

What comes after art?

Kafka's last completed story has become something of an allegory of contemporary theoretical approaches in the humanities. In 'Josefine, the singer, or the mouse people', the narrator, a mouse, ponders the phenomenon of Josefine, a mouse who sings. The problem with Josefine is that she actually seems to make the same kind of noise as all the other mice, but she makes a performance of it, claiming that what she does is very special. She is able, moreover, to make a career out of being a 'singer', despite the doubts voiced by some of her audience. Kafka's story plays with various versions of aesthetic theory, linking Josefine's apparent highlighting of the ordinary to make it extraordinary, for example, to what sounds like Russian formalism's concept of *ostranenie*. The narrator is never convinced by what Josefine does, but is also never finally prepared to write it off. Given that the story was written by someone who had painfully devoted his life to 'literature', and who knew he was dying, the question as to whether he might just have been writing texts like everybody else, and thus doing nothing special really, becomes especially poignant. However, it seems clear that the ironic amusement produced by the fact that this deep text on aesthetics takes place in a world of highly articulate mice takes the story into realms which a discursive account of the issues could not. In this sense, Kafka's story is a great 'literary text' with aesthetic value, and this seems to me important.¹ *Why* it is important takes us to the heart of some much-discussed issues in the humanities.

In recent years some theoretically informed work in the humanities has increasingly focused on revealing the extent to which traditional assumptions informing the investigation of cultural phenomena are likely to obscure dimensions of those phenomena which should lead us to be suspicious both of their aesthetic appeal and of their 'canonical' status. One obvious consequence of these approaches has been that invocations of the aesthetic status of a text or other cultural artefact as the decisive factor in its reception can lead to some version of the accusation of failing to see that, as Walter Benjamin put it, documents of culture are always also documents of barbarism.² The problem with many of the contemporary versions of this stance is that the critic ends up placing herself in something like the position of the narrator-mouse of Kafka's story, aware that she is deeply ambivalent about what she is confronted with, yet still obsessively concerned to get to the bottom of its nature. Added to this,

though, is the lurking suspicion that, in the last analysis, there may not be very much to get to the bottom of. Kafka's narrator asks whether Josefina's song might not be just a fraud, and claims that it will disappear anyway when she dies.

We can project the sort of thing that developed out of the issues Kafka's story highlights onto some recent theory as follows. Isn't art in the strong aesthetic sense essentially a product of the bourgeois era, and isn't part of the contemporary crisis in art's status a result of the revelation of the ideological nature of how art was used by the dominant classes to cover up social contradictions in the name of an illusory harmony said to be present in the work of art? Furthermore, did not Marcel Duchamp's 'readymades' reveal the extent to which art is in fact a result of the functioning of certain institutions in which objects can be located? In future 'art', in a more attenuated sense, might instead be seen mainly as one resource for enriching the contexts of everyday life, as, of course, it had been in some respects prior to the rise of the great bourgeois traditions. In consequence, so the argument goes, we will be able to do without the crypto-theology which lies at the heart of aesthetically oriented accounts of art, and which allowed the ethnocentric, gender- and class-biased, Western tradition to exert such a problematic influence. The same kind of story has been told about 'literature' and the fact that, as Kafka's story itself reflects, there may be nothing to distinguish literature in any fundamental way from other kinds of text. Interestingly, it is harder to do the same with music, though that has not stopped people trying.

These are obviously large and difficult issues, and the caricature just offered does not do justice to the more reflective suspicions of the aesthetic in recent theory.³ However, there does seem to be a crucial division in the debates around the issue of aesthetics, which has been suggested by a thinker as concerned to deflate metaphysical pretension and diminish human cruelty as Richard Rorty. Contrasting the implications of Fredric Jameson's and Harold Bloom's positions for cultural and other politics, Rorty argues that the difference between their adherents is not 'between those who take politics seriously and those who do not'. Rather it is 'between people taking refuge in self-protecting knowingness about the present and romantic utopians trying to imagine a better future'.⁴ The former think that their theoretical insights are the key to unmasking the elevated status of the high culture which they link to the roots of the predicaments of the present; the latter think that significant art cannot be adequately responded to in this manner and that we should be looking to what it can offer us for the future. Behind Rorty's version of this issue lies what seems to me to be a decisive question. The question can be posed quite simply, as we will see in a moment, but the exploration of its implications for the future of the humanities is anything but simple.

The main point of serious investigation of the significant products of Western culture – and this can include everything from Bach, to jazz, Shakespeare, to new forms of independent film – has become, for some recent theory, to explore the extent to which these products contribute to or escape from repressive discourses of race, gender, class, etc. Many approaches put in question by such theory aim, in contrast, to understand how great culture opens up worlds of the imagination which provide new resources of meaning in all kinds of different social and historical contexts. The

simple question is this: are the semantic resources offered by the former positions confined to their insights into the delusions and repressions of Western culture (delusions and repressions which, I should stress, I have no concern to deny)? More provocatively: are those insights therefore themselves superior to what they unmask, offering a truth or revelation inaccessible to their object of investigation? In short: having done the negative critical work, what is on offer as a positive alternative from theories whose primary aim is to unmask, or is this asking too much of them? Was what an aesthetic approach saw in the best of Western and other culture *merely* an illusion from which we should now be liberated? Now this is obviously a very schematic way of putting the issue, and the crude opposition of theoretical attitudes just suggested does not do justice to the fact that many approaches to cultural issues combine something of both sides. However, even allowing for this proviso, the doubts created by these sorts of questions seem to me to be part of what has opened up the space for the contemporary renewed interest in aesthetics.

To put it another way: why would one bother to concern oneself with the well-known products of Western culture, if it were not that they offer more than is apparent when their often quite evident failings with regard to contemporary social, ethical and other assumptions are exposed? An uncomfortable alternative presents itself here for those to whom Rorty imputes 'self-protective knowingness'. The first possibility is that these works are so powerful that the prime task of the theorist is to defuse their ideological power, which means, of course, both that the nature of this power requires a lot more explanation and that the explainer must possess special insight to be able to see through it. The second possibility is that the works are in fact merely what happened to be the focus of the existing forms of study in the institutionalised humanities, and are therefore used to exemplify what the theorist already believed anyway. In both cases aesthetic questions cannot be ignored. In the first case the task is to establish how it is that what had, from the perspective of aesthetics, been understood to offer new resources for hope and meaning that transcend existing ways of thinking and feeling, is in fact more important for its exemplification of repressive ways of thinking. In the second case the question has to be answered as to why one concerns oneself with works which might be seen as more apt for aesthetic than for ideological investigation, rather than doing research into changing social and cultural attitudes in contemporary society or in the historical period in question.⁵ The justification for taking 'high' culture – which is anyway increasingly marginalised in large parts of Western societies – as one's object seems quite hard to find, unless, of course, one accepts the first position. By accepting this position one is, though, likely to end up by trying to acknowledge the power of something which one is at the same time effectively trying to reduce to being a mere contingent product of a history marked by barbarism.

Clearly we should all want to disabuse those whom we teach, and those around us, of racist, sexist and other regressive attitudes. Whether this is best achieved by, for example, looking at colonialism via *The Tempest*, or sexism via Schumann's song-cycle *Frauenliebe und -leben*, seems questionable, unless there are other compelling reasons for reading Shakespeare and listening to Schumann. These reasons would seem to depend on the fact that these are major artists who did something nobody else suc-

ceeded in doing. That this fact matters little in large parts of the contemporary cultural world seems to me to suggest that either one sees one's task as revealing to people that they are missing something important, or that one should do something else. The emergence of the orientation in cultural studies towards 'popular culture' of all kinds is in this respect a logical response to the suspicion that works from the great traditions may now no longer (if, of course, they ever did) have a decisive influence on political and social life. This does not, however, obviate aesthetic questions, even in relation to popular culture. The danger here is that an apparent openness to what supposedly (and sometimes actually) elitist positions have unjustifiably ignored can in fact be based on another kind of failure of openness. Both concentrating on popular culture, and using major works from the tradition predominantly to reveal ideological and other distortions can lead precisely to the situation where one ends up just confirming what one thought and felt anyway. The point of real aesthetic experience, though, is surely that it should take one somewhere else, not just to where one has already been or already is.

Does this mean, then, that the revelation of the history of patriarchy manifest, for example, in Western drama from the *Oresteia*, to Strindberg's *The Father* and beyond, a history which was almost wholly invisible until the emergence of feminist criticism, is missing the aesthetic point of these monuments of Western culture, and so should give way to more traditional approaches? I don't think so. Such readings have opened up a new world which would have remained unarticulated without the perspectives they revealed in these texts. Crucially, though, such perspectives did not need to be forcibly imposed on the texts: they emerge from a new interpretation of the structural tensions in the texts that form part of their aesthetic power. Does the revelation of the patriarchal assumptions of the *Oresteia*, where the myth of Athene being born without a mother is blatantly invoked to reveal the primacy of the male, take away from the fact that the trilogy has a unique power to convey the trauma involved in the transition from one social order to another, however unjust we may find *both* the orders in question? The patriarchal assumptions may be repellent, but many attitudes apparent in works of art, like the questionable aspects of the work of Richard Wagner, repel us, without our assuming we therefore already know more than what such art can convey. If art is, then, in Heidegger's terms, a form of 'world-disclosure', critical readings that show new and problematic dimensions of a work can form an essential part of what that art is.

What I am saying might, though, seem now to leave the door open for a lazy pluralism, in which the *Oresteia* is just as good for explaining patriarchy to a class as anything else, so that the same might be achieved in cultural studies by examples from a TV soap. If we wanted to read the *Oresteia* in the perspective of the history of Athenian justice, then that would be fine as well. It all depends on what one is trying to do: the circularity of interpretation will always mean that one gets results relating to what one started out looking for. In certain respects this pluralism, like the circular structure of interpretation, is inescapable. As a result of the growth of theoretical reflection the humanities have developed new perspectives which make it more and more clear that the idea of finding a definitive method for approaching any aspect of

culture is simply mistaken. The tools we need for one kind of task may be of little use for another, and each may be of great value in their own realm of application. However, this leaves two issues wide open, and they are hardly negligible ones. Indeed, they go to the heart of questions about value and communication that are at the core of the humanities.

First, there are unavoidable and fundamental clashes between the tools for differing tasks, such as those for literary biography based on authorial intention, and those for analysis of discourse based on the primacy of linguistic and literary resources before those writing within them. Where do we go to negotiate such clashes? Cultural judgement has not least to come to terms with the fact that the modern world has shown there are an indefinite number of different ways of approaching cultural products. The crucial issue is, then, how we are to arrive at the ability to choose approaches which are most revelatory and most productive. This, as we shall see, is one of the decisive questions in the history of aesthetics, and is the core of the justification for making the humanities central to education. Second, the critical revelation of the failure of cultural artefacts to live up to the normative demands of the present presumably reaches a limit when that revelation has been achieved. This limit, though, forces one to ask what such an approach is to undertake next, and to ask what the value of this could be. It can, of course, also be that this revelation itself has a hidden repressive aspect. Might criticism based on the critique of ideology actually obscure the potential *political* import of a work by blocking off responses to that work which might enable the reader/listener/viewer to develop new horizons not countenanced by a view which seeks to make art the location of ideological unmasking? Although we should always attempt to police our awareness of the possible repressive consequences of how we speak and of what we value, there must also be a place for creative exploration of the things that positively make our lives more meaningful, without which we would be immeasurably impoverished. It is this possibility which seems to be missing from so much 'knowing' theory that wishes to unmask its object. The great pianist Artur Schnabel talked of music that is better than it can ever be played, and the same can apply to texts which transcend the ways in which they come to be read.⁶

A tension emerges at this point, though, which is paradigmatically manifest in the work of T. W. Adorno. Is it not a form of self-deception to concentrate on the value of aesthetic 'appearance',⁷ if the task should be to make the real world itself more tolerable and humane? The basic problem in Adorno emerges from the conflict between the need for a negative critical perspective which suspects an 'affirmative' culture of complicity in the ills of the modern world, and the need for affirmative resources if motivation for change of all kinds, from the political to the personal, is to be generated. This leads him into paradigmatic difficulties, which reveal much about why aesthetics has been such a contentious area of recent debate. When Adorno claims, for example, that 'The aesthetic totality is the antithesis of the untrue totality', his assertion depends upon there being a wholesale opposition between the state of a world seen in the light of the Holocaust and of the continuing dominance of capitalist exploitation, and the genuine work of art.⁸ It is not, though, that the beauty of the work is per se a criticism of the essentially ugly nature of the commodified world. This

is because, for Adorno, the kind of beauty which manages to be both expressive and formally integrated, in the manner of the great tonal works of music, from Bach to Mahler, is now almost certain to have been appropriated by the culture industry. Adorno is therefore led to an implausible elevation of certain works of aesthetic modernism – such as those of Kafka or Schoenberg – to being virtually the only source of non-deluded insight into a ‘reified’ reality. This, of course, makes the status of his own theoretical claims problematic: do the artworks need his philosophy, or is it vice versa?

Now the difficulties in Adorno are of a quite specific nature, stemming from his totalising verdict on the effects of commodification on modern culture. This verdict leads to the idea of a world where repressive identification, the reduction of things to the ways they can be manipulated for human purposes that is most obviously present in the commodity form, is the key to the most significant problems of modernity. He consequently adverts to what cannot be construed in these terms, which he thinks is manifest in the work of artists who, by refusing to be seduced by instrumental and commercial aims, engage most fully with the immanent problems and demands of their materials. Adorno’s present growing popularity seems, though, to depend in part on the fact that some of his assumptions coincide with certain aspects of other theorists of the kind touched on above, who, unlike Adorno, are suspicious of the aesthetic dimension in any positive sense, and who at the same time, like Adorno, are distrustful of the ways in which thinking functions in terms of reductive identification. The question which arises here is the following. Given both that a major aspect of thinking in the aesthetic tradition from Kant onwards is a concern with irreducible particularity, and that an idea often adduced by many recent theorists is the danger of repressing ‘alterity’, why is a concern with aesthetic experience so questionable in certain influential areas of the contemporary humanities?

A great deal depends here on the kind of story about the history of aesthetics one tells, and on how that story informs the development of contemporary theoretical assumptions. It seems clear to me that the stories which have dominated some theoretical debate rely upon a too limited conception of the history of aesthetics, as well as on questionable assumptions about the nature and role of art. This is not least because some of the notions most frequently employed in theories concerned to unmask the aesthetic in fact rely on ideas that emerged as part of the history of aesthetic theory. Let us go back to the question of judgement, which involves a series of revealing problems in this respect.

One of the assumptions of traditional literary or other artistic education is that its job is to promote the development of people’s ability to judge well, a skill which is part of being able to live well. The reasons why the development of skill in judging is both so important and so tricky were shown by Kant. In any judgement about something in the world one is confronted with a dilemma which has no solution that can be formulated algorithmically. Even in cognitive judgements one has to be able to make a move from the particular empirical manifestation one is examining to subsuming that manifestation under a rule which identifies it. There can be no rule for doing this, though, because one would get into a regress of the rule for the rule for the rule, etc., and thus could never judge at all. Finding the general rule for a particular always

entails the ability to eliminate an indefinite number of possible applicable rules, most of which will be actually irrelevant, but none of which can just be excluded a priori. We are often able successfully to apply rules because our unthematized background knowledge somehow already excludes most of what is irrelevant.⁹ This is why robots can have such trouble in performing many tasks we find simple: if one tries to codify background knowledge algorithmically one just adds even more rules, thus making the task more and more difficult. For Kant judgement involves the active capacity of the subject to make choices which are not necessitated and thus cannot be reduced to a method.¹⁰ Kant's account of aesthetic experience develops from his general account of the nature of judgement, and the implications of his account of the relationship between the two are too often ignored in contemporary theory in the humanities.

Arriving at new knowledge depends precisely on the ability to bring a series of different particular phenomena under a new rule which specifies what makes them identical. It is a commonplace of theory of the kind developed by Adorno that this ability can function repressively. In an essay of the early 1930s, 'Theses on the language of the philosopher', for example, Adorno ponders the issue which Kant is trying to solve in his epistemology, namely how an empirically infinitely diverse world can be brought under unifying rules. The danger, as Adorno sees it, is that the forms of identity employed for this unification will be inherently reductive, because they will depend, as Kant claims, on the functioning of the thinking subject: 'If multiplicity's unity is subjectively impressed on it as form, such form is necessarily thought of as separable from the content.'¹¹ The 'content' is therefore what these days is seen in terms of 'alterity', and Adorno is concerned precisely with the 'non-identical' aspects of that content, which are threatened in a world where rule-bound judgements are increasingly the basis for the functioning of all levels of society. The danger of reductive identification is therefore inherent in the nature of the subject, which seeks to control the world by imposing forms of identity on a world of irreducible difference.¹² The problem is that the search for identity can easily become irrational, invading areas where it has no place. The sort of thing Adorno means is apparent in gender, racial and other kinds of stereotyping (though he sometimes, for example in the really hyperbolic passages of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, extends it to theorising in the natural sciences, which is more problematic).

Like Lacan, Derrida and others, Adorno insists that the subject depends on a language which is not wholly in its power. For Adorno this language is itself in part the product of the repressive history of the subject's attempt to dominate the other. The crucial point here is that the subject's self-transparency, upon which its aim of control is based, is always a delusion. In the 1933 book on Kierkegaard Adorno claims that, 'If language is the form of communication of pure subjectivity and at the same time paradoxically presents itself as historically objective, then, in language, objectless inwardness [which is supposed by Kierkegaard to constitute the subject's resistance to transient external historical developments] is reached by the external dialectic'.¹³ Language therefore subverts the sense in which the subject can sustain itself as a pure origin against the objective pressure of the world. How, then, does this relate to the Kantian questions about judgement?¹⁴

The most important thing in the present context is that Kant thought aesthetic experience was made possible by the fact that even cognitive judgement is, for the reasons we saw above, not necessitated. We can therefore engage in a 'free play' of judgement when we do not attempt to determine the object conceptually, but instead allow our ability to judge in differing ways to work of its own accord. He regards the capacity for aesthetic appreciation which this makes possible as a self-justifying aspect of our existence, and he sees it as contributing to the development of our ability to judge well in cognitive and other contexts. Such appreciation is, it is important to remember, not based on the mere pleasure of a stimulus. Kant already insists in 1769–70 that 'Contemplation of beauty is a judgement, and not a pleasure', and the aim of such judgement is to reach universal agreement, despite the inherently particular nature of aesthetic experience.¹⁵ The essential issue here lies, then, in the relationship between aesthetic experience's reliance on the idea of the activity of the subject, and Adorno's concern with the extent to which the subject functions within linguistic and other constraints. These constraints are more powerful than the subject and may not be transparent to it, even though they have been generated in the history of the self-preservation of the species which makes the individual's existence possible.

Kant's aim of universality in aesthetic judgement depends, then, on the freedom of the subject which seeks a community of agreement with others in relation to its affective and other responses to art and natural beauty. For Adorno universality, in contrast, is precisely likely to be the result of objective pressures for conformity of the kind which recent theory analyses in terms of the repression of the other. The source of such repression is at least in part linguistic, in the form of the prejudices built into particular discourses by the circumstances of their development. Adorno's subject may think it is free, but it is in fact always already formed by such objective pressures. The question is, though, whether a wholesale rejection of what Kant intended does not obviate the *point* of the critical perspective that gives rise to the rejection. If there is no access to what could be understood in some way as taking us *beyond* our being determined by objective social pressures, the sense that these pressures are a problem at all becomes hard to understand.

In its extreme versions Adorno's position therefore seems to lead to a kind of negative aesthetic theology. Only art which is so uncompromising that it could not possibly be thought of as commanding any kind of consensus in contemporary society can be true to the historical situation after Auschwitz. In analogous manner, the sort of 'knowing' theory cited by Rorty leads to a farewell to art as a source of insight or pleasure of a kind that theory cannot provide. This leaves one wondering, though, what the culture that would emerge if the critique were successful could possibly look like, once the cleansing of illusions is complete. How can one aspire to something which seems to have so little positive content? In both cases the model of the subject involved in the theory seems to be predicated to such an extent on what Adorno terms the 'primacy of the objective', the determining power of the world over the subject, that the aim of opposing this primacy itself appears illusory.

One significant part of the tradition of aesthetic thinking that concerns me here seeks to understand what possibilities there can be for the modern subject in a world

where objective pressures of all kinds do indeed continually increase. Adorno is characteristically ambiguous on this issue. He himself offers a more illuminating way of addressing the problem of the modern subject than is available in the parts of his work which repeat the ideas of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, in the tension he identifies between 'expression' and 'convention' in modern art. The difficulty for modern artists lies, Adorno argues, in the fact that, as the means of expression are expanded, the space for individual innovation diminishes, because in time live resources for articulation will necessarily become mere conventions.¹⁶ The Western traditions of modern literature, music or visual art offer exemplary models of the playing out of this dialectic, and the best aesthetic theory shows how vital it is to the understanding of modern culture.

My worry is that we seem to be in danger of losing sight of the exemplary nature of those traditions, and of the theoretical reflections that accompanied them. Culture thrives on critical judgement, and criticism needs models which, without becoming fetishised, can reveal the deficiencies of inferior cultural production. If such models are neglected, in favour of other critical and ideological aims, or of the attempt, in the name of avoiding elitism, to elevate the merely local to the measure of what is culturally valid, the endeavours of those who sought to expand our means of articulation by both assimilating and transcending the weight of objective cultural pressure are devalued.¹⁷ The likely result of this neglect is a self-deceiving, narcissistic relationship to culture, in which what Novalis termed the 'aesthetic imperative' of seeking to transcend one's limits by doing justice to major works of art is forgotten. It is important to remember here that the undoubted elitism that may, for example, have affected the reception of 'high' culture in the nineteenth century cannot, in a Western world where the best cultural products are widely available in affordable form via mass reproduction, just be transferred to the present. The way in which such elitism continues is now more likely to be through the failure to provide the right kind of access to great culture in education. The danger here, of course, is that 'knowing' theory may lead to such access no longer being regarded as a pedagogical priority.

How the development of the kinds of attitude which are merely suspicious of the Western tradition of art affects contemporary Western society cannot be adequately understood in the short term. However, the spread of theories in recent times which seem to depend on cultural amnesia and on the narcissism of seeking confirmation of prejudices rather than openness to the way great works can take one beyond one's prejudices may be a sign of deeper cultural problems. The reason why can be suggested by another aspect of the aesthetic tradition which begins with Kant. This is the demand that one legitimate to others one's judgement about cultural products which can reflect the most intimate dimensions of oneself. It is not, as is too often claimed, that the attempt to arrive at a *sensus communis* is something actually achievable (even if Kant himself seemed to think it might be a way of at least symbolically revealing our shared 'intelligible' nature). The real point is that there can be no definitive way of concretely achieving such a consensus, even though it can remain a unifying point of orientation. The idea of consensus must instead, then, remain a 'regulative idea', not an achievable state of affairs.¹⁸

We acknowledge the legitimacy of this idea if we are prepared to engage in dialogue about cultural experience in which our own particular judgements must be regarded as both inherently fallible and yet not merely arbitrary. The key to this aspect of the aesthetic has best been described by Stanley Cavell, when he claims: 'It is essential in making an aesthetic judgement that at some point we be prepared to say in its support: don't you see, don't you hear, don't you dig? . . . Because if you do not see something, *without* explanation, then there is nothing further to discuss'.¹⁹ Without the possibility of a shared level of appreciation which cannot be theorised, the point of aesthetic judgement dissolves. We may not empirically get to this shared level, but the important thing is the possibility of appealing to it. This combination of the need for legitimation with the realisation that such legitimation relies on an appeal to something which cannot be definitively established also means that what is most essential about aesthetics is immune to arguments which associate it with the repression or denial of difference. At the same time, it should be remembered that the 'non-identical' aspect of aesthetic experience, its resistance to explanation, would be mere mystification without the attempt to render it more generally accessible through critical dialogue and the development of cultural communication.

Now it is important to be clear at this point that I am *not* in any way claiming that the developments in the recent theory and practice of literary and cultural studies, which have, for example, led to attention to what was excluded by the dominant Western critical canon – women's writing, writing by cultural and ethnic minorities, etc. – have been mistaken. These have led to a whole series of new and exciting perspectives which have had important social and political effects. To the extent to which aesthetic thinking contributed to the exclusion of works and aesthetic practices from cultures or from groups of people not previously endorsed by Western academic culture, a critique of 'aesthetics' is clearly justified in the name of what it has excluded. It is vital, however, that the standards of achievement set by the greatest works – standards which are testified to by their offering semantic potential in ever new contexts – can still come into the evaluation of what had been excluded. This should, though, not preclude a rejection of those standards if they are inadequate to the new object's capacity for changing perceptions of what is aesthetically valid.²⁰ It does seem odd, then, in the context of reflections on the ethnocentric nature of some of what resulted from aesthetic thinking, that aesthetics as a whole has often got such a bad name. The idea that someone like Friedrich Schlegel, for example, who effectively invented serious literary history and who had a immense cosmopolitan awareness of world literature, as well as being a groundbreaking aesthetic thinker, could be seen as part of a problematic tradition, is indefensible. The real question, of course, as I suggested above, is *which* tradition of aesthetics is at issue.²¹

One answer to the question of how the traditions of aesthetics are often conceived is the (questionable) philosophical story common to Heidegger, Gadamer, Derrida, Lyotard, in some respects Adorno, and others. In this story modernity is seen as dependent on the idea that the 'certainty of all being and all truth is founded on the self-consciousness of the single ego: *ego cogito ergo sum*' (Heidegger), and this has too often been used to characterise 'aesthetics' as well. The link to aesthetics from the

philosophical story of the domination of being by the subject in science and technology is often made via the idea that art becomes reduced to something dependent upon the contingent individual feeling of the subject. One way of subverting this view of the subject as the source of judgement is, as we have seen, to show how the language in which it makes its judgements is prior to it. Another way, proposed by Gadamer in particular, is to claim that the real significance of art results from its transcendence of its reception and its revealing a truth beyond the subject: 'The "subject" of the experience of art, that which remains and persists, is not the subjectivity of the person who experiences it, but the work of art itself.'²² Clearly the arbitrary and contingent nature of individual aesthetic production and reception – where one sleeps through some vital part of the play or the symphony, or is not 'feeling right' for the work in question – is not the basis of serious understanding of art's significance. Whether this means one should therefore exclude consideration of the subject in the manner Gadamer does is, however, questionable. It is only if one thinks that the history of thinking about the subject is a history in which the subject is universally regarded as the philosophical *foundation* for grasping the nature of the truth of modernity that such an extreme option has to be adopted.

It is surprising how many contemporary theoretical positions tacitly or unconsciously adopt some of this kind of account. The power of the account is obvious: the theory wave in the humanities has made many people aware of the potential for self-deception inherent in the ways we think about culture. This potential derives particularly from the failure to see the extent to which subjects are what they are both because of objective pressures and because they are not the masters of their language. However, 'theory' has also tended to overplay the *extent* to which we can gain higher insight into those deceptions by locating them as part of linguistic and other practices that connect, for example, to the exercise of power in society or to commercial pressures. What is missing in such approaches can be illustrated by consideration of two related topics which have played a very subordinate role in recent theory. A major factor in the rise of aesthetic theory is the change in the status of music during the second half of the eighteenth century. Related to this is the re-evaluation of the nature of 'feeling' that takes place in the same period, which is also linked to the emergence of the discipline of aesthetics. If, as some people begin to do at this time, one makes music into the art which is the key to understanding all art, one has, of course, already precluded a wholesale subordination of the aesthetic to ideology. Music's non-representational status does not allow one to make direct inferences to ideological matters. This does not mean that music, and, above all, talk about music, cannot be ideological. They evidently can: all art is situated in social contexts that involve links between cultural production and mechanisms of power. What matters, though, is the realisation that there are dimensions of cultural articulation which transcend what we can say about them, which are not necessarily usable for ideological purposes, and which are crucially connected to the ways we try to understand ourselves as subjects. Although music's transcendence of the sayable has too often been used as a means of fetishising art, it is a mistake therefore to assume that the *only* possibility for the critic is to unmask mystifications, rather than reveal the ways in which music

and, by extension, other art can bring us up against the limits of more discursive forms of articulation.

Suspicion of discussion about feeling is these days usually directed towards the fact that feeling is linguistically and symbolically mediated. However, this does not mean that feeling is wholly articulated by the symbolic forms we habitually employ. The motor of new articulation in modernity is often the sense that, in Adorno's terms, convention has taken over from expression, and that new expression is demanded by what cannot adequately be conveyed by existing means. Anthony Cascardi suggests in relation to Kant's *Critique of Judgement* that 'Feeling . . . remains cognitive in a deeper sense; affect possesses what Heidegger would describe . . . as "world-disclosive" power'.²³ There is, as Cascardi indicates, an important sense in which insistence on the 'mediated' nature of feelings – on the idea that they rely on what can be stated propositionally – gets things the wrong way round. Kant says that 'The general validity of pleasure [in beauty] and yet not via concepts but in intuition is what is difficult' in giving an account of aesthetics.²⁴ Kant's concentration on pleasure here and elsewhere is admittedly too limiting: the point can better be made in terms of the validity of world-disclosure through feeling. The important point is, though, that if aesthetic validity were of the kind that is arrived at via conceptual agreement, feelings would be reducible to the kind of consensus that is possible in conceptual judgements, and this would obviate the point of the aesthetic. Part of the motivation behind Adorno's work is that he thinks that the point of the aesthetic *is* being obviated in many aspects of modern culture. Much of the culture industry, as he claims, does rely upon the schematisation of feelings into standardised forms which are then provided for by that industry. To the extent that views based on the primacy of ideological aims try to reduce art to what is already known or felt in some other respect, they can actually conspire with this situation.

Modernity need not, then, be understood merely in terms of the reduction of feelings to standardised forms. The explosion of expressive resources in the music composed from the period during which aesthetics emerged at the end of the eighteenth century onwards is a striking illustration of the importance to modernity of forms of articulation which transcend what can be conceptually grasped. The decisive aspect of this explosion is that it involves a two-way relationship between the subject and the forms of expression. The new music both gives rise to new forms of feeling and is a result of the changed self-understanding of those who produce and listen to it. These two aspects cannot be methodologically separated. The subject is on the one hand subjected to existent forms of articulation, and at the same time can refashion these forms to signify something which they previously did not signify. Establishing where one aspect stops and the other begins demands the kind of separation between scheme and content which more and more recent philosophy rejects as a misapprehension of the nature of our being in the world. The account of the subject as the self-deceiving locus of attempted domination of the other is, when looked at in relation to the best aspects of the traditions of aesthetics and modern art, only part of a much more complex story. One of the reasons why so much recent theory, in which music plays a minimal role, is prone to misjudge aesthetic issues lies, then, precisely in its failure

to appreciate the significance of the non-conceptual form of music for any account of the subject. The best Romantic aesthetic theory, from Hölderlin to Schlegel and Schleiermacher, regards the essential issue for us as subjects as our *failure* to be transparent to ourselves, and sees aesthetic production and reception as means of coming to terms with the divided nature of the self, not as another way in which the world is reduced to the measure of the human. In this view the aesthetic is a resource for critical self-transcendence, rather than always being the location of self-deception.²⁵

To conclude: I think there is actually a significant political point to this opposition between theoretical attitudes to the aesthetic. One of the oft-repeated recent worries about theory in the humanities has concerned the growing distance of theorising about art from what non-academic performers, readers, listeners and spectators value when they engage with art. This worry can be used to hide a merely reactionary attempt to re-establish the status quo, which does not bother to ponder why that status quo came under such attack, and this is not what interests me. How, though, might we arrive at a more effective division of intellectual labour, one which does not lose sight of the reasons for which we might have engaged in the first place with the works about which we theorise? These reasons are, of course, the kind of reasons which move anyone to engage with art. The real challenge is, then, to steer a course between mere theoretical 'knowingness' and mere unreflective aesthetic enjoyment. There is no way of mapping out such a course in advance: my claim is simply that the balance has in recent times moved too far in the direction of knowingness, and this has been reflected in some of the theories that have become decisive for many humanities subjects. Although we should keep in mind the worry which permeates the Kafka story with which we began, the worry that there is nothing ultimately significant about art, we still need to take into account the fact that through that very worry Kafka wrote texts which far transcend the texts of writers who were convinced that what they were writing was art. A combination of critical self-doubt with the intuitive sense that there can always be another, perhaps better, way of articulating what concerns us seems to me characteristic of the best we can learn from the traditions of aesthetic theory and from the art to which they were the accompaniment. The contemporary tendency to argue as though we were already in a situation where we know what comes after art precludes such a combination. Contemporary aesthetic production may be more decentred, and the era of the great works may for that reason even belong to the past, but that is not a reason to underestimate what great works do that nothing else can. Perhaps, then, we are not reaching the end of the significance of great art from the Western traditions, but are instead only at a point where some of the academic world seems to have lost sight of just how significant that art may still be.

Notes

- 1 In an entertaining essay Karl Markus Michel plays this story off against Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, granting it greater insight than Adorno (in B. Lindner and M. W. Lüdke (eds), *Materialien zur ästhetischen Theorie Th. W. Adornos. Konstruktion der Moderne* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1980)).

- 2 It is worth remembering that, whatever one thinks of the statement, the opposite does not apply.
- 3 I have, for reasons of space, generally not attached my critical remarks to specific thinkers in this essay, and am relying on something like 'ideal types'. This admittedly runs the risk of failing to engage with the detail of the positions in question, but has the advantage of suggesting broader links between contemporary tendencies.
- 4 R. Rorty, *Achieving Our Country* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 140.
- 5 'New historicism' arguably does the latter, albeit often beginning the investigation with an aesthetically significant text.
- 6 It should perhaps be added that works which seemed canonical in one era can die in another. Whether they may be revived in a later period is then the crucial question.
- 7 The meaning of the German word 'Schein', which is so central to aesthetic theory, is notably ambiguous between 'appearance', which need have no negative connotations, and 'illusion', which clearly does have negative connotations.
- 8 T. W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973), p. 429.
- 9 I shall not deal with the detail of Kant's answer to this dilemma, which would take us too far beyond the scope of this essay. The view suggested here has been best outlined by Hilary Putnam. See also, A. Bowie, *From Romanticism to Critical Theory: The Philosophy of German Literary Theory* (London: Routledge, 1997).
- 10 Kant thinks the categories, the a priori forms of judgement, are the exception to this situation. Without the categories we could, he argues, not even begin to have cognitive dilemmas, because we would have no forms of objectivity of the kind present in maths that organise the material of cognition in ways about which we can disagree.
- 11 T. W. Adorno, *Philosophische Frühschriften (Gesammelte Schriften Vol. 1)*, (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973), p. 366.
- 12 The most obvious source of this idea is Nietzsche's 1873 essay 'On truth and lie in the extra-moral sense'.
- 13 T. W. Adorno, *Kierkegaard. Konstruktion des Ästhetischen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1979), p. 53. There are close parallels between Adorno's critiques of Kierkegaard and Husserl, and Derrida's deconstruction of self-presence in Husserl.
- 14 At an epistemological level, a view like Adorno's suggests that even the notion of pure a priori categories is undermined by their dependence on a language which is historically formed. A significant part of the post-Kantian aesthetic tradition, incidentally, already made this point, which was first raised in the work of Hamann and Herder, who rejected 'pure' concepts because of their dependence on natural languages to be understood at all.
- 15 I. Kant, *Schriften zur Ästhetik und Naturphilosophie*, eds M. Frank and V. Zanetti (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 2001), p. 109.
- 16 It could, incidentally, even be argued that the 'theory wave' is in part a result of the perception of the dominance of convention in art. So much has now been done in the major forms of art that we are increasingly inclined to see what is the same, rather than experiencing what is different.
- 17 The contemporary attempts to re-evaluate the notion of the 'Philistine' fall into this trap. See D. Beech and J. Roberts, 'Spectres of the aesthetic', *New Left Review*, 218 (July–August 1996), 102–27; and cf. A. Bowie, 'Confessions of a "new aesthete": a response to the "new philistines"', *New Left Review*, 225 (September–October 1997), 105–26.
- 18 Wholesale consensus would, as Albrecht Wellmer points out, obviate meaningful communication anyway: what would the point of it be?

- 19 S. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 93.
- 20 It may well be that many cultural expressions have their value within local communities, and thus should not be measured with inappropriate means relating to universalising claims. Even then, however, if these expressions are not to stagnate, it is likely that a confrontation with more demanding forms of expression will result. Think of the move of jazz from the brothels of New Orleans to Carnegie Hall.
- 21 I have explored this issue at some length in the revised version of *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: From Kant to Nietzsche* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002). Some of the points made here in brief are dealt with in detail in that book.
- 22 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1975), p. 98.
- 23 A. J. Cascardi, *Consequences of Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 50–1.
- 24 Kant, *Schriften zur Ästhetik*, p. 137.
- 25 See Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity*.