

INTRODUCTION

Aesthetics and modernity

In recent years it has become apparent that many questions which first became manifest during the emergence of philosophical aesthetics at the end of the eighteenth century play a decisive role both in mainstream philosophy and in literary theory. The critiques of the idea that the world is 'ready-made' by Hilary Putnam and other pragmatically oriented thinkers, the concomitant attention by Nelson Goodman, Richard Rorty and others to the 'world-making' aspects of language, the related moves in the philosophy of language on the part of Donald Davidson and others towards holistic accounts of meaning, and the orientation in post-structuralism towards the undecidable aspects of interpretation all involve structures of thought which developed as part of the history of aesthetics. While some of these thinkers explicitly refer to the tradition to be examined in the present book, others have been notably unconcerned about many of their most significant precursors. In order to help overcome this underestimation of the role of aesthetics the present book will focus on some of the main accounts of the human subject and on the conceptions of art and language which emerge within the Kantian and post-Kantian history of aesthetics. My aim is both to rectify a series of misapprehensions about the history of modern thought which have become the prevailing orthodoxy in some areas of the humanities, and to develop plausible versions of some of the disregarded and misunderstood arguments in that history.

In 1796 a German politico-philosophical manifesto, whose author seems to have been either Hegel or Schelling (but may have been Hölderlin), proclaims the 'highest act of reason' as an 'aesthetic act'. Philosophical reflections on beauty and art have, of course, been around in Western thought since Plato, and Platonic ideas clearly influenced Hegel, Schelling and Hölderlin, but it is only around the middle of the eighteenth century in Europe that the notion of a distinct area of philosophy called 'aesthetics' develops. Between the end of the eighteenth and the end of the nineteenth century the relationship between art and the rest of philosophy undergoes a radical transformation, a transformation that is connected, as we shall see, to vital changes in both the production and reception of music. The ways in which this transformation relates to the development of some of the major directions in modern philosophy will form the focus of my investigation.

Modern philosophy begins when the generally accepted basis upon which the world is interpreted ceases to be a deity whose pattern is assumed to have already been imprinted into the universe. The new philosophical task is therefore for human reason to establish its own legitimacy as the ground of truth. This transformation is prepared in the seventeenth century when Descartes

makes the 'I think' the main point of certainty upon which philosophy can build, but Descartes still relies upon God to guarantee the connection of ourselves to the order of the universe. Towards the end of the eighteenth century Immanuel Kant aims, in the light of Descartes's arguments about self-consciousness, to describe the shared structures of our subjective consciousness which are the 'condition of possibility' of *objective* knowledge, and he tries to do so without having recourse to a divinity who guarantees the order of the world. For Kant the only certainty *philosophy* can provide is grounded in ourselves, not in something outside ourselves. However, in order to establish more substantial links between the external world of nature and the internal world of self-consciousness, he subsequently becomes concerned with what makes us appreciate and create beauty. The reasons for Kant's turn to aesthetics will form the main starting point of the present book.

The new focus of philosophy on subjectivity established by Kant accompanies the complex and contradictory changes wrought by 'modernity': the rapid expansion of capitalism, the emergence of modern individualism, the growing success of scientific method in manipulating nature for human ends, the decline of traditional, theologically legitimated authorities, and the appearance, together with aesthetics as a branch of philosophy, of 'aesthetic autonomy', the idea that works of art entail freely produced rules which do not apply to any other natural object or human product. From being a part of philosophy concerned with the senses, and not necessarily with beauty – the word derives from the Greek '*aisthánesthai*', 'perceive sensuously' – the new subject of 'aesthetics' now focuses on the significance of natural beauty and of art. Reflection on aesthetics does not, though, just involve a revival of Plato's thoughts about beauty as the symbol of the good. The crucial new departure lies in the way aesthetics is connected to the emergence of subjectivity as the central issue in modern philosophy, and this is where the relevance of this topic to contemporary concerns becomes apparent.

Much recent theory in the humanities has regarded the human subject as being 'subverted' by its failure to provide a stable ground for philosophy, because, for example, of its dependence on language or on the unconscious. The point is, however, that such ideas are not the radically new insights as which they have often been presented. Related ideas already play a central role in some of the reflections upon subjectivity which immediately follow Kant and are implicit in some of Kant's own arguments. Furthermore, these theories from the early modern period can actually be shown both to have helped initiate the ideas which inform current debates and, at times, to be superior to many current theories. The important fact about these theories in the present context is that they regard the experience of natural and artistic beauty and the fact of aesthetic production as vital to the understanding of self-consciousness. The ability to apprehend something as beautiful and the ability to make something beautiful, as well as the ability to create new meanings without following fixed rules are seen as involving aspects of the self which cannot be theorised in terms of the

self's becoming transparent to itself as its own object of knowledge. The ways in which self-objectification seems to have inherent limits are an essential factor in the most significant of these theories of aesthetics.

Even more importantly for the story I wish to tell here, the reflections which lead to these models of the subject are frequently connected to the form of art most distant from representation of the object world: music. Towards the end of the eighteenth century 'absolute music', music without a verbal text, becomes increasingly vital in musical praxis, in philosophical reflection upon the significance of art, and as a means of understanding the self. The analogies between the changes in the understanding of the non-representational form of music for philosophy, and the development of theories, in the later Wittgenstein, the work of Heidegger, and post-structuralism, which reject the model of language as the representation of the pre-existing ideas of the subject, or as the representation of pre-existing objects in the world are not fortuitous. The role of music as the most symptomatic art form in this period will, then, be central to my argument because music exemplifies how our self-understanding can never be fully achieved by discursive articulation. If all we are can be stated in words, why does our being also need to be articulated in music, as every known human culture seems to suggest?

The often hyperbolic importance attributed to art towards the end of the eighteenth century evidently has its roots in the decline of theology and the disintegration of theologically legitimated social orders. As Marx put it in the *Communist Manifesto*, 'All that is solid melts into air', and the new orders of things cannot claim the same kind of authority as that provided by tradition and theology. The loss of a nature whose meaning is assumed to be inherent within it and whose structure is divinely guaranteed leads to a search for other sources of meaning and orientation. The new experience of nature as beautiful per se, rather than as a manifestation of the deity, and the new awareness of the fact that human beings can create aesthetic products whose interrelating parts are significant in ways which natural science cannot explain are essential to this search. These new aspects of modernity are, though, open to a wide variety of interpretations. Once it is clear that whatever coherence there is in the world, including in ourselves, can no longer be assumed to be underwritten by God, the relationship between the human and the natural becomes a serious problem. The task set for itself by the philosophy of the time is the creation of a coherent world with whatever natural capacities we possess and whatever innovatory capacities we can develop. Interrogation of the nature of subjectivity is therefore a reflection upon what these capacities are and how they relate to nature in ourselves and outside ourselves. This reflection is notably double-edged: the enthusiasm generated by liberation from theological constraints can easily give way to a suspicion of the resultant freedom and to the sense that the universe is inherently meaningless, because whatever meaning there is can only be a 'merely human' projection. The move that can be traced from early German Idealism to Schopenhauer can be seen somewhat schematically – German Idealism being a

far more complex phenomenon than is often realised – as a move between these two opposed responses, responses which will later both occur in the work of Nietzsche. Despite their opposition, both responses to modernity attach considerable significance to art, either as that which provides images of what the world could look like if we were to realise our freedom and thus establish an appropriate relationship to the rest of nature, or as the sole remaining means of creating illusions which will enable us to face a meaningless existence. These positions are not necessarily wholly opposed: they both share a suspicion that the dominance of quantifying forms of rationality as the increasingly exclusive principle of modern life is part of what gives rise to the crises of meaning in modernity.

At the moment when philosophy becomes concerned in a rigorous manner with scientific method and the de-mythologising capacity of natural science, it also becomes concerned in novel ways with what is excluded by science. Nothing in the sciences provides a sense of the existential meaning nature can have for the individual subject. The point of science is the production of general laws which subsume individual cases and enable the manipulation and control of nature. In consequence, nature seen with the eyes of modern science can begin for many people to look like a machine which is being responded to in mechanical ways. Along with this suspicion of the possible effects of the new sciences goes the awareness that the growing domination of capitalist forms of exchange leads to nature being regarded in terms of the profit which can be extracted from it. One of the key ideas in the new subject of aesthetics is precisely that what makes an object beautiful has nothing to do with its usefulness or its exchange value. Even though artworks clearly do become commodities, neither their use-value nor their value as commodities can constitute them as works of art. The potency of aesthetic theory lies not least in its attempts to explore the implications of this special status.

Schelling states in 1800 that demanding usefulness from art ‘is only possible in an age which locates the highest efforts of the human spirit in economic discoveries’. Given his admiration for the early Schelling, it is therefore no coincidence that many of Marx’s insights into the social and cultural effects of capitalism have their roots in aesthetics. Marx’s critique of the commodity form, for example, gains much of its force from the idea of the object which cannot be represented by anything else: the work of art. The idea of an intrinsic value in things which is independent of their exchange value is echoed in aesthetic theory’s suspicion of the idea that nature is merely an object which is subsumable under general scientific rules, rather than something worthy of contemplation for its own sake. The process of rationalisation which leads to the penetration of rule-bound and quantifying procedures into all areas of science, administration and exchange is, then, both the irreplaceable foundation of the advances of modernity and the source of major uncertainties. Philosophical aesthetics responds to this process by providing a reminder that there are other ways of seeing nature and human activity, apart from the instrumental views offered by the sciences and commerce. The central new idea is that the beauty

of nature need not have an ulterior function and can be its own purpose. Analogously, the rules of an art are seen as the self-legitimizing products of human freedom, not as the result of the instrumental attempt to grasp objective necessities or natural regularities. Not surprisingly, in the light of the contemporary ecological crisis, the questions raised by aesthetics have come to seem more and more significant today. This renewed concentration on what can be learned from aesthetics makes it clear that there are no necessary grounds for assuming that concern with aesthetics should, as it often has been in the modern period, be connected to a rejection of rationality. Instead, art and the understanding of art can enable what has been repressed by a limited conception of reason to be articulated. The awareness of the danger of such repression – which has, I believe, been one of the main sources of the appeal of post-structuralist critiques of ‘metaphysics’ that I discuss below and in coming chapters – is already apparent in the work of two of the founding figures of aesthetics: Alexander Baumgarten and J.G. Hamann.

Baumgarten’s *Aesthetica* (Part 1 published in 1750, Part 2 in 1758: see Baumgarten 1988), and Hamann’s *Aesthetica in nuce* (1762), begin to suggest what is at stake in the emergence of aesthetics as an independent branch of philosophy. Despite their obvious differences, Baumgarten and Hamann share a concern with the failure of the rationalist traditions of the eighteenth century to do justice to the immediacy of the individual’s sensuous relationship to the world which is part of aesthetic pleasure. Philosophy based on the Cartesian ideal of ‘clear and distinct ideas’ finds art a problem because art lives from its particularity, which is not reducible to conceptual generalisation and so does not rely on clear ideas. Hartmut Scheible has suggested of Baumgarten that his life and work were ‘formed by the short historical moment where it is possible, still safeguarded by an unshaken religious world picture, to devote one’s attention uninhibitedly to the single empirical phenomenon’ (Scheible 1984 p. 77). Aesthetic theory from Kant onwards, in contrast, often searches for the whole into which the single phenomenon can fit, once theological certainties have been abandoned, and this search is related to the other ways in which modernity attempts to make the world cohere, from the political to the scientific.

Both Baumgarten and Hamann are still able to celebrate the multiplicity of sensuous particularity, because each particular has its meaning in a whole which is divinely guaranteed. For Baumgarten the rules of art are simply different from the rules of logic. The natural sciences demand Cartesian ‘intensive clarity’, the analytical reduction of complexity to simple constitutive elements. Art demands ‘extensive clarity’, which allows ever greater differentiation into particularity. However, revaluing sensuous particularity and giving it primacy in one branch of philosophy poses instructive problems. How does one grasp the particular philosophically without abolishing its value as particular?

Since Parmenides Western philosophy had been suspicious of the unreliability of the world of sensuous particularity and had tried to transcend it by gaining access to an intelligible world of general essences; by the end of the eighteenth

century the methods of modern science had come to seem by far the most appropriate way of achieving this. The very beginning of modern aesthetics therefore raises the question of the truth which may be attached to individual perceptions. Baumgarten reveals the incompatibility between a conception of truth based on sensuous particularity and a metaphysical world order, but this does not become a problem for him. The endless multiplicity of the particular and individual is an occasion of celebration, pointing to an infinity of meaning not, as it will often do subsequently, to a meaningless randomness. Baumgarten values aesthetic truth as the *Wahrscheinliche*, that which *appears* as true, even if it cannot finally be proved to be true, whereas the sciences can only ever claim truth for what is clear and distinct. The problem with the sciences is, then, that they exclude most of the content of what Edmund Husserl will later term the ‘life-world’, the untheorised horizon of our everyday experience, from any kind of truth. Baumgarten regards empirical perception as an inherent part of the truth of our relationship to the world, which is why he dignifies aesthetics with a constitutive role in philosophy. The question of the meaningfulness of this world does not arise, because our aesthetic pleasure in it suffices to fill the role played by metaphysics, even when the principle of the aesthetic – the particular – hints at problems to come. What happens – for Baumgarten this is evidently unthinkable – if there is no centre from which to organise the endless multiplicity, if this particular pleasurable moment has no connection with any other?

However little else he may share with Baumgarten, Hamann does share the wish to celebrate the endless multiplicity of the world. This wish is also grounded in theology: ‘The unity of the creator reflects itself in the dialect of his works; – in all of them One note of unmeasurable height and depth!’ (Hamann 1967 p. 114). Hamann’s reliance on the word of God is based on an acute new kind of awareness of our dependence on language. Language for Hamann involves an endless process of translation ‘from a language of angels into a human language, that is, thoughts into words, – things into names, – images into signs’ (p. 109), which never results in total communication between one person and another. Significantly, he thinks that the oldest language is music, and the coincidence of signifier and signified, the moment of identity, of ‘representational’ adequacy of what we say or write about the world *to* the world, is not his philosophical ideal. If this adequacy were to be achieved, it would prevent language’s celebration of the exuberant fullness of existence, a celebration which is the basis of Hamann’s conception of aesthetics. The signifying chain can therefore be *celebrated* for its endless differentiability precisely *because* it can never come to an end. The reasons for the more critical accent of *Aesthetica in nuce* are what makes Hamann a more modern figure than Baumgarten. Unlike Baumgarten, Hamann emphatically does not wish to integrate aesthetics into a narrowly Enlightenment conception of Reason.

Hamann insists, above all, upon the primacy of the image, of sensuous thinking, over its subsumption into generalised abstractions: ‘Nature works through senses and passions. How can someone feel who mutilates its tools?’ (p. 116).

The 'Muse', poetry, 'will dare to cleanse the natural use of the senses from the unnatural use of abstractions' (p. 117). Reason is itself – and this is his decisive thought, which links him to later thinkers in the Romantic and post-Romantic traditions – dependent upon language. Language is never wholly separable from sensuousness, so it can never be said to be the pure articulation of truth. As such, Hamann claims, in a manner close to Rousseau, that 'Poetry [*Poesie*] is the mother tongue of humankind' and that 'Senses and passions speak and understand nothing but images' (p. 107). This empiricist-derived priority – Locke was a major influence – is directed against rationalist assumptions about the ultimate foundation of reason in mathematics, in an abstract 'intelligible' realm. For Hamann, then, scientific abstraction and reason are themselves constituted in particular historically-developed languages, which, along with their undoubted 'intelligible' aspect, have an ineliminable sensuous element.

The mathematically based 'Enlightenment' consequently depends upon a much more fundamental enlightenment: 'Let there be light! with this begins the sensation [*Empfindung*] of the presence of things' (p. 107). Despite his relation to empiricism, Hamann's proclamation here is actually closer to the later Heidegger's hermeneutic insistence upon the *Lichtung des Seins*, the 'clearing of being', which is the never fully articulable basis of the specific sciences, and which Heidegger sees as being manifest to us in language as the 'house of being'. Without the prior 'opening up' or 'disclosure' of being, thus without an inherent connectedness of ourselves to a meaningful world which is prior to any attempt to theorise such a connection, any account of a more specific cognitive relationship to being has no basis. Apprehending something *as* something, Heidegger argues, requires a structure more fundamental than is required to be able to quantify it or subsume it under an identifying rule or law once it has become manifest to us. Hamann's very particular, subversive notion of 'enlightenment' demands the inclusion of every aspect of sensuous contact with being in his philosophical project: hence the importance to him of the aesthetic in a conception of reason which is not to be based on exclusion of the particular.

In a strange way Hamann's thinking is therefore both behind and ahead of its time. His attachment to Locke's empiricism locates him in the past and, like Baumgarten, he holds on to a theological position which prevents the world from threatening to fall apart into its particularity. However, some of what he says, as the link to Heidegger already suggests, evidently prefigures the treatment of philosophy and language in post-structuralism: think, for example, of post-structuralism's insistence upon the 'materiality' of the signifier, or of Derrida's concentration on metaphor in philosophical texts as a way of questioning the dualisms of sensuous and intelligible in Western philosophy, as well as of his claim that communication relies on temporalised chains of signifiers that can never be completed. Hamann's ambivalent status is actually common to many of the thinkers to be considered in what follows, quite a few of whom were substantially influenced by him. Some of what these thinkers say belongs to theological and other ways of arguing that we may feel sure we have gone

beyond; at the same time, significant parts of their work now seem to have a striking relevance to contemporary thought. At a time when suspicion of 'Enlightenment' reason is rife, it is surely important to look again at earlier versions of that suspicion to be found in the history of aesthetic theory.

Aesthetics and 'postmodernity'

In some quarters the recent critical debate about the nature of 'modernity' has led to the announcement that the whole 'project' of modernity has been discredited, and that we have consequently moved into a 'postmodern' era. According to such arguments, the modern era was established upon the 'principle of subjectivity'. The modern era is therefore characterised by the subject's domination of the object world which is achieved by reducing it to general concepts and by manipulating it technologically. Both those who rely on the idea of the postmodern and Jürgen Habermas – though he rejects the idea of the 'postmodern' – regard this principle as now having shown itself to be fatally flawed. They do so, however, for instructively different reasons. The former wish to question the idea of universal rationality, whereas Habermas wishes to sustain the universalising demands of rationality associated with modernity via a turn to *intersubjective* communication, rather than via reflection upon the nature of individual subjectivity. One of my main aims in what follows will be to show that subjectivity in modern philosophy is conceived of in more complex ways than have usually been acknowledged in many of the debates over modernity. The history of subjectivity in modern philosophy still current in these debates involves certain thinkers, usually Kant, Hegel and Nietzsche, to the exclusion of others. The ideas of Schelling, Schleiermacher, and the early Romantics, Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis, who are central figures in the present book, rarely appear in a serious form in these debates. However, philosophers like these, for whom aesthetics is a central concern, often advanced arguments as to why reason cannot ground itself in subjectivity that are closely related to contemporary arguments. At the same time, however, they *also* show why it is a mistake for philosophy to relegate subjectivity to being merely a function of something else, such as language, ideology, history, or the unconscious.

The story of modernity told by the proponents of the 'postmodern condition', like Jean-François Lyotard, has its roots in the work of Heidegger, and the power of Heidegger's ideas is also evident in the way they have influenced many contemporary theories of modernity. However, Heidegger's most notable arguments have themselves roots in the work of German Idealist and early Romantic thinkers, and Heidegger's thinking from the 1930s onwards is, significantly, never far away from questions concerning art.¹ What links him to these thinkers from the early modern era is his questioning of the assumption that truth is adequately defined in terms of propositional assertion of 'what is the case', whether because God made it like that or because that is the way it is, independently of how we apprehend it. Heidegger himself makes too little

of this link to the past, preferring to tell a story which highlights his unique role in reminding us of the ‘question of being’. Western philosophy, he claims, has sought the truth about ‘being’ (*Sein*), by asking what being is or seeking an explanation of the fact that it is. Being consequently comes to be regarded as an object to be grasped by scientific theories, technological manipulation, or theology. The *Neuzeit* – the term Heidegger uses for what we have termed modernity – begins with Descartes, when the ‘certainty of all being and all truth is founded on the self-consciousness of the single ego: *ego cogito ergo sum*’. Philosophy consequently becomes an expression of the ‘subjectification’ of being, in which everything is regarded in terms of its relation to our consciousness. Furthermore, the rise of the idea – now familiar from claims about ‘artificial intelligence’ – that consciousness can be explained in the same terms as the rest of nature is therefore also regarded as *itself* the product of the subject’s growing control of nature. For Heidegger this sense of the subject’s power is already adumbrated in German Idealism. German Idealism tries to prove that subject and object are identical, so that the way we think about the world and the world itself are inseparable, because the world is in fact a subject thinking itself. From Descartes, to Hegel’s claim that ‘the substance is subject’, to Husserl’s search for the ‘principle of all principles’, Heidegger maintains, the ‘concern (*Sache*) of philosophy . . . is subjectivity’ (Heidegger 1988 p. 70). Heidegger, then, poses the crucial question as to whether a philosophy based on subjectivity can establish a place from which it could really answer the question of how thinking and being relate. What is the relationship between the being of thinking, and the thinking of being?

In Heidegger’s story – which is followed in certain respects by his pupil Hans-Georg Gadamer in *Truth and Method* – the emergence of aesthetics as a distinct part of philosophy is also itself part of the process of subjectification: beauty becomes solely a matter of subjective feeling, of ‘taste’. Artworks are consequently reduced to the subjective contingencies of their reception, and an aesthetics based on subjectivity therefore has no way of articulating the truth in works of art. Moreover, near the beginning of the nineteenth century, Heidegger claims, the era of the production of great art itself comes to an end, because art can no longer aspire to be true in any emphatic sense, truth having come to be predominantly defined in terms of a subject’s capacity for objectifying the world in science. This, for Heidegger, is the real import of Hegel’s announcement of the ‘end of art’ as a form of truth in his *Aesthetics* that we will examine in Chapter 5.

However, it has often been noted that Heidegger conspicuously excludes music from the realm of great art in such reflections.² Seen from a less philosophical and literary perspective, this exclusion can seem very strange. The fact that Beethoven’s music is exactly contemporaneous with the supposed end of art already begins to suggest an alternative story of modernity which invalidates some of Heidegger’s more emphatic claims. Because he uncritically adopts Hegel’s view of music and Nietzsche’s critique of Wagner, Heidegger is forced

to see the growth of the importance of music in modernity as grounded in an attitude to art based just upon feeling ‘which has been left to itself’, and he links this to the notion that modern culture is the result of a decline from something greater. Music, he claims, lacks the seriousness of earlier art, and only ‘great poetry and thinking’ provide the kind of truth about existence which Heidegger demands.³ Anyone familiar with modern music must find this position highly questionable. The idea that the production – and even the reception – of music is based solely on feelings in the narrow sense is untenable: we would not even hear music as *music* if that were the case. The important consideration here is that the failure of certain positions in modern philosophy to take sufficient account of music often offers clues to why these positions are indefensibly reductionist in their understanding of modernity. This reductionism results from their inadequate response to music’s complex relationship to verbal language. The non-representational, non-conceptual ‘language’ of music is seen by the early Romantics – who are one of the crucial exceptions to this reduction – as enabling us better to *understand* aspects of ourselves which are not reducible to what can be objectively known and which are not to be written off as being merely inchoate feelings. At the same time, some aspects of music do also seem to be present in verbal language, and, as Schleiermacher suggests, this potentially introduces an aesthetic component, based, for example, on the particular rhythm and melody of utterances by a writer or speaker, into all communication. The ‘subjectless’ view of language characteristic of the later Heidegger and post-structuralism, which is summed up in Heidegger’s remark that ‘Language speaks. Man speaks to the extent to which he corresponds to language’ (Heidegger 1959 pp. 32–3), simply does not offer sufficient resources for an adequate account of these issues.

Heidegger’s inadequate account of subjectivity is, however, accompanied by a questioning of science and technology which is in certain respects more enlightening. For Heidegger the modern objectification of nature as a system of regularities which it is science’s task to discover is only one way of interpreting how nature presents itself to us. Nature can, for instance, also be said to present itself to us through works of art: the attention to art as the counterpart of modern forms of rationalisation in Baumgarten and Hamann already suggested a model for this. Heidegger himself famously gives a role to certain forms of art as the ‘happening of truth’ because they ‘disclose’ being, without what is disclosed becoming, in the manner of natural science, merely a classifiable entity for a subject. One of Van Gogh’s paintings of a pair of shoes is, he claims, ‘the opening up of that which the material, the pair of peasant shoes is in truth. This entity steps out into the unhiddenness of its being’, so that there is a ‘happening of truth at work’ in the painting (Heidegger 1960 p. 30), because it discloses the world in which the shoes possess their meaning (see Bowie 1997 chapter 7 for an extended discussion of this topic). Despite the questionable philosophical story about the subject which is attached to it (and the questionable choice of example), much of the substance of Heidegger’s view of art echoes reflections

on art which derive from the worries about rationalisation in post-Kantian philosophy.

The story Heidegger tells about subjectivity has, of course, spawned a number of imitations. In Lyotard's version of Heidegger's story the 'grand narratives' of Enlightenment that emerge in Kant and German Idealism, the stories in which (subjective) Reason was to free us from enslavement to nature and ourselves, have been wholly discredited. Lyotard equates reason with a dominating subjectivity, a will-to-power, without any acknowledgement of how complex the notion of subjectivity actually is in modern philosophy. In this perspective the modern insight into the dependence of consciousness on language, the so-called 'linguistic turn', is read as a major factor in the discrediting of subjectivity as the principle of modern philosophy. For Heidegger the dominance of the subject is subverted by our always already being located in languages which we do not invent and which we require in order to articulate our world. In the wake of Heidegger the very notion that subjectivity is a central issue in philosophy therefore gives way to the idea that subjectivity is an 'effect' of the 'discourses' or 'texts' in which we are located. Lyotard himself then adds a Nietzschean element to Heidegger's story, by claiming that the postmodern world is characterised by a multiplicity of agonistically competing and incommensurable 'language games', none of which can claim any ultimate legitimation for its way of articulating the world.

This story already begins to look questionable, however, when it is realised that the 'linguistic turn' takes place much earlier than is usually recognised. The origins of modern hermeneutics, the characteristic feature of which is the refusal to give any world view absolute validity, because of the need to interpret such views in particular languages, lie clearly in the period of Lyotard's supposedly totalising 'grand narratives' at the end of the eighteenth century. Hamann's critique of Kant in 1784 is based upon Kant's failure to see the necessary role of particular natural languages in the constitution of the 'categories' that are the condition of objective knowledge. In Schleiermacher's work after 1805, and in early Romantic reflections upon music and language, similar claims are used to give a view of subjectivity, language and art which can put into question many contemporary theories of language and literature. The real problem for the post-Heideggerian theorists of modernity is, therefore, the one-dimensional view of subjectivity upon which they base their diagnosis of the present.

The postmodern philosophical critics of modernity also largely ignore some very obvious features of modernity. The link between the centrality of the subject in modern philosophy and the dominance of science and technology over nature is, for example, hardly an immediate one. The emergence of modern aesthetics and its concern with aspects of subjectivity which are incompatible with wholesale rationalisation, such as the production and understanding of music as a new means of articulating feelings and moods, make this clear. The crucial fact is, of course, that scientific method and bureaucratic rationalisation actually attempt to *exclude* the individual subject in the name of 'objectivity', of

what Thomas Nagel has termed 'The View from Nowhere'. This objectivity can indeed, as Kant argued, be said to depend upon its 'other', the subject: there would be no way of even understanding the term object without its counterpart. But the real question is the following: what sort of 'object' is the subject which is attempting to grasp reality objectively? Is it merely an individual will-based urge to control its other? Unravelling the complexities of this question as it appears in Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy will be one of the main tasks of the present book.

This question has, interestingly, re-emerged with a vengeance in the contemporary analytical philosophy of mind, where it has become the focus of serious worries about the scientific direction of contemporary analytical philosophy.⁴ Nagel, who is himself in other respects a rather crude realist, suggests, in the manner of the thinkers we shall be examining, that:

One limit encountered by the pursuit of objectivity appears when it turns back on the self and tries to encompass subjectivity in its conception of the real. The recalibration of this material to objective understanding requires both a modification of the form of objectivity and a recognition that it cannot by itself provide a complete picture of the world, or a complete stance toward it. (Nagel 1986 p. 6)⁵

The subjects that will emerge from the story told here will, then, not just be the objectifying tyrants of Heideggerian thinking because, as Fichte already shows in the 1790s, the subject's capacity for objectivity reaches a limit when confronted with itself. – The fact that aesthetic theory is often concerned, for example, with the way in which the aesthetic object affects the subject without the subject wishing to determine the object suggests one implication of this view of subjectivity. Neither will the subjects be slaves to language: the capacity for situated linguistic innovation of the kind associated with the 'poetic' will be fundamental to the subject as conceived by some of the thinkers to be considered here.

It is, I want to argue, more apt to tell the story of modernity in terms both of the increase of control over nature, based upon the objectifying procedures of the sciences, and of the *simultaneous* emergence and repression of new individual attributes of human beings. These factors are complexly intertwined. Modernity evidently gives rise to greater possibilities for subjective freedom in all areas. This is immediately apparent in aesthetic production, where the diversity of means of expression and resources for new meaning increase, even if what is produced may not always attain to wider significance. At the same time, the scientific, organisational and technological factors which facilitate these possibilities can, as Max Weber argued, lead to an ever deeper feeling of the ultimate senselessness of that freedom and to irrational attempts to counter that senselessness. Modernity both creates space for the proliferation of individual meaning and tends to destroy the sense that such meaning really matters in the face of the dominant goals of society. The most important work in philosophical aesthetics attempts to confront the paradoxes involved in unifying the poten-

tial for individual meaning that results from the decline of theology with the requirement that meaning should attain some kind of general validity.

Many 'postmodern' accounts of the subject in modernity are, even though they highlight important issues, often disturbingly narrow, relying on an over-selective history of philosophy. Their appeal seems to lie in the attempt to diagnose the cause of the many symptoms of unease in contemporary Western culture, and they are, as such, vital indicators of real concerns. However, it is crucial to arrive at the best diagnosis of the sources of these concerns. The attempts to theorise the history of self-consciousness that appear in the philosophy I shall be considering also offer ways of understanding contemporary pathologies, from which everyone potentially suffers. The question is, then, which story of modernity is most plausible? Here there are no easy answers. All large-scale philosophical stories entail serious methodological problems. One should not, for example, just look for the history of an already constituted principle of subjectivity: that just pre-empts the issue in the manner of Heidegger making Descartes the supposed source of the essence of modern philosophy. Neither is one looking at anything objectively identifiable: the obvious fact about subjects in the sense at issue here is that they do not appear in the world.⁶ What is perhaps most worrying in thinkers like Lyotard is that they seem to regard subjectivity itself as the pathology underlying modernity. From this viewpoint, as Manfred Frank has argued, it becomes hard to see why one should bother to attempt to retrace the ways in which the supposed principle of modernity becomes pathological, because it ceases to be clear who or what suffers from it. Without an account of subjectivity that also acknowledges the desperately fragile and divided nature of individual human subjects the whole picture becomes distorted. Furthermore, such theories are often merely regressive, relying too heavily on some of the most questionable thinkers of modernity, like Nietzsche and Heidegger. In this sense, the portentous announcements of the radically new era beyond subjectivity that are present in the earlier Foucault and in Lyotard have more to do with repression of, than with a serious desire to engage with a past we cannot simply escape.

In this context it is notable that towards the end of his life Foucault himself, who had been one of the main sources of the idea of the death of the subject, became concerned with an 'aesthetics of existence' and with the invention of 'new forms of subjectivity' – something which, of course, already requires an inventor that would itself seem to have to be some kind of subject. In an interview in 1983 Foucault suggests that the 'transformation of one's self by one's own knowledge is, I think, something rather close to the aesthetic experience' (Foucault 1988 p. 14), and in 1984 he states: 'I do indeed believe that there is no sovereign, founding subject, a universal form of subject to be found everywhere . . . I believe, on the contrary, that the subject is constituted through practices of subjectification, or, in a more autonomous way, through practices of liberation' (1988 p. 50). If the subject can be constituted by 'liberation' there must, though, be some way in which one can conceive of what a free subject might be.

Establishing this was one of the key tasks of aesthetic theory from Kant onwards, which – like Foucault – did not regard the subject as ‘sovereign’, and it is remarkable how far Foucault seemed to move back towards this tradition in his later period.⁷ Given this shift of perspective by a thinker noted for his earlier antagonism to subjectivity, the issues of aesthetics and subjectivity seem ripe for a re-examination.

The story I wish to tell is primarily motivated by recent theoretical debates, and not simply by interest in the history of philosophy. This explains the perhaps eccentric emphasis on certain thinkers and the omission of others. The most obvious of these is Schiller, who has anyway so far attracted much more scholarly attention in English than Schelling, Schleiermacher and the early Romantics, and whose account of the subject, though it was a major influence on some of these thinkers, is not as sophisticated as what they developed from it. I have not been able seriously to consider questions of influence, and the social and political importance, for their own time, of the ideas I consider is necessarily a secondary consideration. The relevant texts are often so complex that it is actually hard to know what effect they would have had. The first task in relation to these texts is, I believe, to attempt to understand them as responses to certain key philosophical and socio-political problems that still concern people now. Some texts to which I devote considerable space had not yet been published at the time they were written and were only heard as lectures or read as transcriptions of lectures; if they were published, they were not always widely read. The complexities of the route which leads, for instance, from Schelling and Schleiermacher, via Feuerbach, to Marx, or which leads from Schelling, via Schopenhauer, to Nietzsche – and beyond – are too great and still too little researched to allow one to make many really decisive assertions about influence. Any such assertions would also have to confront the fact that many relevant documents may have been lost forever.

Despite these problems, it is very clear that the existing stories in the English-speaking world about German Idealism, Romanticism and hermeneutics are still in need of substantial revision, as is the assessment on both Left and Right of the status of aesthetic theory in philosophy then and now. This revision will also require a different view of the origins and validity of many positions in contemporary literary theory and analytical philosophy. I have for this reason often given a substantial amount of exposition of little known arguments: without a serious engagement with these arguments some of the dead-ends of recent theory seem bound to recur. The story, of course, does not stop where I do. In a book published in 1997 I traced a route ‘From Romanticism to Critical Theory’ (Bowie 1997) which gives detailed accounts of the relationship of Heidegger, Benjamin, Adorno and others to the tradition at issue here. The two volumes do, I hope, complement each other, and the present revision takes some account of the research done for the later book.

Notes

- 1 For a detailed demonstration of this, see Bowie (1997).
- 2 Rüdiger Safranski tells the story of Heidegger in 1944 hearing Schubert's last sonata in B flat and claiming: 'We cannot do that in philosophy' (Safranski 1998 p. 371).
- 3 There are also clear indications elsewhere in Heidegger's later philosophy that he finds music more important than he does in the work on Nietzsche in the 1940s I am considering here. On Heidegger and music, see Bowie 1999.
- 4 See, in particular, Frank 1990, for a detailed engagement with the links between the hermeneutic and analytical traditions.
- 5 Sadly, my hopes in the first edition of this book that Nagel's work would help establish a dialogue between the traditions has, in the case of Nagel himself, in contrast to Rorty, McDowell, Putnam, Brandom and others, led only to ill-informed invective against a misleadingly characterised 'hermeneutics' (see Nagel 1995).
- 6 I do not, then, in the manner of Strawson and others, equate personhood with subjectivity.
- 7 See also Peter Dews, 'The Return of the Subject in late Foucault', *Radical Philosophy* 51, Spring 1989, pp. 37–41.