Art in time of war:
towards a contemporary aesthetic

In times of war

In September 1914 an agonised Hermann Hesse writes of how war is destroying the foundations of Europe’s precious cultural heritage, and thereby the future of civilisation itself. Hesse stands proudly for what he calls a ‘supranational’ tradition of human culture, intrinsic to which are ideals essentially humanitarian: an ‘international world of thought, of inner freedom, of intellectual conscience’ and a belief in ‘an artistic beauty cutting across national boundaries’.\(^1\) Even in the depths of war, insists Hesse, a German should be able to prefer a good English book to a bad German one. Three years later he writes along similar lines to a government minister telling him that he would be a more humane leader in this time of conflict were he to read ‘the great authors’ and listen to great composers like Beethoven.\(^2\)

Much later (1946) Hesse comments as follows on these and other similar writings:

> When I call [them] ‘political’ it is always in quotes, for there is nothing political about them but the atmosphere in which they came into being. In all other respects they are the opposite of political, because in each one of these essays I strive to guide the reader not into the world theatre with its political problems but into his innermost being, before the judgement seat of his very personal conscience. In this I am at odds with the political thinkers of all trends, and I shall always, incorrigibly, recognize in man, in the individual and his soul, the existence of realms to which political impulses and forms do not extend.\(^3\)

Here is an uncompromising expression of that spiritual, essentialist individualism which underpinned Hesse’s equally uncompromising universal humanism. Here too is the corollary of both the humanism and the individualism – a profound distrust of the political.

Though not beyond criticism – he was little known outside Germany and so wanted to avoid his own books being banned there – Hesse was implacably opposed to the barbaric nationalism of his own country from around 1914 onwards. He went into self-imposed exile in 1919, and never returned to Germany. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1946, but for most of his life remained a struggling, exiled, writer. His books were eventually banned in Germany in 1943, and that was
a severe blow. He begins his Nobel Prize letter of thanks with the reasons he cannot be present in person: ‘the hardships of the National Socialist period, during which my life work was destroyed in Germany and I was burdened day after day with arduous duties, undermined [my health] for good. Still, my spirit is unbroken. . .’.4

Art in time of war: my title refers not just to the literary encounter with war, but the way wars in the last century compelled artists and intellectuals into rethinking the aesthetic – its scope, its power and its dangers. One question is paramount: is literature most compelling when in the service of humane values, or when it departs from them? And why begin with Hesse, this once celebrated, sometime cult figure, now much neglected? I begin with Hesse because the full significance of an aesthetic humanism becomes apparent in relation to artists like him in a way it doesn’t in, say, the squabbles within the English literary critical tradition in the last quarter of the twentieth century. More specifically, the critique of humanism which helped provoke those squabbles never properly engaged the example of people like Hesse, preferring instead much easier targets in academic literary criticism. In other words, within both the humanist tradition and the theoretical critique of it, the historical conditions of thought matter, and it especially matters that many recent critics of humanism have been formed entirely within an education system – from school to university – which is itself the product of relative security and prosperity in the post-war period.

Right now it’s especially revealing to reconsider the life and writing of advocates of a high European humanism like Hesse. The reasons are several, including the obvious fact that debates about the relevance (or not) of artistic culture to numerous contemporary malaises are more urgent and conflicted than ever. I was about to remark the crucial proviso that our lives are not, as was Hesse’s and millions of others at that time, devastated by world war. Indeed they are not, and yet we might recall that Britain has been involved in several major wars in the last two decades, and wonder about what part, if any, Hesse’s ideal of a supranational, European cultural tradition played in those conflicts. And although the historical conditions are indeed quite different, we too live in a time of acute distrust of, and perhaps despair about, the political realm which Hesse would have understood. Additionally, in Britain there is an increasingly bitter debate about just how integrated with Europe – how ‘supranational’ – we should become, and nationalism, cultural and economic, remains a potent force, literally breaking up major political parties and stirring potent if as yet localised racism. Some predict that it will only take another economic depression for the reappearance in Britain of the barbarism witnessed in Eastern Europe in the 1990s. Finally, as Hesse well knew, the realm of the aesthetic, even or especially when it tries to stand above the political, never escapes it.

Days after my writing the above in 2001 there occurred the September 11th terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, subsequent to which Britain signed up to another war, one whose scope and extent was, and remains, unknowable. If the rhetoric is similar – the need to defend Western civilisation against barbarism – the conditions of this war are so different as to be unimaginable for those like Hesse. A hastily formed international coalition against terrorism claims to proceed in the name of civilisation but it does not need – indeed is embarrassed by – the old humanist
universals. We know how arrogant and unheeding Western humanism could be in relation to cultural and racial difference, not least within its own colonial and imperialist domains. That’s one reason why, in Western democracies, a confident humanism has given way to an ethic of multiculturalism; for sure, an assumption of underlying similarities is not entirely absent, but it is subordinate to a cautious embrace of cultural difference. Which is why Britain’s prime minister, as he commuted the world in October 2001 shoring up support for the coalition against terrorism, allowed it to be known that, as he travelled, he read translations of the Koran.

What has become truly supranational is, of course, the very capitalism which Hesse and others saw as humanism’s enemy. At one level global capitalism needs and nurtures the multiculturalism which has superseded humanism; at another it promotes a cultural imperialism more arrogant than humanism and underpinned by popular rather than high culture – Hollywood and McDonald’s rather than Shakespeare and Harrods. This is an economic and military imperialism which exacerbates cultural antagonisms. And that means that multiculturalism (or hybridity) can shift very quickly from being an ameliorating influence on those antagonisms to being an opportunity for them to intensify. Terrorism may thrive on the multicultural; a certain kind of terrorism presupposes it. The United Kingdom and the United States are desperate to show that this new war is not being waged against Islam precisely because there are many Muslims, including some residing in Britain, who regard it as precisely that, or at least as a conflict between irreconcilable cultures and religions. Just as it seemed as if the ‘global’ antagonisms of the kind focused in the Rushdie affair had been fudged into history, they erupted again on September 11th, and with a terrible ferocity. One irony of the Rushdie affair was that a work of literature provoked rather than ameliorated those antagonisms. In recent months I listened in vain for significant voices promoting art as a human activity transcending cultural and religious antagonism.

More war and the decline of humanist faith

What precipitated the decline in humanist faith? Well, all three aspects of Hesse’s cultural philosophy – its universal humanism, spiritual individualism, and distrust of the political – were the object of fierce criticism by almost all the strands of so-called theory (literary, cultural and critical) during the 1980s and 1990s, and with a degree of success which helped generated the so-called culture wars. Culture became ‘politicised’ as never before, and almost always around the issue of who was excluded from the humanist universe. Some academics and politicians trying to cling to the humanist tradition blamed ‘theory’ for its demise. This is too easy and often plain diversionary: the problem goes much deeper, and back much further. Quite apart from the growing antipathy to Western humanism among other cultures and world religions, there were deep misgivings within the tradition itself.

Let us go back to the outbreak of another war. W. H. Auden’s poem ‘1st September 1939’ – widely invoked in relation to September 11th – offers a response to the impending Second World War reminiscent of Hesse’s to the First:
Defenceless under the night
Our world in stupor lies;
Yet, dotted everywhere,
Ironic points of light
Flash out wherever the Just
Exchange their messages:
May I, composed like them
Of Eros and of dust,
Beleaguered by the same
Negation and despair,
Show an affirming flame.  

Reminiscent, yes, but so different. There is the speaker’s poignant hesitation, his
unsureness, composed as he is of Eros and dust, and beleaguered by negation and
despair, as to whether he is strong enough to sustain the affirming flame. And now
the contact between the civilised is furtive; Hesse’s image of a supranational human-
ism operating as an overground unity across and above the strife is replaced here by
one suggesting an underground hiding from it; erratic, clandestine communications
occur at night between the fragmented and the dispersed. And then there’s the
description of these communications as ‘ironic’: perhaps, in retrospect, nothing was
more indicative of the diminishing faith in the humanist salvation of Europe than the
turn to irony. In art no less than in life itself, and never more so than in the writing
of Hesse’s compatriot, contemporary, and fellow exile, Thomas Mann, irony becomes
part confession of, part defence against, the failures of that vision. Irony becomes the
crutch of ‘late’ humanism, at once guarantee of its sophistication and confession of
its uncertainty. No surprise then Auden’s subsequent and infamous downplaying of
the importance of art and the artist; ‘we live in a new age’, he wrote a decade later, ‘in
which the artist neither can have . . . a unique heroic importance nor believes in the
Art-God enough to desire it’.  

Though Hesse’s own faith never faltered, by the end of the Second World War it
was tempered. In that acceptance message for the Nobel Prize, as well as that for the
Goethe Prize, both awarded in 1946, he affirms again the belief that ‘culture is supranation
al and international’, but speaks too of a ‘deathly sick Europe’ and his own tempta-
tion to abandon European culture altogether and turn to the wisdom of the Orient.
It’s a temptation resisted, but the influence of the Orient is indeed central to his new
realisation that the fundamental message of mankind’s greatest teachers is stoicism, a
spiritual renunciation of worldly things as the precondition for discerning the mysti-
cal unity in all being. In these final years there is an even greater insistence on the indi-
vidual soul as the touchstone of integrity, perhaps now at the expense of humanism.  

In short the Second World War confirmed, for many, the bankruptcy of
Enlightenment humanism. And now we are talking not just of its inability to prevent
barbarism, but its complicity with it. Theodor Adorno and others in the Frankfurt
school detected in Enlightenment humanism the origins of the very problems which
Hesse imagined it to be an answer to. Adorno declared the worthlessness of ‘tradi-
tional culture’, coming as it now does ‘neutralized and ready made’, adding, famously,
that ‘to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric’.9 Later those like Baudrillard would take this critique to its limit: ‘the “Human” is from the outset the institution of its structural double, the “Inhuman”. This is all it is: the progress of Humanity and Culture are simply the chain of discriminations with which to brand “Others” with inhumanity and therefore with nullity.’10 Even as a thumbnail sketch of western humanism this is grossly reductive; indeed, that assertion – ‘This is all it is . . . simply the chain of discriminations etc.’ – is so reductive as to be itself a kind of terrorism, the intellectual counterpart of the reductive fundamentalism of actual terrorists.

Today’s anti-intellectual guardians of traditional culture love to tell us that Marxism is obsolete, and heavy-duty continental theory just nonsense. That’s an argument for another day. I don’t rely on dubious theorists like Baudrillard, or even great ones like Adorno; I bypass this culture-wars stand-off by invoking George Steiner’s passionate and seminal essays of the 1960s collected as Literature and Silence. Steiner gives a blunt, untheoretical elaboration of Adorno’s argument: not only did the Nazis destroy ‘central European humanism’, but the barbarism of the twentieth century ‘prevailed on the very ground of Christian humanism, of Renaissance culture and classic rationalism’. Recall Hesse’s confident advice to that war leader in 1917, and compare it with this from Steiner in 1966: ‘We know now that a man can read Goethe or Rilke in the evening, that he can play Bach and Schubert, and go to his day’s work at Auschwitz in the morning. To say that he has read them without understanding, or that his ear is gross, is cant.’ ‘What’, speculates Steiner, ‘are the links, as yet scarcely understood, between the mental, psychological habits of high literacy, and the temptations of the inhuman?’11 What indeed.

In today’s international context it is not just Hesse’s idea that salvation might lie in a reaffirmation of a universal, spiritual and ethical humanism that rings hollow, but also its underlying premise, namely that art is a humanising force. The extraordinary thing is, our culture industry and our humanities education system still depend upon that premise. The centrality of the arts within the humanities, most especially of English literature, has always rested on the claim that they have a civilising influence promoting national if not transnational humanitarian values.12 Sir Claus Moser, speaking in October 2000, puts it well: ‘I speak with a passionate belief in the enriching force of the arts in the life of each one of us and of society as a whole.’ Complaining of those philistines in today’s society, some in high places, ‘who fail to appreciate . . . what the arts bring to a civilised society, to our quality of life . . . [and] that a civilised society demands fine culture at its core’, Moser endorses President Kennedy’s belief that ‘the life of the arts . . . is a test of a nation’s civilisation’.13 For Hesse and numerous others in earlier generations, the humanist aesthetic was a liberating expression of profoundly civilising sympathies. For Moser in 2000 humanism remains just that. I respect Hesse writing in 1917; I can’t but see Moser, writing in 2000, as deeply complacent. Far from being liberating, the humanist aesthetic has become a way of standing still amidst the obsolete, complacent and self-serving clichés of the heritage culture industry and the arts establishment. It’s like an edifice which stands still, but on rotten foundations, propped up by vested interests.

But my argument is not just that Hesse’s humanism is untenable and unpersuasive
now, ‘after Auschwitz’, but that it was already so at the time in which he proposed it. In fact, I believe it hardly survived the insight of autobiographical works of his own like *Steppenwolf*. Without doubting Hesse’s sincerity, I’ve often wondered whether other artists haven’t always paid lip service to the humanist defence of art by way of licensing an aesthetic vision which they knew contravened it. One is reminded in this connection of literary didacticism in earlier periods, especially when state censorship prevailed: such didacticism, far from foreclosing on subversive thought, was often its precondition. Consider a simple example. The ending of an Elizabethan or Jacobean play is often didactic – the villains get their just deserts and some kind of conventional and/or providential moral order is vindicated. In the mid-twentieth century a generation of critics tried to convince themselves that this didactic dénouement effectively discredits or at least neutralises the subversive questioning and thought which preceded it. Unfortunately for them, from a creative, a theatrical and an intellectual perspective, the didactic dénouement does not so much close off that questioning as enable it: it subscribes to the law’s letter precisely in order to violate its spirit; far from foreclosing on it, a conforming framework actually licensed a subversive content.

I make this point about the tendentious objective of didacticism because it’s one of several respects in which the ‘modern’ conception of the aesthetic I want to propose is already old; I’m advocating a departure which is also a return. Steiner struggles to redeem something of the humanist aesthetic from its ruins in the twentieth century; in contrast I abandon that aesthetic in favour of another, one which becomes visible in those ruins, and in relation to those challenges, because it was always there.

My case for saying literature all the time violates the humanist imperative could proceed by invoking the views of those who have wanted to censor art, from Plato, through the anti-theatrical prejudices to advocates of modern state censorship. But again I justify this aesthetic not with reference to the enemies of art (though I do argue that they are not as philistine as some would claim) but from within its practice and its defence.

Similarly, I could make my case for the daemonic tendencies of the creative mind with reference to disreputable kinds of writing like pornography, or the semi-respectable, like gothic fiction or Jacobean tragedy. Instead, in recent books like *Sex, Literature and Censorship* I’ve argued the case with texts taken from the heart of canonical respectability.14

I’ll return to this but first, as a way of further following the fate of humanism, I consider further the core premise of the humanist aesthetic, namely that art is a profoundly humanising force. I mentioned just now that it remains as a rationale for humanities education and the culture industries. More surprisingly perhaps is that critics of humanism also adhere to it, albeit in an appropriated and radicalised form. The stand-off here is not so much one between the humanists and the anti-humanists, as between a conservative and a progressive humanism. Consider one of the most confrontational examples of all, namely the cultural materialist critique of humanism. At first sight it opposes the humanist project in every respect. Certainly beleaguered academic humanists see it that way. For example, John M. Ellis laments the threat to a humanist education posed by this critique’s obsession with gender, race and class. Ellis
pines for a humanities education which enabled students to become ‘enlightened citizens’; which produced a society of people educated ‘for full and intelligent participation in a modern democracy’; which helped us ‘develop a richer understanding of human life and to train the mind’, which taught us to enjoy and to love literature; which taught the still viable classical precept that poetry ‘delighted and instructed’, and so on.\\(^{15}\) Those like Ellis are right to this extent: the materialist critique resolutely rejects all three of the tenets I’ve attributed to Hesse (universal humanism, essentialist individualism, an aesthetic realm standing above the political); instead it sees art as either appropriable for the oppressed and exploited, be they defined in terms of class, and/or sex and/or race, or as an instrument of their oppression, or a merging of both positions.\\(^{16}\) In so doing it clearly retains humanitarian ideals albeit under another name, with changed terms and constituencies, and a scepticism about how art, \textit{as currently conceived}, contributes to those ideals. The argument now is whether or not, or to what extent, aesthetic discourse has a ‘democratic and radical potential’.\\(^{17}\)

But there’s a sense in which these arch-enemies, the humanist and the materialist, are competing for the same ethical high ground. To invoke Ellis again, both humanists and materialists would endorse the idea of a society of people educated ‘for full and intelligent participation in a modern democracy’, while disagreeing about (i) what such a society looks like; (ii) the proximity of actual existing societies to that ideal; (iii) the part canonical artworks, and an education based on ideas of the aesthetic as conventionally understood, actually play in promoting democracy and participation. Additionally, from the example of a latter-day humanist like Richard A. Etlin, we can see how the humanist has already conceded ground to the political/ethical agenda of the materialist. Etlin defends nineteenth-century novelists against Edward Said’s claim that they were complicit with imperialism. But far from saying, as his predecessors might have done, that such political considerations are irrelevant to aesthetic ones, Etlin not only marshals those novelists’ own anti-imperialist and antislavery sentiments, but reads their novels for evidence of the same.\\(^{18}\) He thereby implicitly extends the humanist agenda to partially accord with that of his opponents, even while trying to discredit their arguments.\\(^{19}\) It’s difficult not to conclude that the materialists have already won the high ground, although they’ve also extended its terrain. At the very least, the old argument that such political considerations are irrelevant to the aesthetic vision has gone for good. While Etlin refuses to accept Said’s assertion that politics and culture, far from being different spheres are ‘ultimately the same’, he can only counter it with an evasive generalisation: the humanist refuses to confl ate the two spheres ‘in all times and in respects’.\\(^{20}\) The irony of all this is that the survival of humanism may well depend on its critics. In its conservative form as defended by Ellis and Etlin it’s a tired convention; in its appropriated form, on the extended terrain of the materialists, it’s at least still alive.

\textbf{Returns}

From within the same materialist critique something else was emerging much more germane to my purpose than this struggle for the ethical high ground. As the constituencies of the oppressed were refined and enlarged, and the operations of power
understood in all their (often counter-intuitive) complexity, so attention turned from the ‘conscious’, manifest and apparently unified project of the artwork, to a consideration of its ‘unconscious’ or latent tendencies, its internal disunity. More often than not the work was read not for its explicit content but for its tensions, conflicts and contradictions; for what it did not say, yet half-revealed. In a sense — a sophisticated sense — it was read against itself. This was part of a significant change in ways of reading culture more generally: the centre came to be understood in relation to its margins, the ‘other’ in relation to the ‘same’, the dominant in relation to the subordinate, the sane in relation to the insane, the heterosexual in relation to the homosexual, and so on. A paradoxical dialectic became visible in which the ‘in relation to’ became strangely ‘implicated with’ and even ‘dependent upon’: via a violent dialectic the excluded, the inferior and the irrelevant return to haunt and terrorise the identity and well-being of their dominant others, perhaps striking at the literal and symbolic centre of their being.

The violent dialectic between the dominant and the subordinate was something which humanism could not comprehend — hence, in part, the so-called ‘anti-humanism’ of the critique which explored it. It also became apparent from this critique that certain types of literature had always contained their own imaginative understanding of this dialectic, and, if only implicitly — perhaps even unintentionally — a challenge to the very humanism which sought to appropriate them. Many of the canonical works of literature claimed by and for the humanist vision so obviously threaten rather than confirm it; put very simply, they reveal too much. And so a new challenge emerges, one importantly different from the materialist challenge to the limitations of aesthetic humanism, its blindness to the fact of exclusion, the way its supposed ‘universalism’ was not universal at all. The challenge now is to understand the tension between the aesthetic and the humane as commonly understood; to understand that the aesthetic vision has been most captivating precisely when it exceeds and maybe violates the humanitarian one. Captivating yes, but also potentially dangerous: there can be no guarantee that (for instance) the imaginative exploration of the return of the repressed will be conducive to the health of either the individual or the society; only the utterly naive can believe that all repression/suppression is bad.

Those who love art and live by it refuse to recognise this potential challenge, believing instead that art is the most exalted expression of civilised life. They promulgate well-intentioned lies, telling us that great art and the high culture it serves can only enhance the lives of those who truly appreciate them; that such art — unlike, say, propaganda, popular culture or pornography — is incapable of damaging or ‘corrupting’ us. Such an attitude not only fails to take art seriously enough, but rests on a prior process of pro-art censorship more effective than anti-art state censorship. Their defence of art is more often than not a defence against art, and an exaggerated respect for it becomes a way of not engaging with it. Those who love art the most also censor it the most. To approach literature insisting on an alignment of the ethical conscience and the creative imagination is to be blind to the fact that some of the most compelling writing is about the tension between, if not the incompatibility of, these two.
things. If I allude to *Sex, Literature and Censorship* again here it's simply because I only now have time to sketch and develop the argument outlined there.

We know that the aesthetic vision can challenge reactionary social agendas. Indeed, for most defenders of art today, though by no means all, that's welcome enough because theirs is a moderately liberal agenda. But art can also challenge progressive and humanely responsible social agendas. For that reason, to take art seriously is to recognise that there are some reasonable (i.e. rational) grounds for wanting to control it. I'm not claiming that art is inhumane in the sense that it insidiously legitimates the interests of the powerful at the expense of the dispossessed, exploited, etc., although there are indeed some canonical works which have been plausibly read in such terms. Nor is my argument a transhistorical one about all art, or even all literature. It is obviously more applicable to some genres, periods and movements wherein a knowledge of what profoundly disturbs psychic and social equilibrium, of what threatens prevailing notions of civilised life, is central – e.g. Greek tragedy, the drama and epics English Renaissance (especially Spenser and Milton), countless modernist texts, including some which have been interpreted quite otherwise.

Again, a disquieting half-realisation of this has often occurred even within conservative aesthetic perspectives. We can detect it in the most basic category of the humanist aesthetic, that of ‘character’. Time and again, and literally across centuries if not millennia, the most compelling individual creations are the daemonic ones: the vice figures in medieval moralities had vitality and wit on their side; the malcontents in Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy are charismatic, insightful anti-heroes whose deep insight into corruption is enabled by their complicity with it; Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost* has a perverse integrity which at the very least problematises, and for some readers discredits, the didactic project of the entire epic. In *Paradise Lost* the devil is in the structure as much as the detail. Critics have always tried to avoid this by arguing that such imaginative identifications with the immoral and the inhumane are ultimately contained, placed or neutralised by some over-arching ethical vision or structural closure of the literary work.

There is a strange affinity between an aesthetic identification with the daemonic and the theological and ethical impulse to exact a full look at the worst. For instance, what we encounter in *Paradise Lost* is the courage – or arrogance, and perhaps paranoia – of the most formidable kind of theology, that which believes it can most effectively overcome what threatens it only by knowing it to the full. In Milton's case the need for such a confrontation would be intensified by the experience of revolutionary defeat. In *Paradise Lost*, the damage to didactic intent derives from performing this impulse not only as theology but as tragic literature, arguably the definitive expressive medium of defeat. And even if it could be shown that Milton never made, or never intended, such identification (which it can't), it would still be the case that he made it possible for others to so identify, including two of his most influential readers, Blake and Shelley.21 Two points about their readings: first they indicate how cultural pressures at the time of reception will, if powerful enough, always over-ride formal strategies of closure, reactivating and privileging dissident currents in a work; second, their somewhat risky identifications with Satan are made not against but on behalf of the
humanitarian project; in fact they are significant moments in the development of aesthetic humanism.

Even so, such readings of Satan were dangerous enough for God and his followers, if no longer for the rest of us. And that’s my point: we allow such readings when they no longer challenge us. And yet literature is full of knowledge which is dangerous for us: it discloses understandings of the world which our own modes of civilised life cannot or do not want to recognise, perhaps should not recognise. I argue, for example, that modernists like W.B. Yeats and D.H. Lawrence, under the influence of Nietzsche, offer an exhilarating celebration of an amoral aesthetics of energy. As readers have admired and identified with, say, Yeats’s poetic voice they’ve found themselves uncomfortably close to an aesthetic which allowed artists and intellectuals to identify with fascism. My claim though is not that Yeats should be censored as a fascist but that his verse offers us a different and disturbing insight into recent history and ourselves. To understand the poetry is not to transcend its violence but to enter its seductive sublimations. When the poet is free from politics in the narrow sense he can be most effective in articulating some of the deeper fantasies which contributed to millions making certain political identifications and affiliations which in turn led to the death and torture of millions of others. These fantasies remain very alive today. To put it bluntly, a certain reading of Yeats and Lawrence reveals fascist fantasies as a more or less repressed constituent of modern cultures. So: to insist that literature never escapes the political (which I do) is quite different from demanding that it be responsibly political (which I don’t); for me, the value of Yeats and Lawrence lies centrally in their not being politically responsible because all such responsibility rightly entails repression.

Of course this is an argument which commits me to a view of aesthetic appreciation as in certain respects cognitive, that is, possessing a truth or knowledge content. Such an account is associated most immediately with Adorno but again, has a longer, quite conventional history both as working assumption and as theory. Even conservative aesthetic theories embrace it, for example those, including neoclassicism, which regard art as offering generalised, universal truths about the world, though once again the question as to what kind of truth is being offered is one too few stop to answer or even ask. Arguably art has more often than not been assumed to possess cognitive content of some kind, and it is only in relation to theories of art as non-referential that it becomes an issue. The dissociation of art and knowledge is relatively recent. As J.M. Bernstein puts it in *The Fate of Art*, ‘the experience of art as aesthetical is the experience of art as having lost or been deprived of its power to speak the truth. . . . This loss . . . I shall call “aesthetic alienation”; it denominates art’s alienation from truth which is caused by art’s becoming aesthetical, a becoming that has been fully consummated only in modern societies’. To see art as cognitive does not preclude it having specific and even unique types of formal properties (language, style, genre and so on), nor does it diminish their importance. But it does challenge claims that such aesthetic specificity renders the cognitive element of a work as secondary or even irrelevant. And since such claims are relatively recent the onus of proof is on those who make them.
Yet another respect in which a ‘conservative’ or established dimension of the aesthetic harbours a challenge to the humanitarian agenda it was supposed to endorse is latent within the theory of aesthetic appreciation as ‘disinterested’. Such appreciation involves a profound uniqueness of perception which is both detached from and sees beyond the mundane world of politics and interest – the idea in other words of aesthetic perception as, in Kant’s words, ‘disinterested and free’. This idea has its own unique route to the non-humane or the inhumane, in for example Schopenhauer’s reworking of Kant; now aesthetic disinterestedness releases us from the will to live and requires the death of the self – an eradication of one’s individuality and even of one’s humanity. This aesthetic draws us to the sublime and that fascination with a non-human beauty whose power has something to do with its indifference to the human. Subsequently the aesthetic of disinterestedness mutated into a specifically human distaste for, or indifference towards, the human – again most notoriously when beauty is the object of its gaze. There are so many examples from the twentieth century: Lawrence/Birkin’s fantasies of a universe aesthetically cleansed of the ‘foul . . . defilement’ which is humanity; the symbolist poet who declared of an anarchist bomb attack, ‘What do the victims matter if the gesture is beautiful?’ Or Wilde’s remark about Thomas Wainewright: ‘When a friend reproached him with the murder of Helen Abercrombie he shrugged his shoulders and said, “Yes; it was a dreadful thing to do, but she had very thick ankles.”’ Finally, and returning to my war theme there is Mussolini’s indebtedness to the Futurists when he compared bombs exploding among fleeing civilians to flowers bursting into bloom. Karlheinz Stockhausen allegedly said that the events of September 11th were the greatest work of art imaginable. Might it not be that, inside the outrage which greeted these remarks, and the prompt decisions to cancel performances of his work, was a disavowal? At the very least we know that millions the world over watched the events compulsively, over and over again, experiencing a range of emotions: anger, shock, compassion and a horrified fascination at a spectacle which seemed to exceed the cinema’s most sublime special effects, thereby giving a new, awful sense to the idea that life might imitate art.

To recap – it is in such respects that the aesthetic I’m outlining is already apparent within the Western tradition: the tendentious function of didacticism, the fascination and identification with the daemonic, the cognitive dimension of the work of art, and the way aesthetic detachment enables amoral perception.

Know to know no more: dangerous knowledge

This aesthetic is surely most apparent in the artistic preoccupation with dangerous knowledge – the kind of knowledge which disturbs rather than consolidates social and psychic order. Here we’re concerned not just with the dissident perspective of some writers, but the organisation of human culture. An individual identity is composite, a partial organisation more or less complex, and always entailing a greater or lesser degree of repression, suppression and exclusion: identity is constituted by what something is not, as well as by what it essentially is. So too are cultures and civilisations, albeit inconceivably more elaborate both in their organisation and their exclusions.
The more complex the organised unity, the more vulnerable it is to being destabilised, especially by, or in relation to, its exclusions. Further, what is excluded remains inseparable from what is included, which means it is never fully outside. This is one reason why the most potent threat to something operates internally, in terms of its structure and organisation; ruin is an internal not an external process, disintegration from within rather than destruction from without. The alien beast may be slouching towards Bethlehem, but the greater danger lies in the fact that things fall apart and the centre can’t hold. Intellectually speaking this has become a modern commonplace, largely thanks to the likes of Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. There are other terms for the same or related processes of internal ruin, most of them loaded with disapprobation: to degenerate, decompose, dissolve (dissolution, dissolve), unravel, unbind, regress. And of course revolution, in both its old and its newer senses.

In every case of perceived unbinding urgent political questions arise: is this really a threat to our modes of cultural organisation, or might it be incorporated with minimal change? And if the change required is more extensive, does it promise adoption and survival, or disintegration and loss of identity? That such questions will be answered differently depending on position, vested interest and existing relations of power and conflict indicates the complexity of both the process and its perception. That some literature enacts disintegration is obvious: why else censorship? But we know too that even literature overtly on the side of binding also necessarily explores the forces which unbind, and time and again it is these forces which prove the most fascinating: the depiction of utopias never matches that of dystopias, and writers come most alive when exploring that convergence of forbidden desire and dangerous knowledge.

As Roger Shattuck and others have shown, forbidden knowledge has always been a feature of human cultures, most obviously in the concepts of taboo and heresy. Ignorance is bliss, we say. In Paradise Lost Milton gives us this picture of Adam and Eve, sleeping innocently:

These lulled by nightingales, embracing slept,
And on their naked limbs the flow’ry roof
Show’red roses, which the morn repaired. Sleep on
Blest pair; and O yet happiest if ye seek
No happier state, and know to know no more.

In a phrase, ‘Be lowly wise’. Adam and Eve disobey, and their transgressive desire for forbidden knowledge brings death and disintegration into the world, into desire. In other words, it kick-starts history.

To observe the injunction not to know (or, more accurately, for some people, often the majority, not to know) has been regarded as a precondition of social and psychological well-being, and the survival of civilisation itself – again implicit in the very idea of censorship. Against that, the breaking of the injunction has been regarded as profoundly liberatory, albeit with tragic consequences, though sometimes also with revolutionary ones. Straddling that opposition are some of the great transgressive figures of myth and literature including Eve, Prometheus, Faust/us, Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, Flaubert’s Madame Bovary, Thomas Mann’s Aschenbach and Joseph Art in time of war 47

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Conrad’s Kurtz. Others, like Robert Louis Stevenson’s Jekyll/Hyde, embody the realisation that knowledge of evil is more intimate with genius than with barbarism, while those like Shakespeare’s Macbeth, Dostoyevsky’s Raskolnikov and Nietzsche’s creator as supreme amoral artist, confirm Pascal’s observation that there is a kind of evil which often passes for good because ‘it takes as much extraordinary greatness of soul to attain such evil, as to attain good’. Indeed, if most of these figures carry a sense of the dangerous, as well as the liberatory, potential of the forbidden, this is because the knowledge that is forbidden so often reveals the underlying proximities of evil to good. Freud suggests why:

the objects to which men give most preference, their ideals, proceed from the same perceptions and experiences as the objects which they most abhor, and . . . they were originally only distinguished from one another through slight modifications . . . Indeed . . . it is possible for the original instinctual representative to be split in two, one part undergoing repression, while the remainder, precisely on account of this intimate connection undergoes idealization.

**Dangerous knowledge indeed**

In proverb and myth, in theology and philosophy, one human language after another tells us there are things we should not know, things we should not do, and things we should not see, places we should not go, and of course desires we should not gratify. Thus the importance of Nietzsche contrasting the Dionysiac conception of art with the humanitarian, and in terms of two distinct kinds of sufferer – those who suffer from a superabundance of life and those who suffer from an impoverishment of life. The former ‘want a Dionysian art as well as a tragic outlook and insight into life’, and willingly confront ‘the terrible and questionable . . . every luxury of destruction, decomposition, negation’; while the latter need ‘mildness, peacefulness, goodness in thought and in deed . . . a certain warm, fear-averting confinement and enclosure within optimistic horizons’. In Nietzsche we see so clearly that transgressive desire, even when explicitly erotic, aims not just for forbidden pleasure, but forbidden knowledge too.

The humanist wants literature to confirm who and what we essentially are or should be. The aesthetic I’m exploring confronts us with what we are not; or rather, it confronts us with the psychological cost of being who we are, or perhaps the social cost of becoming what we would like to be, had we but courage equal to desire. It means we can never be complacent about the benign influence of art, any more than we can about knowledge per se. To take art seriously is to know it comes without the humanitarian guarantees which currently smother it. We may agree that the suppression of ‘truth’ is harmful socially and ethically, while remembering that it happens in all cultures, including ‘democracies’. ‘Why do they hate us so much?’ was the bewildered, anguished response of some Americans on September 11th, seemingly unaware of so much: unaware that their country was indeed hated with a vengeance of the kind wreaked on that day; unaware that they were vulnerable to such an attack; unaware even of who their enemies actually were. In that case we grieve for the ignorance as
well as the loss of life because if more people had been better informed history might, just might, have been different. But it does not follow that a full access to knowledge is always socially and ethically beneficial. To believe it is must be one of the few remaining naivities of Enlightenment humanism. As that humanism declines many of the older voices it displaced are to be heard once again, distant but compelling. One especially haunts me: in much wisdom is much grief, and he who increaseth wisdom increaseth sorrow. Artists have increased both.

Notes
7 Hesse, *If the War Goes On*, pp. 123–4, 145, 149.
16 The appropriation of the humanist aesthetic by and for those traditionally excluded from it is an important aspect of its history – see esp. J. Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Class* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001). As I argue here, though, this appropriation is also a transformation which threatens some of humanism’s founding principles.
19 As an aside one notes here a typical strategy of the conservative humanist: s/he resists change for as long as possible, but when such resistance is no longer possible gives some ground
reluctantly, either pretending s/he hasn't or, if shown to have done so, claiming this was what was meant all along. As a strategy of course nothing could be more ‘political’ in the narrowest sense of the word. Generally, I find Etlin’s beautifully produced book devoid of understanding of the arts in proportion to its tasteful appreciation of them.

28 Stockhausen later claimed that he had said ‘the greatest work of art by Lucifer’. What exactly he did or didn’t say isn’t the point; rather it’s people’s response to what he was reported as saying – see the Guardian (20 September 2001). More recently Damien Hirst has apologised for describing the attack as ‘a visually stunning work of art’. Other writers have been more cautious; in a recent article Peter Conrad speaks of the ‘inadvertent, possibly shameful wonderment’ at the event shown by Ian McEwan, ‘who thought that the towers collapsed with a “malign majesty”’, and Martin Amis, ‘who thrilled to the “opulently evil” flames’ (‘The presumption of art’, Observer Review (8 September 2002), p. 6.
33 On ‘ocular prohibition’ in myth see especially Shattuck, Forbidden Knowledge, pp. 18–21.