things want, is that in which the appetite comes to rest; whereas the beautiful is that in which the appetite comes to rest through contemplation or knowledge... “Beautiful” therefore adds to “good” a reference to the cognitive powers; “good” refers simply to that in which the appetite takes pleasure, but “beautiful” refers to something the mere apprehension of which gives pleasure.243

This passage is interesting because it demonstrates that Thomas considers ‘good’ and ‘beauty’ to be the same end, that is, they both move the soul by desire toward fulfillment or rest, but beauty is differentiated from the good because the ‘good’ attained in beauty is not found in the attainment of the object but in the delight offered to the cognitive powers themselves. It involves that movement which comes to ‘fulfillment’ but this “fulfillment” is not in ‘doing’ but ‘knowing.’ Here one might call beauty something of a ‘middle term’ which weds the activities of the will and the intellect in their fulfillment as truth and goodness. To understand this better let us consider this next statement by Thomas, which expounds on beauty’s relation to image and form. He writes,

243 PL 199, col. 259
For good (being what all things desire) has properly to do with desire and so involves the idea of end (since desire is a kind of movement toward something). Beauty, on the other hand, has to do with knowledge, for those things are called beautiful which please us when they are seen. This is why beauty consists in due proportion, for the senses delight in rightly proportioned things as similar to themselves, the sense faculty being a sort of proportion itself like all other knowing faculties. Now since knowing proceeds by imagining, and images have to do with form, beauty properly involves the notion of formal causes.\textsuperscript{244}

Here Thomas notes that beauty involves the good but also states clearly that it “has to do with knowledge” and then he directly connects beauty with form. In addition to this, he makes some important statements regarding beauty as involving proportion and ‘the sense faculty.’ When we consider what Thomas understands to be the process by which the intellect comes to knowledge then the centrality of beauty as ‘form’ will become even clearer.

For Aquinas, all knowledge of being is derived from sense experience since the activity of the intellect in the attainment truth must begin in sensory contact with objects.\textsuperscript{245} As he sees it, however, the senses by themselves cannot deliver the \textit{what-}\textit{ness} of things (their ‘quiddity,’ nature, or form), because senses are always particular and knowledge is in the form of universals. For the intellect to apprehend \textit{what} any

\textsuperscript{244} \textit{ST, i-ii, 27, 1 ad 3.} As found in Eco 56-57.

\textsuperscript{245} \textit{ST II-II q. 173 a. 2.} Wippel 35.
being is, it must first receive particular impressions from the senses, and then it must ‘discover’ from those senses a universal ‘nature’ or ‘form.’ This requires that the intellect move in some ways from particulars to universals. This however, cannot be a strictly ‘logical’ movement, since logic itself exists only in the form of universals. There must be in the intellect another means by which particulars of sense can be recognized as universals. This is accomplished, Aquinas suggests, by the ‘possible intellect’ which has the ability to work ‘creatively’ by means of the productive imagination to form an image, or ‘phantasm,’ from particulars. This ‘image’ can then be offered to the ‘active intellect’s’ abstractive power. It is only through the image that form, as ‘universal species, can be apprehended. The generation of this phantasm might as such be regarded as a kind of mediator between the active intellect and the senses, the universal and the particular. It allows the intellect to achieve knowledge of being (truth) by establishing a kind of relation or ‘fittingness’ between the universal species offered by the active intellect and the particulars of sense. It is this image as something

---


247 Wippel 37

248 Anthony K. Lisska describes it in this way, “[I]t appears that Aquinas suggests that the vis cogitativa is the faculty of inner sense by which we are aware of an individual as a member of a particular kind. This mental act is neither identical with nor co-extensive with the mental act of concept-formation, which, of course, is what Aquinas identifies with the role of abstraction through the intellectus agens. To know a concept is to have an awareness of the "nature" or "essence" of a thing. This nature is common to many; hence, the individual concretum as individual is precluded from being the intentional object of the intellectus agens [abstracting the essence] or the intellectus possibilis [knowing the essence]. Aquinas articulates this position in the Summa Theologiae with the following proposition: "Unde intellectus noster directe non est
neither purely ‘sensible’ nor strictly ‘abstract’ that allows the intellect to grasp the universal species. This act of relating, by means of the creation of, and reflection upon, images Thomas calls a \textit{conversio ad phantasma}, which involves the intellect repeatedly “turning back upon” (\textit{reflexio}) its own images in order to ‘adequate’ them to the universal form.

If beauty, as Thomas asserted earlier, involves the notion of ‘formal cause’ and consists, of ‘due proportion’ in reference to the ‘sense faculties’ and ‘the imagination’ it would seem that beauty ‘directs’ the soul to knowledge just here, in the mediation between the intellect and the senses, universality and particularity. Beauty would also be a kind mediation between the good and the true (as he pointed to earlier) because it

\begin{flushright}
\textit{cognoscitivus nisi universalium.} [I, Q. 86, a. 1] It is precisely at this point in the discussion that the \textit{vis cogitativa} comes into play. It is this inner sense faculty which conditions the mental act to be aware of an individual as a member of a "kind." This does not mean that it is an awareness of a "nature" or "essence." This is the role of first intentional awareness on the part of the \textit{intellectus possibilis}. In other words, the \textit{vis cogitativa} is not aware of "human nature as human nature," but rather as Megan the human person and Elin the human person. This awareness comes about through the working of the phantasms in the \textit{vis cogitativa}. The phantasm peculiar to the \textit{vis cogitativa} "conditions" or "colors" the mental awareness of the \textit{vis cogitativa} so that it interprets the object--the primary substance--in the external world in a unique way.” Thomas Aquinas on \textit{Phantasia: Rooted in But Transcending Aristotle's De Anima}. Thomistic Institute: Summer 2000. The University of Notre Dame Thomistic Institute July 14-21, 2000
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textit{Quodlibet} 8, q.2, a. 1
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textit{De Veritate}, q.10, a. 5.. There is some debate here about what actual constitutes the ‘conversio’. See Anthony J. Lisska \textit{Aquinas’s Theory of Perception: An Analytic Reconstruction}. (Oxford Univ. Press, 2016). 220-223. Since I am summarizing Thomas’ account only in order to treat Balthasar’s development and adaptation, I leave these debates to the side for the time being.
\end{flushright}
is by way of the soul’s activity of producing and reflecting upon images that its *desire to know* comes to completion. Beauty, as Aquinas mentioned, is a kind of desire for the attainment of a good, but this good is in reference to knowledge, not the object itself. This is important because it is by the creation of and reflection upon images that knowledge becomes not so much on an imposition of universal abstract form *upon* the inner senses, but the “fittingness” between universals and particulars which is made possible through image.

This ought to lead us to consider Thomas’ account of form as not simply an abstract universal (*entelechy*) but also as a kind of ‘shape’ (*morphē*) or image. Form as *morphē* (what I here call image-form) is somewhere ‘in between’ universal concepts and the particulars of sense. This is confirmed by Thomas’ account of image in terms of ‘likeness.’ This again makes clear why Thomas sees a clear connection between form and beauty. He notes that the beautiful includes *claritas, consonantia, propo ritio,* and *perfectio.* All of these are qualities which involve a certain characteristics that aren’t strictly ‘logical’ but neither are they entirely ‘sensory.’ That is they all concern certain modes of ‘relatedness’ or ‘fittingness.’ Again, one here can understand why image-form must involve as a certain ‘fittingness’ between the multiple particulars of sense towards

---

251 ST q. 35 a. 2, ad. 1 See also Brendan Thomas Sammon, *The God who is Beauty: Beauty as a Divine Name in Thomas Aquinas and Dionysius the Aeropagite.* (James Clarke & Co. 2014) 350.

252 Eco, 66 ff. See also See also Brendan Thomas Sammon, *The God who is Beauty: Beauty as a Divine Name in Thomas Aquinas and Dionysius the Aeropagite.* (James Clarke & Co. 2014) 350.
their ‘perfection’ or completion in a kind of unity. It is this ‘unity’ which allows the active intellect to ‘adequate’ itself to the image.

If it is image-form as an *phantasm* which is produced “in relation to the senses” and which finds fulfillment in the cognitive faculty’s achievement of proper ‘adequation’ then beauty makes for the possibility of knowledge (the true). This activity, moreover, is driven by *desire* (and the delight which comes through *claritas*, *consonantia*, *proporitio*) and as fulfillment is also related to the good. As such beauty (as form) allows the good (as fulfillment of desire) and truth (as knowledge of being) to resonate in the intellect. Here, it should be said, beauty concerns the character of form throughout the intellective process, and not strictly in its mode as an ‘abstract universal’ or ‘intellectual species.’ As such it is beauty which allows the image establish the relation (*proportio*) between the senses and the imagination.

When ‘image-form’ is understood in this way, as that which relates the active intellect and the senses then form cannot be understood either as the product of the

---


254 ST, II-II 141, 4 ad 3. While Thomas, to my knowledge, does not elaborate on this point, I would suggest that this activity is not a process of moving from one distinct ‘stage’ of apprehension to another (from the particulars of sense, to image, to abstract universal) but that it is a kind of natural and effortless motion (except in cases of confusion or ‘cognitive dissonance’ or intense aesthetic reflection ) whereby form itself ‘transforms’ through the ordering of the beautiful through its creative, abstractive, and logic modes, always remaining constituted in some sense by both ‘intellect’ and ‘sense.’

255 Consider ST I, 5, 4 ad I
agent intellect actively pressing itself upon the senses, or as just passively receiving from them. In the generation of the image-form the intellect is both active and passive. Beautiful form becomes the “aesthetic” capacity of the soul (in the entwinement of intellect and desire) to attain a unified truth and goodness by its own capacities. It is also the convergence of the Good and the True within the soul precisely through its adequation by means of *claritas, consonantia, proporitio*, and *perfecta*. In short, while the soul is directed by the intellect and drawn by the will towards the true and the good, it is only through beautiful form that this process unfolds and finds completion.

To interpret Thomas in this way is not to suggest that beauty is principally subjective. Beauty shares with the Good and Being a certain objective preponderance. Aquinas echoes Augustine in affirming that things please and delight because they are beautiful; they are not called beautiful simply because they please and delight. With truth and goodness, however, beauty manifests itself “in relation” between the soul and being. The soul is directed ‘outward’ toward being, and what it grasps are *beings* known by way of their form. And this form is not purely ‘noetic’ as a kind of *entelechy* which determines ‘what’ things are from the ‘outside.’ It is something which manifests itself in *perfectio, claritas, consonatia*, and *proporitio*. There is here no ‘hard line’ separating the subjective from the objective poles of this relation. As Aquinas suggested, the soul is “in all things” as beings are “in” the soul by means of form. Thus we might say that for

---

256 It is not within the purview to discuss the nature of ‘Unity’ as a transcendental. It is just here, however, where one could see its centrality in the manifestation of the good and the true.

257 *De Vera Religione c. xxxiii, PL vol. 34 col. 148.*
Aquinas ‘beautiful form’ as is both the nature of things and the means by which the soul comes to know. Let us now take these observations from Thomas and consider the way in which Balthasar treats them phenomenologically in order to recover the Gestalt.

Balthasar and Gestalt

Form, for Thomas, is simultaneously at the center of knowledge acquisition and the nature of things, and it is this relationship that allows Balthasar to establish it as a phenomenological object comprised of its two-fold structure. Gestalt is composed of an ‘exterior’ which appears (the ‘horizontal’ structure) and an ‘interior depth’ which remains hidden (the ‘vertical’ mystery). The convergence and entwinement of these moments in the Gestalt is what ‘illuminates it’ from within. This understanding, as we shall see, is a phenomenological rendering of Thomas’ account of form.

In the Glory of the Lord I, Balthasar issues his own account of Gestalt, which is in fundamental agreement with that of Thomas, but transposed into phenomenological terms. He famously writes,

Formosus (‘beautiful’) comes from forma (‘shape’) and specious (‘comely’) from species (‘likeness’). But this is to raise the question of the ‘great radiance from within’ which transforms species into specious: the question of splendor. We are

---

258 I will use the term Gestalt when speaking of Balthasar’s understanding of form, as opposed to that of Thomas. This is only to maintain clarity as we explore the two accounts.

259 More on this will be said below.
confronted simultaneously with both the figure and that which shines forth from the figure, making it into a worthy, a love-worthy thing. (GL1, 19-20)

By making several etymological connections Balthasar highlights certain fundamental characteristics of Gestalt. Form is not primarily a ‘noetic category’ but an appearance. It is also not first a ‘universal idea,’ or the ‘means’ by which the intellect lays hold of its object; it is figure (Gebilde) possessing ‘shape’ and ‘likeness,’ making what is perceived knowable and desirable. Likewise, it is by nature beautiful as it is both ‘species’ and ‘figure;’ it ‘shines’ in making itself ‘known’ (the true) and shows the figure to be ‘love-worthy’ (the good). In this description Balthasar is presenting a reading of Thomas which brings to the surface the relationship between beauty, image, and form, but it is done in such a way that the beauty-character of Gestalt becomes visible. Let us consider some of these dynamics more fully.

Gestalt as figure is not considered strictly non-sensible. It certainly involves a movement of the intellect, but the intellectual powers are not something divided from the senses. He claims Gestalt is visible (GL1, 171). It is even material (GL1, 118). It does determine the nature of things as an exterior structure but breaks out from “within.” (GL1, 120) It is also not primarily the means by which the intellect grasps the quiddity of things. It is an open phenomenon which includes the manifestation of the sensuous and qualitative dimensions of beings. (GL, 394) The one who beholds Gestalt thus does not work by way of abstraction but must read it materially, as a figure, in order to
understand the being as a unity. (GL1, 614) *Gestalt*, in short, is something *perceived*, with all the interconnections that term involves.

As we saw, for Thomas form both determines the nature of things and is the means by which the intellect comes to knowledge of those things. Again, Balthasar fundamentally agrees with Thomas, but it is precisely *Gestalt* as the unity of these two moments that manifests its profound phenomenological character. *Gestalt* is simultaneously the manner in which beings manifest themselves, and the way in which the beholder perceives. It can thus be understood as the ‘unity-in-difference’ between knowing and being, subject and object. *Gestalt*, in short, is a manifestation of being-as-encounter. As such it is impossible to categorize the *Gestalt* as either originally subjective, as the result, for example, of the synthetic processes of the intellect (this in turn would make the *Gestalt* something primarily psychological or epistemological) or as something primarily objective, and conceived of as in itself and utterly independent of subject (as posited for example by a metaphysics of substance, or the Kantian *an sich*). *Gestalt* is irreducibly encounter, an appearance which is made possible *between* the one who appears and the one who perceives.²⁶⁰

It is this relation, according to Balthasar, which provides the necessary conditions for *Gestalt* being something essentially true. *Gestalt* is an appearance, as we have seen, but (as Thomas demonstrated) it is an appearance of being. It, as appearance, is how

beings are known. Here again, Balthasar draws from Thomas’ account of form as providing for the possibility for understanding. This however, is understood phenomenologically as a moment of the disclosure of being as an appearance of depths. It is only as when the appearance is recognized as an encounter with being, that is of what ‘is’ that the appearance can be recognized as true. He notes,

> We thus have an initial description of truth as unveiledness, uncoveredness, disclosedness, and un conceal ment (a-lethia) of being. This un conceal ment implies two things: First, that being appears; second, that being appears. Now, unveiling consists in the fact that this duality is nonetheless a singularity – and truth consists in unveiling. On the one hand, being is not concealed in itself like some unknown “thing-in-itself” that remains incommunicado behind an uncommunicative appearance. On the other hand, the appearance is also not a kind of unstable fata morgana, a mirage floating over nothing or over an abyss of enigma…. The fact that being is unveiled entails analytically that it is also unveiled to someone who recognizes it in its unveiling. This “someone” is the subject (TL I, 37).

Here truth is understood as disclosure, or un concealment. It is a moment within which beings reveal themselves for what they are. This ‘revelation’ is in the form of Gestalt as being in the act of expression. This again must be understood as irreducibly relational. An appearance which is not at the same time ‘perceived’ is no appearance at all. Disclosure which is not at the same recognized remains in concealment. Here the ‘convertibility’ of truth and being which Aquinas establishes is interpreted as the
irreducible relation between being, which appears, and the one who beholds this appearance.\textsuperscript{261} \textit{Gestalt} is thus a kind of dialogical encounter. Truth, from this perspective, is not so much a product of the interaction, something that can be extracted from the moment of disclosure and replicated independently. It is something that is inextricably tied to the encounter. To use Adorno’s language, truth requires the recognition of particularity in the sense that what is revealed is not first and foremost ‘data’ or a certain ‘logical content’ or an ‘abstract universal.’ The particular is not an exemplar of a certain independent and privileged universal. What is revealed, the truth is being in its appearance. This is something that is not fungible, exchangeable, or repeatable without a certain loss. Balthasar uses the example of ‘man’ and ‘human nature’ to illustrate this relation of universal and particular:

> What the concept first apprehends, what is primarily correlative to it, is the essence in its universality. But the universal contains the particular just as much as the particular contains the universal. There is no single man who does not embody and possess what it means to be man, that is, the full, undiminished nature of man… He realizes his entire, one-of-a-kind uniqueness exclusively within the universal possibility of which he is a single instance. On the other

\textsuperscript{261} Thomas writes in \textit{ST} I, Q. 16, a. 3 “The true resides in things and in the intellect, as said before (Article 1). But the true that is in things is convertible with being as to substance; while the true that is in the intellect is convertible with being, as the manifestation with the manifested; for this belongs to the nature of truth, as has been said already (Article 1). It may, however, be said that being also is in the things and in the intellect, as is the true; although truth is primarily in things; and this is so because truth and being differ in idea.”
hand, the concept of man cannot be abstracted in such a way as to leave the individual person’s being outside its conceptual content. No individual man is a synthesis of universal human nature and individual personality. For it precisely *intrinsic* to the universal concept of human nature to be realized from instance to instance only as an individual person (TL1, 154).

Essence, or nature, he asserts, “can appear only in the unrepeatably occurring uniqueness of the singular” (TL1, 155). In this way the universal is the “field of expression” of the particular for the universal “manifests its totality exclusively within the always differentiated particularity” (TL1, 155). As such, the universal cannot be a “naked abstraction” (TL1, 155). As such, Balthasar understands truth as *Gestalt* in a way that is strikingly similar to Adorno. He states,

Any solution to the question that tends to reify the universal as such is not viable. The universal is realized in the individual alone, in such a way, moreover that the individual represents an inexplicable excess over and above the universal (TL1, 155).

Again, aesthetic experience presents helpful examples of this need to understand the universal *in relation* to the particular. No retelling, description, or explanation of a work of art, for example, is equivalent to its actual being as expression. We can know *about* a work by Anselm Kiefer, Philip Glass, or Picasso from being exposed to a description or analysis of it, but no ‘knowledge’ reveals the being of the work as expression. Knowledge which separated from encounter is only a digest, interpretation, or exposition. These provide a certain ‘knowledge’ of being, but their
‘truth’ is always only an echo or afterimage of the original truth which presents itself in the performance (expression of the being) of the work itself. As such, *Gestalt* is essentially what appears through an encounter between the subject and object, but the object here is not passive and merely acted upon, nor is it a fungible object which can be replaced by its concept form or idea. It is being in its own movement as self-disclosure.

It is important to highlight that the truth which is made possible by this appearance is dynamic in that it requires movement from both ‘poles’ of the relation. As shown in the last chapter subjects *perceive*, and perception is not a mere passive reception of certain impressions, but an act of *wahrnehmen*, the taking hold of what gives itself as true. At the same time, however, neither is the act of being perceived utterly passive. Perception of *Gestalt* is not the taking hold of a brute object or fact, or phenomena that is merely receives the action. Being *appears*. Balthasar notes,

The evidence that here an essential depth has risen up into the appearance, has appeared *to me*, and that I can neither reduce this appearing form theoretically into a mere fact or a ruling principle – and thus gain control over it – nor can I through my efforts acquire it for personal use. In the luminous form of the beautiful the being of the existent becomes perceivable as nowhere else... (GL1, 153)

In the *Gestalt* an essential depth ‘rises’ to the surface, ‘appears to me’ and as such is luminous. To quote from Adorno, the object of perception is not a “product of cognition, the result of the labor that has congealed in it – a dead thing” (ND 91).

Object, we might be so bold to say, is also subject, for it *acts* in moving “outward” as an
appearance. As *Gestalt* beings present themselves and this presentation is intrinsic to their own activity of being. Beings as such are not just things which possess properties as a kind of neutral and indifferent ‘stuff.’ Appearing is the activity of beings, it is their outward disclosure, in a ceaseless act of giving of themselves to the other. This again becomes clearer by use of aesthetic examples. A painting, a dance, or a musical piece “appears” to an observer. This “appearing,” however, is not something simply happenstational, secondary, and purely external to the being of the artwork. It is what the work *is*. *Gestalt*, like art, is in a similar way being-as-an-act-of-expression.\(^\text{262}\) Both art and *Gestalt* exist only as a kind of encounter between beings.\(^\text{263}\) This dynamic can also be illustrated by countless other forms human and animal life. The man who straightens his gait upon meeting a stranger, the peacock who presents its plumage, the tiger’s stripes, the bird who sings at dawn, are all forms of being as expression. This, however, is not something which is simply an act of conscious, volitional creatures. It is

---

\(^\text{262}\) D.C. Schindler describes Balthasar’s understanding of this as follows, “[T]he object of consciousness, if it is not to be merely a lifeless surface and therefore essentially a projection of the knowing subject but the thing itself, must present itself to consciousness in its being. It must be seen to subsist there in some manner. This means that we could speak of the object of consciousness in some sense as being also the *subject* of consciousness, as vitally sharing in consciousness, and perhaps as giving rise to it along with the knowing subject.” D.C. Schindler, *Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Dramatic Structure of Truth*, (New York, Fordham University Press, 2004) 96 (Hereafter cited in text as DSF).

\(^\text{263}\) The idea of art that is nowhere perceived or encountered (even to the artist) is simply nonsensical. Balthasar suggests the same thing of being (TL1, 55 ff.)
an essential act of all beings.\textsuperscript{264} Indeed, he suggests, appearing is “first of all an absolute property in being as such.” (TL1, 37)

\textit{Gestalt} manifests truth as disclosure also within the act of the one who beholds. Balthasar follows Thomas in arguing that the soul is \textit{essentially} directed “outward.” Subjectivity, in other words, is “intentional” in the manner conceived by the Brentano, or Husserl.\textsuperscript{265} At the same time being is \textit{essentially expressive}, “moving toward” the subject (GL1, 126, 216). Because of this \textit{Gestalt} is not a product of either consciousness or being itself, but the manifestation of encounter which unfolds as the ‘whole relation’ emerging from its particular moments. Whereas this again is essentially in agreement with Thomas, as a metaphysical demonstration Thomas’ account can lead us to imagine the relations between knowing and being, subject and object, as involving more or less sequential processes that can be analytically broken up into discrete stages or ‘parts.’\textsuperscript{266} Balthasar’s phenomenological depiction actively resists any such tendency by pressing the non-reducibility of these relational ‘moments’ as essential to the nature of the \textit{Gestalt}.

\textsuperscript{264} Being as appearance does not require “human subjectivity,” of course. The ultimate manner in which being is expression, is as the glory of God, perceived by God in its own nature and existence as utterly dependent and yet freely responsive to the Divine light. (TL1, 40 ff)

\textsuperscript{265} D.C. Schindler, DST, 96.

\textsuperscript{266} This need not be interpreted as a criticism of Thomas himself. If Balthasar and Adorno’s diagnosis of our present is correct then it would be ‘predisposed’ to read Thomas’ metaphysics in this way.

\textsuperscript{267} Balthasar speaks of the truth of disclosure (\textit{a-lethia}) as also \textit{emeth}, or ‘fidelity, constancy or reliability.’ (TL1, 38) Here one can see him transposing epistemological concerns (verification,
[i]f Gestalt is broken down into subdivisions and auxiliary parts for the sake of explanation, this is unfortunately a sign that the true Gestalt has not been perceived as such at all” (GL1, 26).

To say that Gestalt cannot be broken down does not mean that it is immune to critical investigation. Indeed, Balthasar notes Gestalt “is determined by many antecedent conditions.” (GL1, 26) The point which Balthasar wishes to make is that Gestalt exists as a unity-in-relation and cannot be intelligibly dissolved into more ‘basic’ explanatory principles. Any attempt to extract such principles from the whole leads to a failure to perceive the Gestalt. Here Balthasar’s defense of the non-reducibility of that unity invokes something of the ancient metaphysical problem of composition (e.g. the relation between parts and whole) as found, for example, in Parmenides, Theaetetus, and Sophist. Logically, analysis presupposes unity. Knowledge of parts can only be had through grasping them in relation to a whole. One cannot study, for example the genetic structure of a person without recognizing the object of one’s study as a “genetic structure” (a whole-comprised-of-parts) and, in turn, one cannot fully grasp that structure without considering it as a “part” of the person which constitutes a greater whole. Each whole is only understood through analysis (that is as a whole which exists as a relation of its parts) and those parts to be understood must be perceived in-relation

justification, and the like) to relational terms. Truth is emerges in relation and this relation is not merely a moment of disclosure but something which abides between subject and object.

268 See Verity Harte, “Plato’s Problem of Composition” in Proceedings by the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy, Vol. 17, (Brill, 2001) 1-17
to the whole. D.C. Schindler, in describing the *Gestalt* notes that parts “are necessarily members of a greater whole, and conversely, a whole that is truly such involves parts that are not indifferent to each other but are rather integrated in a permanent tension.”\(^{269}\) This “tension” (unity-in-relation), he suggests, is expressed by the very word *Gestalt* which “belongs to the large family of terms formed by the addition of the prefix *Ge-* , signifying a “collectivity” or series of actions taken together at once as a totality.”\(^{270}\) *Gestalt* in this way involves an irreducible relationship between parts and whole, wherein neither is metaphysically “prior.” Unity-in-relation is irreducible.

This can be seen in the examples of *Gestalt* Balthasar points to in *Glory of the Lord I*. These are “person,” “marriage,” “Christian,” “Christ,” and “scripture.” (GL1, 26) Each of these *Gestalts*, obviously involves a manifold of “antecedent conditions” biological, physiological, social, theological, historical, and the like. They also can be interrogated analytically in terms of their “parts.” If however, these “parts” are not conceived of as *parts* that is, as being in relation to the whole, the *Gestalt* will be missed. A whole may be grasped (it is in fact logically presupposed) but if this whole is not understood as an existing-in-relation to its parts, and those parts as themselves existing-in-relation to the whole then that form will not be perceived as *Gestalt*. It is important to recognize that, in this sense there are many forms which may not be considered *Gestalts*. Systems, formula and principles which are conceived as formal

\(^{269}\) Schindler, DST 168.

\(^{270}\) Schindler, DST 167.
unities that allow more or less indifferent and arbitrary content to be ‘inserted’ would not be *Gestalt*. At the same time, neutral composites, that is more or less artificial wholes which exists only as a contingent aggregate of parts would also not be *Gestalt*. For *Gestalt* parts and wholes must exist in relation.

One can grasp the phenomenological significance of these differences, in considering the relationships that have been discussed at length between the rise of the mechanical/mathematical conception of nature and the disenchantment of the world. When one perceives nature as a mathematically governed mechanical system, things tend to either appear as formal unities which possess more or less indifferent content (as expressed, for example, in many formal-mathematical descriptions of physical phenomena) or as mechanisms, that is, as artificial unities which are essentially composite structures. As Herbert McCabe has argued, machines, for example, are ‘artificial wholes’ which are not essentially related to their parts, but exist as compositions. They may function as wholes but are themselves essentially parts which have been engineered to operate in complex relations. The difference between machines and living organisms is the relationship between parts to whole. With living organisms the parts must be conceived of in relation to the whole. He illustrates, “So if you are so ill-advised as to pat the leg, you touch the whole jaguar; when you are then

---


grasped by the claws, you are grasped by the whole jaguar. When the jaguar’s brain moves its legs it is the whole jaguar moving the whole jaguar.”273 In this way machines are and mathematical formula do not typically take the form of Gestalts (though they may be perceived as such under certain aspects) and beings perceived under these ‘forms’ will lose their Gestalt character. Once a jaguar as an actual thing is conceived as either fundamentally an ‘exemplar’ of a species, or a composite of material it becomes a mute object a dead thing. Once again, examples from art are insightful in grasping the Gestalt. One cannot understand a painting, a song, or drama except as a complex relation of parts and whole, and the ‘meaning’ of these art forms must unfold in the dynamic relation between them. Art, like Gestalt is open to analysis, but there cannot be an ultimate reduction to either pole without losing Gestalt since it exists as unity-in-relation.

This D.C. Schindler describes insightfully as a “tension” for this relation is more than composition (part-and-whole) but identity-in-difference. And it is this irreducibility of relation that highlights the temporal aspect of the Gestalt. As mentioned before Balthasar sees Gestalt as “determined by many antecedent conditions.” The fact that it is ‘determined’ by these “antecedents” carries undeniable temporal connotations.274 Unlike the eternal forms contemplated by Plato, Gestalt is something that ‘unfolds’

273 Ibid 59.

274 Again this is something which Schindler highlights, referring to forms such as music, drama, and organic life. Schindler, 169. Thomas can be understood this way as well, since being is not understood primarily as ‘substance’ but as act.
through a complex movement both within and without. Indeed the unity of the *Gestalt* can be understood as one that is ‘performed’ as ‘moments’ shape and define each other within a dynamic unity.\(^{275}\) In this way Balthasar’s notion of *Gestalt* shares characteristics with Adorno’s notion of “constellations” in that the unity of the whole is only secured through the difference of the parts from each other, and the difference of those parts, as parts, from the whole.\(^{276}\) What is important to recognize is that the irreducible relationship of ‘identity’ and ‘difference’ is *played out* as an unfolding unity. To borrow again from Adorno, *Gestalt* “is the nonviolent synthesis of the diffuse that nevertheless preserves it as what it is in its divergences and contradictions.” (AT, 143) “For this reason,” he suggests, “form [Gestalt] is actually an unfolding of truth” (AT, 143). Here Adorno is speaking directly of autonomous art, and as such, it suggests that what Adorno sees in art Balthasar sees in *Gestalt*. For both the unity “constantly suspends itself as such; essential to it is that it interrupts itself through its other just as the essence of its coherence is that it does not cohere” (AT, 143). The language of each thinker might lead one to imagine that Balthasar privileges unity over difference and Adorno difference over unity, but this is an attempt impose *resolution* onto what is constitutively *tension*. Identity and non-identity constitute each other in a relationship of identity-in-difference that is indissoluble. No *Gestalt* is a fixed object that exists in identical relationship to itself from moment to moment. It undergoes change. It

\(^{275}\) This is also made evident in the examples used by Balthasar (person, marriage, Christian, Christ, scripture). Each of these things only “is” only through its relations in time.

\(^{276}\) GL1, 442.
becomes different. This difference, however, is a difference that exists in the singularity of the *Gestalt*.

This unity-in-difference can even be understood within Thomas’ account of knowledge acquisition if one does not relegate the *‘conversio ad phantasma’* to a passing stage within the process, or only a ‘half-form’ by which the intellect grasps the real unchanging essential structure of the being. To speak of this in Thomas’ language would be to say that the identity of ‘intellectual species’ and ‘substantial form’ is not necessarily a ‘termination’ in knowledge. Intellectual adequation is a moment (perhaps a critical one for scientific or practical purposes) but it is only a moment within the unfolding unity-in-difference between subject and object. Beings express themselves as *Gestalt* within an unfolding process of difference-in-unity (one that can be interpreted in terms of beauty as *claritas, consonatia, and proportio*). They are themselves being as a movement of unity-in-difference. The subject, simultaneously ‘responds’ to this act of expression by its own active and receptive capacities (imagination and reflection) in order to ‘understand’ that being. As he states,

The only possible basis for the knowledge of truth, then, is the subject’s primary ability immediately to mirror – in the intrinsic interconnection of sense and intellect within itself – the mirroring of the essence and the appearance. (TL1, 153)

---

277 Schindler, DST 172.
Truth thus ultimately appears through a kind of ‘mimetic’ tension between subject and object.\textsuperscript{278} This understanding is something that continually unfolds between these faculties in the experience. There may moments where the Gestalt as intellectual species, is grasped, but this is itself only a moment of truth.\textsuperscript{279} Truth as encounter occurs in process, and moments can be grasped, but there is no absolute completion. Truth here is not static, it is the unfolding of being as ‘identity-in-difference.’

The importance of the idea of unity through constitutive tension can be seen most emphatically in Balthasar’s understanding of Thomas’ teaching on the ‘real distinction’ between esse and essentia. This is a much nuanced and debated doctrine among Thomists and has been explicated thoroughly elsewhere.\textsuperscript{280} What is important for our purposes is to see that Balthasar turns to this doctrine in order to demonstrate that beings are comprised essentially of relation and as such they have no ultimate

\textsuperscript{278} It is not within the purview to explore the connections between Balthasar and Adorno on ‘the mimetic faculty’ but they are undeniably present. For Adorno on Mimesis consider Richard Wolin, “Utopia, Mimesis, and Reconciliation: A Redemptive Critique of Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory” \textit{Representations}, Vol. 32 Autumn 1990. 33-49

\textsuperscript{279} This would seem to be the consequence of Thomas’ own thinking if his account is interpreted diachronically.

ground or resolution in themselves. Balthasar’s most extensive investigation of this in the *Theological Aesthetics* comes from the end of Book 4, where he attempts to read Thomas’ metaphysics as ‘aesthetic’ through and through. This he does in two ways, first by suggesting that Thomas argues that beings are constituted by *proportio*, and second by *communissimum*, and each of these is made clear through the real distinction between *esse* and *essentia*.

As is well known, Aquinas suggests that that all beings exist by means of two principles that account for their existence, *esse* (being) and *essentia* (essence). *Essentia*, or ‘essence’ can be understood as the principle determining what a thing is. It is synonymous with form. Actually existing beings are not only form, however. Besides form there is also the mere givenness, the fact that they *exist*. As Balthasar repeatedly suggests, any description of a thing cannot be exhausted by answering the question ‘What is it?,’ no matter how comprehensive. In addition to “what a thing is,” there is the manifest truth “that it is,” namely, that this *particular thing* actually exists. The actuality of an existing thing cannot, however, just be another property or characteristic alongside the essence of a thing, one, because essence requires existence simply to ‘be’ in the first place, and two, because I can know the nature of something and

---

281 Their ‘ground’ Balthasar ultimately argues is nothing other than the free creative act of God, which is in itself, approachable by reason, but is ultimately cognitively impenetrable.

282 ST I, q. 76, a.4, ad 2.
nevertheless not know whether it actually exists.\textsuperscript{283} Existence neither comprises, nor is it in addition to the nature (essence) of things. There lies a ‘real distinction’ between \textit{esse} and \textit{essentia} in all beings.\textsuperscript{284}

There is much more that would need to be said to make Thomas’s argument fully comprehensible. What is important for our purposes is that Balthasar turns to this teaching on the real distinction in order to highlight that according to Thomas each being exists only through a certain relation between \textit{esse} and \textit{essentia}, that is a unity that is irreducibly unity-in-difference.\textsuperscript{285} The word Thomas uses here is \textit{proportio}. The term \textit{proportio} was a common term in medieval aesthetics covering a range of relations, and Thomas himself at times used it synonymously with \textit{harmonia}, \textit{commensuratio}, \textit{conformitas}, and \textit{convenientia}. (GL4, 397) For Balthasar the importance of \textit{proportio} is that IT “secures the structure of interaction and participation, in which one element reveals another and the whole comes into view in its parts.”\textsuperscript{286} The recognition that each “reveals” the other is central to recognizing the aesthetic character of \textit{proportio}. In this sense “the real distinction” does not describe two self-subsisting entities which

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{283} Thomas uses the example of knowing what a ‘phoenix’ and ‘human being’ is and nevertheless not know whether these things exist in reality. (See Wippel, \textit{The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite Being to Uncreated Being}. 140
\item \textsuperscript{284} Apart from God, of course, whose very nature is to exist. For Thomas’ discussion on these issues see, \textit{De Ente Et Essentia}. Ch. 4, Trans. Robert T. Miller (1997) http://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/aquinas-esse.asp
\item \textsuperscript{285} For Thomas being is literally “other than” essence, or quiddity. (Wippel, 140).
\end{itemize}
can simply be ‘fitted’ together but which can exist quite independently from each other. It involves, rather, being as constituted by unified relation (as a musical composition ‘exists’ only as notes played in relation to others (com-positio). Since this relation is one ‘between’ existence and essence the relational character as such “goes all the way down.”

Balthasar notes that for Thomas neither being nor essence are self-subsistent. Being “only realizes natures in so far as it realizes itself in nature. In itself it has no subsistence but inheres in natures.... But because esse does not subsist, it cannot even be said to release natures from itself as its possibilities it is only in them that it comes to ‘standing’ and subsistence.” (GL4, 403) As such, “esse, as Thomas understands it, is at once both total fullness and total nothingness.” (GL4, 404) At the same time essentia stands to esse as potency does to act. In other words being does not ‘receive’ essentia as an active ordering principle upon it (as a kind of primordial ‘stuff’), rather esse is actual, and ‘actualizes’ essentia only as that which ‘receives.’

287 This is a proportionality whereby both ‘modes’ of the relation are ‘suspended’ by each other. As Oliver Davies notes, “proportionality also guarantees the principle of what von Balthasar calls oscillation, or Schwebung, whereby the single element is held in suspension between

---

287 Balthasar quotes Thomas as saying, “The being of things flows from the Word as from a kind of primordial principle, and this flow is terminated in the being which things have in their own nature.” (GL4, 402)
the surrounding forces and thus in itself becomes expressive of an encompassing mystery."\textsuperscript{288}

It is this which demonstrates the ‘real distinction’ to manifest \textit{Gestalt} as in its “vertical form.” Balthasar follows Thomas in understanding \textit{Gestalt} to be synonymous with form, or \textit{essentia} (with all the characteristics highlighted above). However, \textit{Gestalt} is not something which is simply ‘there’ as a kind of composition in tension. Beyond the qualitative nature of \textit{Gestalt}, beyond its unity-in-difference, and constitutive of that unity-in-difference, is the irreducibility of the relation which is that between essence and existence.\textsuperscript{289} This is not just another brute fact or characteristic of thing, but the abiding mystery which is its very existence. No thing in this universe, or the even universe as a whole possesses (as what might be enumerated in a comprehensive description of it) a reason or ‘principle’ for its existence. Each thing is enfolded within and expressive of an incomprehensible mystery (the mystery that it exists at all and that this existence is not, so to speak, a ‘natural’ characteristic of it). Each \textit{Gestalt} (as a horizontal structure of being-relation) is itself suspension between of \textit{essentia} and \textit{esse} as an incomprehensible depth. Said differently, each \textit{Gestalt} is a suspension of that appearance over incomprehensible depths, as an appearance which reveals those depths as a mystery. To say this, for Balthasar, is not to understand \textit{Gestalt} as in some

\textsuperscript{288} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{289} “The creature itself is essentially a \textit{proportio} between \textit{esse} and \textit{essential}, so that its proportion in relation to God becomes ‘the proportion of proportion’, what Thomas calls \textit{proportionalitias}, a suspension of a suspension.” (GL4, 409)
way enshrouded in darkness and slung over an abyss. Being, while essentially mysterious and unknowable is at the same time, the ‘light’ of revelation, disclosure, glory. It “roots the possibility of every possible thing in reality.” (GL4, 402) It shows “being to be communissimum, that in which all communicate.” (GL4, 402). As has been repeatedly shown in throughout this exposition of the manifest nature of Gestalt. The appearance is not, as Balthasar asserts, “a kind of unstable fata morgana, a mirage floating over nothing or over an abyss of enigma....” It is an appearance of depths, a ‘veiled presence’ a ‘trace of the unapproachable,” a semblance of things unseen (TL1, 37).

The Problem of Perception

In Theo-Logic (I) Balthasar states,

[T]he infinite Creator has equipped [created being] with the grace of participation in the inexhaustibility of its origin... It bears in itself a wealth that cannot be consumed like a finite sum of money. You are never finished with any being, be it the tiniest gnat or the most inconspicuous stone. It has a secret [geheime] opening, through which never-failing replenishments of sense and significance ceaselessly flow to it from eternity” (TL I, 107).
This is might be considered a summation of Balthasar’s understanding of the nature of our cosmos as systematically developed by Thomas Aquinas. There is glory in each thing that participates in, and itself uniquely expressive of, “never-failing replenishments of sense and significance.” By virtue of its existence as a free creature (which is simultaneously utterly dependent on God) each thing reflects God’s glory in its own being-as-expression. Even the inconspicuous gnat and the stone, which seem to possess no beauty that might capture the mind or value upon the scale of human value possesses a ‘secret opening’ through which limitless glory streams from all eternity. Thus, gnat and the stone show themselves true, good, and beautiful not because of loveliness to eye or touch but because they are seen to participate in a grace that is inexhaustible and which shines through them. The ‘insignificance’ of their Gestalt (conceived strictly ‘horizontally’) is itself entwined with a vertical depth that plunges down into the inapproachable reaches of Being, and which thus ‘communicates’ a grace that is inexhaustible. Even the gnat and the stone can ‘shine’ with the aura of semblance because they are seen as bearing traces of an inapproachable Light. Such glory manifests when they are seen in relation to the One who, to borrow from Gregory the Great,

...abides in everything, outside everything, over everything, under everything, transcendent by power, undergirding with support, outside in his greatness, within in his subtlety, sovereign from above, upholding from below, embracing

\[290\] This depiction he offers at the close of his investigation of the Thomas’ theory of the ‘real distinction’ in Theo-Logic I, The Truth of the World. 102-107.
from without, penetrating from within... and as one and the same wholeness, everywhere supporting by ruling, ruling, by supporting, embracing by penetrating (GL4, 340).

If Balthasar has been correct, then this description of the gnat and the stone may have appeared to Thomas evident, inhabiting as he did, forms of life, language and practices that were ‘turned outward’ toward this light. Today we find such descriptions of ‘gnat and stone’ much less so. Balthasar’s depiction might seem lovely to those more mystically inclined among us, but it is far from evident and probably is not even considered very seriously. One difference, between us, of course, is that for Thomas such depiction of things was based upon knowledge, or what he called scientia, that is, a systematic demonstration of the necessary connections that define the nature of things in our cosmos. For us, such claims float free and as such, are often taken as nothing more than the projection one’s own aesthetic dispositions or spiritual fancies. What Balthasar has sought to do is challenge this state affairs through demonstrating Gestalt in a way that shows it to be more than a projection. The depiction of gnat and stone as Balthasar has argued, is not entirely severed from scientia, understood in its classical “Thomist” sense. Such scientia is still ‘fixed’ however within certain discourses (metaphysical, phenomenological) that are far removed from how things appear to us.

291 For a brief account of Thomas’ understanding of Scientia and theology, see Denys Turner, Thomas Aquinas: A Portrait. (Yale University Press, 2013) 194 ff.
Our own conditions of experience have led us to perceive things very differently. When he writes the following as a critique, he describes our condition aptly:

If each and everything thing were nothing more than an “instance of ...” or a kind of algebraic “x” that could be exchanged for other entities without loss, then things would possess absolutely no intrinsic value of their own as individuals... Any knower who grasped the essence of the species of which they are exemplars would immediately comprehend at the same time every individual entity that fell under it: no individual could present him with any further mystery.... In a world such as this, existence would no longer have any meaning for being would have lost the property that alone is the possession of being its desirability: unrepeatability, and therefore, interiority” (TL1, 81).

In such a context, we should expect depictions of *Gestalt* to appear questionable, if not “fantastic.” Balthasar wishes us to grasp *Gestalts* we now fail to perceive, and to do so he must challenge the very patterns of thinking that have brought about our myopia. And yet, recovering largely forgotten terms and defending them with philosophical arguments will not in itself lead us to perceive the glory of things. Our ‘myopia’ has been made possible by a comprehensive life-form and thus the recovery of *Gestalt* requires not just a retrieval of past concepts and systems of thought but those modes of perception whereby *Gestalt* can not only be ‘understood’ but ‘seen.’

This, he believes, requires the retrieval of theological aesthetics not first and foremost as a tradition of writing and thinking about God, but as a tradition of perceiving and expressing the glory of God. What our situation demands is theological
aesthetics as a ‘form of life’ wherein Gestalt (in its vertical and horizontal movements) is shown by means of scientia and perception, or what Balthasar also calls the ‘attunement’ (Stimmung) of “Christian experience.” (GL1, 250) To become “attuned” involves the transformation of self by “the perception of God, who is unperceivable in himself and yet has become perceivable through his free grace” (GL1, 302). It is only when we our intellective and sense faculties are “elevated” by this that things are truly “seen” (GL1, 316). In a life form properly “attuned” semblance would show itself to be more than ‘mere appearance’ but as a positive manifestation of God’s transcendent truth, goodness, and beauty breaking through from beyond and within each being. It is in this way that Balthasar calls the Christian to be “the guardian of metaphysics in our time” (GL5, 565).

It is precisely here, however, that Adorno will interject with an emphatic “Nein.” The effacement of that holy Other which secularization has made inescapable cannot be willed away by metaphysical hopefulness. Even if Adorno agrees that “Kant’s doctrine of the block was part of a social delusion,” nevertheless “it is still based as solidly as the factual rule of the delusion” (ND, 389). In the shadow of this “block” we must confess despite our greatest longings, that transcendence “feeds on nothing but the experiences we have in immanence” (ND, 398). Gesturing a way forward by through a return to traditional theology and metaphysics is “blocked” (ND, 402). Semblance may perhaps be rescued but this cannot come from a kind of “metaphysical hopefulness” it must rather break out from within the ephemeral and immanent “in the breaks that belie identity.” (ND, 404). In a difficult but important passage in the concluding pages of
Negative Dialectics Adorno sums up Kant’s block as an irreversible transformation of semblance itself. He writes,

Kant called transcendental dialectics a logic of semblance: the doctrine of the contradictions in which any treatment of transcendent things as positively knowable is bound to become entangled. His verdict is not made obsolete by Hegel’s effort to vindicate the logic of semblance as a logic of truth. But reflection is not cut short by the verdict on semblance. Once made conscious, the semblance is no longer the same. What finite beings say about transcendence is the semblance of transcendence; but as Kant well knew, it is a necessary semblance. Hence the incomparable metaphysical relevance of the rescue of semblance, the object of esthetics (ND, 393).

To understand this claim we must turn to Balthasar and Adorno on the question of transcendence and that particular form of semblance which is the glory of Christ.
CONCLUSION

‘INVERSE THEOLOGY’ AND THE GLORY OF CHRIST

“If Christ were born a thousand times in Bethlehem, but not in you, you would remain lost forever... The Cross on Golgotha cannot redeem you from evil if it is not raised up also in you.” – Angelus Silesius

Last chapter argued that Balthasar’s response to damaged experience takes form as a critical recovery of Gestalt which is rooted principally in a phenomenological reading of the metaphysics of Thomas Aquinas. In this act of recovery two central ideas emerge, the centrality of beauty in the experience of Gestalt (as the convergence of the ‘horizontal’ and ‘vertical’ dynamics) and the ‘real distinction’ which sets the proper ‘metaphysical context’ for a reading of those dynamics. It was also suggested, however, that even if Balthasar’s philosophical explication and defense leads one to take Gestalt seriously as a possible ‘phenomenological object,’ a crucial problem remains. In this form, ‘Gestalt’, ‘beauty’, ‘the real distinction’ are ideas, and ideas, even if coupled by scientia, are simply not enough. If what we are grappling with is a certain phenomenological condition - damaged experience - then philosophical defenses in themselves are inadequate. If our present age actually suffers from ‘the decay of aura’ or ‘the eclipse of glory’ then what is needed is not primarily theory but healing. For both thinkers, our age is deeply in need; not primarily of a theory of semblance but
semblance itself.

‘Inverse Theology’

The question then is what path might actually lead to a recovery of semblance? Balthasar suggests ‘theological aesthetics,’ not primarily as a tradition of thinking and writing about God, but of the reception and expression of His glory. As was suggested in the conclusion of the last chapter, however, ‘traditional theology’ is a way Adorno believes to be ‘blocked’ (ND, 397). Both traditional theology and metaphysics attempt to speak of objects sub specie aeternitatis and as such they fail to come to grips with the ‘Kantian block.’ As Adorno has suggested, the real significance of this block is not its status as a philosophical argument but its expression of what has happened to experience by means of disenchantment. As last chapter’s concluding quote from Negative Dialectics suggested, even if Hegel demonstrated a contradiction in Kant’s thinking (i.e. that to posit a ‘dividing line’ between what one can know and what lies beyond knowledge is to have already transgressed that line) the Kantian Block cannot be philosophically reasoned away (ND, 402). The loss of semblance, which is the experiential consequence of disenchantment, is what was truly demonstrated by the block. And this as lived historical experience remains fully intact. Mythical gods, angels, and miracles, have been burned away by the light of Enlightenment reason and the rationalized forms of life it has made possible. This fact cannot be rounded upon by theory, nor once it has been ‘exposed’ does it vanish like Helena’s garments in the arms
of Faust. For better or worse, “once made conscious, the semblance is no longer the same” (ND, 393).

The block as such is a socio-historical phenomenon. On the one hand this provides hope because it does not render the block metaphysically absolute. Adorno’s statement that “[t]ranscendence feeds on nothing but the experiences we have in immanence” is not a timeless statement of metaphysics. It is an admission that transcendence, traditionally conceived, has become impossible (ND, 398). On the other hand, recognizing the historicity of the block presents us with a far deeper problem of coming to grips with a situation that is largely beyond our control. To recognize ourselves as entrapped by our own history of progress is to begin to grasp the Gordian knot within which we are caught. The ‘universal power’ of Enlightened reason is one over which “we ourselves are powerless” (DoE, 22). Acknowledging the irrevocability of the block is to thus take utterly seriously the actual phenomenological condition within which we live. Enlightenment perspicacity has disenchanted the world. “All gods and qualities have been destroyed” (DoE, 5). And this destruction is a historical fact.

This fact relates to both experience and reason. It concerns experience because reification has left us unable to recognize objects of experience in ways that allow their semblance character to appear. Enlightened perspicacity has pulled the gods down to earth. And yet in this light we ourselves now fail to truly live.292 While “[a]nimism had endowed things with souls; industrialism makes souls into things” (DoE, 21). This reality

292 Reference to Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life (Verso, 2005).
cannot just be wished away. The fact of the block renders any attempt to grasp the
substance of things beyond the ‘veil of experience’ impossible by the standards of
Enlightened reason itself. “The cognitive process that is supposed to bring us
asymptotically close to the transcendent thing is pushing that thing ahead of it, so to
speak, and removing it from our consciousness” (ND, 407). If reason itself has become
essentially human and instrumental then ‘metaphysics’ and ‘theology’ can no longer
continue to speak without betraying their forms of utterance as a lie. Again, this is an
historical statement, which as historical does not remove any of its force.

Recognizing the block for what it is thus leaves present day theology and
metaphysics in a state of ruin. These forms continue to endure in our age not because
they can ultimately be taken seriously, but because they express our abiding need for
transcendence. The demand that life have ‘meaning’ that we ourselves do not create,
or which isn’t oriented by our own projected needs appears, after the block, ‘irrational’
and yet it cannot be abandoned if we are to retain our humanity (ND, 376).
Metaphysics endures in an age of disenchantment as an expression of our own failure to
achieve what Enlightenment promised. If we continue to clamor for all talk of
“transcendence” it is only because we find the burden of this failure unbearable. As
such, we “consider [talks of metaphysical meaning] eagerly and directly [and] take this
for a sign of a transcendent presence” (ND, 376).

What is crucial to see in this is that reification (which is itself the ‘semblance’ of
Enlightened perspicacity) is even expressed in contemporary efforts at retrieving
metaphysics and theology. Disenchantment is expressed precisely in our attempts to
overcome it. “The web of semblance in which men are caught extends to their imagined ways of tearing the veil.” (ND, 372) In a world in which reason has become a human power ‘theological recovery’ becomes, in other words, a form of Prometheanism.

Attempts to resurrect metaphysical theories of the Absolute, or mounting theological arguments to explain God’s absence, or trying by Herculean efforts to ‘bring transcendence back in’ are ways of combating disenchantment that only continue to reiterate its general inescapability. In such forms theological and metaphysical ‘rescue’ themselves defame the Holy. (ND, 402) If God were indeed what those great religious traditions of ages past claimed of him, then ‘metaphysics of transcendence’ and ‘theological rescues of God’ as arguments show themselves ignorant to what ‘transcendence’ had originally expressed, and show themselves as a kind of blasphemy.

Metaphysicians and theologians, in other words, rightly stand in company with Job, against which God interjects,

> Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?

> Gird up your loins like a man,

> I will question you, and you shall declare to me.

> Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?

> Tell me if you have understanding...

> Where is the way to the dwelling of light,

> And where is the place of darkness,
That you may take it to its territory

And that you may discern the paths to its home?²⁹³

Theological utterance which is not a response, fragile, stuttering, and weak belies its own atheism. That this is true is for Adorno not ultimately another ‘theology,’ but an admission of what we have become. In this situation truth and piety demands the renunciation of theological truth: “[The] one who believes in God cannot believe in God, why the possibility represented by the divine name is maintained, rather, by him who does not believe” (ND, 402).

This however does not entail a rejection of theology in toto.²⁹⁴ In fact, it is precisely the unassimilable character of theology and metaphysics properly expressed (theology, in other words, that recognizes transcendence through its own fragile stammering) that aligns with Adorno’s attempt to resist the present state affairs.²⁹⁵

²⁹³ Job 38:1-4,19-20

²⁹⁴ Christopher Craig Brittain does a good job providing an analysis of Adorno’s concerns for theology, including the ‘Kantian Block’ and also introduces fundamental possibilities for the relationship between Adorno and theology ‘traditionally conceived.’ What I wish to suggest is that Balthasar’s account of ‘theological aesthetics’ differs markedly from ‘traditional theology’ if what one means by ‘traditional’ is principally the reading and writing of texts. As I hope to show. Christopher Craig Brittain, Adorno and Theology, (A&C Black, 2010). 37ff., 83ff. 190ff.

²⁹⁵ Adorno tends to always speak of theology in two modes simultaneously. As both ideology, when it conforms to the philosophy of the day, and also as gesturing towards truth in its act of resistance against a society bound by its ideology to the immanence of reason. The following quote I take to be a gesture towards the theology of Barth which is itself a form of theological resistance that takes transcendence seriously. “The theology and metaphysics which necessity resurrected are condemned, despite some valiant Protestant resistance, to serve as ideological passports for conformism.” (ND, 398) See also, (ND, 421).
Metaphysics and theology are both impossible and unavoidable. As he notes, “At its most materialistic, materialism comes to agree with theology.” (ND, 207) Indeed, Adorno even confesses his own ‘need’ for metaphysics not, of course, as a systematic theory of being, but as an expression of his own need to regard human life as intrinsically meaningful. He confesses,

But if I will not deny that the philosophy of history has overthrown the metaphysical ideas, and yet I cannot bear that overthrow unless I am to deny my own consciousness as well—then a confusion that goes beyond mere semantics tends straightway to promote the fate of metaphysical ideas to a metaphysical rank of its own (ND, 372).

It thus should be said, for Adorno, that metaphysics and theology are impossible but are at the same time utterly necessary. That is, they are required as ways of resisting a condition wherein things, ideas, and experiences have become utterly ‘anthropomorphic.’ This is why, on several occasions Adorno speaks of theology, not only as important, but as at the heart of his own attempts at resistance.²⁹⁶ In a letter written to Benjamin in November of 1934 Adorno states, for example,

... [I]t seems to me doubly important that the image of theology, into which I would gladly see our thoughts dissolve, is none other than the very one which sustains your thoughts here— it could indeed be called an ‘inverse’ theology.

²⁹⁶ (ND, 208, 230, 401) See also Christopher Craig Brittain, Adorno and Theology, (A&C Black, 2010) 2.
This position [is to be] directed against natural and supernatural interpretation alike.\textsuperscript{297}

The ‘image of theology’ in which he would ‘happily’ see his and Benjamin’s thoughts dissolve is not ‘traditional theology’ (at least as he conceives it) but ‘inverse theology.’ What is this? For the purposes of our study several basic contours will be suggested. First, an ‘inverse theology’ speaks of transcendence, but does not presume to speak \textit{sub specie aeternitatis}. It honestly comes to grips with the historical reality of the block by refusing to presume to speak substantively of things ‘in themselves.’ This is not only necessary for the reasons traced above, but because such a theology would be needed in order to take ‘transcendence itself’ \textit{utterly seriously}. \textit{That is to say it would not attempt to ‘conceive’ of a transcendence over against the human} (which Hegel rightfully exposed as nothing other than a projection of subjectivity in the form of ‘the unhappy consciousness’). It would, rather, approach transcendence through negativity. To use another image of Adorno, it would lay claim to a ‘messianic’ hope that present states of affairs can be recognized and criticized not on the basis of some positive conception of life in the form of a ‘utopia’ (ND, 378). Inverse theology rests upon a ‘messianic light’ that reads present conditions not in relation to a posited ideal (which

\textsuperscript{297} Quoted in Christopher Craig Brittain, \textit{Adorno and Theology}, (A&C Black, 2010) 2.
can only be a negative projection of our own needs) but *negatively* as ‘injustice’ seen as such only in relationship to a justice which cannot be positively conceived.\(^{298}\) He states,

The only philosophy which can responsibly be practiced in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption... Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light (MM, 247).

‘Inverse theology,’ in other words, would not dare to speak ‘for God’ by means of its own positive conceptions of transcendence, but recognize itself as in a place that is ‘finite’ ‘weak’ and ‘vulnerable. It would also, however, stand discontent with the present state of affairs, rooted in a firm conviction that all present ‘justice’ will be shown for what it is through a future redemption that is at this present moment inconceivable.

Second, an ‘inverse theology’ would not present ‘metaphysical’ theories in an attempt to reconcile existence to suffering. This is made clear in Adorno’s discussion of metaphysics, suffering, and death in the concluding pages of *Negative Dialectics*. “After Auschwitz,” (which Adorno understands an embodiment of Enlightenment *in extremis*) no metaphysical ‘answer’ to suffering can continue to stand. Any attempt to suggest

\(^{298}\) Much could be said here about the similarities and tensions between Adorno and Barth on these questions. As we shall see Balthasar will weigh in on this as well.
“the positivity of existence as sanctimonious” shows itself to continue to “wrong the victims;” by “squeezing any kind of sense, however bleached, out of the victim’s fate.” (ND, 361) Much could be said here about the relationship between theology and suffering, of which theodicy is a common form. What ought to mentioned here is that for Adorno inverse theology cannot attempt by means of theory to pronounce reconciliation on a world inflicted by catastrophe. It must attempt to address injustice while refraining from instating its own ideas of justice, reconciliation, and ultimate ‘meaning,’ as absolute. This again, is the only way in which one might express a ‘theology’ that is justified after the block. ‘Inverse theology’ as such cannot, as Hegel did, attempt to reconcile the ‘slaughter bench of history’ with ultimate meaning. This again is not itself a metaphysical position. If it were it would be nothing more than a reiteration of nihilism, relativism, and the like which expresses Enlightenment in the form of despair (e.g. Schopenhauer, Nietzsche). ‘Inverse theology’ must instead make “a mockery of the construction of immanence as endowed with a meaning radiated by an affirmatively posited transcendence” (ND, 361). This is the posture of ‘messianic’ hope.

Third, an ‘inverse theology’ would not approach semblance as a ‘way to transcendence’ positively conceived. This is what both Benjamin and Adorno understood the romantics (e.g. Schelling and Hegel) as attempting to do by rendering semblance as symbol. As they see it, this is only an attempt to overcome the block by using the finite, material, and human as a bridge to the infinite, immaterial, and divine. ‘Symbol,’ in other words is an attempt by way of immanence to gain access to
transcendence. Walter Benjamin made this point early on within his work *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* when he suggested,

This abuse occurs wherever in the work of art the ‘manifestation’ of an ‘idea’ is declared a symbol. The unity of the material and the transcendental object, which constitutes the paradox of the theological symbol is distorted into a relationship between appearance and essence (OGTD, 160).

Art conceived as the ‘manifestation of an Idea’ is art conceived as symbol. And symbol involves, essentially, the attempt to arrest the infinite and transcendent by means of the particular, limited, and finite. ‘Symbol,’ or what Adorno will call ‘sign,’ is thus a kind of ‘magic,’ that involves an attempt to gain control over what lies beyond one’s power by manipulating what lies within one’s power. Adorno echoes Benjamin’s rejection of ‘sign’ and adds to it the accusation that this function of sign lies at the heart of Enlightenment’s attempt at mastery of the other. ‘Sign’ is a means of manipulation and control of the non-human by human invention, which is exactly the urge which drives disenchantment. As he notes in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, “For science the word is first of all a sign... [a]s sign, language must resign itself to being calculation and, to know nature, must renounce the claim to resemble it” (DoE, 13).

Here Adorno contrasts ‘sign’ and ‘image.’ ‘Sign’ is a means to grasp hold of that which lies beyond one’s power specifically by reenactment and repetition, which in purified form is nothing other than ‘identity thinking’ (as seen in chapter 2). Image however, involves the recognition of objective preponderance, and is initiated through a process of ‘mimesis’ whereby one conforms oneself to the other. Image involves a
‘resignation to likeness’ in the sense that it does attempt to ‘know’ the other by identity, but affinity (ND, 48, 68). Image involves “the appearance of the whole in the particular,” a phenomenon which he states “constitutes its aura,” but this appearance is made possible by a “renunciation of external effects” (DoE, 14). That is, image is a semblance of the unseen through one’s own attention to material objects by way of ‘mimesis’ and thus a production of likenesses which do not seek to control what lies beyond one’s sway but ‘renounce control’ to it. This form of renunciation which constitutes ‘the image’ is for Adorno embodied most fully in art. Art is ‘production’ involving the imposition of self upon material for the purpose of producing form, but this form does not claim to arrest the essence of its ‘material.’ Nor is its ‘material’ merely a husk that can be thrown away once the essence has been grasped. Art works with material and through this work brings to expression both the possibilities of matter and human spirit. It becomes a harbinger of semblance, not as a ‘sign’ which can be grasped and manipulated in order to attain the essence which the sign ‘contains,’ but is a form of production beginning in mimesis and which ends in affinity. The semblance of the image is thus a recognition of genuine otherness and self in a hope of ‘reconciliation’ (AT, 134, 190).

An inverse theology must be as such a theology of image. It acknowledges the block, but in attempting to ‘mimic’ objects of experience rather than import itself upon them, or master them by means of ‘signs,’ it seeks genuine ‘reconciliation’ with all that has been effaced by Enlightenment rationality. In theological language, inverse theology would not seek to penetrate into the realm of the spirit (the Idea) by means of
the flesh (the sign), but would see in the flesh a glory which is both its own and not its own. In this way inverse theology would not attempt to extract or impose meaning on the material and the particular but recognize in them a flickering of life under the shadow of death. It would strain to see the dead ‘raised.’ He thus writes, “At its most materialistic, materialism comes to agree with theology. Its great desire would be the resurrection of the flesh, a desire utterly foreign to idealism, the realm of the absolute spirit” (ND, 207).

In this way inverse theology and art are closely entwined, and this is why “even in an age when they fall silent, great works of art express hope more powerfully than the traditional theological texts...” (ND, 397). One might say that artworks align with inverse theology by standing as plenipotentiaries of the resurrection of the flesh. They embody in their emblematic character what life would be like free from its bondage to identification. In the wake of Enlightenment all thinking, all language, concepts, and systems of thought have become irrevocably humanized, this is the death of theology and metaphysics. Art, however, seeks the transcendent while acknowledging this situation. It does not shirk from its own status as something ‘human.’ And yet, at the same time it strains for depth and intrinsic value as lying beyond the sway of the human urge to dominate. One might say art shows itself a site of ‘intra-mundane

---

299 “Christian dogmatics, in which the souls were conceived as awakening simultaneously with the resurrection of the flesh, was metaphysically more consistent—more enlightened, if you will—than speculative metaphysics, just as hope means a physical resurrection and feels defrauded of the best part by its spiritualization” (ND, 401).
transcendence.’ These are several crucial ways that Adorno might be considered ‘theological’ in a genuine sense. He does not claim access to, or power over, the an sich. It is not, as symbol and as ‘traditional theology’ attempts to be, a bridge beyond the block. It is however, a form of recognition that seeks to ‘give voice’ not by conforming objects to reason, but by seeking to reconcile us with what has suffered at our hands.

Having established this, we must now turn to consider Balthasar and his appeal to ‘theological aesthetics.’ For the limited purposes of this conclusion let us grant Adorno’s claims to the impossibility of ‘traditional theology’ are true. Let us also consider seriously the possibility of ‘inverse theology’ which recognizes semblance as a ‘trace of the unapproachable’ in three forms discussed above: In (1) a recognition of our own utterance as human, (2) an unwillingness to reconcile suffering with existence by means of theory, and (3) as involving a theology of ‘image’ which refuses to lay hold of the infinite by means of the finite. What I wish to consider is the possibility that Balthasar may grant all what Adorno has said above, and yet maintain that ‘theological aesthetics’ as a tradition of the reception and expression of God’s glory is still possible, even necessary. This is true precisely because the crux of theological aesthetics is the Gestalt of Jesus Christ, who himself ‘inverts’ theology in his appearance. The glory of Jesus Christ, for Balthasar, thus makes theological aesthetics both possible and necessary. I thus conclude this study by tracing in the most general outline the distinct character of this Gestalt, and will attempt to do so by also attending to the unresolved concerns I have suggested, but which heretofore have remain unaddressed. These are, first, the concern that if there is to be a recovery of glory it must involve not merely the
recovery of *Gestalt* as an ‘idea’ but as a mode of perception, or more properly, as a form of ‘encounter.’ It is only as such that *Gestalt* may not only be understood but *seen*. This, of course, places emphasis Balthasar’s suggestion that theological aesthetics must not be a tradition of theory first and foremost, but a tradition of the reception and expression of God’s glory, and most distinctly this glory in Christ. Secondly, I have chosen to do this granting the legitimacy of Adorno’s argument regarding the irrevocability of the Kantian block, and in light of this, the strictures he has placed upon ‘theology.’ In treating these I hope to at least suggest that ‘theological aesthetics’ in the form traced below does meet these demands. I also imply that there are important affinities between what Adorno sees as ‘redemptive’ in art and what Balthasar sees as ‘redemptive’ in the tradition of theological aesthetics. The differences between them are many and cannot be dismissed. However, I believe that it is enough for this study, which has sought to address the possibility of the recovery of experience, to show what they share in common.
The Glory of Christ

It must be said that up to this point no heed has been made to the distinction that Balthasar regards as absolutely essential between glory understood as the general manifestation of the beauty, in entwinement with truth and goodness, and that particular glory that appears in the ‘dialogical encounter,’ between God and humankind which is Jesus Christ. For Balthasar this distinction is fundamental, and stands as the pivot upon which all questions as to the reception and expression of glory must turn (GL7, 13). It is this particular Gestalt, which takes form not only as a certain ‘event’ in history, but as an intrinsic possibility in all experience, which provides the basis for the possibility of theology sketched above.

As we have seen, if we are to grant Adorno’s argument, then any theology that can be taken seriously as a means to recovery cannot presume to transcend beyond ‘the block.’ In other words, it must approach the question of transcendence through a recognition of its own provisionality, humanity, and fragility. For Balthasar, this is also

300 Of course there are innumerable ways to study ‘the Glory of Christ.’ I will follow Balthasar when he suggests, “To consider this glory one may trace its ‘analogies’ in history, religion, and culture outside of his particular tradition of revelation, but one must acknowledge in this the absolute non-repeatability, of the revelation of God in Christ. In this way glory, as revealed him fully and uniquely becomes, its own ‘phenomenological object. ’ Treating the ‘Christ-form’ in this way “consists in bracketing off provisionally at the start the historical revelation in Christ in its historicity, and taking this as a phenomenological eidos, in order to go on to establish whether and how this surpasses and judges every possible human sketch of thought in philosophy and religion; not that the eidos wins a narrow, fortuitous victory in this, but that it soars up every time in absolute superiority.” (GL7, 16)
true, and essential. It is important to recognize that according to this tradition (exemplified in biblical and spiritual literature) transcendence has not typically been conceived ‘metaphysically’ as an encounter between a certain class of beings ‘on one side,’ so to speak, and ‘God’ as a ‘transcendent being’ on the other. Transcendence, one might say, has been expressed not so much in spatial terms, but as an appearance of radical freedom. Phenomenologically, the ‘vertical’ moment of Gestalt is not so much an ‘invisible presence’ which is ‘beyond’ the visible, but as an appearance which shows itself utterly other than one’s expectations, predilections, and language. This is seen above all else in the glory which shows itself in Christ. Christ shows himself a manifestation of transcendence precisely because his Gestalt essentially ‘shatters’ all previous notions of the divine glory. As Balthasar states, “All along this path” of manifestation, which shatters all concepts and categories, philosophical, theological, and religious systems, “he reveals his glory” (GL7, 23). In this Gestalt God appears in a form ‘opposite to himself’ (that is opposite to prior conceptions of divinity) and precisely by such an act of radical freedom God confirms His ‘absolute’ otherness. God ‘metaphysically conceived’ is precisely not finite, corporeal, weak, mortal, etc. In Christ God shows himself to be all of these things. And yet this is at the same time not merely a shattering through ‘radical otherness.’ Balthasar notes,

No one has ever seen God (Jn 1.18; 6.46; 1 Jn 4.12; 1 Tim 6.16), apart from the Son who is in the bosom of the Father; it is always the radiance of the unutterable that we shall see upon the face of the Son (Jn 17.24 Rev. 22.4) and thus see the ineffable ‘as he is’ (1 Jn 16.12), ‘face to face’ (1 Cor. 13.12) (GL7,
It is important to note that in the manifestation of the Gestalt God’s ‘transcendence’ is precisely what does not appear. It is not a ‘concept’ but the manifestation of an other as other in radical freedom. Yet this other is beheld ‘face to face.’ The ‘shattering’ is accompanied by tender affinity between this other and our own human frailty. Each of these stands as a ‘moment’ within the tension of the Gestalt. This is a glory which appears is in the form of both ‘likeness’ and ‘unlikeness.’ (Balthasar of course sees this expressed in the tradition by the analogia entis.) This ‘unlikeness’ (recognized as the transcendence of divine freedom) is in its ‘moment’ an a demonstration of a higher unity-in-difference. In other words, divine freedom manifests itself by ‘shattering’ all concepts and categories, but in the next movement its presents itself in ‘tender affinity.’ The tension and relation of these moments that ‘higher unity’ which is beyond the transcendence which is simply the ‘other,’ to the transcendence which simultaneously ‘not other’ (non-aliud). The one who recognizes the Gestalt of the glory of Christ perceives an image which simultaneously shatters their own ideas but at the same time touches the deepest ground of their being (GL7, 266). That which initially shows itself to be impossible and repellent begins to manifest itself as a greater truth, goodness, and beauty than could have been possibly conceived apart from this appearing. This ‘likeness in unlikeness’ is crucial, for it shows that ‘transcendence’ is not a realm conceived beyond the block, but a negative (in the sense that it continues to shatter one’s own expectations and language). We are reduced to stuttering but this ‘messianic’ appearance also redeems what it shatters (together with what we have
shattered) and draws those ‘pieces’ into completely unforeseen configurations of action and life. This revelation of ‘likeness in unlikeness’ is at the same time a ‘unity-indifference’ essential to the Gestalt. It is performed in the encounter with the appearing of Jesus Christ. Our perception of this form, to speak in the terms of ‘inverse theology,’ involves a ‘taking hold’ of this Gestalt in ‘stammering’ (one cannot arrest the Gestalt, without being arrested by it). “In the Bible, the ineffable, before whom words can only stammer and must in the end (in finally apophatic theology) be silent” (GL7, 266).

He continues, however, “[t]he paradox of Biblical revelation is that the ineffable as such has placed itself in the word: this proclaims its sublime freedom and power, but also the terrifying danger that the word, where it ceases to be a word of prayer, may forget the ineffability of God and absolutize itself as a human logos in philosophical logic or philology” (GL7, 266). The ineffable, in other words, has expressed itself. This leads, naturally to a profusion of expressions in response to that word. Some of which reveal express the Gestalt some which do not. What is important for our purposes is to recognize that perception of the Gestalt of Christ leads to our ‘expression’ in and through words and images.’ Again, to use Adorno’s language, what is revealed in this Gestalt is something not known by way of symbol’ but images. What serves to guarantee this the recognition that likeness is always within a greater unlikeness. And yet, again, even this ‘unlikeness’ abides in a unity-in-difference with those who behold the Gestalt. To say that Christ is the ‘likeness’ of God is not to say that through Christ we have the means to arrest what lies beyond our power; it is to say that his likeness is
a manifestation of radical otherness to us and for us. This likeness is one ‘performed’ by Christ, who the image given to us of who is absolutely unknowable. The glory of Christ is thus a manifestation of depth, that is an expression of an other, but this expression is not an ‘in road’ to an an sich but is the manifestation of One who lies fundamentally beyond our control, and which manifests this ‘beyond’ by demonstrating his own freedom by showing himself to us in his Gestalt. In this way, the appearance doesn’t reduce the unknowability it deepens it. He states,

God is incomprehensible, and the more he offers himself to our understanding mind, the more his incomprehensibility grows. S Comprehendit incomprehensibile esse. This is true, no longer as a theorem of negative theology in general, but of the most concrete theology of all, which Paul calls the ‘folly of God’ in the Cross of Christ. (1 Cor 1.25)

Again, with the strictures established above one can interpret such claims primarily phenomenologically. That is, as a claims concerning the Gestalt. In the wake of Enlightenment reason has taken principally the form of knowledge-as-domination. In this condition what is truly ‘transcendentally other’ can only appear as a Gestalt which lies beyond our control.\textsuperscript{301} Response to this Gestalt takes form as a recognition of the irreducible ineffability of that which has manifested itself, and yet in a ‘profusion’ of

\textsuperscript{301} There is a fundamental difference however. For Balthasar this freedom cannot be ‘the freedom of the subject,’ a freedom which for Kant is ultimately ‘posited’ by reason to secure human freedom (something which is guaranteed by subjectivity in the form of rationality). This freedom must be objective.
images it shows itself as a self-disclosure of one who more than ‘other.’ This ‘other’ is so radically other that it cannot ultimately fixed by a negation. It shows itself to us as a difference-in-unity.

This can be read throughout the tradition of theological aesthetics in the profusion of images which express the form which has been received. Christ ‘shows’ his ‘divinity’ as a Gestalt. This Gestalt proves itself true by its likeness to past expressions of his Gestalt but at the same time this new form simultaneously ‘shatters’ and ‘re-forms’ all past forms. This is shown again and again throughout the history of the tradition of the reception and expression of this Gestalt. I wish to press here, once again, however, that the phenomenological aspect to this shattering and surpassing is not limited to the past. The Gestalt appears as a word and as an image to us. To say this differently, the Gestalt isn’t always received second hand. It continues to manifest itself in every experience and in every life. (TL4, 433) In essence, the Gestalt of Christ is not essentially an object at all, not an ideal or phenomenon or even indigent particular. Nor is the Gestalt a recorded historical event. The Gestalt of Christ is an encounter between persons and the ineffable and inapproachable, wherein this ‘other’ expresses itself to us ‘face to face.’

“Doxa” is the divinity of God as it is freely made known. The fact that it is made known means that it has placed itself within an expressive form; but the fact that it is made known means that in the same act it bursts through every form. (GL7, 266)
Because the ineffable has taken concrete form and has showed himself in the likeness of an image we are not reduced to ‘simple negativity’ in the sense of recognizing a ‘limit’ placed upon thought and language. The ‘negative’ comes by way of a proliferation of images, no single one of which can be absolutized. There are an infinite number of ‘paraphrases’ exemplified in the scriptures themselves. (GL7, 266)

Each ‘paraphrase’ articulates a likeness which, because it is judged by means of its relations with other images (the horizontal ‘tension’ of the Gestalt) and also because the image is of one who is inapproachable there is manifest a depth/distance within the image. The proliferation of images is exactly what demonstrates the infinity of this other.

At this point, we are right to ask, “Even if all this is granted within the Gestalt (provisionality, vulnerability, freedom, image) how can such a form be perceived?” If it cannot then all that has been said above ultimately falls back into the discourse of ‘traditional theology and metaphysics’ which have been rendered impossible by the block. Is it then a prerequisite of the perception of this Gestalt that one ‘posit’ the divinity of Christ by an act of ‘faith?’ If so, this would certainly leave the Gestalt in a problematic position vis-à-vis Enlightenment. Adorno himself dismissed ‘faith’ as useless regression. As he understands it, ‘faith’ is purely a ‘privative concept,’ an action performed not by the intellect, but by the will as a kind of voluntary surrender of reason. As he describes it, room has to “be made” for faith (DoE, 14). Faith in this form

---

302 Even the Gospels are not ‘the image’ but only records of the image, and they are, multiple.
is essentially a *sacrificium intellectus*, a maneuver which is ultimately untenable in our Enlightened age.

For Balthasar, however, faith is not primarily an act of will or an act of intellect but is an act of perception, an activity of turning oneself towards that which is other to oneself. This form of faith is in response to an appearing, but it is essentially a form of perception, that is, a mode of encounter. Faith is not, as such, an act of the subject in blind surrender to the object (or to a creedal proclamation). Faith involves a series of moments of encounter that constitutes the *Gestalt*. This he discusses in three modes that of ‘*epiphany,*’ ‘*poesis,*’ and ‘*charis.*’ (GL1, 34 ff.) We will explore each of these in turn.

*(1) Epiphany:* Balthasar states, “The beautiful is without doubt ‘appearance’ (*Erscheinung*), or epiphany (*epiphaneia*)” (GL5, 600). To encounter something as beautiful involves, as we have seen, not only ‘taking hold’ of *Gestalt*, but also being ‘arrested’ by it (GL1, 125). To truly perceive the *Gestalt* one must not just ‘mentally attend’ to an object but be ‘drawn outward’ toward it. Perception involves the act of drawing together and ‘harmonizing’ the various phenomenal ‘moments’ into a perception of a whole. But this activity is not strictly ‘internal,’ to the self. Epiphanic perception is a kind of ‘rapture,’ and involves being drawn ‘out of oneself’ toward the objective self-expression of the appearance which ‘shows itself’ in its wholeness and fullness.\(^{303}\) ‘Faith’ is as such a movement experienced when perceptive ‘grasping’ takes

\(^{303}\) This dynamic is crucial not only for Balthasar’s account of Beauty, but for Truth and Goodness, Being, and Love. We cannot explore this at length here, for the time being it can
form as \textit{self-abandonment}. This requires one ‘trust’ (\textit{fiducia} or ‘have faith’ ‘have confidence’) in the appearance such that one can be ‘moved outward’ in a transport toward the object-in-expression. (GL1, 220)

Aesthetic analogies to such a movement abound, in the rapture of beauty and in experience of art, as well as in the generation of art. The language which Balthasar adopts to speak of faith in this way is ‘attunement’ and ‘adaptation’ of oneself to the \textit{Gestalt}. (GL1, 220) Again, this attunement and adaption isn’t essentially internal.

‘[I]t is not man’s entry (\textit{Einfahren}) into himself, into his best and highest possibilities, which can become an experience (\textit{Erfahrung}), but, rather, it is his act of entering the Son of God, Christ Jesus, who is naturally inaccessible to him, which becomes the experience that can claim for itself his undivided obedience (GL1, 222).

There are undeniable echoes here between what Balthasar calls ‘attunement’ and what Adorno calls ‘affinity’ which he understands within the province of art. Balthasar doesn’t disagree (such forms, after all have largely been relegated to this realm with the fragmentation of the \textit{Transcendalia}). It is not, however, limited to the sphere of art. It extends by faith in Jesus Christ to an entire form of life. A life of faith in the \textit{Gestalt} of Christ is in essence an attunement of oneself to this \textit{Gestalt} by patterning oneself after, and seeking to ‘attune’ oneself in every experience to the original form by

\begin{quote}
\textit{simply be said that in accounting of this Balthasar adopts the Thomist conception of the principal intellectual act as a \textit{conversio ad phantasma} made possible by the harmonization of the agent intellect with the self-expressive act of beings through their ‘form.’}
\end{quote}
which one has been captivated. In this movement of the *Gestalt* every activity and
event becomes an ‘image’ that expresses (in more or less likeness) the *Gestalt* which
continues to manifest itself in its own freedom. In this way faith is not something one
‘has.’ It is a pattern of *dispossession* and attunement towards the *Gestalt* which has
both shatters one’s foundations and which expresses its own essential affinity by
showing its unity-in-difference. Balthasar notes

I cannot clasp faith’s supernatural reality to myself as if it were soothing
belonging to me as a possession. In faith and through it, rather, I am made open
and dispossessed of self... The important thing is the movement away from
myself, the preference of what is other and greater, and precisely the person
who has been expropriated for God does not want to become fully secure with
regard to this Other and Greater. (GL1, 224)

It might thus be said that faith is erotic. The other self-discloses to us and at the
same time exposes us for who we are. We ourselves are ‘revealed’ in this disclosure
(the true). (GL5, 600) At the same time we are captured by the splendor of this other (in
beauty) and drawn outward toward the other in desire (the good). This eroticism is not
primarily a grasping which seeks possession of the other, however, because the very
openness required for *ekstasis* is an openness to the Other in trust, in the recognition
that something has shown itself which is greater and more glorious. This ‘eros,’ towards
the other thus depends upon faith, that is openness. Balthasar notes that in this faith
there is a movement ‘of flight’ which can be called ‘salvation.’ He notes “the goal of
salvation is *grasped* in flight, because the flight can be understood only through its goal;
but it is grasped only in flight and not in itself, and, therefore, it cannot be translated into a static ‘certainty’…” (GL1, 228.) This erotic movement of being captivated by the good, the true, and the beautiful and ‘leaving one’s own country’ for that which shows itself ineffably greater is the dialogical encounter which constitutes the Gestalt of Jesus Christ itself. Epiphanic perception is manifestation of this Gestalt which comes in ‘movements’ of faith and love toward the expressed ‘image’ of the Ineffable. The term which Balthasar often prefers to describe this relationship is ‘circuminscession’ undoubtedly for its dynamic and relational connotations.

Balthasar’s primary concern is that in this erotic ‘journey’ the object of perception cannot be conceptually reduced to the subject (what he calls gnosis) nor can it be given the status of a fixed object closed in upon itself (positivism). In epiphanic perception the Gestalt ‘radiates’ outward and simultaneously draws us inward. The original and most constant form of this movement is love. “Within love, nothing is more pressing and vital that the drive to relinquish one’s own control” (TL1, 21). Genuine love is “self-forgetful, loving attentiveness to the object, to its meaning, and to the preservation of its integrity” (TL1, 216). It is when one loves, in other words, that the Gestalt of Christ shines forth, from both without and within.

Paradigmatic experiences of this kind of rapture, of course, are found in lives of deep ‘spiritual intensity,’ (and seen, for example, in prayer and contemplation) but it is this movement outward in faith and love which takes on an infinite number of forms and can be followed diffusely and constantly. Epiphany, which is a form of encounter with this other that expresses itself in the journey of ekstasis. (GL1, 312)
This experience of epiphany, if released from its confinement to the aesthetic, by means of theological practice can penetrate the rigid veil of reification. It must of course involve ways of relating to others which presume openness, trust, and the recognition that they are beings of intrinsic value, beauty, and truth. Christ is epiphany, and through the Holy Spirit, the historical disclosure of the divine life through Jesus Christ ‘appears’ within history. This is itself a prompting toward this movement of ‘flight’ and ‘openness’ towards this Other that shows itself in an otherness which is radically free.

(2) Poésis: Balthasar insists that the dialogical encounter which constitutes the Gestalt is not only receptive, as a ‘beholding’ of form, it is also productive, involving ‘poesis’ or ‘making.’ This introduces questions as to the origins of the ‘poetic’ faculty, and the phenomenon of ‘inspiration’ which while today has been primarily restricted to the ‘aesthetic,’ but was originally both more comprehensive and immanently theological.\footnote{In describing poesis, or the ‘faculty’ of creation Balthasar suggests that there is a point at which one’s own inspiration mysteriously passes over into inspiration through the genius, the daimon, or indwelling god, a moment in when the ‘spirit that contains the god’ (en-thusiasmos) obeys a superior command which as such implies form and is able to impose form” (GL1, 35).}

What he is suggesting here is that within dialogical modes of perception moments of creativity, imagination, and ‘genius’ are not understood as emerging solely

\footnote{I use the term ‘theological’ in its broadest sense, as including ‘religious’ or ‘spiritual.’}
within a mysterious ‘vanishing point’ in the self. Within one’s own action, at the point of its ‘origin’ there is a ‘higher openness’ which is “above the rational and discursive faculties of thought, and which appears as being ‘given,’ in a ‘mania’” (GL5, 603). Terms such as ‘insight’ ‘illumination’ or ‘enlightenment’ are suggestive here because they imply a ‘receptive’ moment within the highest and most intense forms of intellectual activity. The monological conception of an autonomous subject acting upon an external world is disrupted. The point at which the subject is most itself, it remains essentially ‘open’ to the ‘indwelling spirit.’ *Gestalt* here manifests not only in *epiphany*, that is to what is before it, but in *poesis* to what is ‘behind’ and ‘above’ (GL5, 607). It is at this point especially, Balthasar notes, that ‘beauty’ is witnessed not merely as a convergence of ‘innerworldly’ dynamics (GL5, 607). *Gestalt* emerges not only ‘between’ subject and object, but *subject and object dichotomies are undone altogether*. One expresses oneself through *action* and *imagination* but this itself is a movement of ‘inspiration’ from an other. The unity-in-difference which constitutes the *Gestalt* is here radicalized. The other works ‘in me’ and ‘through me.’ Imagination is a kind of ‘flash point’ of this which breaks in an outside which is utterly within. It is here that Balthasar suggests, *poesis* shows itself as theological glory (GL5, 608).\(^{305}\)

\(^{305}\) It is also the point at which, “for the religious person, Being becomes Theophanous, whether the divine appears in the form of a mythic image (with all the provisional character of such images), or whether his ‘mental (*geistige*) senses’ (as Marx also called them) as ‘spiritual (*geistliche*) senses’ make him capable of hearing and of seeing the mystery of Being as a whole.” (GL5, 608). This mode of perception leads prompts one toward an ‘intermediate realm.’
Balthasar suggests that it is precisely this ‘realm’ of the *daimon*, the ‘in-dwelling God’ that modernity has “progressively restricted, suppressed, and finally denied.” (GL1, 63) This is as one might expect. If Enlightenment perspicacity demands that reason be utterly transparent to itself it cannot tolerate an equivocality of self which is not-self, an ‘object’ which is ‘subject.’ It cannot tolerate *poesis* as *daimonic*. Thus he suggests, “[t]he history of the modern world lies just as much in the ruination and abolition of this *daimonic intermundum* as it does in the de-Christianization of public life and culture.” (GL1, 63) The modern concepts of ‘genius’ ‘insight’ and ‘inspiration’ have since been restricted to the aesthetic domain as remnants of earlier forms of dialogical encounter. It is, however, by *poesis* in the *Gestalt* of Christ that this can be reopened.

It is just here that Balthasar’s suggestion that one may *perceive* the *Gestalt by poesis* (that is by opening oneself in one’s own ‘makings’ to the influence of the an other crosses with the *Gestalt* of Christ. For the *Gestalt* of Christ is precisely not something merely ‘appears’ as an object within a ‘visual field’ so to speak. The *Gestalt* is something that manifests both ‘outwardly’ and ‘inwardly’ through the ‘Spirit of Christ,’ This again shows itself as an ‘other’ precisely as a manifestation of *freedom*.

Precisely at the moment when he unites man with Christ, the Holy Spirit bestows freedom on him: he elevates man’s restricted, creaturely freedom to the level of a liberated mighty, divine freedom, in order to then entrust this grace-gift of freedom to the believer as a freedom truly his own and truly to be exercised by him. (GL1, 196)
This ought not to be something understood merely within the context of ‘spiritual life.’ If we can presume Thomas’ account of knowledge, then knowledge is always mediated by the ‘productive imagination.’ This being so one must imagine a moment of ‘spontaneity’ ‘creativity’ and indeed ‘artistry’ in every act of knowledge. To borrow from Kant famous dictum, ‘inspiration is a condition for the possibility of experience.’ This ‘production’ of images which comes seemingly \textit{ex nihilo}, as a kind of ‘making’ can be understood theologically as a manifestation of the activity of the Spirit in the generation of images, and in turn knowledge. This activity is \textit{daimonic activity} is implicit in every form of experience, but is deepened, enlarged, and opened up in the \textit{Gestalt of Christ}. There is a kind likeness-in-unlikeness here. Just as no one can ‘know Christ’ except as their ‘eyes are opened’ by the Spirit, no one can ‘know’ anything at all except through that ‘opening’ of spontaneity, of the ‘in-dwelling god,’ which is the Holy Spirit.

This, just as in the ‘moment’ of encounter which is epiphany, is not fundamentally a ‘turning inward on oneself.’ It is not fundamentally achieved by introspection. It occurs in the activity of \textit{making} and \textit{acting}. This is nothing other than ‘the good’ which seizes self and ‘moves’ the self, not heteronomously, but in the very moment where one ‘discovers’ oneself. That is in one’s activity. All that has been said here as well can be understood fully within the strictures of ‘inverse theology.’ To speak of the ‘activity of the Holy Spirit’ working from within is not to posit a metaphysical substance somewhere beyond ‘the block.’ It is to recognize that within reason itself (in
as much as it is founded upon a ‘production of images’) there are ‘traces of the inapproachable’ that is semblances of the unseen.306

To recover this ‘movement’ of the Gestalt in its original fullness would require active postures which seek to remain ‘open’ to the activities of this Other who manifests Himself from within. And again, the aesthetic analogies are innumerable. Within in the tradition which is the reception and expression of the Gestalt of Christ this involves a posture of the creative making of life which is patterned off the original Gestalt and is receptive to the inner workings of His Spirit. (GL1, 158) In this way poesis as a moment of receptivity within activity can manifest semblance in all that is made and known. It perhaps here more than anywhere that one can echo Balthasar in declaring that Christ, (against all philosophy) “vindicates the poets” because the infinite is expressed in the finite precisely as an endless production of images which find themselves in relationship to the original Gestalt (what Balthasar calls the Ur-Bild) (GL1, 31).

(3) Charis: The third mode of perception which Balthasar points to is Charis. This term, he notes, means “loveliness, dignity, brilliance, favor, grace, gratitude all in one.” (GL5, 609) Balthasar highlights the broad range of its meaning to show the way in which worldly “dignity” “beauty” and “loveliness” is itself open to, and intrinsically related to the ‘higher’ Charis of ‘grace,’ the Gestalt of Christ (GL1, 34). He writes,

306 In human production itself there is an ‘openness’ through which an influence (not only of the spirit of Christ, but of the demonic as well) can manifest itself.
Actual grace is more than just a (moral) ‘invitation and encouragement’ on the part of the object, nor is it a mere ‘physical impulsion’. Actual grace is what Thomas, following Augustine, describes as *pondus* (an image related to the Biblical *kabod* and *Gloria*... it is the ‘dynamic and energetic or drastic and elastic’ influence which moves ‘the will as an energy and ‘fertilization’ immanent to the will’s deepest recesses – a *forma*, a *spiritus*, and a *virtus voluntatis*, that proceed from the inside to the exterior (GL1, 12).

Grace involves the perception of intrinsic ‘dignity’ and ‘openness’ of the historical and human to that which ‘grace’ which moves upon them, and appears within them. It is a mode of perception which ‘bestows’ upon individual moments, events, and objects an unseen beauty and value, which is by no means readily apparent. (GL5, 609) That which is *charis* (beautiful in this world) is an appearance, but this appearance is, in Balthasar’s words, only a ‘seedbed’ for a ‘higher’ manifestation which may yet ‘fertilize’ it. As I see it, it is in *charis* as a perceptual mode that one can recognize Balthasar echoing Adorno in pressing the need not for a ‘theory’ to reconcile existence with suffering, but a commitment to see the redemption of those of suffer.

*Charis* is, in other words, not a theory or an ethical system but a form of perception that ‘sees a dignity’ which is anything but apparent. It ‘reads’ in the suffering and undignified what lies concealed beneath appearance. This is what prompts a movement toward their redemption. (TL4, 75) This is not in any way an imposition of harmony upon dissonance, an attempt to enforce our notions of ‘justice’ upon those
who are afflicted, which Adorno suggests is the hallmark of philosophy. In a manner which strongly echoes Adorno, Balthasar asserts,

[P]hilosophy wants to do justice to the claim to absoluteness that lies in the pathetic events of the world stage... The best philosophy can do, as a human enterprise, is to arrive at the horizon of an abstract absolute in the presence of which... the historical is enacted (TL4, 74).

This, again shows Balthasar to stand in strong accord with Adorno. What he suggests here is that because philosophy (at least in its monological form) is wed to the universal it cannot understand suffering except through an attempt to reconcile the particular cries of those who suffer with an explanation provided by the universal. This cannot but continue to impose injustice by means of ideas.

*Charis,* which is a kind of ‘seeing of what is not seen,’ however, does not seek to ‘explain’ the cry of suffering by means of a ‘universal’ but understands them as possessing a kind of unseen dignity. This, of course, is expressed in the *Gestalt* of Christ who as the ‘wounded and dying God’ shatters all apparent notions of beauty and value. This *Gestalt* of Christ, which is a cruciform glory, ‘calls us out of ourselves’ by presenting others who suffer as ‘graced’ even in their apparent dejection and ‘ugliness.’ We are reminded that the glory of Christ appeared as anything but beautiful to visible eye. “He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.” (Is. 53:2) As such this *Gestalt* of Christ ‘elevates’ the cries of the suffering not to a state of reconciliation with existence, *but to a greater ‘tension.’* In this ‘moment’ of *charis* the actual cries of the weak and suffering *stand opposed* to the
‘apparent dignity and value’ which we impose. Charis in this way ‘contradicts’ an unformed vision. It is thus charis which does not ‘resolve’ tensions, but exacerbates it. It prompts a vigilance and heightens tensions:

[O]ur aim must be to show that man’s historical situation in this world is in a state of permanent tension: he is constantly on the lookout for a solution, a redemption, but can never anticipate or construct it from his own resources; nor does he have even an intimation of it...” (TL4, 75).

Charis prompts one not to ‘explain’ suffering but respond to it. This is not for Balthasar maintained through a perennial ‘negative,’ however. Redemption is not limited to a future unknown. It ‘occurs’ and is discovered and received in countless manifestations. Within the movement of the Gestalt these ‘discoveries’ continue the prompt desire and anticipation, however. They do not, like ‘metaphysics,’ prompt theoretical closure. Such moments are the ‘flickering’ of the light of redemption which, Balthasar suggests, cannot be positively assessed prior to the moment in which they appear. Such moments can be ‘known,’ only when recognized by the light of charis in the Gestalt of Christ.

For Balthasar neither epiphanea, poesis, or charis denies the night of suffering, nor its tensions with all that we know as good, and true, and beautiful. If beyond all appearances our world is radiant with the glory of God, and yet we currently live in ‘this present darkness’ (Eph. 6:12), this condition demands response. An ‘eclipse’ is far more irresolute than a ‘decay.’ It is in this eclipse, that the ‘wounded’ glory of the Christ continues to shine. Thus the cross, ‘when it is lifted up’ in no way justifies suffering. It is
the means by which those who suffer can be seen, and their voices heard, as they echo Christ’s own “Eli, Eli, lama Sabachthani.” And it is here, in this present darkness, that the Gestalt of Christ shows, despite all appearances, that there is hope.

Balthasar’s conviction that the Gestalt of Christ continues to shine within this dark night reflects what Kumiko Tanabe describes as the discordia concors in the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Between the dissonances of selves and the seeming irreconcilability of ends there remains, from the perspective of divine Otherness a hope for redemption. In the Gestalt of Christ the tensions and contradictions themselves bear seeds of charis. The ‘Messianic’ is thus not an apocalypse that, as a utter ‘negative,’ is waited upon to ‘break in’ from without. The Messianic ‘plays’ even amidst the banal and tragic. As Hopkins expresses in his poem The Kingfisher Catches Fire:

I say more: the just man justices;
   Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God’s eye what in God’s eye he is-
   Christ. For Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
   To the Father through the features of men’s faces.307 (9-14)

This ‘playing’ is, of course, not an indifference to the suffering of existence. It is a proclamation of hope in the face of it. The Christ who ‘plays’ is also the one who was

himself a victim. His *Gestalt* still bears these wounds, even if ‘transformed’ in his resurrected flesh. To use Hopkin’s language, it is ‘lovely in limbs’ despite the fact that these limbs were ‘wounded for our transgressions.’ What Hopkins here expresses, which is entirely consistent with Balthasar, is that the *Gestalt* of Christ is wholly apocalyptic, not in the ‘Messianic’ sense of breaking in from a future now unknown, but in ‘unveiling’ (*apocalypsis*) present moments of discordance as open to healing and reconciliation within the unceasing ‘tension’ of existence. It is this hope, I have suggested, that does not resolve the tension, but exacerbates it. Hope, as a moment in the *Gestalt* is one that propels us forward in efforts to “Heal the wounded, and bind the broken hearted.” (Ps. 147:3)

It is perhaps just here, when faced with hope in this twilight of glory, that Balthasar and Adorno find themselves at greatest odds. For Balthasar, despite his lamentation, is driven forward by a profound and unremitting hope in this *Gestalt*. Hope, however, was something which Adorno would not himself allow. “The only dawning hope,” he proclaimed, “is that there will be nothing any more” (ND, 380-381). It is thus telling that upon his death Balthasar’s remains were interred under the cloister of the Cathedral of Lucerne. His body lies entombed within a church of stained glass and stone. Adorno, by contrast, is commemorated by a monument in Frankfurt. It consists of a physical re-creation of his desk, a lamp, and a metronome. All of which are encased in a large glass cube.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Proust, Marcel. In Search of Lost Time, or À la Recherche du Temps Perdu. 1913.


