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**Commitment and Responsibility after the Holocaust: Literature and  
Responsibility in Sartre, Adorno, Levinas, Lyotard, and Derrida**

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**Erich Richard Christiansen**

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**Erich Christiansen**

We, the thesis committee for the above candidate for the  
Master of Arts degree, hereby recommend  
acceptance of this thesis.

**Hugh J. Silverman – Thesis Advisor**  
**Professor of Philosophy**  
**and Comparative Literary and Cultural Studies**

**Megan Craig – Second Reader**  
**Assistant Professor of Philosophy**

This thesis is accepted by the Graduate School

Lawrence Martin  
Dean of the Graduate School

Abstract of the Thesis

Commitment and Experimentation after the Holocaust

by

Erich Richard Christiansen

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This paper will examine the response of the philosophy of literature to the events of the Holocaust. It will pursue this question in the work of Sartre, Adorno, Levinas, Lyotard, and Derrida. What emerges from this line of thought is the question of how one creates art that portrays horrific events, while at the same time undermining the types of thought-patterns that lead to genocide and fascism. Furthermore, the thinkers in question look at the ways in which self-consciously experimental literary forms are well-equipped to do this.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

Works referred to often in this piece are abbreviated as follows:

- ASJ* Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew* (1947), trans. George J. Becker (New York: Schocken, 1976).
- AT* Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997)
- BEM* Jean-Paul Sartre, *Between Existentialism and Marxism* (1972), trans. John Matthews (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974)
- BLO* Jean-Paul Sartre, *Black Orpheus* (1948), trans. S. W. Allen (Paris: Presence Africaine, n.d.)
- BN* Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (1943), trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956)
- EH* Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1945), trans. Carol Macomber (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007)
- MM* Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (1951), trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1974)
- N* Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea* (1938), trans. Lloyd Alexander (New York: New Directions, 1964)
- ND* Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (1966), trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973)
- PMC* Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984)
- SQ* Jacques Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question*, ed. Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005)
- WL* Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?* (1945), trans. Bernard Fretchman (New York: Harper & Row, 1965)

### Introduction

Genocide has always presented a challenge to human understanding, but the scale and proliferation of genocides in the 20<sup>th</sup> century presents a problem different in kind, as well as degree, from similar previous events. How one thinks the unthinkable and portrays the unimaginable is a limit case that addresses the very foundations of philosophy on the one hand and the arts on the other.

Obviously, the Holocaust, or Shoah, is a paradigm of this kind of horror. My hope is that by understanding the issues at stake, in the way this event has been addressed by philosophers, artists, and the testimony of survivors, we can understand what is at stake in any discourse about large-scale political and ethical catastrophe.

Probably the most famous idea associated with Holocaust literary criticism is Theodor Adorno's (in)famous proclamation that "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric." (*Prisms*, 34) While on the one hand, this passage is almost always taken out of context, and was furthermore later recanted, it nevertheless contains an element of emotional truth that bears examining.

When this sentence stands alone, one doesn't see that it was presented in the context of an essay about the ways in which criticism of high culture nevertheless buttress the very culture it tries to critique ("Cultural Criticism and Society"). Moreover, in his later book *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno modifies his statement, admitting: "Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems." (ND, 362)

Nevertheless, the point he was driving at in his earlier formulation should be well-noted. For Adorno, a certain way of making art was no longer possible—or at least was no longer responsible. If by “poetry,” broadly understood, one means a sort of beautification, a craft of designing a pleasing object out of whatever kind of material, then yes—after something like the Holocaust, this seems like a colossal squandering of the power of art to move us, communicate, and illuminate.

This principle expresses itself instinctively in a kind of recoil that many people seem to have from the use of the Holocaust as subject matter in the arts or entertainment. What is wanted instead is the unvarnished testimony of the survivor, of the witness. Any use of the storyteller’s art beyond this can often seem offensively superfluous. This seems to be at least a part of the impetus behind a film like *Shoah*.

We may very well question assumptions like this. We can ask, as Derrida did *Demeure*, whether or not one practices a literary art anytime one tells a story. But what seems right about this type of intuition is the tremendous responsibility that it demands that the arts of language live up to.

The focus of this paper will be to analyze two such responsibilities. Both of these responsibilities are pronounced under the assumption that there are modes of thought that are necessary for cultivating fascism and genocide, and the assumption that art is in the position to counteract these thought patterns.

1. How does one understand another person without that “understanding” obscuring or annihilating the infinite uniqueness and irreplaceable individuality of that person? How does one cultivate empathy without thereby reducing the one empathized with to a mere concept? How does

the artist portray suffering while avoiding these problems—especially in terms of portraying the suffering of others?

2. How do we move from the preservation of the individual “I” to the formation of a social and ethical “we?” The work of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe suggests that fascism may be understood as the assumption that a national or racial community is defined in an essentialist and organic way, and that this community’s political institutions therefore arise organically from it. So how do we instill and define an alternative view of community? And how do we form a “we” that avoids essentialism, and therefore, exclusivism, by defining the Other in an essentialist way as well?

In addition, we will also be examining how two other issues come into play. Since the Nazis took freedom and gave death, any deep philosophical analysis of fascism and the Holocaust must take into account the metaphysical questions that this historical experience raises about freedom and death.

I have privileged literary art in part because, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, European philosophers have shown an intense interest in literature; some of them were literary figures themselves. This is at least partly because the examination of literature gives us a paradigm case through which to understand language as such. Language, in turn, reveals an entire metaphysics of how humans form concepts, convey understanding, come to self-awareness, and form connections with and responsibilities toward each other. On the other hand, the Holocaust has also made many philosophers question what they had

thought about death, identity, and responsibility, and how thought and expression are or become adequate to this experience.

In what follows, I will first discuss the work of Jean-Paul Sartre. I will examine how his philosophy of existentialism, based in a radical atheism, created a system of understanding the human condition in terms of metaphysical and political freedom, and the ethical and political responsibilities that follow from that condition. Furthermore, more specifically for our discussion, I will look at how this system implies an approach to literature and theory of group vs. individual identity.

After that, I will examine how a variety of prominent thinkers have, in the years after the war, confronted the ways in which the historical calamity of the Holocaust raised urgent ethical problems and the ways in which these problems entwined with the responsibilities of the artist, primarily the literary artist. For Theodor Adorno, Auschwitz was the paradigm for all that was wrong with the modern era. On the one hand, it was only the most nightmarish example of the basic nature of global capitalism, which totalizes, makes everything the same, and destroys all sites of resistance. On the other hand, the event of Auschwitz changed something fundamental about life on earth. It changed the way we understand death, the very way we die, and thus, the value and the living of life itself, damaging these latter profoundly. Therefore, Adorno thought that the truth and value of art, and its responsibility, lie in its being able to create a space that was completely other than one's received, social reality, to preserve the individual and the particular against the forces that sought to subsume it.

Emmanuel Levinas, himself a survivor of the Nazi terror, created an ethics based on an encounter with the Other, in which the call and obligation of ethics exists before

personal identity, and is dependent on a recognition of the Other as alterity, rather than as conforming to our preconceived ideas. Attendant upon this idea is a concept of art that is suspicious of representation. Rather, he insists on art that retains the Other's mystery and ineffability. Despite offering some important insights, Levinas' analysis, both metaphysical and artistic, suffers from some profound problems that need to be addressed.

Jean-Francois Lyotard is similarly suspicious of totalizing systems, and the way they try to subsume individualities and local identities into a preconceived whole. The silencing of the voice of the other is what he defines as "terror." He points to two ways in which discourse can overcome this. One is by creating art that portrays the fact of the incommunicable itself. The other is by recognizing that there are different regimes of discourse, each meaningful in a different way and that we must be open to the claims of different discourses.

Finally, we will look at Jacques Derrida, primarily in how he reads in poetic practice of Paul Celan. In doing so, he will suggest how the reading of a poem itself shows how we realize the task of encountering the Other, commemorating his individuality, forming a "we" with him, and thus recognizing my own obligation.

To put it somewhat bluntly, what all of these thinkers seem to be after is the question, can literature stop mass murder on a national scale? If the answer is yes, it's based on two premises: 1. that there is a certain totalitarian thinking that makes such horrors possible, and  
2. that this mentality can be subverted through a certain approach to the arts, in this case specifically, literature.

### Sartre: Starting the Conversation

Existentialism, as it was formulated into a movement in the 1940's, was incubated in the atmosphere of war and fascism. As such, the work of its main proponent, Jean-Paul Sartre, lays out a conceptual grid that helps us understand the world crisis that Nazism and its Holocaust entailed and implied.

To begin with, the movement that would be named "existentialism" in Sartre's lifetime was a world-view that had been incubating through the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and in some ways, culminated at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>. This tradition promulgated a certain way of viewing God, alienation, and death. Thus, in this chapter, we will look at the connection between mortality, freedom, and individuation that forms the foundation for Sartre's approach. Then, we will examine the way in which this free individual encounters the Other, in hostility, but also in solidarity. We'll see how Sartre's theory of literature shows authentic writing as an exemplar of the ethical relationship to another's freedom. And finally, we'll bring all these elements together in a view of how identities are imposed on groups, or conversely, chosen by them. This latter will be in terms of both Europeans Jews and diasporic Africans.

The twentieth century opened in a Europe in which Friedrich Nietzsche had proclaimed the death of God. Sartre makes this insight central to his version of existentialism: "we merely mean to say that God does not exist, and that we must bear the full consequences of that assertion." (EH, 27) Our "abandonment" is what makes it possible for humans to live freely and creatively, since there are no eternal, otherworldly

values imposed on us. But while this is, in a sense, a kind of liberation, at the same time: “Existentialists... find it extremely disturbing that God no longer exists, for along with his disappearance goes the possibility of finding values in an intelligible heaven.” (EH, 28)

Such a discourse became horribly relevant during the years of the Holocaust. Murder and torture on such a vast scale was seen by many as only being possible in a world without a God. The philosophical problem of evil had never seemed so urgent. This question was particularly pointed for the community that was the Nazis’ main victim, since being Jewish is defined both by religion and ethnicity—in other words, these victims were targeted for their version of God, and now the victimization was, for many, calling that God into question.

This crisis was naturally also often a theme in Holocaust literature. It was perhaps most poignantly portrayed in one of the central scenes in *Night* by Elie Wiesel. In Auschwitz, a child is hanged, while the other inmates are made to watch. Someone in the crowd asks, “Where is God now?” To which the narrator responds, “And I heard a voice within me say: ‘Where is he? Here He is, He is hanging there on this gallows.’” (*Night*, 62)

Another topic on which much philosophical work was being done in the years between the wars, that would become tragically urgent during and after the second war, was that of death itself. One thing that should be recognized is that Sartre set up much of the conceptual vocabulary that was employed by the continental philosophers who came after him, even though many claimed to explicitly reject his thought. Death, the implications of mortality (or finitude), freedom, the other, and the gaze all feature prominently in Sartre’s conceptual system. For another thing, Sartre’s literary practice

and writings about literature are two things which seem in a certain way to set up a conflict with each other that is echoed throughout the discussion that follows—although I will show how this conflict is only apparent, through a looking at a less-discussed piece.

I think that the first thing to understand is the central role of death in Sartre's thought. And this has a direct precedent in his encounter with the work of Martin Heidegger.

In his epoch-making 1927 work *Being and Time*, Heidegger describes our realization of our own mortality as being something that individuates us and sets us apart from the community. I realize that, at the time of my death, I am the only one who will experience it. Thus bereft, the end of my life seems to rob that life of its meaning, a meaning that had formerly seemed self-evident when I moved organically within the milieu of the community that I was born into. Of course, strictly speaking, I don't "experience" my death at all. I exist and experience, then I don't exist, and I experience nothing. But to Heidegger, one of the things that makes me human is that I can *anticipate* my death. I can picture—and dread—what it will be like to no longer exist, to have my unique consciousness snuffed out. And this anticipation, this dawning of potential meaninglessness, is what makes me question the received values of a community that I may never otherwise have confronted. I am forced to decide for myself what my life will mean, since no one else can do it for me, just as no one else can die for me. This is what Heidegger calls "Being-Toward-Death." (Heidegger, 233-247)

This is certainly *not* the emphasis that Sartre wants to bring to his analysis. Certainly, Sartre believes that the lack of God and the reality of death is what create the conditions of human freedom, which for Sartre is the highest value. It is this that gives

humans the ability to make choices, to form themselves freely. Nevertheless, for Sartre, death is not that which forces us to consciously form our own projects, but rather, the terrible, meaningless accident that disrupts our projects and derails our attempts to create meaning. For Sartre, since there is no inherent meaning to anything in the universe, humans have to create such meanings individually and collectively. Death, therefore, is what interferes with this project, and therefore makes us vulnerable to absurdity.<sup>1</sup>

In a sense, these two positions could be seen as complimentary to each other. Death could be the terrible accident that in fact does serve to make us aware of the underlying absurdity of our condition. However, it seems to me that the difference is that Sartre wants to focus on death as a kind of *injustice*, a basic unfairness, not as a part of nature—unless it's to prove that nature is likewise unjust.

Sartre's masterwork *Being and Nothingness* was finished amidst the turmoil of the occupied Paris of the Second World War. Even though by his own admission he only participated in a couple of minor actions, Sartre was nevertheless a participant in the Resistance. In the midst of resistance, Paris was a place of secrecy and fear, a place where sudden death was possible at any time. And at the hands of the perpetrators of the Holocaust, this was not the "glorious" death of the battlefield, but the ignominious one of summary execution. Being-Toward-Death was a terrible risk for something greater, not an inevitable parameter of meaning.

In this context, the relevance of Sartre's ideas about freedom, responsibility, and their inextricable link becomes clear. In occupied France, each person had the choice of whether to collaborate or resist. This is the kind of choice that no version of determinism

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<sup>1</sup> Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. (1943) trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956) p.685-687. Hereafter referred to as *BN*.

can write off or excuse while remaining rational. And the results of such a freely made choice affected the society as a whole, in its very fate.

For our purposes, a very important aspect of this encounter between individual freedom and the surrounding society is the encounter with the Other. So what is the relationship of our freedom to other people? To explain this, let's briefly look at our relationship to other things in the world. Like Heidegger, Sartre says that our projects organize the world we inhabit—in fact, this creates a “world” in the Heideggerian sense. Everything we encounter falls into a hierarchy of significance based on our objectives.<sup>2</sup> But when we encounter another human being, we do so with the awareness that they are also organizing our apparently shared world according to their standards of significance. When I'm alone in a park, for example, I feel as if everything there was planted just for me, that in a sense, these are my trees and flowers and benches. But when I spot someone else coming down the path, my perception of the space changes. I'm aware of another mind, of another freedom, of the possibility of another perspective on the world that may overlap or compete with mine, and thus that my viewpoint has to make room for. My whole bearing changes, as I reorient my world toward another. (BN, 341-343)

This is, in a sense, perspectivism turned on its head. It's not that I'm constantly adopting different viewpoints in regard to the world, but that the world is full of minds with different perspectives that I am always encountering.

But how much can I know about another mind? This is precisely the problem. When I encounter other people, I perceive them only as exteriors, as object-like things. I cannot directly apprehend them as consciousnesses or as potentialities. In this regard,

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<sup>2</sup>. This is the characterization of “world” that is presented in *Being and Time*. The later Heidegger makes the idea of “world” more complex.

Sartre writes a lot about “the look” or “the gaze.” This is how we encounter the Other in the world, which is problematic, because we therefore always run the risk of seeing the Other as a kind of thing. Thus, there is also a risk here of losing my freedom. When I first encounter the Other, I don’t know what his intentions are toward me. He may seek to dominate or exploit me. Thus each encounter begins with a potential hostility that must be resolved. Often, however, it is “resolved” by one of the parties giving up his freedom, and being treated as an object by the Other. (The modes of how this happens are discussed in *Being and Nothingness*, Part 3, Chapter 3)

This is how ideas like essentialism and determinism arise. When others encounter me, they don’t see my projects and possibilities; therefore they don’t see my freedom. I’m caught in a moment of my process, so to speak. (BN, 347-349)

The term “self-conscious” is not accidental. It connotes being overly aware, to the point of awkwardness, discomfort, and vulnerability. But in literal terms, this is how consciousness and self-reflection are born—in the encounter with the Other’s gaze.

The concept of “the Other” will become a central ethical principle for Levinas—particularly, in terms of our discussion, in regard to his ideas about the ethics of art. And this aspect will continue, in informing our discussion of Lyotard and Derrida.

For Sartre, the reality of the Other means that our existence, though relying on personal and ontological freedom for its meaning and value, is nevertheless irreducibly social, and therefore by implication, ethical. His vision of individual freedom is not a narcissistic one that would glorify the self at the expense of others, thereby justifying exploitation. Rather, one is led to the realization that, if there is no divine legislator, then one must create standards for humanity through one’s decisions. If there is no human

essence that is eternally defined, then that essence is created by the sum of my actions. And since my actions always have consequences in a world of others, if I exercise my freedom, it can only be justified by respecting the freedom of others also.

Of course, one may always attempt to deny one's responsibility by denying one's freedom. One can claim that one is determined, whether by social or genetic or neurological factors. They could also do this, as we will later explore more deeply, in racial or national terms. Sartre refers to this, in *Being and Nothingness* (Part One, Chapter Two) as "bad faith."

Sartre's was a message that was particularly resonant with the post-war world. The crimes of the Nazis were based in authoritarianism and racism; it would not have been possible without either of these things. That is to say, an utter contempt for the individual.<sup>3</sup> This was a contempt both for the individual's freedom in terms of basic political rights and also her uniqueness, in consigning one's essence to her membership in a group. But here was a philosophy that upheld the freedom and dignity of the individual, as well as, as we've seen, his responsibility. Thus it was both individualistic and socially conscious; not just in a liberal, political way, but in a profound metaphysical, and even cosmic way. This was anti-fascism in its most thorough sense.

These are the major points of Sartre's philosophical system, certainly in terms of our discussion. But Sartre was also an important literary figure. So we'll next see how his basic philosophical principles translated into a theory of literature.

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<sup>3</sup>. Of course, fascists of all stripes *claim* to be concerned with the individual, but only in terms of the "great man" that can provide leadership where parliamentary discussion cannot. But it's understood that everyone else is supposed to obey him, sacrificing themselves for the greater whole that this leader represents.

In his essay, “What is Literature?” Sartre outlines why he thinks that fiction has a unique relevance among the art forms. That is, since stories tell of human actions, human decisions made in the context of concrete situations, fiction recreates the actual experience of the practice of human freedom. It does this by capturing a situation, in regard to which the protagonist makes a choice, just as the reader would when confronted with such a situation in real life. To Sartre, the other art forms do not encounter the world; rather, they create beautiful forms for the sake of creation. For him, even poetry, although also language, is so formal it ends up marginalizing the meanings in language, and becomes more akin to painting or music.

What, for Sartre, sets prose apart from painting, music, and poetry is the impossibility of these latter forms to be engaged, socially and politically. This is because whereas prose deals in words understood as “signs,” these other forms create images, which, having their own sensory qualities, exist as things in themselves.<sup>4</sup> Thus, whereas the prose writer, in portraying a thing in the world, also makes it into a symbol for an idea, the visual artist, for example, an image that is thing-like, and consequently possessed of all the ambiguities of a real thing in the world that has not been rendered as a sign. “The writer can guide you and, if he describes a hovel, make it seem the symbol of social injustice and provoke your indignation. The painter is mute. He presents you with *a* hovel, that’s all. You are free to see in it what you like.” (WL, 4)

The purpose of writing, then, is to posit and create a meaning for the inherently absurd phenomena of the world. But the diffusion of meaning in this kind of portraiture

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<sup>4</sup> Sartre, Jean-Paul. *What is Literature?* (1949), trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 2. Hereafter referred to as *WL*.

makes the portrait into one more object in the world, with the same inherent lack of meaning.

It is this difference in relationship to the world that, for Sartre, also distinguishes prose from poetry. In prose, the word always refers to a condition in the world. In poetry, the poet lingers sensuously on the words themselves. Thus, he claims, poetry makes words into a barrier to acting in the world, rather than as a tool to enable such acting. Rather than seeing the world through words, the poet instead only gets himself reflected back to him by the word: for example, in the function of metaphor, whereby everything that happens in the world seems to be a symbol of the poet's own thoughts and emotions.

For this to take place as Sartre describes, Sartre has to see language as transparent and instrumental.

This will prove to be a flaw in Sartre's approach, since this is exactly the view of language that was subsequently contested by the structuralists and poststructuralists. Nonetheless, he holds out the possibility that poetry, though not "engaged" in the way he outlines, may still be a social critique of a certain kind—specifically in being the negative image of the work that engaged prose accomplishes.

We will see how Adorno had a similar view of the role of art, in terms of maintaining its autonomy.

This condemnation of poetry is one that, as we will see, he comes to modify in works like *Black Orpheus*. But his view of what fiction does forms a literary theory that is well worth considering.

To Sartre, fiction is not imagistic in the way other arts are, because language does not appeal directly to the senses. Its images therefore have to be internalized, re-imagined, and thus made real by each reader for herself. For Sartre, the literary work is composed “*through* language,” but is “never given *in* language.” (WL, 38) The actual literary object is composed in the mind of the reader. It is actually “a silence and an opponent of the word” (WL, 38), that the “reader must invent... in a continual exceeding of the written thing.” (WL, 39) The “object,” thus understood, always exceeds the words because it is transcendent; it always points beyond the word to something in the world.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, the reader herself is at the same time also the world that the word points to. The characters gain their emotional power only through being loaned the emotions of the reader. These feelings are loaned, named, and reflected back in a dialectical process. We recognize our world, and ourselves, and project this vision back onto our relationship with the world. (WL, 39-40)

The most important thing about this reciprocal process for Sartre is that it is predicated on freedom. Since the work depends on the reader’s consciousness, she must freely enter into the process, must make the choice to invest it with meaning. It is thus an “appeal” “to the reader’s freedom to collaborate in the production of his work.” (WL, 40) This appeal is just the opposite of trying to have an affect on the reader, to try to hold the reader in the writer’s sway. (WL, 43) Once the appeal becomes a kind of trick, you no longer have good writing. (WL, 58)

The appeal recognizes the reader’s freedom by laying out the stakes of the choice to be made. The writer offers a vision of the world that the reader is free to accept or not. This process recognizes the freedom of our creativity in regard to meaning (the writer)

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<sup>5</sup> This is something we will later see Derrida come to.

and our ability to make choices in the world (the reader)—even, given sufficient analysis, at a foundational level. This is why Sartre rejects Kant’s definition of art as having to do with the “free play of the imagination.” This formulation “forgets that the imagination of the spectator has not only a regulating function, but a constitutive one.” (WL, 41)

The validity of Sartre’s project, the freedom and responsibility involved in the ontology of choice as a basic category is best seen in catastrophic times. As we’ve seen, Sartre forged his approach in occupied Paris, where each person had the ability to resist or to collaborate. In more sheltered times, we have the luxury of allowing for gray areas or for the recognition of absolving necessities. And in fact, the narratives of those who were in the camps testify to Sartre’s uncompromising vision. Such testimony is rife with instances of prisoners who collaborated and guards who aided, in a vast range of capacities.<sup>6</sup>

To see clearly how these two approaches that Sartre employs need not contradict each other, we can look at the final scene of *Nausea*, for a poetic portrayal, in the course of a modernist novel, of how the “appeal” works. Of course this is only one scene, in an important novel that addresses a variety of profound issues. But what’s important for our current discussion is how the last section illustrates the way in which what is communicated in art (in this case, music in particular) reaches out toward the Other, and offers a basis for empathy and solidarity.

*Nausea* is the story of Antoine Roquentin, a historian who has come to a small provincial town to do research. While there, he has the experience of a radical loss of meaning, perceiving himself to just be one more object in the world. The novel charts his inner journey through this perception and its ramifications.

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<sup>6</sup> See in particular *The Kingdom of Auschwitz* by Otto Friedrich.

At the end, as Roquentin is waiting for a train to leave the city (having abandoned his historical work), he goes into the café he had been frequenting one last time. He decides to listen to his favorite jazz record from the jukebox there, “Some of These Days.”<sup>7</sup> His discussion of this provides the climax and conclusion of the novel.

Roquentin prefaces his musings by commenting on the mistaken soporific notion of what music does. “To think that there are idiots who get consolation from the fine arts...”Chopin’s Preludes were such a help to me when your poor uncle died.”...They imagine that the sounds flow into them, sweet, nourishing, and that their sufferings become music, like Werther; they think that beauty is compassionate to them.” (N, 174)

By contrast, when he has no music, he feels somewhat comfortable in the ugliness of the world, because, finding himself equally banal and ugly, he’s not challenged by it. But when his record starts, that changes. “Now there is this song on the saxophone. And I am ashamed. A glorious little suffering has just been born, an exemplary suffering. Four notes on the saxophone. They come and go, they seem to say: You must be like us, suffer in rhythm.” (N, 174)

This challenges Roquentin’s entire existence. He says, in comparison “the sincerest of my suffering drags and weighs”; and by contrast, the music “cuts through the drab intimacy of the world” surprising everyone who lives in bad faith. (N, 175)

The paradox is that, in a sense, the song doesn’t exist. It’s not the kind of brute animal or mineral facticity, bereft of meaning, which Sartre has been describing and using metaphorically. One could say the playing of the record is a vibration; but it’s

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<sup>7</sup> This was a popular song in the 1930’s, but unfortunately, I haven’t been able to locate a recording that anywhere near fits Sartre’s description. Particularly, there are none that I know of sung by a black woman. My best guess is that Sartre was either referring to Sophie Tucker’s 1928 recording, mistaking her for black, or Cab Calloway’s 1932 record, mistaking his high (sometimes near-falsetto) voice for that of a woman.

more accurate to say that, as a work of art, the song is, like language, pure meaning. What Roquentin understands is that art is the creation of an essence out of existence. Even though this essence is not inherent, it is still possible. Furthermore, it is inevitably created out of the materials of existence, specifically, the self. The project becomes “...to drive existence out of me, to rid the passing moments of their fat...purify myself, to give back at last the sharp, precise sound of a saxophone note.” (N, 175)

Not only does he speak of “an exemplary suffering,” he also describes “the long, dry laments of jazz...like a pitiless witness.” (N, 175-176) Roquentin imagines the lives of the Jewish man who wrote the song and of the black woman singing it. He imagines their suffering in terms of the punishing heat of New York tenements. Through this communication, through this witness, art is established as the expression of “a deeply felt communal anguish.”<sup>8</sup> The essence that art creates is a social one. In portraying one’s condition, it offers a vision of the social totality and an overt or implied values system in regard to that totality. This vision is a call to solidarity; we are being asked to “suffer in rhythm.” Art crystallizes these values, but understood in the context of Sartre’s system, does so with the knowledge that it is a process of creation. In fact, the artist takes responsibility for this process. “The Negress sings. Can you justify your existence then? Just a little?” (N, 177)

This moment is important in two ways. First, it shows art in the process of creating a “we,” a social solidarity forges through the shared values that the work of art foment. Second, it shows the forging of the identity and meaning of the individual in such a process.

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<sup>8</sup> This phrase originally referred to Miles Davis’ playing on the *Sketches of Spain* album. Quoted by Ron David in *Jazz for Beginners* (New York: Writers & Readers, 1995). It might be worth noting that Davis and Sartre were good friends.

In understanding this “we” that is thus formed, it is vital to understand who Sartre portrays as making this appeal. I don’t think it’s accidental that Sartre chose to use jazz, which is a fundamentally black music, or that the artists he tried to imagine were black (and a woman) and Jewish, respectively. These are both excluded, oppressed groups. It isn’t just that the song renders into sound the suffering of any mortal being, but that it testifies to *particular*, socially sedimented sufferings that are the result of injustice. This is what the “pitiless witness” bears witness to.

Yet, the experience and depiction of this particularity reaches toward something universal. It asks for recognition of the humanity that the artists and the listener share. The “long, dry laments” don’t ask for our pity and guilt; they ask for our empathy and solidarity. They ask us to “suffer in rhythm” with them.

(In *Black Orpheus*, we will again see how the portrayal of the lived experience of the particular makes an appeal toward a tentative universal.)

In response to this imagined question about the justification of existence, Roquentin responds by being inspired to create art himself. “Couldn’t I try...Naturally, it wouldn’t be a question of a tune...but couldn’t I, in another medium?...It would have to be a book: I don’t know how to do anything else.” (N, 178) But it would specifically be literature. “But not a history book: history talks about what has existed—an existant can never justify the existence of another existant.” (N, 178) This is ultimately why the Rollebon project had to be abandoned. “It would have to be beautiful and hard as steel and make people ashamed of their existence.” (N, 178) This would be done by portraying counter-factual possibilities and thus depriving people of the bad faith they had lived within. But it would also provide personal redemption for the artist, in knowing that he

had participated in this process. “And I might succeed—in the past, nothing but the past—in accepting myself.” (N, 178)

To me, this social aspect is the main point of “What is Writing?” While this essay is deservedly controversial in many problematic claims that it makes, the main point that I want to stress in terms of this discussion is the idea that fiction should be engaged, that is, socially relevant. We certainly don’t have to agree with Sartre’s assertion here that other art forms (even poetry) are incapable of doing this. What we can gain from Sartre’s position is the insight that, instead of creating a beautiful form that ideally exists hermetically, fiction portrays our freedom to us by showing people in situations making choices about those situations. Consequently, by virtue of the responsibility attendant upon freedom, the writer has an obligation to portray these situations in good faith.

There has been a great deal of criticism of this position, to the effect that art should be autonomous, that it shouldn’t be didactic, etc. But I think such insistences misunderstand Sartre. His position should definitely not be confused with the artistically bereft socialist realism of the Soviet Union at that time, nor with the simplistic agit-prop that Berthold Brecht seemed to advocate (although he was usually a subtler artist than this as well). After all, Sartre himself was the author of *Nausea*, a novel with no overt politics at all. But what the artist does have a responsibility to do is to portray the world honestly, rather than aesthetically flee into pure style.

Thus, the realist and the modernist both have, in a sense, the same mission. Both express (and thus preserve) the vision of the individual, while reaching out toward the Other by offering a vision of a possible “we” for the Other, the reader, to accept. One

does this naturalistically, the other impressionistically. The ways in which, the latter may do this work better than the former, is something we will examine with Adorno.

So far, we might note, Sartre has only spoken of the individual standing up against monolithic essentialism imposed by a hostile Other in somewhat abstract, universal terms—almost as if this struggle were the same for all people, at all times. This position would, of course, tend to undermine the principle of the contingency and uniqueness of each person. Furthermore, the intense alienation that he describes has so far only been portrayed at the individual level. It doesn't address the collective alienation of an entire oppressed people, how the dialectic of freedom and circumstances results in the creation of group identities. In *Anti-Semite and Jew*, he speaks directly to the problems of the Holocaust, in terms of how racists use “bad faith” to impugn a false group identity onto their victims and thus give themselves an identity and a meaning in the process. On the other hand, in *Black Orpheus*, he shows how the union of art (particularly literature, of course) with a social movement can forge a group identity in a positive sense. One of the things that's important here is an apparent shift in the ontological status that he grants to poetry. Furthermore, this re-evaluation of poetry leads into a thinking about language that sounds like it anticipates some of post-structuralism more than it sounds like anything we've heard so far in Sartre.

In *Anti-Semite and Jew*, we have his direct response to the Holocaust itself. Sartre addresses, not the horrors of the extermination itself, but rather analyzes the racism and the psychology of racism that makes such an event possible.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> In the following discussion I will be using the term “racism” almost interchangeably with “anti-Semitism.” While understanding that one could also classify anti-Semitism as religious intolerance or as

A main theme of the book was bad faith. As we've seen, bad faith is when one seeks to avoid responsibility by denying one's freedom, through essentialist thinking. By imbuing oneself with an incontrovertible essence, one claims to be unable to achieve any other kind of existence. Bad faith thus defines the anti-Semite in terms both of his self-image and the image he projects onto Jews. Racists escape from personal responsibility by subsuming themselves and their destiny within their racial group and by blaming all problems on another, internally undifferentiated "group."

If this is so, what are the underlying psychological and philosophical conditions of racism? When one chooses this attitude what else does one thereby accept, or conversely, what assumptions have to be there to lead to this acceptance?

For one thing, Sartre points out that anti-Semites often point to supposed historical data to back up their claims, citing the role of "the Jews" in different situations, including the French Revolution, the First World War, etc. Even if these claims were true—and they're mostly bogus—the point is that one is judging present-day individuals in terms of what members of their group have done in the past. "If one is going to reproach little children for the sins of their grandfathers, one must first of all have a very limited conception of what constitutes responsibility... One must convince himself that Jewish character is inherited."<sup>10</sup> In short, one must think in terms of group characteristics and group essence—which existentialism stands opposed to.

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ethnocentrism, I want to emphasize the context of this piece being written in the aftermath of the Holocaust. The Nazis carried out their murders in terms of an idea of race. Daniel Goldhagen has argued, in *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, that the Holocaust was not only made possible, but inevitable when, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Jews began to be considered as a biological race rather than as a religious community.

<sup>10</sup> Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Anti-Semite and Jew* (1946) trans. George J. Becker (New York: Schocken, 1976) Hereafter referred to as ASJ.

Secondly, one may say that racism is a kind of a passion, a moment of one being swept away in emotion rather than thought. But in the end, one chooses to allow oneself to be so swept away. (ASJ, 17-18) So the question becomes: “How can one choose to reason falsely?” Sartre answers that it comes from “a longing for impenetrability.” (ASJ, 18)

“Impenetrability” here means being in a state impervious to change, to experience, to new ideas. Ultimately, it means a state impervious to truth. “The rational man groans as he gropes for the truth; he knows that his reasoning is no more than tentative....He never sees very clearly where he is going...But there are people who are attracted by the durability of a stone...What frightens them is not the content of truth, of which they have no conception, but the form itself of truth, that thing of indefinite approximation.” (ASJ 18-19)

As such, people of this mind-set don't even really want learning or experience; they want their opinions “to be innate.” (ASJ 19) “Since they are afraid of reasoning, they wish to lead the kind of life wherein reasoning and research play only a subordinate role, where one seeks only what he has already found, wherein one becomes only what he already was.” (ASJ 19)

This is essential for understanding racism in another way, also. If learning didn't occur, if truth, therefore, weren't a process of growth, then one couldn't determine one's essence through the circumstances of that person's birth.

Ultimately, the predisposition toward racism has to do with awareness of freedom and the use of that freedom to create a self. The anti-Semite has no self. He takes his identity from a concept of “group” and defines that group by the hated outsider to that

group. Rather than be threatened by the dominance of the Other's gaze as in our earlier discussion, the racist welcomes the definition that that gaze brings."...he sees in the eyes of others a disquieting image—his own—and he makes his words and gestures conform to it. Having this external model, he is under no necessity to look for his personality within himself. He has chosen to find his being entirely outside himself, never to look within, to be nothing save the fear he inspires in others." (ASJ, 21)

Part of this group-thinking is an embrace of mediocrity. The anti-Semite may admit that Jews are intelligent and talented; but only because the racist doesn't value these qualities. These, after all are individual qualities, and he gets his worth from his race, which is a community and a heritage. "This man fears every kind of solitariness, that of the genius as much as that of a murderer; he is the man of the crowd...The phrase 'I hate the Jews,' is one that is uttered in chorus; in pronouncing it, one attaches himself to a tradition and to a community—the tradition and community of the mediocre." (ASJ 22)

We will see a different way of approaching the idea of a culturally and artistically-constructed community when we discuss *Black Orpheus*.

Anti-Semitism allows its adherent to avoid evaluating the current world system. The anti-Semite typically sees Jews as a world-wide spirit of evil, working behind the scene to cause every bad thing in society. This is essentialism at its lowest, imparting an evil essence on the Jews, such that they can't help but do evil. (ASJ, 39) This view allows one not to have to take any responsibility for this condition. "The anti-Semite is afraid of discovering that the world is ill-contrived, for then it would be necessary for him to

invent and modify, with the result that man would be found to be the master of his own destinies, burdened with an agonizing and infinite responsibility.” (ASJ, 40)

In opposition to this inherent conservatism of racist thought-patterns, revolutionaries, on the other hand, are judged by their acts, not by their essence. (ASJ, 42)

Thus we see some of the problems of essentialism, illustrated by the extremity of its racist version. On the one hand, this outlook allows the racist to escape his own responsibility. “Now the anti-Semite flees responsibility as he flees his own consciousness, and choosing for his personality the permanence of rock, he chooses for his morality a scale of petrified values.” (ASJ, 27) And on the other hand, it inevitably culminates in the attempted destruction of that hatred’s target.

Anti-Semites see the Jews as a kind of infestation that society has to be “cleansed” of. “His task is therefore purely negative: there is no question of building a new society, but only of purifying the one which exists.” (ASJ, 43) As we’ve seen, Jews are seen as having an essence of complete Evil. This dualism is part of the essential conservatism of the racist outlook. If all society “has to is to remove Evil, that means that the Good is already given.” (ASJ, 44)

Taking the good as a given also, of course, allows the anti-Semite to languish in bad faith. “He has no need to seek it in anguish, to invent it, to scrutinize it patiently when he has found it, to prove it in action, to verify it by its consequences, or, finally, to shoulder the responsibilities of the moral choice he has made.” (ASJ, 44)

The anti-Semite’s Manichaeism “puts his emphasis on destruction,” often the logical outcome of a purely negative task. (ASJ, 43) “What he wishes, what he prepares,

is the death of the Jew.” Not that all anti-Semites demand murder, at least not openly; “but the measures they propose—all of which aim at his abasement, at his humiliation, at his banishment—are substitutes for that assassination...They are symbolic murders.” (ASJ, 49)

Sartre argues that the ideological defense to this that most Jewish people (at least in France) have relied on is to embrace ideals of universalism. That is, they have adopted the ideals of rationalism and democracy that say that all humans are equal and entitled to freedom and dignity simply on the basis of being human. Thus particulars, like race, religion, and nationality melt away and become irrelevant in the context of the human family.

But there are dangers attendant upon this gambit. The Jews do get a friend in the democrat; but in the end, this isn't much help. Because the democrat only sees the individual as an example of a universal “human nature” which is “always the same in all times and all places.” (ASJ, 55) The problem with that outlook is this: “The democrat, like the scientist, fails to see the particular case; to him the individual is only an ensemble of universal traits.” (ASJ, 56) The Jew *as Jew* remains invisible to him. This liberal is willing to encounter a Jewish person, but only under the abstraction of “citizen,” not as a person from a concrete community, with a concrete history and specific problems that are a part of that history. In fact, “he fears the awakening of a ‘Jewish consciousness.’ He wants to solve the “Jewish problem” by making the definition “Jew” insignificant.” In the end, what this leads to is an endorsement of assimilation.

In fact, Sartre goes so far as to say,

For a Jew, conscious and proud of being Jewish... there may not be so much difference between the anti-Semite and the democrat. The former wishes to destroy him as a man and leave nothing in him but the Jew, the pariah, the untouchable; the latter wishes to destroy him as a Jew and leave nothing in him but the man, the abstract and universal subject of the rights of man and the rights of the citizen. (ASJ, 57)

In these assertions, there are clear parallels to controversies that arose in the course of the Civil Rights movement in the United States. Union activists that, in the 1930's and before, were willing to fight for the rights of black workers as fellow workers eventually balked at supporting equal rights for black people as a separate issue with its own unique demands. Similarly, in the 1960's white liberals who had supported the demands of the Civil Rights movement, that all Americans have the same rights regardless of race became apprehensive at the Black Nationalist insistence that black people in the United States formed a separate nation, in the sense of having a history and therefore interests that they didn't share with other Americans.

Of course, this isn't the only way that a sympathizer with the oppressed can inadvertently fail to appreciate an oppressed person's concrete personality and individuality. One can also lump a person in with a group and only see that person's group identity, but out of sympathy rather than hatred. But that can be almost as dehumanizing. Even the compassionate gaze may be objectifying.

We have been indignant, and rightly, over the obscene "yellow star" that the German government forced upon the Jews. What seemed intolerable about this was that it called attention to the Jew, that it obliged him to feel

himself perpetually Jewish in the eyes of others. There were some who tried by all possible means to indicate their sympathy for the unfortunates so marked. But when very well-intentioned people undertook to raise their hats to Jews whom they encountered, the Jews themselves felt that these salutes were extremely painful. Under the looks of support and compassion, they felt themselves becoming *objects*: objects of commiseration, of pity, of what you will—but objects. (ASJ, 76-77) <sup>11</sup>

In order to be in good faith, the Jewish person must encounter her situation *authentically*. As Sartre defines it, “Authenticity...consists in having a true and lucid consciousness of the situation, in assuming the responsibilities and risks that it involves...” (ASJ, 90) However, given our preceding considerations, this is often difficult to do. There are two main ways in which one can be inauthentic in this context. One is to embrace the democrat’s vision of a universality that takes no cognizance of the uniqueness of particular situations. “In the face of universal and eternal laws, man himself is universal.” (ASL, 111) The other is to embrace essentialism, and to completely identify oneself with one’s “Jewishness” as a natural, immutable, defining quality. That is, “to be Jews as a stone is a stone,” to be defined once and for all. Sartre refers to this latter as a type of “masochism,” which he defines as the desire to be seen as an object. (ASJ, 107)

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<sup>11</sup> This is the major theme explored in Ralph Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man*. There, the black protagonist considers himself invisible because he is always encountered as an *example* of a black man, never as an individual. Whether they’re racist, paternalistic southerners or bigoted northerners or political radicals opposed to institutionalized racism or white women attracted to some “exoticism,” no one in the book sees *him*.

Authenticity, on the other hand, would be to neither deny one's Jewishness, nor to make oneself identical with it. To understand how to be authentic, one first has to understand what exactly constitutes "being Jewish." For Sartre, what Jews actually all have in common is neither race nor religion, but rather a common *situation*. That is to say, they live in societies that *treat* them as Jews.

Several works of art have implied a similar idea. In Philip Roth's novel *Portnoy's Complaint*, the protagonist denies his Jewishness to his family, saying that he is an atheist instead. To which his sister responds that Hitler wouldn't have asked whether Portnoy believed in God or not. A similar conversation happens in the film *The Believer*, in which a young Jewish man is so filled with self-hate that he becomes a Nazi skinhead. His mother tells him that Hitler would have considered him Jewish regardless of what he thought, to which he responds, "So, what, is Hitler the head rabbi now?" In both cases, we see examples of Sartre's point: that Jewishness is defined here in terms of one's treatment and situation. In this sense, I don't think it would be far-fetched to say that the Holocaust created the modern definition of being Jewish, insofar as it was the common historical trauma, the history and heritage of which all Jews share.

Sartre's position in this regard is consistent with his over-all existentialist project. What unites Jews as Jews is what unites humans as humans: a common situation. Sartre wants to replace the traditional discussion of "human nature," which implies a static, ahistorical essence, with a discussion of the "human condition." Since humans are free, there aren't any inherent actions or behavior patterns in human life; one creates oneself

and one's own values through a series of conscious choices.<sup>12</sup> As we've seen, this is not self-creation *ex nihilo*; rather, one makes decisions in response to, and in the context of, a certain historical, economic, and cultural environment. However, what is not only common to all humans, but also inescapable, is that one finds oneself in a context in which those decisions must be made and those actions must be taken. Even though I may not be able to fully understand your context and situation, I nevertheless may understand that, like me, you are *in* a context that you must make a free, conscious choice in regard to.

Simply put, to be authentic, one has to both acknowledge the truth of the situation that one finds oneself in and, on the other hand, to be aware of one's freedom to do something about it. As we have seen, the inauthentic Jew fails to do either of these things, either in terms of denying one's situation by retreating into an abstract universalism, or in terms of equating oneself with an essentialist, pre-conceived notion of "Jewishness." What is called for, instead, is for one to accept that as a Jewish person, whatever choice one makes, that person makes it *as a Jew*. Even if one were to strive for the ideal of the universal and deny that being Jewish ultimately made any difference, one still makes this decision as a reaction to a lifetime, or at least a history, of discrimination and persecution. (ASJ, 89)

One of the implications of this is that, by one's actions, one is also contributing to a history and a definition of being Jewish. Unlike many post-structuralists who wanted to destabilize the idea of personal identity or current analytic philosophers like Derrick Parfitt who want to deny the continuity of the self, Sartre is not the kind of anti-

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<sup>12</sup> This definition of "human" allows Sartre to avoid the "humanism" that he criticized in *Nausea* and *Being and Nothingness*, and also what marks what's different about his idea when he re-introduces the term "humanism."

essentialist that denies that a person can *ever* have an essence. It's just that one is not born with it programmed in. Instead, one creates one's essence, one's definition, through the sum of one's decisions.

For Sartre, this happens equally in a group as in an individual. In *Existentialism is a Humanism*, he had discussed how this fact enjoins on us a responsibility for all humanity in our actions. (see pages 17-18 above) But, he argues, this same principle applies to the smaller group, Jews, in the same way as it does to the larger group of humanity. Each Jewish person, through her actions, contributes to the over-all meaning of what it is to be Jewish, and thus, to be authentic, should be cognizant of that when consciously making decisions. "To be a Jew...is to be responsible in and through one's own person for the destiny and the very nature of the Jewish people." (ASJ, 89)

While all this may give us important insights into the background of an event like the Holocaust, and also the way in which an oppressed group deals with a post-Holocaust world, the question remains: what does all this have to do with literature?

Two things, I think. First, is the book's charge that racism, and perhaps racist violence in particular, is made possible by a subsumption of the experience of and encounter with an individual into the concept of a group or type. Sartre's assertion sets up an idea that we will see is shared by the other thinkers examined in this study: Adorno's critique of totalization and advocacy of art counter-acting it, Levinas' idea of encounter with the Other, Lyotard's call to preserve a degree of non-totalizing incommunicability in art, and Derrida's problematization of the dynamic of singular and universal in the event of witness, and how poetry testifies to this. The relevant thread

running through all of this is the way in which a certain approach to literature can overcome the kind of detrimental thinking under discussion by presenting and preserving the unique, irreplaceable voice of an individual, a voice that cannot be reduced, without remainder, to an over-all concept. How this happens will unfold over the course of this study.

Secondly, Sartre offers the idea that a group, which is ultimately defined socially, can nevertheless participate in the creation of its own essence; a group can take control of defining itself. To see how this is done, we need to examine one of Sartre's lesser-known works: *Black Orpheus*. Here, he discusses contemporaneous African diaspora poetry in terms of its revolutionary form and content. In the course of this, he not only re-evaluates and modifies his position on poetry, but offers a sophisticated view of language itself that anticipates some of the ideas that post-structuralists would claim to be in contradistinction to Sartre. As always, the basic existential question is, how do I undertake the project of shaping the world that shapes me? Here it is the same for a race: how do people of African descent, oppressed and molded by other races and nations for centuries, take control and work to define themselves for themselves? And what is the role of art in accomplishing this?

*Black Orpheus* was written in 1948, as the introduction to the *Anthologie de la Nouvelle Poesie Negre et Malgache de Langue Francaise*, edited by L.S. Senghor.<sup>13</sup> It seems to me to be impossible to grasp the full depth of Sartre's ideas about racism, colonialism, language, and the power of art unless we look at *Anti-Semite and Jew* and *Black Orpheus* together. These two pieces fill each other out in a yin-and-yang manner.

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<sup>13</sup> Hereafter referred to as BIO.

Three main points are important here for our purposes: Sartre's observations about the formative powers of language, the revision of his views about poetry, and his exploration of literature as involved in the self-conscious creation of a people's identity.

In the first place, this text is unique because it shows that Sartre takes seriously the power of language structures to form thought-patterns and to thereby constitute individuals. This was often an accusation against existentialism, brought forth by structuralism and post-structuralism, that the former philosophy didn't deal with the importance of language. Indeed, in texts like *What is Literature?*, Sartre seems to have a view of words as being transparent and instrumental. Here, however, he presents a different view.

Sartre recognizes how language structures shape the structures of thought—particularly in the form of binary oppositions, the deconstruction of which would become a major task of Derrida's. Central here is the binary opposition between “black” and “white” in European speech, and all the connotations and inflections that are dependant on that usage. These paired terms “cloak the great cosmic division ‘day and night’ and the human conflict of colonist and colonial.” When the black student of French is taught the language containing “this hierarchic coupling,” “the instructor gives him in addition a hundred habits of language which consecrate the priority of white over black.” This student “will learn to say ‘white as the snow’ to express innocence, to speak of the blackness of a look, of a soul, of a crime.” (BIO, 27) Thus a whole system of values is inscribed in what is ostensibly the most quotidian phraseology.

In fact, this symbol system came to fortify the Eurocentric notion of white perspective neutrally representing perspective itself, and even whiteness somehow being

identical with being human itself. “The white man, white because he was man, white like the day, white as truth is white, white like virtue, lighted like a torch all creation; he unfolded the essence, secret and white, of existence. (BIO, 7)

Furthermore, since this language hierarchy reinforces a political and cultural hierarchy, we can also see the colonizing effect of language. “Structuring of thought,” after all, does not proceed in any kind of neutral way.

Nevertheless, Sartre implies that there is something in the individual that makes that colonization incomplete, leading, thereby, to alienation.

In a direct rejection of the instrumentalist view, language is here seen as, fundamentally, a failure. It is perceived as a failure in the daily experience of a colonized black person; but that perception reveals a fundamental truth about all language as such.

The colonized person, speaking French for example, is not exactly speaking a “foreign language,” since he has been taught French from an early age. He may be perfectly at home when using that language to accomplish tasks in engineering, politics, science, scholarship, etc. But when it comes time to express oneself culturally or to express one’s deepest interiority: “It is necessary to speak of the slight but constant unhedging [sic] which separates that which he says, when he speaks of himself, from that which he wishes to say.” As if a “spirit steals his ideas from him, that it softly twists them to signify more or less that which *it* wishes, that the white words drink up his thought as the sand drinks blood.” When he stands back and reflects on the situation, “the white words stretch out in front of him, strange and unfamiliar, incomplete symbols and objects in halves.” (BIO, 24) His words thus fail to strike the mark they aim for. (This idea of failure in language will surface again in Lyotard.)

This experience, however, is potentially universal, once one comprehends the ontology of signified and signifier. In a remarkable passage that sounds like the Sartre of *Black Orpheus* attacking the Sartre of *What is Literature?*, he writes

Insofar as we can believe that a pre-established harmony rules the correspondence of Word and Being, we employ words without seeing them, with a blind confidence. They are like sensory organs...open windows to the world. Upon the first failure, this babel falls outside of us; we see the system in its entirety, it is no more than an upset and deranged mechanism whose great arms still gesture grotesquely in space. We see immediately the folly of the enterprise of speech. We understand that language is, in essence, prose; and prose, in essence, failure. (BIO, 25)

Note that the target here is specifically prose language. Because “it is common knowledge that this feeling of failure before the language when considered as a means of direct expression is the source of all poetic experience.” (BIO, 24) Thus the stage is set for our next main point, Sartre’s new idea of poetry.

The paradox of poetry is that, even though it exists through language, it exists as a rejection of the everyday view of “language.” Insofar as it absents itself from the pragmatic norms of communication, poetry can be said to be a type of silence. It is speech approximating silence. “Being raises itself before us as a tower of silence, and if we still wish to capture it, it can only be through silence...” (BIO, 25)

But how does one accomplish this task of using words to achieve silence? By relentless experimentation, which undermines received meanings, by “making words mad.” By doing so “the poet makes us suspect that beyond this clamor which cancels

itself by itself, there are enormous densities of silence... From Mallarme to the Surrealists, the profound aim of French poetry seems to me to have been this auto-destruction of the language.” (BIO, 25)

This was the aim of the 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-garde. “The poem is an obscure room where the words collide against each other...they reciprocally ignite each other with their fire and fall in flames.” (BIO, 26) But this project takes on even greater significance when linked with a political project, like the liberation of an oppressed people.

“Destruction, auto-de-fe of the language, magical symbolism, ambivalence of concepts, all of modern poetry is there under its negative aspect. But it is not a gratuitous game.” (BIO, 30) When the colonized poet writes in French, “since the oppressor is present even in the language they speak, they will speak this language to destroy it.” This poet tries to “degalicize” words; “he breaks their customary associations, he couples them by force.” (BIO, 26)

Thus a poetic use of language can become the voice of a people, even when that language began as that of the oppressor. This can happen when the marginalized group, or certain of its members, uses that dominant language in a way that is completely and unmistakably their own. American black people do this with slang, and the dialect that was once called “Black English”; Paul Celan did it with an avant-garde poetic style. He certainly wrote in German and was one of that language’s greatest poets. Yet, as Michael Hamburger wrote, “His German could not and must not be the German of the destroyers. That is one reason why he had to make a new language for himself...” (Celan, 27) And part of how he did that was by being one of the poets whose work came to most closely approximate the silence we’ve discussed. We will return to this.

This idea of poetic language being the voice of a people leads us to Sartre's next major point, which is the view of literature as the self-conscious creation of a people's identity.

The poets collected in the anthology Sartre was introducing were part of a literary and political movement called "Negritude." This was, as the preceding has suggested, a movement for black identity in opposition to French colonialism. As had been done in the United States by Marcus Garvey on the one hand and the Harlem Renaissance writers on the other, this movement sought a consciousness among black people world-wide of their shared African heritage, and to use this as a site of resistance to colonialism.

Sartre lauds this movement for finally being a moment when, in public poetry, black people can "communicate to each other without witness." (BIO, 26) That is, without the observation and witness of the white man. In fact, Sartre employs his idea of the gaze to show that it doesn't just pertain to the surveillances of the rulers, but now, in the anti-colonial moment, the gaze is turned back on the imperialist, so that he can know what it's like to be regarded by the Other. This is the experience he believes the European will have when seeing the work in this anthology: "and I want you to feel, as I, the sensation of being seen. For the white man has enjoyed for three thousand years the privilege of seeing without being seen. It was a seeing pure and uncomplicated; the light of his eyes drew all things from their primeval darkness ... Today, these black men have fixed their gaze upon us and our gaze is thrown back in our eyes..." (BIO, 7)

But Sartre defines this shared history the movement speaks of as not so much a common diasporic culture, but rather, the shared condition of the history of slavery. (BIO, 52-53) Just as "being a Jew" was defined as being *treated* as a Jew in one's

society, “being black” is defined as, not simply a skin color, but the sets of treatments that have resulted from that skin color. This is what, after centuries of geographical and cultural separation, ultimately unites the black people of the western hemisphere, brought there through the trans-Atlantic slave trade, with the native Africans who were enslaved by colonists in their own countries.

Furthermore, the fact that conscientious black people perceive their experience of this history, even though in recent generations they themselves did not live through slavery per se, proves that even in such a particularity, there is still a move toward a more universal awareness. Thus their experience “is simultaneously the intuitive grasp of the human condition and the still fresh memory of an historic past.” (BIO, 52-53)

We have already said that the human condition is constituted by the fact that, though our various situations differ, all humans find themselves *in* a situation, in regard to which they have to make conscious decisions. Therefore, paradoxically, the way to whatever exists of the universal consists of living your own particularity to its conclusion. (BIO, 62) As we saw in Sartre’s discussion of the “authentic Jew,” the way to authenticity lies in participating in the over-all human experience by plunging deeply into one’s own situation.

In being thus both universal and particular, Sartre says that Negritude “is an oath and a passion simultaneously.” (BIO, 59) This is because one’s being of African descent is an accident of fate that befalls one; one’s pride in being that is a choice made in response to this very specific situation; and one’s commitment to expressing this pride by standing up to imperialism marks the emergence of an “ought,” a value that can be

appealed to universally. This situation is a passion in that it happens to you, but an oath in that one derives values from it that one pledges oneself to.

Based on this premise of approaching a sort of universality through living out the particular, Sartre can claim a role for black people of being universal spokespeople for suffering, having experienced its greatest depths. Writing about their historical plight gives us an extreme case whereby we may approach an understanding of suffering in general.

Obviously, we can see how this idea applies to the literature of the Holocaust also. The survivor, by bearing witness to her particular suffering, reminds us all of the basic mortality and vulnerability to suffering and injustice that mark being human. Having endured the depths of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Jewish people have a unique opportunity to speak for, and to, all humanity.

But as we've also seen in the preceding discussion, universality is always ad hoc, hard won from lived experience. A premature and facile universalism can also be very dehumanizing and objectifying. So language and literature not only have the positive task of fostering empathy, and thereby creating an always-tentative "we," but also the negative one of overturning systematic preconceptions and exploding thought-systems that try to impose their own totality. The Nazis, too, aspired to universality—and they instituted theirs by force.

Literature has not only to make possible the communication that forms a community, but also creates the alienation needed to preserve one's individuality. Sometimes, what most preserves one's freedom and dignity from domination is the intimation that there is something incommunicable and ineffable about that person.

This is something that the following thinkers will explore in depth and take as central. That is, they will explore the question, what is the dialectic between what must be told and what can't be communicated?

## Adorno: Damaged Life and a New Way of Death

Theodor Adorno, one of the founders and most important thinkers of the Frankfurt School, was himself a survivor of the Third Reich. Not in the sense of having lived through the camps, but in the sense of being, as a Jew and a Marxist, a potential victim who was, nevertheless, able to escape in time. But many of his family and friends were not able to do so. Adorno raises survivor guilt to a metaphysical principle, in the idea of the “guilt context of the living.” This is a phrase that Adorno uses in *Aesthetic Theory*<sup>14</sup> but that originally came from his friend and mentor Walter Benjamin’s essay “Fate and Character.”<sup>15</sup> Benjamin himself was a victim of the Nazis: fleeing from their invasion of France, he was refused entry into Fascist Spain and, wandering through the Pyrenees, trapped between two borders, committed suicide. Adorno came to see the Shoah (which he abbreviates under the name “Auschwitz”) as the kind of event, the occurrence of which actually qualitatively changes the nature of life on earth. This is reflected in the subtitle of his book *Minima Moralia: Reflections from a Damaged Life*.<sup>16</sup>

The reciprocal of this damaged life is a damaged death. One of Adorno’s central points is that the event of the Holocaust actually warped and corrupted the way that human beings experienced death. Whereas Heidegger could still speak of a death of one’s own, which made of each of us an individual, a death that one chose in a way that would give a meaning to the whole of one’s life, Auschwitz has made a mockery of this.

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<sup>14</sup> P. 144. Hereafter referred to as AT.

<sup>15</sup> Although it should certainly be understood that Benjamin uses this phrase in a way that’s quite different from the way that Adorno does. Benjamin refers, instead, to that ancient discovery in which humans realize that they are vulnerable to suffering, not as punishment from a god for sins which must be atoned for, but simply as the condition of being mortal. “Fate is the guilt context of the living.” (Benjamin 308)

<sup>16</sup> Hereafter referred to as MM.

There, death de-individualized; people were murdered because they fit a category, because each constituted merely a “specimen” of that category.

One way of understanding this contention is to look at the image of the firing squad, and how it was used in different contexts in the twentieth century. As was noted above, Sartre’s view of death reflected the wasteful, arbitrary nature of death as interrupting one’s project, characteristic of the execution of the resistance fighter. But this type of death still follows, in a certain way, a pre-Holocaust paradigm. This is still a death that individuates. The person put up against a wall by fascists is someone who has defied them—someone who is losing his life in the pursuit of a noble project. Six guns trained on one body align the forces of repression in opposition to one subversive life. The fighter stands, heroically awaiting his death, secure in the knowledge that he hasn’t betrayed his comrades.

Sartre portrays a similar situation in his short story “The Wall.”<sup>17</sup> There, an anti-Franco fighter is captured and threatened with death by firing squad. This becomes his moment to make an ethical decision, even knowing that the odds are ultimately stacked against him (and realizes that, even though made in good faith, his decision still inadvertently causes death and misfortune). In this previous squad image, there is still the possibility for a heroic death, in not betraying the cause. But Adorno points out that the mass deaths of the Holocaust are designed to remove any dignity or heroism from death. Rather than death being, as for Heidegger, a process of individuation, it is here very much a de-individuation. The subject is made into an object at every phase of the process. (Attesting to this is the experimental nature of the camps. Not just in the literal experiments that Mengele carried out, but in the trial and error approach to killing

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<sup>17</sup> In Sartre, Jean-Paul, *The Wall*, tr. Lloyd Alexander (New York: New Directions, 1948)

methods.) Hence the mythic awe with which the inmates received news of public suicides in the camps, that is, those who have been objectified reclaiming their own deaths.

The film *The Pianist* gives us a very different image of those being shot from the ones we previously looked at. In the firing squad, the victim is individualized; the oppressor's power lines six shooters against one individual, bringing its forces to bear on stopping one opponent. This bestows on the victim a kind of bloody dignity. On the other hand, *The Pianist* contains a scene in which a Nazi officer makes five or six Jews lie on the ground with their hands behind their heads. He then proceeds, by rote, to walk down the line, dispatching each one with a single bullet to the back of the head. Here, the trope of the firing squad is reversed. Instead of being individualized under several guns, several persons are annihilated, as nothing more than parts of a process of death, under a single gun.

Elie Wiesel describes an example of this with an anecdote that appears in *Night*. He tells of a couple who had tried to escape, and were brought back to face a public execution that had the purpose, of course, of terrifying the other inmates. The woman, however, had hidden a razor blade in her tunic. When they are brought to the scaffold, she embraces her man, and uses the blade to kill him and a Nazi officer before killing herself. This story spread like wildfire throughout the camps, and was greeted with amazed admiration. The reason for this was that, even though these two people still lost their lives, they did so on their own terms. Their lives were already forfeited, but they were able to reclaim their deaths from the Nazis. The uniqueness of this event proves the

rule of life in the camps; that of a seemingly total loss of control of one's life, death, and fate.

Adorno concludes that this type of thinking is merely the horrific end-product of the type of rationality that characterizes modern technological society in general and mass-production capitalism in particular. And in point of fact, this is a thinking that can be traced back to the beginnings of our survival as a species. Among other places, Adorno discusses this in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, co-authored with Max Horkheimer. After all, survival for a self-conscious, non-instinctual creature is based on series of classifications: predator and non-predator, edible and poisonous, etc. But largely, our thinking hasn't moved on from there; we are still under the domination of the concept. That is, our society is imbued with a process by which knowledge occurs by subsuming individuals, particulars, or events, under one general idea that purports to explain each of them. Thinking is habituated to forcing each event it encounters into a preconceived mold. At its limit, this results in racism, fascism—in treating people as “specimens.”

Perhaps the place where Adorno presents this idea most powerfully is in the last section of *Negative Dialectics*.

The administrative murder of millions made of death a thing one had never yet to fear in just this fashion. There is no chance anymore for death to come into the individual's empirical life as somehow conformable with the course of that life. The last, the poorest possession left to the individual is expropriated. That in the concentration camps it was no

longer an individual who died, but a specimen—this is a fact bound to affect the dying of those who escaped the administrative measure.<sup>18</sup>

But it is important to note that for Adorno, this is not simply a recognition of a historical tragedy, nor is it simply a condemnation of fascism as a system or genocide as a policy. His intention is to identify a systemic mentality, characteristic of our era in history, which we need to be alert for. This is the role the Holocaust must have in our consciousness. “A new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon unfree mankind: to arrange our thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen.” (ND, 365)

To this end, Adorno certainly doesn’t ignore the atrocities inflicted by the Allies, either.

Cinema newsreel: the invasion of the Marianas, including Guam. The impression is not of battles, but of civil engineering and blasting operations undertaken with immeasurably intensified vehemence, also of ‘fumigation,’ insect-extermination on a terrestrial scale... The enemy acts as patient and corpse. Like the Jews under Fascism, he features now as merely the object of technical and administrative procedures... (MM, 56)

As was discussed above, Adorno sees this type of highly rationalized, thoroughly administered violence as stemming from the mentality of a world-wide system of domination, that tries to force each particular, every individuality into its totalizing mold. “Genocide is the ultimate integration. It is on its way whenever men are leveled off—“polished off,” as the German military called it—until one exterminates them literally, as

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<sup>18</sup> Adorno, Theodor. *Negative Dialectics* (1966) trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973) p. 362. Hereafter referred to as ND.

deviations from the concept of their total nullity...the individual is as fungible and replaceable as he will be under the liquidators' boots." (ND, 362)

Under such a system, within such a society, one can only find oneself among the survivors through some sort of ruthlessness, some sort of aggressive survival instinct--cooperating with those in power, somehow being useful to them, or benefitting oneself at the cost of one's compatriots. This is the sense in which Adorno makes survivor guilt into a regulative principle.

But it is not wrong to raise the...question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living—especially whether one who escaped by accident, one who by rights should have been killed, may go on living. His mere survival calls for the coldness, the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity, without which there could have been no Auschwitz; this is the drastic guilt of him who was spared. (ND, 362-363)

For Adorno, art is the curative that counterbalances these thought patterns. Art is precisely about appreciation of “sensuous particulars.”

An example of how this attention to “sensuous particulars” works is Impressionism. Instead of being a mimetic picture that seeks to replicate the experience of looking onto reality itself, Impressionist painting reveals itself as a collection of colors and brush-strokes, even as an over-all image is revealed. We linger on individual colors, individual splotches, even as we recognize the over-all form that they constitute. When we look at one of Monet's water lilies, it isn't just an instance of us recognizing an exemplar of the definition “water lily,” but seeing the aspects of *this* one. “Impressionism dissolved objects... into their smallest elements in order to synthesize

them gaplessly into the dynamic continuum. It wanted aesthetically to redeem the alien and heterogeneous in the replica.” (AT, 154-155)

To Adorno, this seems like an irreconcilable contradiction. How can we appreciate yellow as yellow, but also recognize it as part of a sunflower? This, to Adorno, is exactly what art does. “It is the non-violent synthesis of the diffuse that nevertheless preserves it as it is in its divergences and contradictions, and for this reason form is actually an unfolding of truth.” (AT, 143) These different layers and different meanings are held together in a way that doesn’t eliminate them: “A posited unity, it constantly suspends itself as such; essential to it is that it interrupts itself through its other just as the essence of its coherence is that it does not cohere.” (AT, 143)

Therefore, these particulars only appear through concept and interpretation. Without particulars, there’s no art, just an idea. Without ideas, there’s no art, only nature.

But just as art can defy the logic of the market system through its “uselessness,” so too it can defy a society’s totalitarian enforcements of its own interpretations by art’s seeming “meaninglessness”—which is to say, the way the internal contradictions of a work might seem to not add up to a whole, but remain in tension. But this very condition lets us understand that there are meanings that lie outside of any totalizing system. “In the administered world” art does its work “in the form of the communication of the incommunicable, the breaking through of reified consciousness.” (AT, 196)<sup>19</sup>

However, to be relevant, this “incommunicable” must be analyzed in terms of its context, what it is reacting to. There is a temptation to simply label a work as “absurd,” and leave it at that. The image that tried to transcend cliché is thus rendered a cliché. Therefore, works cannot be “hermeneutical objects,” in the sense of taming them by

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<sup>19</sup> As we will see, a similar idea will be very important for Lyotard.

identifying an exhaustive concept as their meaning, but neither can the fact of the absurdity itself be left uninterpreted; “it is their incomprehensibility that needs to be comprehended.” (AT, 118)

So far, this discussion might seem relatively innocuous, or at least abstract, when the heterogeneous elements that are being reconciled are things like colors, shapes, tones, rhythms, phrases, and words (in the latter’s sensual aspect). But what about those elements that are jarring, dissonant, or ugly? In fact, “the concept of aesthetic pleasure as constitutive of art is to be superseded.” (AT, 15) How are these aspects formed by the artist, what are the implications of this, and most importantly, what are the ethical questions that this raises?

First, Adorno would reject out of hand the (somewhat antiquated) idea that such things have no place in art, that art is the creation of “the beautiful.”

This is one of heterogeneities that dynamic art allows to play out within itself: the presence of ugliness within the artwork. But in what way is modern art different from traditional forms in this respect? “According to traditional aesthetics, the ugly is that element that opposes the work’s ruling law of form; it is integrated by that formal law and thereby confirms it...” (AT 46) That is, traditionally, ugliness was introduced as one element among many in a composition, the over-all effect of which was beautiful. (One may consider the rough peasant faces in the vistas of Breugel.) But this ultimate harmony lacks truth-value, because it portrays a world in which all elements balance each other, and ugliness is neutralized. Adorno’s definition of beauty “is the result, not of a simple equilibrium per se, but rather of the tension that results. Harmony that...denies the tensions that have entered into it, becomes something disturbing, false...” Instead:

“The harmonistic view of the ugly was voided in modern art, and something qualitatively new emerged.” (AT, 46)

Ultimately, perceptions of the “ugly” have a class basis. We might put it this way: people who identify with the ruling class, or at least with its values, recoil at the sight of the suffering that class society itself has caused.

The aesthetic condemnation of the ugly is dependent on the inclination, verified by social psychology, to equate, justly, the ugly with the expression of suffering... Hitler’s empire put this theorem to the test, as it put the whole of bourgeois ideology to the test: the more torture went on in the basement, the more insistently they made sure that the roof rested on columns.” (AT, 49)

If we take the portrayal of suffering as the starting-point of art, or at least modernist art, then with that we are also defining art as ultimately expression, rather than semblance. Therein lies the truth-value of semblance. “The rebellion against semblance, art’s dissatisfaction with itself, has been an intermittent element of its claim to truth from time immemorial...Dissonance is effectively expression; the consonant and harmonious want to soften and eliminate it. Expression and semblance are fundamentally antithetical.” (AT, 110)

Expression, so defined, is not just subjective, but rather a reaction to one’s environment and society as a whole. As such, it portrays the social whole even in its individuality. “Artistic expression comports itself mimetically, just as the expression of living creatures is that of pain.” (AT, 110) Its importance comes from this. “Rather than such feelings, the model of expression is that of extra-artistic things and situations.

Historical processes and functions are already sedimented in them and speak out of them.” (AT, 111-112)

Part of the importance of this social relation is that expression is the first step toward wrenching yourself free from the status quo. “That it is spoken, that distance is thus won from the trapped immediacy of suffering, transforms suffering just as screaming diminishes unbearable pain.”

Thus we see that the heterogeneous particulars from which art constructs a whole include beauty and ugliness, and harmony and dissonance, as we’ve discussed—but they also include the heterogeneity of the individual and society, as well as, more generally, between the subject and object.

It should be noted that despite the intrinsic social significance of art that he posits, Adorno of course, remains a strident modernist, mostly rejecting “realist” art-- including social realism. For him, realism defeats art’s real purpose, by mimetically recreating the circumstances, that is, the society, in which the audience finds themselves. Through the pure transcendence of abstraction, which leaves us only with “sensuous particulars” rather than resemblance or narrative, we are reminded of possibilities. We are invited to imagine the wholly other, in contradistinction to the closed possibilities of our totalizing social system.

The whole reason that art is able to negate the status quo is because art doesn’t merely repeat it. The artwork has meanings, even revelations, which depend on what doesn’t exist.

Here we have, in essence, the same role that Sartre ascribed to the jazz song: it is a transcendence that makes us aware and ashamed of our current mode of existence.

In fact, Adorno believes that most of the time “social realist” art has the opposite effect from what its creators intend. Whereas dissonant art recreates the tension in the viewer that is inherent in the reality that is portrayed, those invested in the “status quo, by contrast, can only deal with this same material by swallowing hard at graphics of starving working-class children and other extreme images as documents of that beneficent heart that beats even in the face of the worst, thereby promising that it is not the worst.” (AT, 49)

In other words, focusing on a recognizable “humanistic” image allows the audience to see the ordeal as a “triumph of the human spirit” instead of as a current crisis that demands to be addressed.<sup>20</sup>

Of course, one may see this as a very limited view of art. Limited, in that this view expunges the expression of joy or the pleasure of beauty from art. Adorno is famous, or infamous, for having said that to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And indeed, if we take art to be a sensual pleasure that just happens to have a transcendent function, as escapism with a positive connotation, then it is tempting to see art as a frivolous exercise that cannot claim any right to speak in the face of an event like Auschwitz. But this assertion is disputed by the voices of the survivors who spoke, not necessarily plainly as in a police report, but in poetry or in poetic prose. Some of them, like Primo Levi, discovered their previously unknown literary voice in the very act of telling their stories. So, in *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno is forced to recant this position.

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<sup>20</sup> Certainly, one may argue that historically, social realism has had exactly the opposite effect: the portrayals of urban poverty and industrial conditions in the novels of Charles Dickens or *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair aroused public consciousness of these conditions, in a way that led directly to activism and legislation. However, this occurred in an era in which people relied on prose fiction as a source of information. In an era when the function of media became ever more separated from that of the arts, a new evaluation of art, and its ethical function, became necessary.

In regard to this, he says, “Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream...” (ND, 362) So art still has to do with sensuous particulars; but now, these are the particulars of pain and horror. Art is a preservation of the history of “the memory of accumulated suffering.” (AT, 261)

Adorno retains his caveat against the naturalistic. Art should transform consciousness; its form and style should break up customary habits of thinking. It should still be the wholly other to the society that it resists. “Art is the social antithesis of society...” (AT, 8) Much of *Aesthetic Theory* is concerned with the ways in which, since art is made in a society, the structures of formal innovations mirror the structures and resistances, in a word, the tensions, of the society in which they are produced. So while the artist seems to mainly be concerned with pushing forward his art as such, it is up to us to read the suffering recorded in the work. (AT, 88) And not, of course, simply the “scars of damage and disruption” (AT, 23) of the individual artist, but the social context that created such suffering. “History is the content of artworks. To analyze artworks means no less than to become conscious of the history eminently sedimented in them.” (AT, 85)

(Actually, in saying “it is up to *us* to read...,” I’m reading Adorno somewhat generously. He actually seems to think that it is only the philosopher and critic that can tell the artist what in fact she has actually done. “The truth content of an artwork requires philosophy. It is only in this truth content that philosophy converges with art or extinguishes itself in it.” (AT, 341) In this respect, the image of the artist that emerges is one of an idiot savant that creates unintentional brilliance, which must be interpreted on a “higher” level. At least, Adorno does this in separating the function of the “artist” from

the function of the “philosopher.” It is not clear to what extent he believes that the same individual can perform both these functions.)

This returns us to an earlier question. If art is to be either pure alterity or the record of suffering, or both, then is the portrayal of happiness forbidden? For the most part, Adorno seems to think so. He fears that depicting what is to be seen as “the good life” sets up a utopia, another concept that we may either be deluded by or enslaved to, in the sense of making that a dominant, totalizing idea. Instead, Adorno advocates what one may call a “negative theology,” an art and an ethics based on taking Auschwitz as a “negative utopia,” the paradigm of what it is that we *don't* want.

This is one of the many paradoxes that Adorno sees in artistic creation. Art wants to be something new; it wants to be a determinate negation of the conditions of the society it finds itself in. Adorno compares this quest to that of a child sitting at a piano, trying to find a new chord. That’s not possible<sup>21</sup>, since everything that you can play on the piano “is implicitly given in the keyboard.” Therefore,

The new is the longing for the new, not the new itself: That is what everything new suffers from. What takes itself to be utopia remains the negation of what exists and is obedient to it. At the center of contemporary antimonies is that art must be and wants to be utopia, and the more utopia is blocked by the real functional order, the more this is true; yet at the same time art may not be utopia in order not to betray it by providing semblance and consolation. (AT, 32)

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<sup>21</sup> Adorno’s infamous ethnocentric dismissal of jazz is beyond the scope of this project. But without it, he might have acknowledged Thelonious Monk’s use of his elbow to add more notes to the clusters. Although these new chords are still limited to the keys of the piano, which is Adorno’s point.

In other words, art wants a happiness that is gained by overcoming the world as it is; yet, creating that sense of happiness *with* the work may seduce one into forgetting the state of the world as it is, thereby betraying art's very mission. Consequently, art is often characterized by *longing*. But of course, not an idle longing, but a historically inscribed one that brings a demand for change with it.

Artworks would be powerless if they were no more than longing, though there is no valid artwork without longing. That by which they transcend longing, however, is the neediness inscribed as a figure in the historically existing. By retracing this figure, they are not only more than what simply exists but participate in objective truth to the extent that what is in need summons its fulfillment and change. (AT, 132)

Without this, art becomes merely the “beautification of life without its transformation...” (AT, 257-258) And this becomes an ethical question, about art's duty and its mission. Art thereby becomes complicit: “The injustice committed by all cheerful art, especially by entertainment, is probably an injustice to the dead; to accumulated speechless pain.” The victims, living and dead, rely on the artist, whether from within their numbers or not, to articulate their suffering. To fulfill this mission, we must resist what Adorno calls the “culinary conception of art,” (AT, 92) that it is some kind of pleasant taste or flavor.

This brings us to one another of Adorno's key artistic tenets—and one of his most controversial. Because this point is the basis for his condemnation of not only artistic hedonism and realism, but that which unites the worst aspects of both—popular culture.

Adorno sees popular music, film, literature, etc., as being part of the “culture industry,” which acts as a force of repression by creating entertainment that replaces and subverts the mission and potential of fine art. We have already seen the way in which realism, when viewed as revolutionary form, may defeat its own purpose. But commercial realism does the same thing overtly, without that redeeming intention. Adorno refers to the “commercial omnipotence” of “semblance.” T.V. shows, blockbuster movies, and bestselling novels have no room for abstraction or experimentation. Their purpose is to make as much money as possible, and their formulas, therefore, are based on what has proven to already sell; thus they are based on the status quo. Audiences are then closed into an endless loop, because what they have proven to buy in the past becomes the only things made available to them.

The social role of commercial art, then, is to close off the universe of possibilities that art should be making available to us. If sit-coms have stock characters and typical endings, or if songs always follow the same repetitive verse-chorus structure and always have vocalists, we come to accept a universe in which everything always occurs as expected, where there is no tremendous change. We come to accept capitalism, imperialism, and war as “the way of the world,” because these occurrences follow the patterns of the world as we have always known them. Both the social system and its art propagate the justification of the “ever-the-same.” (AT, 129)

Aside from the limitations of realism and the guilt of creating pleasantries while the suffering demand to be heard, this is the biggest problem with popular culture—its abandonment of the transformative nature of art. This is Adorno’s main concern, more so than art being twisted into totalitarian propaganda, and giving us *specific* false notions

about the society we live in. He does not, for the most part, critique Nazi art, although the Holocaust is clearly his standard for conscience. This standard, rather, calls for him to look for totalitarian trends in *today's* world. So Adorno is not as concerned with the grand Wagnerian gestures that lead us into war, as he is with the books and shows that lull us into thinking that war, along with the rest of the system, is inevitable. "The empty time filled with emptiness does not even produce false consciousness but is an exertion that leaves things just as they are." (AT, 246)

Ultimately, what art can also do is to reinscribe the very fabric of society by positing a new "we" upon which to found it. This is perhaps the biggest tension of heterogeneous elements: between individual and world, subject and object, two pairs which parallel each other. Joined to this, as we have just seen, is the tension between what we can envision and what we can realize.

The paradox is that by exploring our own individual expression through the advancement of the artistic repertoire with which we each express ourselves individually, we actually reach objective truth and create a social connection. Or at least realize a social connection that is already implicit. "By entrusting itself fully to its material, production results in something universal born out of the utmost individuation. The force with which the private I is externalized in the work is the I's collective essence; it forms the linguistic quality of works..." (AT, 167)

"Literary forms," of course, show us this most clearly. They, "by their direct and ultimately inescapable participation in communicative language, are related to a we..." (AT, 167-168) But this isn't the simple daily "communication" of transferring data within the fixed meanings of the closed universe of modern, dominated society. Literary

works, instead, “for the sake of their own eloquence they must strive to free themselves of all external communicativeness.” (AT, 168) Rather, they communicate by instilling a similar experience and relation to the world, rather than engage in semiotics.

Because of this, we can perhaps see art’s formation of a “we” more clearly in terms of music or visual art. These, to Adorno, work not exactly through the communication of meaning that literature does, but through a rendering or recreation of shared experience—which ultimately reflects a shared environment or condition. Music posits a shared “inner” experience of ours. “Music says We directly, regardless of its intentions.” Even when an artist is only trying to render his own experience into sound, that this has meaning for another “depends on whether these experiences actually speak through the works.” In other words, the experience of the emotion must ring true for the listener. What is shared in this “ringing true” builds a community between us.

Thus, the creation of conscious art demonstrates the conflict between two kinds of “we’s.” There is the received one of race and nation and class (this latter, insofar as one is kept in one’s place), and there is the one that we perceive in what is communicated in the shared suffering expressed in the jarring dissonance of modern art.

In short, art is the kind of communication that potentially penetrates through the consensus reality of symbol-systems circulated by murderous, oppressive power structures by using “ugliness” and disruption to give the lie to the naturalism and repetition of those symbols. Such dissonance shows the longing—and thereby implies the possibility of—a newer, better society on the other side of the received patterns of the status quo. We are forbidden, however, from portraying the happiness of this new

society, for fear of creating a new utopic vision that would lull us into complacency about its realization through the pleasure of lingering in the image.

But while we don't depict the felicity of the new community, the fact that we are able to encounter the expressions of others' suffering implies that such a humane community may exist—at least one day. “Although art is tempted to anticipate a nonexistent social whole, its non-existent subject... it bears at the same time the mark of this subject's non-existence. The antagonisms of society are nevertheless preserved in it.” (AT, 168)

There is thus the paradox of a community based on mutual alienation. But this reality of alienation was created by the terrors of our social condition, not art's expression of them.

Adorno calls for an art that will undermine the thought processes of genocide by reemphasizing the irreducibility, uniqueness, and capacity for suffering of each and every individual, and the absurdity of reducing that individual to a category like “Jew” or “German” or “communist,” etc. At the same time, a “We” or a community is created by our very ability, through art, to recognize these things about each, and thus, the real conditions of that society that tries to dehumanize us.

### Levinas: Art, Ethics, and the Other

Sartre introduced the figure of the Other into the discourse of French thought. His view of the Other as perpetual potential adversary, as a constant threat to one's freedom, was the view of the partisan, the freedom fighter locked in a struggle with fascism. But it takes a variety of perspectives to add up to the truth of a matter. What about the viewpoint of the prisoner, the one whose fight for freedom has been momentarily lost—the one whose life or death is at the mercy of another?

Emmanuel Levinas was a French Jew who survived imprisonment by the Nazis. He was a philosopher, a phenomenologist, a former student of Husserl and Heidegger. He was mobilized by the French military as a translator; this status is probably what saved him from extermination. Nevertheless, he was confined in a separate camp for Jewish prisoners, where he was subjected to forced labor. And as with so many who survived, his family was not as fortunate. His mother-in-law was deported and disappeared; his father and brothers were murdered.

The following will be an examination and critique, partly of Levinas' aesthetics and ethics of aesthetics—but more so, of the metaphysics which that aesthetics is based on and is made possible by.

We might begin our discussion of his thought with an examination of his view of death, and how that fits into the line of reasoning we've been pursuing. Specifically, we'll look at how that view is presented in Part III of *Time and the Other* (as excerpted in *The Levinas Reader*). To illustrate what seems to be a change in the way death is perceived, we moved from Heidegger's view to Sartre's modification of it, using the image of the firing squad. Then Adorno claimed that after Auschwitz, such a view was

outdated, that death itself had been transformed by that cataclysm into something evilly industrial. But Levinas wants to re-situate our thinking about death, away from emphasis on the fatal moment itself, to focus rather on the moments of torture, of suffering.

Maybe this position reflects Levinas' own experience. He wasn't confined to a death camp, where millions of lives would have been coldly snuffed out, in the way that Adorno describes. Levinas was in a work camp, but let's be clear: for the Nazis, work to be done by Jews was not productive work. Certainly, these prisoners were sometimes farmed out to German corporations to do slave labor, from which these companies derived pure profit. But by and large, the work they did was not economically rational; it was hard labor inflicted with the intention of causing suffering. It was a form of torture. (And, in places like Auschwitz, where these brutal tasks were coupled with insufficient food, clothing, and shelter, along with constant beatings and harassment, they also became a form of murder.)

As Levinas' one-time teacher Heidegger observed, we don't really experience death, since that moment is the end of consciousness. But as humans, we are unique in that we know the anguish of *anticipating* death. Levinas concurs, but wants to move the discussion from this psychological anguish to the plane of the physical anguish that precedes death. We may not experience death, but we do experience suffering.

Heidegger and Sartre emphasize death as that which turns our being into nothingness. But for Levinas, suffering shows us precisely the *impossibility* of nothingness. When I am tortured, but kept alive, I realize that my being has fallen completely under the control of another, which includes the removal of my chance to no longer exist. The impossibility of nothingness means, in other words, the impossibility of

escape. In confronting and enduring what Levinas calls “moral suffering,” by which he means psychological or even philosophical anguish, there may still be a feeling of maintaining one’s dignity, and therefore, there remains a sense of freedom. But in “the pain lightly called physical” one can’t separate oneself from facticity; there is no transcendence. (Levinas 39-40) Nor is there dignity: one bleeds, one vomits, one whimpers and cries, one confesses everything, one urinates and defecates, one screams.

When death does come it comes in the form of knowing that suffering may end. (Levinas 40) This state is expressed in music in pieces that depict death as a welcoming lover that will end pain, like Schubert’s “Death and the Maiden” or Charles Mingus’ “The Chill of Death.” (In his play *Death and the Maiden*, Ariel Dorfman makes this connection explicit by having the main character remember being tortured by the Chilean government to the sounds of “Death and the Maiden.”)

Unlike in Heidegger, for whom mortality individuates us and thereby makes us realize our freedom, here death is seen as complete unfreedom, total passivity. (Levinas, 40-41) As I alluded to a moment ago, the lack of physical control is symptomatic of this. In fact, Levinas parallels this with the helplessness of “infancy. Sobbing... announces death. To die is to return to this state of irresponsibility, to be the infantile shaking of sobbing.” (41) In our firing squad image, one could, knowing one had freely decided to give one’s life for the cause, have the possibility of looking down the barrels of the guns with a sense of dignity and heroism. Levinas, on the other hand, sees death as the end of virility. (42)

Of course, our mortal condition means that we are always prone to this vulnerability to a certain extent; nevertheless, in normal circumstances we exercise a

freedom. Our vulnerability and passivity lies in the fact that, as animals, we aren't self-sufficient; we have needs, the fulfillment of which necessitates our transcendence toward the world. (Levinas, 38-39) But at the same time, we satisfy those needs by doing work. Work closes the gap between us and our environment, the distance between us and the world. In our ability to transform the world, work shows us our freedom. (39)

Nevertheless, this is seen as all coming to a stop with death and its attendant suffering. Such a state marks the end of any control we have of our circumstances. Whereas for Heidegger, being-toward-death is the very definition of an authentic project, for Levinas: "Death is the very impossibility of having a project." (Levinas, 43) The awareness of death is the awareness of an absolute limit, an end no project can survive.

Being a condition that is completely impervious to all of our plans or projects, or even our knowledge in terms of what happens afterwards, death is something completely alien to human experience. "It is not unknown but unknowable, refractory to all light." What this alienation demonstrates is that there is a fundamental otherness that lies at the heart of existence. Since death is completely other, it shows that existence is plural. This ontological fact establishes our relationship to this otherness as one of mystery. (Levinas, 43)

Heidegger had described our whole concept of the future as originating with our ability to make plans. But Levinas defines the future as that which befalls us, not that which we can grasp. "Anticipation of the future and projection of the future, sanctioned as essential to time by all theories from Bergson to Sartre, are but the present of the future and not the authentic future." (Levinas, 43-44) If what is to come is outside our control the way death is, then the future, too, is defined as pure alterity.

Death is to be understood as an Event. That is, an occurrence that is novel and unique, that defies all given categories. As such, it also may be defined as a mystery, in the way we've discussed. However, the question arises: how can death be an Event *for us*, if death is what annihilates our self, our freedom, and our projects? "But the death thus announced as other, as the alienation of my existence, is it still *my* death? ... How can the event that cannot be grasped still happen to me?...How can a being enter into relation with the other without allowing its very self to be crushed by the other?" (Levinas, 44)

To answer this, Levinas takes for granted the idea that, along with death and futurity, the Other is also encountered in other individual humans. "I have just described a dialectical situation." That is to say, a dialectic between the self and alterity. "I am now going to show a concrete situation where this dialectic is accomplished." He then describes how the self is preserved in otherness by facing up to the encounter with the other person as an Event. One does this through what he calls the face-to-face. "The relationship with the Other, the face to face with the Other, the encounter with a face that at once gives and conceals the Other, is the situation in which an event happens to a subject who does not assume it, who is utterly unable in its regard, but where none the less [sic] in a certain way it is in front of the subject." (Levinas, 45)

This face-to-face is pure relationship, irreducible to the individuality and the decisions of the people who make up that relationship. To Levinas, the subject is pure passivity in relation to the event. On the one hand, in its newness, we really have no hold over the future. For another thing, the subject is also not primordial. Rather, the subject comes out of a universe of "anonymous and irresistible existing." That is, a generalized

“existing” predates the formation of any type of individual. Eventually, individuals emerge, with the power to make decisions and exert some control over their environments and destinies. However, this individuality traps one in “identity.” Levinas seems to imply that forming a project and carrying it out leaves “a subject shut up in itself,” no longer capable of encountering “an opening onto a mystery.” (Levinas, 46)

The reason that we don’t usually perceive others as the Other, as the mystery, as we encounter them in our daily lives, is that our social conventions are set up in such a way as to prevent this. Thus “the solitude and fundamental alterity of the other are already veiled by decency.” (Levinas, 47)

In the encounter with the Other, obligations are not here seen as equal, as they would be in a social contract theory, for example; “alterity appears as a nonreciprocal relationship...It can be said that intersubjective space is not symmetrical.” (Levinas, 48) My obligation is presented as superseding my freedom. He will return to this momentarily.

A major way that Levinas illustrates what he means by the encounter with alterity is through a discussion of the feminine and the erotic relationship. He sees gender difference, not as a specific difference, but as difference itself, presenting “reality as multiple, against the unity of being proclaimed by Parmenides.” (Levinas, 48) This notion of difference, as we’ve seen, is characterized by mystery and obscurity; the feminine “is a flight before light.” (49)

Part of Levinas’ reason for bringing up the erotic relationship as an example is to directly confront Sartre’s view of the Other. While Sartre sees the encounter with the Other as two freedoms confronting each other, wherein one’s own freedom is always at

risk of being dominated by that Other, “The Other is not a being we encounter that menaces us... I do not initially posit the Other as freedom, a characteristic in which the failure of communication is inscribed in advance... For with freedom there can be no other relationship than that of submission or enslavement. In both cases, one of the two freedoms of annihilated.” (Levinas, 50)

Levinas admits that his view of the Other is not concerned with freedom or individuality at all. “I am not concerned with an existent, but with the event of alterity, with alienation.” This is why he wants to look at the love encounter, which according to him, falls outside of a free decision or choice of project. “Love is not a possibility, is not due to our initiative, is without reason; it invades and wounds us, and nevertheless the *I* survives in it.” (Levinas, 50)

The *I* survives because the erotic is an “absence of any fusion.” This encounter is not characterizes by fusion, but by the caress. The caress is technically not touch, because it is not the feel of the skin per se that it is looking for. In fact, it doesn’t know what it’s looking for. (Levinas, 51)

Levinas emphasizes a “pre-reflective self-consciousness” that is “less an act than a pure passivity.” (Levinas, 80) He pictures (presumably as opposed to Heidegger’s idea of time as created and ordered by one’s project) a type of time “free from the sway of the will, absolutely outside all activity of the ego, and exactly like the aging process which is probably the perfect model of passive synthesis...” (80-81)

This passivity is “to be open to question, but also to questioning, to have to respond.” Thus: “Language is born in responsibility. One has to speak, to say *I*... But

from that point... one has to respond to one's right to be." He then reminds us of Pascal's statement, "the I is hateful." (Levinas, 81)

The first paragraph of section IV of this piece summarizes his position succinctly:

My being-in-the-world or my 'place in the sun,' my being at home, have these not also been the usurpation of spaces belonging to the other man whom I have already oppressed or starved, or driven out into a third world; are they not acts of repulsing, excluding, exiling, stripping, killing? Pascal's 'my place in the sun' marks the beginning of the image of the usurpation of the whole earth. (Levinas, 82)

It is in opposition to this that he offers the idea of the self-effacement that would occur in the "face-to-face." He makes the face his basis for the ethical encounter because its reality "goes beyond those plastic forms which forever try to cover the face like a mask... But always the face shows through these forms." (Levinas, 82-83) The meaning of the face is not its form, therefore, but rather its indication of the "proximity of the other." (82)

This type of encounter has to do, at base, with mutual vulnerability and mortality. "From the beginning there is a face to face steadfast in its exposure to invisible death, to a mysterious forsakenness...mortality lies in the Other." Expression therefore lies in this, not in communication—and certainly not communication understood as semiotics. "Does not expression resemble more closely this extreme exposure than it does some supposed recourse to a code? True *self*-expression stresses the nakedness and defenselessness that encourages and directs the violence of the first crime..."

What “communication” that does occur happens in the form of ethical obligation. “But, in its expression, in its mortality, the face before me summons me, calls for me, begs for me, as if the invisible death that must be faced by the Other, pure otherness...were my business...The Other becomes my neighbor precisely through the way the face summons me...” (Levinas, 83)

A key to this idea of responsibility, though, is that it is a “responsibility stemming from a time before my freedom...” These ethics are not something that, to Levinas, I freely choose, but always already just the opposite. In fact, I am specifically unfree in regard to the Other; in this regard, I am in fact a “hostage.” Like a hostage, I can be exchanged for another; in the same way, ethics demands that I be willing to sacrifice my interests for that of the Other. This “demands an infinite subjection of subjectivity.” (Levinas, 84)

As a result, ethics replaces the “struggle for vital existence” of the individual. In fact, Levinas defines being “human” as a “capacity to fear injustice more than death, to prefer to suffer than to commit injustice, and to prefer that which justifies being over that which assures it.” (Levinas, 85)

To sum up briefly: for Levinas, responding to the call of the Other takes precedence over the formation of the self. Our encounter with the Other should be guided by the Other’s demands, by the attempt to determine what he requires of us. We do this in the form of the “face to face,” in which the face is taken as an image of the concrete existence of the Other, which exceeds any idea I may form of him. The presence of the face, and not communication, is at the base of true expression.

Thus we have the basis for his view of art. He discusses this in “Reality and its Shadow.” He seems to be suspicious of art, as something that purports to be a portrayal of the Other, while failing to truly be an encounter. He argues against the idea of the image as “transparent,” as allowing us to see the object it portrays directly. What separates the image from a sign is that the former is to some degree opaque, which is why we can linger on it. But neither is the image “an independent reality.” (Levinas, 134) It sets itself up next to reality as a resemblance, “its double, its shadow...” (135)

And Levinas certainly takes this doubling to be pernicious. The image is a unique kind of symbol, in that it is a doubling that replaces the object it depicts “fully to mark its removal, as though the represented object died, were degraded, were disincarnated in its own reflection.” (Levinas, 136) The artwork depends on the absence of its subject.

This happens even outside art; art only amplifies the process. People in their being exceed the sensible qualities by which we form an image of them. Thus is formed their caricature. All image, all resemblance, all allegory is to some degree caricature. (Levinas, 135)

Thus it is, for Levinas, with realism. On the other hand, the classical arts that try to depict perfect forms try thereby to correct those caricatures, to dissimulate them into ideal appearances. Thus these images become idols. Levinas then takes sculpture to be the paradigmatic art form; “every artwork is in the end a statue—a stoppage of time...” (Levinas, 137) Time is stopped because the work portrays a moment that, by virtue of depiction, is forever arrested in eternity. Frozen in an instant, the people in a painting or a sculpture have no future. These characters appear subjected to fate, “that fate refractory

to the will of the pagan gods...” (138) Necessity appears, but not accompanied by freedom, the balance between which characterizes reality. (138-139) Removed from this dialectic, the image becomes myth rather than history.

Humans make art in this way because they realize that an instant *can* stop. It stops during the time of dying. Not death, because that takes one out of time. Death for us who are in time is, as we’ve seen, the anticipation and realization of death. “Death *qua* nothingness is the death of the other, death for the survivor.” (Levinas, 140) On the contrary, *dying* is that moment when we are in a present that knows no future. Levinas calls this “the meanwhile.” (140-141) It is this that the statue inhabits, “never finished, still enduring—something inhuman and monstrous.” (141)

Because it is thus frozen, art can never go beyond itself toward something better. To Levinas, artistic enjoyment tends to make one focus on the work itself, rather than what it represents in the world. Thus art consumption replaces action and evades responsibility. “From this point of view, the value of the beautiful is relative. There is something wicked and egoist and cowardly in artistic enjoyment. There are times when one can be ashamed of it, as of feasting during a plague.” (Levinas, 142)

But what for him rescues art from this is the discourse of the critic. The critic discusses the influences of the artist, thereby reintegrating this disengaged person into history, into the human community. The philosopher, as critic, restores possibilities to the frozen image. The critic treats art as myth.

Such a displacement of the meaning of the work from the intentions of the author, which was standardly taken to be its locus, is cognate with Levinas’ ethical/ontological position. If “I” gain my significance in my encounter with the Other,

that is, in the process of a type of conversation, then the significance of what I do or create may also be formed in a similar manner. In fact, Levinas sees this artist-based understanding of the work to be a “dogma.”

If such criticism seems to prey parasitically on the work, it is only because this is necessary. The artist apparently needs explication due to his own inability to truly express. “To say clearly what he says obscurely is to reveal the vanity of his obscure speech.” (Levinas, 130)

To Levinas, the artist does not actually express or communicate, because this formulation takes the images of art to be something like a language, which (in this view) they are not. Art actually lies outside of the world, outside of truth. Therefore, “criticism... would represent the intervention of the understanding necessary for integrating the inhumanity and inversion of art into human life and into the mind.” (Levinas, 131)

Levinas uses terms like “inhumanity” in regard to art, because to him, the image is not an idea, a process of reasoning (which could therefore be communicated), but rather, something more like a mesmerization or even a seduction. The distinction between images and concepts is key. To Levinas, to form a concept of an object is to “grasp” it, to forge a living relationship with it. To conceive is an *action*. An image, on the other hand, is “disinterested,” in the Kantian sense, removed from the world, from the plight of humanity. But this isn’t even the right term, because disinterest implies freedom, the choice to be disinterested. What marks the image, though, is “passivity”, both in terms of the artist that is possessed by the image to be rendered and in terms of the spectator who is enthralled by it. This effect is achieved most strongly in the use of

rhythms, which dissolve the observer's outlines in their flow, "a sort of passage from oneself to anonymity." (Levinas, 133) Images "*impose themselves on us without our assuming them.*" (132) (Italics in original.) This is the condition of "a waking dream" (133), since the categories of neither the conscious nor the unconscious apply. The viewer, fascinated by the forms of objects, becomes one more object among them. (As opposed to ordering them with the freedom of an observing consciousness, as in Sartre or Heidegger.)

In the end, the critic becomes necessary to transform the artist's egotistical playing with images into an intellectual concept that would have a social significance.

Lest we see here the same objection that could be raised to Adorno in this respect, Levinas finally admits that modern literature might be on the right track, since now, "the artist...refuses to be only an artist...because he needs to interpret his myths himself." (Levinas, 143) The idea of the death of God throws artists back upon themselves, to find inspiration in the materials themselves, instead of in a more doubtful "reality" and thus to aspire to a new vocation of "creator." (143)

Levinas exerted such a profound influence on recent thought, including on all the thinkers we'll be dealing with in the remainder of this study, that his arguments deserve to be examined in detail. There is a great deal that is deeply problematic in them.

First, though, it should be recognized that Levinas begins with an important contribution by redefining death in terms of the torture and suffering that precede it, rather than in simply the awareness of mortality. On the other hand, we should be wary

of taking this as a refutation of the view of Heidegger or Sartre. Rather, I think it complements them, by showing an aspect of mortality that they hadn't considered in the same way. Because there are still plenty of circumstances in which a consciousness of mortality like the one they describe is relevant. The guerilla fighter or the commando that embarks on a suicide mission is a perfect example of this. She has made a decision in full awareness of her mortality and has confronted her death in a way that gives her life meaning, by freely contributing a project (national or revolutionary) that she chose. If she dies agonizingly in the battle, or is captured and tortured by the enemy, then certainly she will encounter death in the "passive" way that Levinas describes. But her project lives on by virtue of the decision already made.

On the other hand, we have the case of a terminal cancer patient who, on the occasion of the prognosis of death, re-evaluates his life and sets out to accomplish things that will allow him to give it meaning. The point of this example is that, though we may eventually encounter death in the way that Levinas describes, in pain and without choice or dignity, our consciousness of this reality allows us to take charge of our lives in the meantime.

The basic problem here is Levinas' claim that not only does death put an end to one's projects, but makes having a project itself impossible. Even though one dies, one is still capable of having made a difference in the world. One opts for eternity by fighting for the survival of the ideals that one has chosen to embrace. Here we might make use of Alain Badiou's distinction between the animal self and the immortal self. "In the first place, because the status of the victim, of suffering beast, of emaciated, dying body, it reduces him to the level of a living organism pure and simple." (*Ethics*, 11) On the other

hand, as an animal being, the human is also a predator. “But neither of these attributes can distinguish humanity within the world of the living.” In the camps and the torture chambers, we witness both aspects. But as any torturer or murderer will tell you, what they do can only be possible by first degrading the victims, by undermining and attempting to rob them of their humanity. But there are always individuals who don’t succumb, who maintain their dignity. Which is to say, that they have a standard for how they will conduct themselves that they maintain regardless of the depths of their physical misery—even up to, and including, death. By opting to define themselves as something more than simply a suffering, mortal being, by embracing an ideal and a truth which will outlast their physical existence, they become the opposite—an *immortal*. “The fact that in the end we all die, that only dust remains, in no way alters Man’s [sic] identity as immortal at the instant in which he affirms himself as someone who runs counter to the temptation of wanting-to-be-an-animal to which circumstances may expose him.”

(*Ethics*, 12)

The next problem lies in Levinas’ introduction of the Other in terms of death. On the one hand, he takes the quality of the unknown that death has to characterize it as a mystery, such that it demonstrates existence to be plural. However, doesn’t this conflate ontology with epistemology?<sup>22</sup> That is, just because we don’t know about something, does that make it a new, mysterious category, *sui generis*? As event, perhaps it is this: but that remains to be proven, not taken axiomatically as Levinas appears to do.

But the ontology itself is also suspect. To speak of death as a figure of the Other seems like a false substantialization. Death, after all, is not a thing, except insofar as a word is used about it. Levinas’ type of usage is a prime candidate for the charges levied

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<sup>22</sup> Although, of course, the two are always closely connected.

by nominalism. Death is, rather, as far as anyone can tell, the end of, or lack of, a process. Our breath stops, our heartbeat stops, consciousness is extinguished. The word “death” indicates a lack, not a presence.

Of course, people often *experience* central moments in our existence as mysterious otherness. They often talk, for example, about the “miracle” of birth. But as the late comedian Bill Hicks said, this is “no more of a miracle than eating food and having a turd come out the other end.” In other words, both birth and defecation are biological processes, and as such, decidedly *unmysterious*.

Nevertheless, there is something that happens in both birth and death that, given our poor vocabulary, molded by centuries of religion, only the term “miracle” can commemorate. There is, and should be, something breathtaking about the appearance of a new life, with all the possibilities that brings. There’s something incredible about recognizing the unique advent of a completely unique being. Inversely, there is, and should be, something sobering and silencing about the end of that unique person, that unique existence. The new universe of possibilities that had opened up is now closed again. When we celebrate one and mourn the other, we’re implicitly recognizing these truths.

In that sense, these events truly are Events in the way that Levinas and others want to use this term. The existence of each human being is a reality that can’t be captured, let alone exhausted, by my definition, concept, or characterization of it. This, I will argue, is the real insight that Levinas attains. We will return to this later. But this concept of Otherness brings with it the risk of treating the Other as an obscurity, as Otherness being somehow otherworldly. This is what we need to be careful of.

This is exactly what is implicit in Levinas seeing death as his paradigm for Otherness. Death is only Other if we picture it, not as the cessation of life-processes, but in its religious characterization as the migration into a new world. Only if one holds this out as a possibility can we say that death is “unknown” to us.

Implicit religious premises like this haunt Levinas’ work like the ghost of a dead God.

The reason that it was so vital to go on at length critiquing Levinas’ ideas about death as Otherness is that death is the figure that he uses to introduce the Other into our understanding of existence. It is precisely this phenomenon that he uses to prove that “existence is plural.” Without this step, his case becomes more difficult to build.

But even if we accept this step, the move from death as Other to other individual people as Other is tenuous at best. In any case, it depends on the false substantialization we mentioned earlier.

This concept of death as the Other is also the basis for Levinas’ thinking about futurity. As we saw above, he thinks that, in its very newness, we really have no hold over the future. Since death, for him, wipes out our ability to have a project, the future, like death, is something that seizes us and befalls us.

And that may be an accurate assessment of how people experience—and undergo—history. But it seems to me that the point is to change this. The point is to organize society and communities in such a way that they no longer seem to befall us like blind forces of nature.

As we’ve seen, however, it is just this mastery of one’s own fate that Levinas seems to reject. We have cited above how he has posited that the emergence from

anonymous existing to subject-hood through mastery traps one in identity. But it is just such a rejection of a real concept of the future that leads to such a narrow conception of “identity.”

Of course, identity, narrowly understood, can indeed be a trap. The circumstances of birth, race, class, culture, religion, and upbringing are deeply programmed and can be the biggest obstacles to a free, individual existence. The question is: what in the word “identity” remains “identical?” Does this refer to the obligation to remain always the same, always tied to the self one has received? Or does one’s identity refer to the program that one has chosen for oneself, the free project that bestows meaning? If this is the case, it might be better to use Badiou’s term “fidelity.” Rather than be mired in categories that purport to exhaust the contents of the world, one remains open to the authentic Event. But when an Event has occurred, and been taken to be a positive development, one pledges one’s allegiance to this new form that has emerged in history, and one remains true to the vision of realizing this Event once more. If identity is understood as fidelity, then one is not trapped but freed, insofar as one is not seized by the future, but in fact creates it.

This has implications for a theory of art also. Art is not just as the preservation of the moment of suffering for the victim; this very preservation is a realization of the ideal of the “never again.” Thus the rendering of passivity itself becomes activity.

I will not here rehearse all the criticism made against Levinas’ notion of the woman as Other, or of the erotic as the archetypal encounter with alterity. This has ably been accomplished by feminist critics from Simone de Beauvoir on. Here it will suffice to mention that this view depends on a mystification of biology, not dissimilar to the one

he formulates in regard to death. He transforms men's and women's plumbing and the artifice of social customs that surround them into a paradigm of the ontologically alien. Furthermore, what becomes of his view of the erotic when it happens between same-sex couples? Is this erotic still an encounter with Otherness? Especially if it's between men; what is his erotics without "the feminine?"

Rather than examine the implications of this for his views of gender, I will instead look at a disturbing premise on which he based this claim. He does not "posit the Other as freedom, a characteristic in which the failure of communication is inscribed in advance." (Levinas, 49) He denies this because he sees the consequence of this as being the condition Sartre describes, in which Sartre sees the encounter with another freedom as potentially threatening to my own. If two freedoms encounter each other, the only possible relationship Levinas sees is "freedom or enslavement." In either case, "one of the two freedoms is annihilated." (Levinas, 50)

Levinas' assertion is disturbing. "The Other is not a being we encounter that menaces us or wants to lay hold of us." (Levinas, 49) This assertion is contradicted if one has ever walked at night in a dangerous, impoverished area (as I have often lived in)—any appearance of an unidentified other is immediately perceived as a threat to my being. But in addition to this, it is as if Levinas is saying that for true communication to take place, the whole notion of freedom has to be abandoned, that one side has to overwhelm and seize the other. And this, not incidentally, is exactly how he views the erotic connection. "Love is not a possibility... is without reason; it invades and wounds us..." (Levinas, 50)

This view of communication is clearly still theological—like God (the wholly Other) speaking to Moses through the burning bush. The idea is that of being overwhelmed and enthralled by Otherness. No wonder Levinas calls this exchange “asymmetrical.” God may have told Job, “Come, let us reason together”—but only after an overwhelming display of power.

Ultimately, this God, this wholly Other is the rescuer Levinas wants us to really depend on, not the obligation of our fellow humans. This is also why he wants this entire project to rely, at base, on the pre-reflective, in order to allow the theological back in.

This also explains his “unique” view of eros—which is the perfect image of the dysfunctional relationship. In other words, the person who abandons rationality, who is “caught up,” and “given over.” Whereas, in point of fact, there are, and ought to be, free choices that we make throughout the course of a relationship. These choices should be made so as to maintain our human freedom, dignity, and individuality. Otherwise, this “love” is, in fact, pathological. Levinas notwithstanding, real love, real communications, *only* happens between two freedoms. Love may be stronger than death, but it ought not to be stronger than reason.

The love relationship, in fact, shows us that, rather than being considered a “hostage” to the Other’s expectations and demands, we in fact have a duty to self to ask “what may the Other *not* ask of me?”

I have been trying to show the ways in which Levinas’ thought—about freedom, ethics, individuality, death, communication, even the erotic --is permeated, and thus explained, by this theological framework. Badiou goes farther, arguing that Levinas’ system is entirely dependent on this theistic base, inescapably present in it.

To Badiou, this very concept of Otherness can't actually be experienced without the theoretical framework of the "Altogether-Other." "The other always resembles me too much for the hypothesis of an originary exposure to his alterity to be necessarily true." (*Ethics*, 22) If, as I have suggested, we reject Levinas' mystifications of death and sexuality, then we are left with alterity as the simple encounter with another human being. And as Badiou has suggested, we are generally drawn to similarities, which may always be found, rather than differences. Thus, to arrive at an idea like Levinas': "The phenomenon of the other... must then attest to a radical alterity which he nevertheless does not contain by himself." This principle that transcends any particular encounter is that of what Levinas calls the "Altogether-Other"—"and it is quite obviously the ethical name for God. There can be no Other if he is not the immediate phenomenon of the Altogether-Other." (*Ethics*, 22)

Badiou doubts we can separate the religious aspects of Levinas' thought, preserving the rest: "to believe that we can separate what Levinas' thought unites is to betray the intimate movement of his thought, its subjective rigor." (*Ethics*, 22) Instead, Badiou wants to remove otherness from the consideration of ethics. He takes the diversity of human customs and experiences as a given; the question is, rather, what makes us the same? (25-28) Or, to put it in my own terms, what connection can I establish to another such that I can conceive of an ethical obligation to him or her?

And this is one of the main things art can do for us. By portraying others in ways that creates a recognition of things we share, we understand what binds us together and obligates us to each other. In short, the artistic portrayal of others can be an important source of empathy.

In addition to empathy, the aforementioned discussion of eros leads us back to our discussion of Levinas' aesthetics per se. In his discussion of the erotic he seemed to put freedom on one side and communication and eroticism on the other. But in the aesthetic essay that we examined, he seemed to reshuffle the deck, citing the seduction inherent in art as contrary to the communication inherent in the face to face.

As we have presented it, Levinas' view of art is flawed in several main ways. One of these is the way in which he seems to be attacking the straw man of a by then already discredited philosophy of art. That is, he attacks art as being somehow synonymous with "beauty," in a pre-Hegelian kind of way. His point, of course, is that art contemplated in a purely aesthetic way, divorced from society and having no ethical responsibility, is in a sense morally corrupt. This is not so far from Adorno's claims. But where these writings by Levinas fall short is that they don't recognize any modernistic artistic developments. Adorno contraposes the work of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in opposition to what he calls the "culinary" view of art. For Levinas, there scarcely seems to be a 20<sup>th</sup> century, except for the literature he grudgingly admits toward the end.

So the question arises, why the willful ignorance? What could his position gain therefrom? One possibility is that such a critique cements his position as a moralist, a Savonarola inveighing against wicked, secular, sensuous art forms. By subordinating the communication, which takes place through image and symbol, in art to the direct communication of the face to face, Levinas is making the Platonic move of presenting art as a derivative imitation that obscures truth rather than revealing it.

Nevertheless, the question remains as another of his charges. Can the seduction and distraction of images only be overcome by an experimental form that seems to implode aesthetics itself?

If we go back to our discussion of Sartre's view of literature, the answer is, not necessarily. By introducing the "appeal," Sartre proposes to make the experience of the artwork a *direct* connection between the audience and her situation, that is, her society, rather than simply a form that has to be interpreted, and thus, rejoined. To Sartre, words are always embedded in a situation, showing the speaker's involvement in it. "We are within language as within our body...we perceive it...in the course of an undertaking, either of me acting upon others, or the other upon me. The word is a certain particular moment of action and has no meaning outside of it." (WL, 14-15) Language, moreover, exists in a situation that, as pertaining to humans, is already imbued with discourse. Therefore one cannot use words for "harmless contemplation. To speak is to act; anything which one names is already no longer quite the same; it has lost its innocence." (16)

The reason that naming is an action is that it places the subjective individual into objective discourse, to be examined by a community of listeners or readers. Naming a person's behavior puts it in terms that everyone who understands the words can comprehend. And if the type of person so described had been ignorant of the implications of his actions, after the word has been used, he can no longer make that claim. Language places the subjective firmly into the realm of discourse. (WL, 16-17)

Jean-Francois Lyotard (a student of Levinas', who we will examine more closely in the next chapter) applies the latter's kind of critique to film, a medium which usually functions as the shadow of reality *par excellence*. His analysis, and the controversy over it, allows us to look at the artistic issues that arise from Levinas' position.

Lyotard condemns films like Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, charging that they exploit images of suffering to further what is essentially an entertainment medium, which the audience sees as a spectacle instead of being moved by it. In contrast, he offers the film *Shoah*, which is a collection of interviews with survivors, with the camera focused on each one's face as they tell their story. This technique encounters the Other ethically, by preserving the "face to face."

But the aspect of this film that Lyotard was to draw attention to is not the expected one. In contrast to the objectification of other, more commercial Holocaust films,

Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah* is an exception, maybe the only one. Not only because it rejects representation in images and music, but because it scarcely offers a testimony where the unrepresentable of the Holocaust is not indicated, be it but for a moment, by the alteration in the tone of a voice, a knotted throat, sobbing, tears, a witness fleeing off-camera, a disturbance in the tone of the narrative, an uncontrolled gesture. So that one knows that the impassible witnesses, whoever they might be, are certainly lying, "play-acting," hiding something. (Lyotard, 1988, 26)

Here, the face is important, not because of the authenticity of the encounter with the Other that it makes possible, but rather what the possibility of inauthenticity suggests.

That is, that the very openness of the face conceals the possibility of alterity. Otherness, the exceeding of definition or category, is manifested by the idea that, even in the telling, a person's whole story can never be told.

Nevertheless—well-taken as the point is, shouldn't this paradox make us question the very taking of the face as a standard, as our dominant metaphor?

Perhaps Levinas selected the trope of the "face" as the site of the encounter with another person because that is the intersection between the mind and the body, in other words, the combination that constitutes the human as such. But the face is also the site of the dissimulation of what Levinas himself refers to as "decency." Its expressions and impassivity is where we conceal ourselves from the kind of encounter that Levinas wants from the face-to-face.

The fetishization of the face in the philosophy of Levinas and in traditional art forms like portraiture corresponds to the fetishization of the human voice in music. It is a familiar, reassuring image that belies the mystery and alienation that it conceals. These are the reasons that Adorno rejects realism as soporific.<sup>23</sup>

In light of these observations, we might say that the real encounter with alterity is not with the face, which paradoxically serves as a mask, but with what the surface of the face conceals.

But what about an art form that genuinely encounters the Other, while at the same time retaining an awareness of the paradox of the face as mask? Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus* is an interesting example of precisely this. In it, Spiegelman tells the true story of his father's survival of Auschwitz. But the author undermines the false mimesis that Levinas is wary of in a number of ways. For one thing, Spiegelman makes

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<sup>23</sup> See also Sartre's discussion of the town's portrait gallery in *Nausea*.

an exception to most of the more famous survivor testimonies. Most of these begin with the narrator's capture or deportation, or the orders that led up to it. But *Maus* begins the father's story long before the Nazis, so we get the full scope of a human life before the shadow of Hitler fell on it. In this way, Spiegelman avoids reducing the reality of his father to the concept of "victim" or "survivor." As we've seen in Sartre, the pitying liberal gaze can be as objectifying as the hating racist glare.

Spiegelman also constructs the book as a conversation with his father, who tells the author his story, while the author is portrayed asking about it and listening to it. In this way, the spirit of the "face to face" is preserved. Spiegelman also includes his girlfriend as a character and anecdotes from his own life to emphasize the piece's status as a dialogue.

But of course the most striking aspect of *Maus* is that motif from which it gets its name. All the characters are portrayed as animals. The Jews are mice, the Germans, cats, the Poles, pigs, and the Americans, dogs. This is both an homage to the comics' art form, in which animals are often anthropomorphized, and the self-conscious creation of myth that Levinas seems to approve of. In fact, these animals might also allude to fables, which teach values—among which are empathy—through myth-making. This portrayal distances the subject matter from the unprocessed replication of the given that realism involves.

At the same time, this menagerie is also a reversal and a reclaiming of the process of dehumanization that the Nazis themselves inflicted. As Lyotard puts it, "If one represents the extermination, it is also necessary to represent the exterminated. One represents men, women children treated like "dogs," "pigs," "rats," "vermin," subjected

to humiliation, constrained to abjection, thrown like filth into the ovens.” (Lyotard, 1988, 27) As with the restoration of their pre-Holocaust lives, this is a reversal of the total annihilation—physical and cultural-- that the Nazis sought.

In one important sense, I disagree with the previously discussed position of Badiou. While I certainly think that religion, in all of its negative aspects announced from Nietzsche on, is at the very root of Levinas’ world-view, I don’t go so far as to say that this invalidates his entire approach, even if Badiou posits that such a rejection is the most respectful way to deal with the rigor of Levinas’ thinking. Instead, I think that it’s vital to understand, despite all the reservations I’ve voiced, the main point that Levinas was trying to make with his analytic of the Other.

It seems to me that Levinas’ contribution was to extend the trajectory of the line of thinking of Sartre and Adorno: the ethical call to truly encounter the individual, to hear her voice, to not lock her into our categories, concepts, and preconceptions, all of which are the primal intellectual breeding grounds for things like racism, nationalism, religious bigotry, and fascism.

I hope to have shown the flaws in his outlook, the ways I wish he had approached these subjects differently. Because we should, for one thing, encounter the other, not in terms of the fetish of the face, but in the universe that each face conceals from us. From the billions of atoms that make up his body to the potential billions of thoughts within his head, what constitutes the very alterity of the Other, is his infinity. This is what ultimately exceeds all our characterizations, clichés, and prejudices. And from where

does this infinity, this ability to always exceed come from? From the Other's freedom, from his infinite potential.

Nevertheless, the basis of what is right in Levinas is in his ethical call to encounter this other as Other, to pay that alterity the respect that each of us deserves. I will leave the last word here to Kafka, who captured this encounter so beautifully in one of his letters: "We are as forlorn as children lost in the woods. When you stand in front of me and look at me, what do you know of the griefs that are in me and what do I know of yours... For that reason alone we human beings ought to stand before one another as reverently, as reflectively, as lovingly, as we would stand before the entrance to hell."

(Kafka, 9)

### Lyotard: the Stakes of Discourse

Even though, as I hope to have shown, Existentialism laid the groundwork for many of the key points of European thought that followed it, it suffered from the lacuna of not having a thorough treatment of language itself (with the exception of a few works like *Black Orpheus*). Most of Sartre's writings seemed to view language as transparent and instrumental. But it became clear that, as Heidegger had held all along and which emerged as the central theme of his later work, language has an opaque aspect that forms its uses as much as it is formed by them. In the course of the 1960's, approaches based in structuralism and post-structuralism, which took this problem very seriously, gained ascendancy.

One of these thinkers was Jean-Francois Lyotard. In what is probably his most famous work, *The Postmodern Condition*, he outlines the "grand narratives" that characterized the modern era. That is, that whereas tradition-based societies pass on myths to legitimate that society, the modern era is marked by narratives that seek to provide the standard of truth and justification for all times and societies. Such universalizing vision has fallen prey to the type of totalization that Adorno, for example, warned against. However, Lyotard goes farther, in that Adorno prescribes one type of liberation from this condition, a thinking that is itself its own kind of totalization. As an antidote, Lyotard takes his cue from contrarian analytic philosophers. Just as the later Wittgenstein saw different goals resulting in different language games, one of which could not be judged against the other,<sup>24</sup> and Thomas Kuhn saw different sciences as each having their own procedural standards, which did not add up to "science,"<sup>25</sup> so Lyotard

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<sup>24</sup> This is the main theme of *Philosophical Investigations*.

<sup>25</sup> This is the main point of *The Trouble with the Historical Philosophy of Science* (1992).

thought that different discourses in society had their own narratives to justify them, and no “big story” could force them all together.

Lest one be concerned that this justifies a devolution to solipsism, cognitively, linguistically, and socially, Lyotard posits that the language game actually constitutes the social bond. A question, which is the beginning of discourse, “immediately positions the person who asks, as well as the addressee and the referent asked about: it is already the social bond.”<sup>26</sup>

What, then, is the alternative to recognizing the variety and incommensurability of language games? Force. Force operates in many ways, but the most extreme by means of terror.

This lies outside the realm of language games, because the efficacy of such force is based entirely on the threat to eliminate the opposing player, not on making a “better” move than he. Whenever efficiency (that is, obtaining the desired effect) is derived from a “Say or do this, or else you’ll never speak again,” then we are in the realm of terror, and the social bond is destroyed. (PMC, 46)

In the appendix to this work, “Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?” Lyotard applies these principles to the philosophy of art. He distinguishes between modernism and postmodernism; to do so, he first describes the impulse they have in common, which is, the rejection of realism. If, after Hegel, art is not to be judged by its “beauty” but by its idea, then the creation of art raises the question of the composition of reality. The main aesthetic question becomes, in what way does art reflect reality? If we

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<sup>26</sup> Lyotard, Jean-Francois. *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) p. 15. Hereafter referred to as PMC.

have difficulty deciding on an answer to this question, then a similar one arises: what is art, and how do we know it when we see it? The metaphysical question “what can we consider reality?” has its parallel in the question raised by Marcel Duchamp’s ready-mades: “what can we consider art?” Whereas realism’s “only definition is that it intends to avoid the question of reality implicated in that of art.” (PMC, 75) Lyotard calls the “demand for reality” a demand “for unity, simplicity, communicability, etc.” (PMC, 75) That is, it is that whose referent is immediately recognizable, and as such, around whom a consensus of interpretation is immediately formed.

Such an immediate consensus of meaning is the opposite of experimentation, or as Lyotard calls it, “Artistic and literary research.” (PMC, 76) It is promoted by two sources: forces of political repression and the demands of the art and literary marketplace. In the former case, both the Nazis and the Stalinists enforced realism because they didn’t want questioning of the consensus reality each system had instituted. (PMC, 75) In the latter, dealers and publishers want to maximize their sales by appealing to pre-established standards that have proven to sell (as was noted in the Adorno section). But in either case, political or economic, what is demanded is “works which, first, are relative to subjects which exist in the eyes of the public they address, and second...that the public will recognize what they are about, will understand what is signified... and if possible, even to derive from such work a certain amount of comfort.” (PMC, 76) The problems with such demands have already been addressed by Adorno.

If this is what modernism and postmodernism share, then what divides them? A basic attitude toward the experimentation that seeks this form beyond form. To Lyotard,

modernism is a melancholy, a nostalgic longing for “presence,” a regret about the limitations of our human conceptions—and therefore, the basic *need* for experimentation.

Whereas, postmodernism emphasizes

the increase of being and jubilation which result from the invention of new rules of the game, be it pictorial, artistic, or any other... The nuance which distinguishes these two modes may be infinitesimal; they often coexist in the same piece, are almost indistinguishable; and yet they testify to a difference (*un differend*) on which the fate of thought depends and will depend for a long time, between regret and assay. (PMC, 80)

In the end, Lyotard is suspicious of this kind of nostalgia for a unity of meaning and a final reconciliation of all language games. The “assay” that he speaks of defines the postmodern in that it “searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them, but to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable.” Alluding to the inconceivable, as modern and postmodern artists do, “is not to be expected” to “effect the last reconciliation between language games” and “only the transcendental illusion (that of Hegel) can hope to totalize them into a real unity.” But

the price to pay for such an illusion is terror. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take. We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and the communicable experience... The answer is: Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name. (PMC, 81-82)

For Lyotard, therefore, “postmodern” art is that art which portrayed incommunicability, which presented something that could not be translated into anything else. It was something that frustrated (a false) totality.

However, Lyotard became concerned with the ethical dilemma implied in this incommensurability. When discourses (generated by different language games) come into conflict, how are we to adjudicate between them—or among them? This was the question he addressed in *The Differend*.

As Robert Leventhal puts it,

...Auschwitz and the Holocaust were already an important subtext in Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition*. The terror of the ‘one’ absolute hegemony of one form of speech was likened to Fascism and the extermination of the Jews, where the Nazi’s ideal excluded and ultimately tried to eliminate the language(s) of the Jews... to invoke absolute conditions of discourse, to institutionalize one specific way of talking and thinking is fascist, according to Lyotard, and creates the basis for a violent expulsion of the Other. (Leventhal, 1-2)

But in *The Differend*, this issue moves to center stage.

A “differend” is defined as the inability to judge between two discourses. If one could judge between them, it would be a litigation, not a differend. A “victim” is a plaintiff denied the possibility of being heard, because her status wasn’t recognized by the discourse of the tribunal. “I would like to call a *differend* the case where the plaintiff is divested of the means to argue and becomes for that reason a victim.” (*Differend*, 9)

This analyzes the malevolent brilliance of the Bush administration. Recognizing terrorism suspects as neither suspected criminals nor as prisoners of war traps them between discourses, and thus leaves them without advocacy.<sup>27</sup>

There are rules for the correct formation of any phrase. This set of rules is a phrase regimen. There are many such sets for many differing purposes. As such, phrases from different regimens cannot be translated into each other. But they can be linked. The body of rules for such a linkage constitutes a genre. The rules of each genre are proper for attaining certain goals. Between differing genres, it is impossible to avoid conflict; there is no over-all genre to adjudicate between them. This is the problem of politics. This is the differend. For Lyotard, it is philosophy's task to recognize the differend by dispelling the mistaken idea of the transparency and instrumentality of language.

As historians know, "reality" is not simply that which is given to a subject. How could one bear witness to the inside of a functioning gas chamber? If it were functioning, one could not live to bear witness to it. In fact, what is taken for reality is constituted by establishment procedures with certain protocols. This becomes especially clear in regard to historical events that seek to eliminate their witnesses. This is a condition that Holocaust deniers try to mobilize for their own purposes.

Reality "is not a given, but an occasion to require that establishment procedures be effected in regard to it." (*Differend*, 9) As we've seen, to be victimized is to be judged by another genre, for one's own genre not to be recognized. This is the very definition of political terror: to remove the other from the conversation. This can be done in two ways: "to make it impossible to speak", or "to make it impossible to keep quiet."

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<sup>27</sup> This issue is discussed in *State of Exception* by Giorgio Agamben and *Precarious Life* by Judith Butler.

(*Differend*, 11) The former is done through imprisonment or execution, the latter through torture or inquisition. We see here the dual nature of power, negative on the one hand, productive on the other.<sup>28</sup>

The differend demonstrates to us that language is not communication in the sense of an “exchange of information,” a technology of meaning that we should seek to bring under greater and greater controls so that it can be more “productive” for our ends. Rather, the differend is what happens when an event demands to be put into language, but the genre of discourse we have been employing is inadequate to the task. “The differend is the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be. This state includes silence...” (*Differend*, 13)<sup>29</sup>

We then have the feeling of “not being able to find the words.” And here we have two choices. We can either be silent or we can found a new genre. “A lot of searching must be done to find new rules...that are able to express the differend disclosed by the feeling, unless one wants...the alarm sounded by the feeling to have been useless.” (*Differend*, 13)

This process is not without turmoil and suffering. “In the differend, something ‘asks’ to be put into phrases, and suffers from the wrong of not being able to be put into phrases right away.” From this condition come both the “feeling of pain which accompanies silence” and the feeling “of pleasure which accompanies the invention of a new idiom...” (*Differend*, 13) In this pairing, we can see a parallel to what Lyotard had previously described as the difference between modernist and postmodernist art.

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<sup>28</sup> This is a main theme pursued by Michel Foucault, in works like *The History of Sexuality: Vol. 1, The Politics of Truth*, etc.

<sup>29</sup> In regard to this, we should understand and respect the reluctance of some survivors to speak of their ordeals.

This feeling of pleasure also comes from the relief that, if we can form new phrase regimens, we can prevent the establishment of a discourse that totalizes, in the way that Adorno and Lyotard both feared. “‘You can’t say everything.’—Disappointed? Did you desire it?” What this caesura implies is that the world is not a finished, totalizable product, but rather, that genuine Events are still possible. And we should comport our use of language, at least in certain types of discourse, to the recognition of this. “This implies the expectant waiting for an occurrence... that indeed everything has not been said. The vigil.” (*Differend*, 80)

This possibility of an Event is demonstrated by that afore-mentioned experience of not finding the words. In such a case, what one has is a feeling—a feeling which demands expression. This is what we have to remain open toward. “Insofar as it is unable to be phrased, in the common idioms, it is already phrased, as feeling. The avowal has been made. The vigil for an occurrence, the anxiety and the joy of an unknown idiom, has begun.” (*Differend*, 80)

Of course, we can’t be completely silent, because we’re always within language. But we can use language to demonstrate its own inadequacy. This is the type of art that Lyotard had advocated in *The Postmodern Condition*.

This caesura and its implications are a major theme of the project of Paul Celan’s work. When we discuss Derrida’s thought later on, we will examine more closely some of the implications of the poetics and metaphysics of Celan’s work. But for now, we can say, all too briefly: on the one hand, as his work developed, Celan’s poems became shorter, denser, more opaque. In short, they approached silence more closely. On the other hand, the trajectory of all his work defined a new style, a unique idiom. Through

surreal images and a transformation of structures of grammar and syntax, this approach communicated the emotions of alienation, displacement, horror, and death in a way that was just as visceral as realist accounts, which were themselves phantasmagoric.

What is suggested is that a modernist or postmodernist aesthetic, that is, a self-consciously experimental one, is better equipped to deal with disaster than another one. This is because the form itself is already exploring the bounds of the expressible, before the catastrophic experience of the inexpressible occurs.

Other literature that speaks to these issues is work that combines genres, making us shift between sets of rules governing them, re-inscribing these shifts into a new whole, while not presupposing the unity of a thing called “language.” W. G. Sebald does this in *The Emigrants*, in which he collects the stories of emigrants from Germany or German-speaking areas. These stories are based on fact, but are written in a self-consciously literary way. And Sebald actually goes as far as to say that there are places where he has modified the facts to make a better story. Is this fiction or non-fiction? Furthermore, he starts each character’s tale with the story of his own life at the time they met, and the interaction between his life and theirs. Is this then biography or memoir?

Georges Perec goes even farther in *W; or The Story of Childhood*. Perec divides this book between the story of his own childhood as a refugee from the Nazis and a dystopian story he wrote the first version of when he was 16. In the “factual” section, he checks his memories against what relatives who were there tell him, and often corrects mistaken impressions he had. The operation of memory becomes almost as important as the memories themselves. Meanwhile, the fictional half, which for awhile he had forgotten writing, shows how the specter of the world of the camps, in which his mother

had presumably died but which Georges himself never experienced, permeated through his consciousness and found its own way out.

In both of these efforts, language is used to create a new genre “universe” by confounding the lines between established ones. Here we see the intrusion of what Heidegger and Levinas would call an Event. If the Holocaust is truly an Event, a genuinely new occurrence which forces us to invent new categories and concepts to deal with it—if, as Adorno says, its advent changes life on earth-- then it would stand to reason that it would also require new phrase regimens as well.

But of course, it must be bourn in mind that this quest for new genres is an attempt at linking, first and foremost. This is what is developed in terms of the use of language in *The Differend*, in a way that it is not in regard to art in *The Postmodern Condition*. It is not simply a seeking after the ineffable and the negatively sublime, but rather a deeper communication than simply the “information exchange” that typifies commercial society. As we saw with the other thinkers examined, what is being groped for is the constitution of a “we.”

In both Kant’s ethics and in the political theory of a republic, the principle of autonomy is “the ability of a phrase regimen to generate a ‘we.’” Only on the basis of a “we” can an “ought” be established with any fairness or equity. Therefore, one way of understanding the genocidal ideology is that it is a discourse that precludes the formation of a “we.” (*Differend*, 97-99) Certainly, a republic or a movement may issue imperatives that may result in death. But this is almost always an alternative to something else: death or defeat (Leningrad), death or enslavement (Masada, the Paris Commune), death or violating one’s own ideals (Socrates, John Brown). This is the source of the idea of the

“beautiful death,” the death that “means something,” which we observed in our discussion of various firing squad images. “The ‘reason to die’ always forms the bond of a we.” (*Differend*, 100) By choosing death in the course of realizing a “we” of shared values, one opts for one’s abstract self over one’s animal self.<sup>30</sup> This ensures the survival of the name of the “we”—“the perpetuation of the proper name.” One thereby assures a values-system’s immortality: to “Die in order not to die.” (*Differend*, 100)

In Auschwitz, on the other hand, there is no alternative. The Nazis say to the Jews, not “die or...” but simply “die.” A “we” cannot be formed in such circumstances.

This, of course, is the opposite of the democratic paradigm, in which, because of self-rule, we are beholden to the law because we created it. Instead, the Nazi officer who “orders death is excepted from the obligation, and that which undergoes the obligation is excepted from the legitimation. The authority of the SS comes out of a we from which the deportee is excepted once and for all: the race, which grants not only the right to command, but also the right to live...” (*Differend*, 101)

Thus the SS even takes away the right to the ethically “beautiful” death, and the perpetuation of an ideal name. The deportee is denied “accession to an immortal, collective name...The individual name must be killed (whence the use of serial numbers) and the collective name (Jew) must also be killed in such a way that no we bearing this name might remain...” (*Differend*, 101)

Does this fact mean that, with Auschwitz, any possibility of a social “we” has vanished? If it has, there is still a phrase that says so, meaning that there is in turn a speaker and an addressee. That is, a “we.” The search for a “we” has created a “we” in the speaking of its lack. (*Differend*, 102) This is the movement that characterizes the

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<sup>30</sup> See the discussion of Badiou, in the Levinas section above.

kind of art we've been recurrently speaking of: the frustration of normalized communication, the sense of not having the words, of expression used to convey that there is something inexpressible.

The opposite of this tentative claim, based on a negation, is the type of claim of the Nazis, which is a pure positivity. They have created a "narrative of northern peoples" under which "an entity forgets its contingency and is able to raise superstition to the delirium of its being a necessity and a virtue." (*Differend*, 104) One of the deep philosophical problems with an approach like this is its taking of some description, like birthplace or ethnicity, as a binding ideal. "The blindness... resides in the pretension to found the good or the just upon the true, or what ought to be upon what is." (*Differend*, 108) This is the problem of essentialism, which "conceives the referent of the name as if it were the referent of a definition." (*Differend*, 460)

In a truly ethical situation, however, what we have is not a given order, but a conversation. When I am addressed by a phrase purporting to tell me my duty, the "you" addressed by the imperative is only a potential "I," depending on whether or not I accept the legitimacy of the claim and the obligation. "*I and you* work toward the formation of a consensus." (*Differend*, 111)

Ethics as an "I/you" situation can perhaps be better understood by rendering Levinas' principles into linguistic terms. Maybe we can substitute the writer and the reader for the self and the Other, in order to understand the thrall and obligation in which one holds the other. "For the one who reads is the one who requests, one who calls. The one who writes is bound by this request, is upset, beside oneself, unsure whether one is

binding or liberating oneself by writing... What messengers are we, what messages?"  
(*Differend*, 113)

In other words, whereas Levinas says that we are already a "hostage" to the Other before we even form a selfhood, perhaps it is more accurate to say that, before we have a clear idea of self, we are already in language, already speaking, and already in relations with others, already in an ethical situation.

Therefore, the obligation of one person to another remains an open, tentative, probing question—just as does the question of which genre to express that in.

The way to recognize and preserve, not only the unfathomable singularity of the individual, but the individuality of the authentic encounter as well, is to recognize the differend, "the 'abyss' between phrase regimens." (*Differend*, 123) What is needed is to accept the discords that inevitably arise from the differences between these regimens, while at the same time seeking ways to link them without reducing them one to the other. This is the very site of politics. "Politics... is the threat of the differend. It is not a genre, it is the multiplicity of genres, the diversity of ends, and par excellence the question of linkage." (*Differend*, 138)

To see the stakes of this situation, we need to understand the alternative to it. "By evil, I understand, and one can only understand, the incessant interdiction of possible phrases, a defiance of the occurrence, the contempt for Being." (*Differend*, 140)

Evil is defined here, by the closed society, by the closure of discourse. In it, essences are fixed and the advent of a singularity which may redefine the accepted standards of discourse is denied. It is a "hegemony of genres" (*Differend*, 141), which allows only one kind of expression.

This is why the genre of narrative must be approached with certain caveats, rather than being taken as inherent. “Narrative is perhaps the genre of discourse within which the heterogeneity of phrase regimens, and even the heterogeneity of genres of discourse, have the easiest time passing unnoticed...It acts as if the occurrence, with its potentiality of differends, could come to completion, or as if there were a last word.” (*Differend*, 151)

This lack of a last word is reflected in the status that he accords to the conjunction “and.” It is the key to understanding parataxis, as opposed to syntax. Syntax uses connectors like “therefore,” “because,” “and so we see,” etc., to fuse phrases into a whole. But with parataxis, with the simple conjunction of the “and,” we leap into the void, seemingly forming phrase regimens ex nihilo. “Parataxis thus connotes the abyss of Not-Being which opens between phrases, it stresses the surprise that something begins when what is said is said.” (*Differend*, 65-66) Thus, through one of the most ordinary words, we see the gaps that prevent totalization, the respectfully tentative way in which we should reach out toward the Other.

As Lyotard moves from *The Postmodern Condition* to *The Differend*, his focus on literature as such wanes, to be replaced by meditations on language in general. But I should make clear that literature is still the use of language par excellence, the testing ground for any idea of language we may have. What is at stake here is what has been at stake throughout what we have been discussing: how does one preserve a singularity, a uniqueness (the annihilation of which constitutes oppression, when it is not outright murder) while forming a we?

These questions will also be investigated by Jacques Derrida.

### Derrida: Witness, Remnant

Jacques Derrida's name is synonymous with deconstruction, the approach he founded. All too briefly, this method consists of tracing the architecture of discourses: demonstrating the boundaries that define them, the internal oppositions on which they're built, the terms they privilege and marginalize, and the cultural histories of the words and figures they employ. One of the consequences of this style of reading is the famous "death of the author" movement, in which the intentions of the creator of a text is subordinated to the meanings that come out of a text itself, by rigorously examining the actual words and the relationship to each other in which they are structured. As such, a text is always an encounter with alterity, because its meaning is always dependent on another reading, with no final teleological authority to justify it.

What we will trace in the trajectory of Derrida's thought is the basic problem of how a life, an individuality, a uniqueness is to be preserved and commemorated, while not at the same time being annihilated by the definition or concept through which we understand that life. And when we encounter such a memorial, what is our obligation to the truth that we thereby witness? And how, then, does that witnessing and obligation form a "we?" Derrida will suggest that the reading of a poem is a model of how to do this, in how the poet creates something unique, which nevertheless still has a potentially universal meaning, and in how the poet entrusts this meaning to us, the readers—a trust which can become an ethical obligation. In this relationship between commemoration and subsequent duty, recognition of the past becomes a promise for the future. Finally,

Derrida will look at how this type of memorial, entrusting, and duty become a way of understanding being Jewish itself.

In *Cinders* and in *Sovereignities in Question*, Derrida examines texts pertaining to disasters enacted by the Third Reich. While the latter is primarily the philosophical explication of a poet, the former is more akin to a work of poetry itself.

*Cinders* begins with a phrase that haunts Derrida for 15 years: “Cinders there are.” This is a silent call across the years, one demanding that he answer to what is meant by this phrase.

The cinder is the trace of something that has vanished. There are, after all, no cinders without a fire. It is a story waiting to be told. It is a preservation that is fragile, that will itself soon dissolve. But it preserves nothing, because what it had been is unreadable. It avers only that something was here. The cinder therefore *is* not, yet “Cinders there are.” And therefore the place where it was is a place of nothing, a pure space without content. And yet this place is necessary for any memory to occur. “There are cinders only insofar as there is the hearth, the fireplace...” (*Cinders*, 41)

The sentence is a cinder. It is what is left over after the work of the person who signs as “author.” But it doesn’t tell us of the author, only of itself. And here Derrida invokes the name *de l’holocauste*: “...the cinder (what remains without remaining from the holocaust, from the all-burning...)” (*Cinders*, 43) And invocation it is, calling upon the shadow that floats through these words, as a Jew, as a Frenchman, as a person of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as he writes a book already written for him by so many voices before.

*Holos caustos* means “all-burning.” If all burns, what will be preserved, and how?

Yet cinders, like writing, like all understanding, are fragile and have little time; they are all heading toward the crypt. (53) One wants to use language to fashion an urn for the cinders, but this urn itself is fragile; it can itself shatter into dust. Unlike a cenotaph, it doesn't provide a place for the work of mourning. (53, 55)

But a sentence is not that fragile, after all. It endures, it preserves, it does mourning's work. "The sentence is adorned with all its dead." (55) The sentence we need, the one that preserves the cinder, "would tell of the all-burning, otherwise called holocaust and the crematory oven, in German in all the Jewish languages of the world." (57)

The cinder is preserved because the fire is in retreat. But be careful, the fire disguises itself amid the dust. (61)

So we see the poetics of memory and of mourning, the obligation to use language responsibly, to use it to confront the fire. What is left after the burning is something fragile and "unreadable" in a literal sense; nevertheless, it testifies to the fact that *something* happened. When the survivor bears witness, what is it she bears witness *to*? What are we to understand and in what way are we to understand it?

The question becomes, what are the problematics of memory, of being a witness, of bearing witness? Of being a survivor recounting a situation defined by all those who didn't survive?

For Derrida, the position of witness involves a fundamental paradox. In court, the witness has a special role, because he was in a position that no one else was in, and could

therefore relate what no one else could relate. But if no one else was there to see what he saw, if no one else could have experienced what he did, how is anyone else to understand the story that he tells?

The “we” and the “I” are co-founded in the double gesture that establishes both my singularity and the ability to communicate that to the Other. “*Singular in general*”: that is my condition that makes a text I put forward readable, what makes me able to be an example. This is also how the text is inscribed into an understanding of the world: the text “*refers*, it has a unique, factual, and undeniable referent—and an irreplaceable signature.” (*Demeure*, 91)

The signature, like the date, is one of an apparatus of concepts with which Derrida reads the work of Paul Celan. Celan is one of the pre-eminent poets of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and, seemingly, the one most written about by philosophers. He was a survivor of a Nazi work camp, one established early in the war in Rumania, Celan’s homeland. This was not yet an extermination camp, but rather one that was convened for a specific purpose of slave labor, the dissolved. Celan saw what his experiences boded and fled the country. His parents weren’t so lucky, and both died in camps.

Celan was always an experimental poet, his work rich with bizarre images and sometimes obscure allusions, particularly to Jewish history and mysticism. He established an early reputation as a witness of the Holocaust with his poem “Todesfuge,” (“Death Fugue”). In it, he describes a Nazi officer commanding Jewish prisoners to dig, conducting their movements like a perverse, violent musical performance. But, expressionistic as this was, Celan soon became dissatisfied with such straightforward

reference. From that point on, his work grew more and more mysterious and seemingly hermetic, loaded with neologisms and fracturing normal German syntax. These poems were filled with bizarre images, greatly influenced by, among other things, the vocabulary of surrealism. He wrote in the language shared by Goethe, Rilke, and Trakl—yet, as we have said, his German was not the German of his would-be murderers. Instead, it was a language subjected to a torturous redefinition, into a personal vocabulary of horror. It was precisely this implosion of meaning that is of interest to us here, the way that he was able to convey this sense of horror, without the specifics of a personal history, or the telling of events. It is a meaning that speaks, largely, through the difficulty and ambiguity of its meaning.

Derrida's posthumously published *Sovereignties in Question*<sup>31</sup> is a collection of lectures and interviews that deal with Celan's legacy. In it, Derrida follows threads of images through Celan's body of work to see what that work can teach us about the traumas of history, the role of language, the embrace (or formation) of identity, the poetics of witnessing, and one's commitment toward the future.

And he warns us not to proceed too hastily with our interpretation of Celan—especially since that work is characterized by the interruption of communication with us, the derailling of meaning. “Caesura is the law. Yet it gathers in the direction of the discontinuous, in the severing of the relation to the other or in the interruption of address, as address itself.” (SQ 4)

Perhaps the central image of Derrida's meditations is that of the date. He follows the thread of images of different kinds of commemorations throughout Celan's poetry.

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<sup>31</sup> Derrida, Jacques. Ed. Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005) Hereafter referred to as SQ.

The date in the sense of an anniversary, “repetitions of singular, unique, *unrepeatable* events...” (SQ, 2) He puts the central question like this: “How can one date what does not repeat if dating also calls for some form of return, if it calls in the readability of a repetition? But how can one date anything other than that which never repeats itself?” (SQ, 2)

We could take, as examples, each of our own birthdays. A birth is, by definition, something that happens to each of us only once. Yet, by happening, it becomes part of our calendar, something whose essence is, in some sense yet to be seen, repeated.

The question raised is about the paradox of the date. When we commemorate something, we seek to retain the memory of something unique in history, something unprecedented, an event whose meaning we have chosen to preserve. After all, we wouldn’t commemorate something that happened all the time. Yet, our very desire and ability to commemorate it is based on the assumption that there is something universal about that event, something which persists through time, and even that we in some way expect to manifest itself again through our active remembering of it.

This is particularly clear when we consider the date as the relationship of the event to the calendar. Here we have something that occurs which is unique, that demands to be preserved in its uniqueness, a true Event. But by dating it, by putting it on the calendar, we are inscribing it into a system of meaning, a grid that assigns history into a comprehensible order.

With this comparison, we can gain insight into how all memory works—and all language, which is itself a grid of meaning that, by definition, makes events readable. Why else do poets date the poems they write? This is the connection to explore.

These are the spheres that each poem inhabits: the Event and its inscription, the ineffable and its readability. On the one hand, the composing of a poem, like the dawning of consciousness, is a process of individuation. Derrida quotes Celan, who calls the poem “the language of an individual which has taken on form.” (quoted in SQ, 5) But this very individuality may potentially cause it to remain un-understood. “Singularity, but also solitude: the only one, the poem is alone.” (SQ, 5)

So then: “What assigns the singular to its date?” (SQ, 5) What inscribes it into a grid of readability? Or to put it another way: how can I understand the commemorations of another? “[H]ow can such an other date, irreplaceable and singular, the date of the other, the date for the other, be deciphered, transcribed, or translated? How can I appropriate it for myself? Or, better, how can I transcribe myself into it?” (SQ, 7)

And yet, this must happen; it is the very thing that allows reading to take place. Any given date “will have been able to be written, alone, unique, exempt from repetition. Yet this absolute property can also be transcribed, exported, deported, expropriated, reappropriated, repeated in its absolute singularity.” (SQ, 6)

This, however, is a risk. The poem will “expose itself... risk losing itself in a readability.” Therefore, “keeping...to the truth of each poem...this irreplaceable itself...” (SQ, 6) is a commitment. In a reading of the poem that does it justice, we commit ourselves to preserving this uniqueness even as it reaches to something more universal.

This idea of commitment gives us our fullest understanding of the date. We not only write *at* a certain date, we write *to* a date, also. (SQ, 8) Commemoration is a pledge to carry whatever truth, whatever bid for universality we have found worth preserving in

the Event, forward into the future. Though we honor the past, we are doing so by the realization of its promise in the future. If we march on August 6<sup>th</sup>, we're not simply "remembering" the bombing of Hiroshima, which will never happen in exactly the same way again and whose specific victims are beyond the reach of our mourning. What we are doing is making a commitment to the truth of that event, vowing to work to prevent another occurrence with the same terrible truth.

If we understand the date in this way, as the nexus between the singular and the universalizable, which entails our ethical responsibility to preserve the irreducibility of the two, then we can see that the date is the very site of our encounter with the Other. The date gives the poem "the chance to speak to the other." (SQ, 8) That is, one singularity that allows itself to be read encounters another such singularity; one "date" addresses another. This is "the secret of the encounter." (SQ, 9)

In speaking, the poem releases itself from the date (without disowning it) in order to be decipherable. (SQ, 8-9) Thus, the date has "broken the silence of pure singularity." (SQ, 9) Understood as addressing itself to "another date" is how the date doesn't efface itself in generality, but rather forms a constellation of dates, which "commemorates heterogeneous events." This is the authentic encounter. My experience, on any given date of the calendar, in any given part of history, is not and cannot be the same as anyone else's. But in understanding that, my communication with the other begins, as we realize what a common date shares, and respect what it cannot.

But *how* do we preserve and respect such a thing? How do we use interchangeable words to capture the unexchangeable? By creating the literarily and the discursively unique. Thus a paradox: each commemoration of a date is itself a unique

event: “*each-time-only-one time.*” We may never bring into being the “pure poem,” that is, that which “each time only once, has meaning only by having no meaning, no ideal or general meaning,” which would truly preserve, even within language, the absolutely singular. Nevertheless, the poem can always confront genre. (SQ, 11) The connection to Lyotard is clear; the laws of each genre regulate and dictate what may be said within it. Perhaps the singular can’t be preserved with the impossible task of the ex nihilo creation of the sui generis with each writing. But the parameters of the language game that the word finds itself in can always be disrupted and challenged.

To illustrate this paradox of the date, Derrida draws from Celan the striking image of circumcision. Like the one this ceremony produces, the date is a type of cut or incision, which “the poem bears in its body like a memory...” (SQ, 18) The date is also like a ghost, which can never come back to life, yet haunts us: “...this revenance of impossible return is marked in the date...” (SQ, 18) But then, to contrast with this readability of the date, we have the return of the imagery of *Cinders*: ash. Ash is the remaining singularity that outlasts its commemoration. (SQ, 20)

From this point on, Derrida focuses mainly on the images that appear two of Celan’s poems, “Aschenglorie,” (Ashglory) and “Shibboleth.”<sup>32</sup>

Amid the dense imagery of “Ashglory,” Derrida focuses on two main moments: the title itself (which appears in the first line) and the last stanza. The title draws attention to the paradox that Derrida sees in the cinder, the ember. That is, the way that ash is a remnant, a trace, of something that has ostensibly been utterly destroyed. In this

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<sup>32</sup> “Shibboleth” shares several key images with another poem, “In Eins,” which Derrida actually spends more time with. However, I think that “Shibboleth” is more relevant to the issues I’m taking up.

sense, ashes bear witness. But what is the relationship between this testimony and the rest of the world? The last stanza reads,

Niemand  
zeugt für den  
Zeugen. (*Breathturn*, 90)

Nobody  
bears witness for the  
witness.<sup>33</sup>

“Shibboleth” gets its title from an incident from the Book of Judges, Chapter 12. The Hebrews had militarily defeated the Ephraimites and were trying to prevent the refugees from fleeing back across the Jordan River to their homeland. To distinguish their own people from the Ephraimites, the Hebrews subjected each person seeking passage to a test: pronounce the word “shibboleth.” This was a word that Ephraimites, given their dialect, could not say the way the Hebrews did. Therefore, if the interrogated could not pronounce it, they were killed. 42,000 people were killed as a result.

Since then, a “shibboleth” has come to refer to a password, a term that identifies one’s alliance.

Shibboleth

Together with my stones  
grown big with weeping  
behind the bars,

they dragged me out into  
the middle of the market,  
that place  
where the flag unfurls to which  
I swore no kind of allegiance.

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<sup>33</sup> Translated by Pierre Joris.

Flute,  
double flute of night:  
remember the dark  
twin redness  
of Vienna and Madrid.

Set your flag at half-mast,  
memory.  
At half-mast  
today and for ever.

Heart:

here too reveal what you are,  
here in the midst of the market,  
Call out the shibboleth, call it out  
into your alien homeland:  
February. No pasaran.

Unicorn:

you know about the stones,  
you know about the water,  
come,  
I lead you away  
to the voices  
of Estramadura.

An initial reading suggests this piece being based on Celan's own experiences as a prisoner of the Nazis, and also the political climate of the anti-fascist struggles of the 1930's. It begins with images of imprisonment and, possibly, slavery. The speaker is "behind bars." He is "dragged.../ into the middle of the market." This could allude to the history of the Holocaust in two ways. First, civilians who were killed in retaliation for partisan attacks were usually executed in a public place, as an example to the local populace. Furthermore, throughout history, slaves were sold in the marketplace along

with other goods. Although Jews were not sold in this way (having presumably become enslaved through conquest by the Egyptians), this image nevertheless could be seen to allude to slavery being part of their long history of suffering.

In this marketplace, “the flag unfurls to which/ I swore no kind of allegiance.” Like a shibboleth, a flag is a political symbol, one which signals inclusion and exclusion. This image, of course, suggests the flag of a conqueror to which one is subjected. However, it could also refer to the flag of one’s own country, from which one has become alienated. This could, in turn, reflect the situation of a country whose government had become oppressive, like those of Germany or Rumania, which had become fascist. Or a rejection of nationalism in general, such as the kind of national or racial identity that the Nazis, for example, represented. Or it could also reflect the situation of Jewish people, who before the creation of the state of Israel, were without a flag or a nation that they *could* swear allegiance to.

What the flute is called upon to remember, in Celan’s case, is “the dark/twin redness/ of Vienna and Madrid.” These were both areas that had active leftist resistance, but which were both crushed by fascism, by the Nazis in the *anschluss* in the first case, and by Franco in the Spanish Civil War in the latter.

After calling on the flute for memory, he then asks “memory”: “Set your flag at half-mast...today and for ever.” A flag serves not only as a symbol of national identity, but, lowered to half-mast, as a symbol of national mourning. Thus, it becomes, rather than a shibboleth that inflicts suffering, instead one that commemorates it. He calls for symbols to be mobilized to reflect a permanent state of mourning.

The speaker then also calls upon his heart, to “reveal what you are/ here, in the midst of the market.” The heart should “Call the shibboleth, call it out/ into your alien homeland.” The “alien homeland” designation gives credence to the earlier reading, which suggested that the flag is rejected because it represents a supposed homeland from which one has been disinherited, by legislation or alienation. But the alien homeland could have another meaning, too; because then the speaker says “February. *no pasaran.*” February 1936 is when the Frente Popular, the coalition of Spanish leftist forces won the election—the election that Franco’s forces rebelled against. The latter slogan is Spanish for (roughly) “no passage” or “don’t let them pass.” It became a slogan of the anti-fascist fighters of the Spanish Civil War, as a rallying cry to defend their territory against enemy attackers. This was particularly used during the siege of Madrid. (SQ, 23) Militants from all over Europe (and from the United States) came to Spain to fight against Franco’s forces. Even though Spain was not their country of birth, they fought for an ideal to be realized. In this sense, they could be said to be fighting for a true “homeland,” for freedom and for working people. This is the “alien homeland” that they would inhabit—the homeland of the future.

This complex of images puts a number of ideas into play for Derrida. We have here the use of language and symbol to create identity—and to deny it. We have the idea of homeland, and whether that constitutes an essence or a promise. And we have the relation between history, mourning, and struggle. And with the invocation of “February,” we also have a date.

The phrase “no pasaran” becomes a shibboleth, a watchword, a verbal handshake, a means of identification. But even so, it is not a key to a cipher. Understanding it does

not decode it. And a poem functions in the same way. Like it, “the poem unveils a secret only to confirm that there is something secret there, withdrawn, forever beyond the reach of hermeneutic exhaustion...it remains, and the date with it, heterogeneous to all interpretive totalization.” (SQ, 26) Celan’s poem demonstrates just this principle, in the multiple readings that each of its lines invites. Even as we read and comprehend it, the poem does not surrender its uniqueness.

On the one hand, Derrida talks about this equivocality of language, “Babel within a single language.” That is, “*Shibboleth* marks the multiplicity within language...” “But by the same token, the insignificance of language... it can take on meaning only in relation to a place. By place, I mean just as much the relation to a border, country, house, or threshold as any site, any *situation* in general from within which... alliances are formed, contracts, codes, and conventions established that give meaning to the insignificant, institute passwords, bend language to what exceeds it...” (SQ, 28-29)

This seems to be a shift for Derrida. Formerly, his deconstructionist approach wanted to see everything that could be understood as a “text,” because every situation that could be understood needed to be understood through language-like structures. There was an implication that reading and interpretation was all there was; that the world was only text. Here, however, he has not abandoned looking at structures—but he now understands that these linguistic structures order something that “exceeds language.” In fact, he uses the Sartrean term “situation”—which is to say, the circumstances in which one makes a decision, the occasion for intervening in reality.

Language works because it exists in a *place*. This “place” might be geographical, political, or ideological. The shibboleth, in its original usage, was a password, something

that allowed passage from one place to another—and passage to safety, because failure to give it cost one one's life. *No pasaran* shows the opposite side, an injunction to hold a space that has been won against those seeking entry. But in either case, language reflects our situation as much as it constitutes it.

As we will see more later, this condition is also two-edged: “the value of the shibboleth may always, and tragically, be inverted.” (SQ, 30)

Tragically, because the inversion sometimes overtakes the initiative of subjects, the goodwill of men, their mastery of language and politics. Watchword or password in a struggle against oppression, exclusion, fascism, and racism, it may also corrupt its differential value, which is the condition of alliance and of the poem, making of it a discriminatory limit, the grillwork of policing, or normalization, and of methodical subjugation. (SQ, 30)

In other words, the codes and symbols that allow us to recognize our comrades, those who share our spirit—these same structures of code can be used to exclude and oppress, to enforce identity at the expense of the other.

One of these structures of understanding, broadly understood, is of course, the date. When one signs a poem or a document with a date, one inscribes the possibility of everything we've talked about.

Because a date's definition therefore depends on the future, there is no decryption that exhausts the meaning of a date or a poem. But this also means that the poem may eventually lose all its witnesses, the community that by encountering it, would give it a

meaning; it remains alone. Derrida cites the last stanza of “Ashglory:” “No one/ bears witness for the/ witness.”

This potential community is recognized by the singular’s entry into language. It thus becomes a “ciphered singularity,” something that can be decoded, but whose decoding can never reduce it to the parameters of any system of understanding. It is not hermetic; there is a will to be understood, a seeking of a connection, even if that connection fails. The existence of the poem proves that, even if all else fails, what is communicated is that there is still a speaker and an intended hearer. And this latter always occupies a position of alterity. “The poem speaks, even if none of its references is intelligible, none apart from the Other, the one to whom the poem addresses itself and to whom it speaks in saying that it speaks to it. Even if it does not reach the Other, at least it calls to it.” (SQ, 33)

There is, however, also the risk, not that what is said is un-understood, but rather that it is understood all too much. There is the risk that intelligibility effaces what is singular in what is being said. This is the irony of a poem of mourning, that seeks to preserve the memory of one who has been lost; regardless of the specific content, the poem itself is already a type of mourning, in that its reading recognizes that the concrete uniqueness of the departed has been lost, and that all we have now are the marks of language, which are general and abstract. The poem’s “readability is paid for by the terrible tribute of lost singularity. Mourning in the reading itself. What is encrypted, dated in the date, is effaced...and all the losses, all the beings that we lament in this mourning, all the griefs are gathered in the poem of a date whose effacement does not await effacement.” (SQ, 37)

As with language, mourning and memory only take place in, let alone are guaranteed by, a community. But just as the departed has disappeared, so may this community. This is especially poignant in terms of a community of the survivors of a tragedy. Though they survived their particular ordeal, they are nonetheless mortal. “Finite surviving, this is their lot.” (SQ, 36) And this furthermore means that as they pass away, there will also pass away those capable of understanding their message. There is just the chance that their testimonies will one day “no longer signify at all.” (SQ, 36)

It is often the case, then, that a community is formed simply through designation, through a kind of marking, structured linguistically, if not literally rendered in language. Derrida cites Celan’s prose piece, “Conversation in the Mountains.” It is “a meditation on a Jew, son of a Jew, whose name is ‘unpronounceable’ and who has nothing of his own, nothing that is not borrowed, so that, just like a date, what is proper to the Jew is to have no property or essence. Jewish is not Jewish.” (SQ, 35)

How does one define a “Jew”; what constitutes the “Jewish” community? What it certainly *can’t* be is some kind of an “essence.” What would that essence be? It’s not a shared language: Jews speak Hebrew, Yiddish, Ladino, German, English, or Russian. It’s not a shared homeland: prior to 1948, there was no piece of land dedicated to Jews, and in any case, not all Jews are Israelis. It is, strictly speaking neither a religion nor an ethnicity, as the seeming unresolvability of this debate would imply. Hitler’s claim that it was a “race” has been debunked. This is why we can say that the man “has nothing of his own.” So without an essence, how do we come to a definition? By a simple fact of designation, a naming—what in the Christian tradition would be called a baptism, what Derrida calls a circumcision (though not all Jews are literally circumcised). This

designation, which happens in history but functions like language, is a marking that constitutes inclusion and exclusion—it is a shibboleth.

Derrida is certainly aware of the ominous overtones that the use of this word has. Like the person's name in Celan's piece, "for the Ephraimites, in another way, *shibboleth* was also an "unpronounceable" name. One knows what this cost them." (SQ, 35)

Derrida refers to the date as "mad" and as being "ashes."

A date is mad, that is the truth.

And we are mad for dates.

For the ashes that dates are. Celan knew one may praise or bless ashes.

Religion is not necessary for that. Perhaps because a religion begins there, before religion, in the blessing of dates, of names, and of ashes.

A date is mad: it is never what it is, what it says it is, always more or less than what it is. (SQ, 37)

Religion, like language, begins in an effort to summon again what was lost, to make appear that which is not present. They are attempts to make ashes speak. We read the ashes through things like words and dates, which are mad, because of the instability between the universal and the particular that they contain. In communicating to us the universal or the intelligible, they hint to us (if we would read them correctly) that there is something unspeakably unique that lies just beyond the grasp of their telling. This kind of telling is the work of the poem.

Both the poem and the commemoration operate under the risk of this mortality and finitude: the risk of entrusting memory to one's readers, the risk of what one has to say being effaced in its very reading—and the risk of there one day being no one to read

it. To illustrate this, Derrida refers to another one of Celan's poems: "Psalm." The poem is ostensibly about the loss of, or the abandonment by, God. It includes the lines:

No one moulds us again out of earth and clay,  
no one conjures our dust.  
No one.

Praised be your name, no one.  
For your sake  
we shall flower.  
Towards  
you.

A nothing  
we were, are, shall  
remain, flowering:  
the nothing-, the  
no one's rose. (*Poems*, 175)

This is utter abandonment: life and growth, but no God, destiny, or transcendent meaning toward which to order it. This is the lament of a once "chosen" people that has been deserted by its God. But in another way this reflects a common human condition. Derrida says, "...I am only a cipher commemorating precisely what will have been doomed to oblivion, destined to become name, for a finite time, the time of a rose, name of nothing, "voices of no one," *name of no one*: ash." (SQ, 41)

Derrida also invokes the image of the desert, another site of abandonment, in which the Israelites wandered for 40 years: "the desert in which there would be no one left to bless the ashes." (SQ, 42) True mortality, the full implications of our finitude, not only means the deprivation of a God, but also the possibility of the eventual loss of the community in which one's meaning is inscribed. The barrenness of the desert one is lost

in indicates the risk that, like the sarcastic “prayer” of the poem, one’s address actually addresses no one.

What the poem actually “sings” is the date, the anniversary, which is “the seal of an alliance and of a promise.” (SQ, 44) As we’ve discussed, the memorial of a date is actually a promise to preserve the meaning of that event. This play between the universal and the particular that we’ve been exploring is also a manifestation of “the indecision” “between the empirical and the essential.” (SQ, 44) How do we find the meaningful in the unique and what is irreplaceable in each example of an idea? But literature also investigates this nexus, in communicating meaningful ideas through the creation of absolutely unique works. Thus “philosophy finds itself in literature,” due to this common concern that they both have. (SQ, 44)

A date always reflects a “situation” (it is interesting for Derrida to introduce a famously Sartrean term). He then introduces the term “crypt,” playing off of the meanings of crypt as both gravesite (commemoration) and as code (encryption)—just as, in any writing that takes place, there is this play between commemorating the specific and the general. “The crypt takes place... wherever a singular incision marks language.” An incision—like a circumcision. But the point of philosophy and of poetry is that they “become readable” for those “who have no part in the event.” (SQ, 48) These, presumably, are those who are called upon to be the “witnesses for the witnesses.” That is, the message is intended not only for the speaker’s contemporaries, who presumably share a common enough situation that what is said will be understandable, but it is also intended for those who are far removed from these specific circumstances, enough so that

what they glean from the telling is only a broad, universal idea, not simply an empirical historical one.

Sartre uses what might be considered a similar term. Instead of talking about an “incision,” Sartre talks in *Being and Nothingness* about an action, a decision, punching a hole in the fabric of existence. Of course, one of the differences between these two images is that Derrida’s choice shows his over-riding concern with language, since the incision he describes is also a kind of marking. But this comparison shows that there’s another possible problem here. Derrida calls this incision “a passion, not an action, of the poet.” Similarly, the situation “can give place to calculations. But... it ceases to be calculable.” (SQ, 48)

Here we see echoes of Levinas, in the passivity that that thinker makes central to his view of ethics. This, of course, is in contradistinction to Sartre, who is very much a philosopher of action. I’m led to wonder if this has to do, not only with Levinas’ status as a prisoner as I suggested earlier, but also with what Sartre’s Marxism—and, therefore, class consciousness—brings to the analysis. A desire to achieve rectitude through passivity is fine, for example, for well-meaning intellectuals of the ruling classes and those functionaries who ideologically identify with them. Since they are the ones who profit from an unjust, inequitable society, they want to become passive in order to cease committing evil. By vilifying “power,” they seek to disown the power that their ancestors of their class won and abused. But the working class can’t afford this. They must be proactive in creating the kind of world that they want; revolution depends on decision and action.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> This is not, of course, to suggest that Sartre was himself a worker. He always acknowledged his bourgeois position. Nevertheless, his *thought* was class conscious.

But what distinguishes Derrida's vision from that of Levinas' is the former's concern for futurity. True, in the just-cited passage he does seem to see the future, like Levinas, as beyond one's control, as something which befalls one. But Derrida's view of the date as a promise to the future, as a commitment to realizing an idea that one is preserving of an event from the past, means that he sees art and ethics as a project, as attempts to realize a positive image of the future. This is shown in his view of preservation of the date as fidelity to a counter-factual. The date means "the claim, the engagement, that does not limit itself to the acknowledgement of a fact, but invokes a responsibility for it." (SQ, 49)

Derrida sees "being Jewish" as having this same kind of structure. The acknowledgement of Jewish identity is not "the reappropriation of an essence" (as we proved it could not be)—but a commitment to the future. Which, however, is not a purely free decision, but comes out of the historical situation that one did not choose, "within the accepted memory of an unknown destination." Memory here is not understood as something that merely wells up within one's consciousness—another example of Derrida rejecting passivity. Rather, memory is understood as an active commitment to one's view of the meaning of the past, even though one did not choose the events of one's past. And even though the future that one has committed oneself to realizing is carved out of a trajectory that we are always already on. Nevertheless, these limitations on our freedom and responsibility must not obscure our basic ability and mission to envision and realize counterfactuals. This commitment, and not merely a taxonomical recognition, is what being Jewish means to him: "We undertake it to be' and not merely "It turns out that in fact we are it." (SQ, 49)

The name “Jew” is the shibboleth. The experience of being Jewish is just this indeterminacy, as in the poem, as in the date, between singularity and universality. “Witness to the universal, but as absolute, dated, marked, incised, caesuraed singularity—as the other and in the name of the other.” (SQ, 50) Being a Jew is a very specific historical experience, which, like any true experience, is not reducible to anything else. Nevertheless, this very historical experience has confronted Jewish people with events that have universal significance. In being treated as the Other, for example, their experience allows us to understand the very structure of alterity itself.

Though it is not acknowledged by Derrida, it is easy to see something like Sartre’s analysis at work here. We’ve seen that Sartre had already discussed, decades before, the authentic Jew gaining the universal, not through a hasty universalism nor through a nationalist parochialism, but by living through his own particularity. As he demonstrated, in both *Anti-Semite and Jew* and in *Black Orpheus*, our essence, even when it is ostensibly racial or national, is created through a project, even though the project emerges from the conditions of our situation. And what is this situation? That of being *treated* like a Jew. When Derrida speaks of Jews as having no essence, but of simply being demarcated by a shibboleth, might it not mean something very similar? Furthermore, Sartre dropped a former marginalization of poetry to make this point—just as Derrida takes the experience of the poem as central to his idea.

Nevertheless, Derrida’s treatment distinguishes itself by taking alterity itself as something that the Jewish experience testifies to. “Witness to the universal as absolute singularity, as the other and in the name of the other...”: this is what we call upon poetic language to do. (And even more ordinary language, if we understand it correctly.)

Because this singularity isn't simply self-affirmation, but a reaching out toward the other, in order to found a community in which the singularity of each may be respected. "Let the word pass through the barbed wire border... passage of the other toward the other— respect of the same, of a same that respects the otherness of the other." (SQ, 51)

Formulating it in this way, Derrida avoids the traps that Badiou pointed out lie in an ethics based entirely on alterity. Because, in order to enter into an ethical relationship with someone else, I have to see in what way I can connect with him, what it is we share that binds us to each other. But Derrida wants to balance this with an approach that will respect the other's absolute singularity. Thus, any "same" that we propose as a basis for ethics must be ad hoc and tentative. As Sartre has pointed out with his Picasso example, our ethics have to be experimental, like art is experimental.

The image of circumcision was chosen as a guiding one here because it marks the first passage<sup>35</sup> of the individual male into the Jewish community, "and it takes place... only once, at an absolutely set date..." (SQ, 53) Once again, there is the play between the singular event and the commonly held grid of understanding. But furthermore—this is a symbolic moment, but one "painfully inscribed on the body itself." "The wound or the scar" is readable, but "it is also very unreadable, and this is why it wears out reading." For this reason, the scar is a "carnal mark at once endowed with and deprived of singularity." (SQ, 54)

On the one hand, circumcision is clearly something physical: "circumcision remains a matter of the senses and of the body. It offers itself to be written and read on the body... the body thus offers itself to be thought, signified, and interpreted..." (SQ, 59) Recognizing this essential physicality is important, because it places the event within real

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<sup>35</sup> The bar mitzvah is another kind of passage.

history, within that which “exceeds language.” Nonetheless, this physical act is also essentially a symbolic one, and as such, functions linguistically.

We may also say, pursuing the image further, that the word itself is also circumscribed. This is because in submitting itself to being read, in opening itself up to interpretation, the word is opened “to the stranger, to the other, to the neighbor, to the guest, to whomever. It is the absolute to-come.”<sup>36</sup> If it truly opens itself to the future, the word’s “coming must be neither assured nor calculable.” (SQ, 56)

In the circumcision of the word, it is “at least promised to the other.” But just like the initiate to the physical ritual, the reader to whom the poem is addressed is unique, even though it could be anyone: “...one who is not yet named, the one who perhaps awaits his name, which is bestowed by circumcision...” (SQ, 60) The meeting with this uniqueness is what Derrida means by the “encounter.”

This type of address risks the essence of the message. One entrusts the meaning of what one has to say to the other. This is the risk of living in a universe without received meanings, without inherited essence, a universe that is not a plenum, but rather contains gaps, spaces of nothingness in which true action and real interpretation not only takes place, but is constant. This type of writing, this type of incision, has to do, therefore, with “the living Nothing.” (SQ, 60)

The “writing of circumcision...is a writing of Nothing. It... embeds the inscription of Nothing in the flesh, in the living word...” (SQ, 61) This is the basic nothingness that Sartre says is necessary for freedom. And this kind of writing is exactly the gesture with which the free act transforms the fabric of existence.

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<sup>36</sup> This formulation reflects the German word for the future, *zukunft*, the to-come.

It is this gap, this space, which allows poetry to happen. It is also this gap through which a specific historical experience, like that of the Jews, can be read with a universal meaning. For this reason, “all poets” are “Jewish in essence.” But the paradox is that “this essence promises itself only through dis-identification, that expropriation in the nothing of the non-essence of which we have spoken.” (SQ, 62) The poet, as fashioner of language, and the Jew, as witness to the persecution of difference, are both only possible in the rejection of a static received essence, of an inherent identity.

It is this status that escapes the “double-edge” of the shibboleth, which was originally, after all, a marking for extermination. The Jews can only escape the exclusion that accompanies identification by recognizing the non-essence of Nothingness, the anti-essentialism of the Jewish experience. (SQ, 63) Without this, they risk taking Jewishness as an essence, as an exclusion. Without this, they risk the atrocities inflicted in the name of Zionism and the impasse that lies in the way of Mideast peace.

It is, after all, this anti-essentialism that allows Celan to write in German, ostensibly the language of his executioners. Derrida asks, “How is one to bless in German?” (SQ, 62-63)

I would say that this also becomes an opportunity for self-reflection for Germans, also. This, too, is a question of language and of the future. What is one to make of, what is one to do with, German culture and the German language? Some, like historian A.J.P. Taylor want to argue that there is something fundamentally suspect about German culture, and attempts to trace the inevitability of Hitler’s rise throughout that entire culture, from Luther on. Given the terrible crimes committed on its behalf, how is one to defend such a legacy? Only by denying essentialism (on which Nazism is based) and

instead, seeking that which aspires toward the universal in the works of the German language. As with Derrida's definition of the Jew, what makes one truly "German" in this sense is the cosmopolitanism that defines the best of its philosophy, literature, and music. The greatest exemplars of "German culture" were those very people who denied such a thing: Goethe, Beethoven, Nietzsche, Mann, Hesse, etc. Especially those who were also Jews, like Heine, Kafka, and Mendelssohn. And this is to say nothing of the way in which this common linguistic heritage creates a body of work that exceeds national boundaries: Mozart, Rilke, and Schoenberg, were not, after all, "Germans" strictly speaking.

The shibboleth "German" is a sign that opens itself to the future. What about that past should one embrace?—that question can only be answered by what future one commits one's self to realizing.

And yet, like everything else, this legacy is of course marked by the past. The Holocaust is a permanent incision in the "body" of German culture, a wound around which it must orient itself, and with which it will forever struggle. This is part of the commitment, part of the responsibility that "Germanness" will entail from now on. Some younger writers in German seem to have the attitude, "That was so long—can't we write about something else now?" And certainly, their subject-matters should change. But if they think that the formation of their values can escape this confrontation, then they are deeply in bad faith.

There is thus always the threat of perjury "at once distinct and inseparable from the finitude that any testimony also presupposes..." (SQ, 78) Part of what creates my

singularity is my finitude. This makes me an individual, but it is the very condition that makes me able to be inaccurate, too.

Of course, witnessing does not just have to do with the one testifying, whether in terms of the judge or the audience. In either case, the addressees “also have to be witnesses...in their turn, before their consciences or before others...” (SQ, 89) There is some testimony that transforms, or ought to transform, the one who hears it. Things that, once heard, cannot be unheard. In that case, an ethical responsibility is not just created for the witness, but for the witnesses *to* the witnessing. Those who hear the testimony must then preserve the truth of what they have heard. They have to preserve it in front of their own consciences, in terms of not allowing themselves to forget what they have seen. And they have to pass the story on, to not let it be forgotten. Once again, this is an encounter with a unique event in the past, which gains its significance through a commitment and a promise to the future.

It is this reliance on the other that Celan despairs of in “Ashglory”:  
“Nobody/bears witness for the/witness.” This is the glory found in ashes, the risk of effacement. “Ashglory” expresses “a desperate sigh” about the elimination of the witnesses. This is why witnessing calls out to us, the audience, the other, to carry on its truth.

The poem, in its variety of interpretations, in the way it surrenders itself to reading, it shows us the fragility of meaning, the possibility of singularity being lost. This is the manifestation of non-manifestation. (SQ, 91)

Ultimately, this has to do with death. Death is this ultimate limitation of witnessing, because we can't bear witness to the other's death. We can't even bear

witness to our own death, since it's not an experience we come back from to testify to. As we've seen, this mortality makes our singularity possible, but at the same time puts it, and its memory, at risk of perishing. Our concern, therefore, is for the "surviving of surviving." (SQ 91)

One way of preserving this singularity in the poem is a way that Celan has shown us, in the condensing of allusions. This process is "foiling the unity of reference." This may put witness, narrowly understood, at risk, "without, however, effacing the singularity of each event, of each date thereby re-lated, re-marked." (SQ, 95)

Ultimately, the one who hears my testimony is my grave, the keeper of my memorial, the last testimony to my singularity, if only to carry on the idea that *someone* has lived. (SQ, 95)

Here we come full circle to the image of ash, the remnant that is legible in its very unreadability.

## Poetry: Language of the Body, and Language of Ethics

In terms of all that we've seen, what can we say is the task of self-consciously literary writing when confronting absolute ethical disaster? What can it do that's different from what straight narrative does? What are the philosophical underpinnings of literature that are suggested thereby?

In Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, the Jewish moneylender Shylock, perceiving himself to have been wronged on the basis of his Jewishness, gives a classic speech explaining his desire for revenge.

Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as the Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?

This speech is remembered because it constitutes an attempt to establish community between gentiles and Jews on the basis of a shared humanity, specifically, the capacity to suffer, to be a fragile body. Therein lies the power of socially and ethically committed art; it unflinchingly reveals to the world the suffering that exist, in order to evoke empathy in the public, and thus to incite it to action.

However, there remains the debate about which approach to art best realizes this ethical imperative. Artistic realism assumes that its plain-spokenness best conveys the situation of the world, unhindered by the distractions and self-indulgence of "experimentation" and "formal innovation." There is something of an assumption that

the more objective the telling, the more power and impact the message will have.

This assumption puts itself in contradistinction to what I will call “poetic” language, or “poetry,” for short. This is why Adorno’s initial condemnation of post-Auschwitz poetry had such resonance and is so often repeated.

Although realism seems to have this aforementioned physicality on its side, this is nevertheless only effective when it is inscribed in a values-formulating discourse. The German men of Police Battalion 101 are an example of this.<sup>37</sup> They were a group of police officers who had been mobilized for service on the eastern front. Specifically, this “service” was to form firing squads for committing genocide in villages throughout the east. In their training, it was explained to them that the work that they were being called on to do was physically gruesome, especially as it included the killing of women, the elderly, and children, including infants. The commanders made it clear that anyone who did not feel up to the task could be excused from that duty with no penalty. Some took the offer and opted out immediately. Others became so violently ill after one or a few missions that they resigned subsequently. (Goldhagen, 212-218)

One might think that this kind of physical sickness may be taken as an embodied ethical reaction—except that this experience did not translate into ethical action. Most of the men did not request transfer, even after performing great atrocities. And those who did want them were given transfers to other units, with no repercussions, and no further protests were made. The silence was so great that the conclusion seems to be that their opposition was not to the killing, but to themselves having to be the ones to do it. It is therefore mistaken to believe, as often seems to be implicit, that an “objective”

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<sup>37</sup> Though it had been told prior to this, I will be drawing on Daniel Goldhagen’s discussion of this group in Part III of his *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*.

description of suffering will ignite some kind of universal ethical reaction, since the actual presence of it, the actual *infliction* of it, did not. The strength of detailed physical descriptions lies not in objectivity, but in the potential to realize shared suffering, with a shared human body as its site and locus.

This is the strength of poetry, in that it is embodied, sensuous language that is constituted by an *appeal* to the senses. And I mean an appeal in the Sartrean sense. Modernist language knows that there is no universal, pre-established discourse or values-system that we can assume; and furthermore, if one does take itself for granted, it may very well be because it has imposed itself unjustly. The writers who use language in this way know that they are tentatively feeling out a new way of speaking, a new concept to express—and a new community to be thereby defined. In writing, I know I'm not invoking an eternal order, an innate understanding. I am groping for a new way of expressing and understanding, and I am asking you, in your freedom and singularity, to understand this new genre. In doing so, as Derrida saw, I am taking a risk. I risk losing myself in your interpretation of me; I risk our common link, our community, being lost by not being accepted by the future. This appeal leaps out into the void, and may never reach the other that it seeks.

This is one of the important things that Lyotard understood. Terror is what excludes this linking. But terror is made possible by a discourse that considers itself complete, that seeks total control over reality. It is a discourse without lacunae. So what is necessary is not just the linking of discourse, but an understanding of the moment that makes this necessary. This moment is the breakdown of language, the not-knowing what

to say. It is the same phenomenon that Sartre describes as the beginning of poetry. It is the result of Derrida's singularity that cannot be fully put into language.

Many of the men of Police Battalion 101 had bodies who betrayed them, which recoiled in horror *for* them. But this is not yet conscience. They were so ensconced in the value-system they had received that they were apparently able to accept this occurrence as a personal failing of their own, rather than a failing of the ideology they served. What was necessary was for a gap in internal monologue, an interruption of rationalization. A failure of meaning, a moment of absurdity.

This is potentially what modernist art can provide. A portrayal of suffering, to be sure. But also the disruption of narrative that goes with it, the verbal equivalent of silence that Celan achieves, or the creation of language as a scream, that someone like Antonin Artaud demonstrated so well. This stoppage, this shudder, this reticence of speech. The moment of breakdown in which everything one thought one knew collapses, and one must search for, or at least accept, a new way of expressing the new reality.

It is this moment that is the difference between the old soldier that shrugs and says "War is hell," and the young, soon-to-be dissenter whose life will never be the same. Both have witnessed atrocities, but each inscribes it in a different chain of discourse.

After a long history of images of suffering, maybe this is the way that many of us can achieve the alienation necessary for a true reevaluation. Maybe Adorno is right. We need to not just see the facts, but to also disrupt our normal, comfortable thought patterns. The scream of the saxophone, the cruel slash of paint, or the tumult and conflagration of words could be what would disorient us enough to wake us up to the nightmare more than

a proliferation of reportage and documentaries. These are the sensual particulars that not only tell us about pain, but seek to recreate its structure, its impact, and disorientations.

Although this, too, leads us into a problem. How can I communicate my pain, which after all is something only I experience? This is what Ludwig Wittgenstein demonstrated in his pain argument from *Philosophical Investigations*. He realized that pain can only be shared, if at all, as the function of a discourse, as the formation, through discourse, of a community of suffering. Language is the bridge across which we make suffering commensurable. But even so, how can it be fully captured? Isn't there something irreducibly personal in my experiences that is not exhausted by an explanation or description of it?

We come to realize that the mentality that makes people able to inflict such suffering and death is that they have learned to think of others in terms of essentialist definitions: "Jew," "gypsy," "Communist," "black," "foreigner," "infidel," "enemy of the people," "kulak," "white devil," etc. The assumption is that, through a definition, one can sum up another's life and meaning in such a way that one can judge, and thus, dispose of him.

This is a risk anytime you have a group identity, a group definition. We have seen that in discussions of the definition of Jewishness from Sartre to Derrida. This term, this identity is not nothing, it is not arbitrary; it reflects an authentic historical and cultural experience, the memory of which deserves to be preserved. But if the meaning of the word (and thus the meaning of the experience) remains absolutely particular, then it remains absolutely parochial. Identifying one's own meaning entirely with one's ethnicity and one's religious sect reflects and participates in the same mode of thinking

perpetuated by racism and intolerance. One's experience, one's thought, one's possibilities are inexhaustible and irreducible. The presence of the unfathomable is what makes me an individual.

The trick is to balance a claim to absolute singularity, which would protect me from being treated as a "specimen," as part of a mass to be disposed of, with a claim to a more universal connection, one that would obligate someone to respect that singularity?

It is thus that the scream enters into language. The scream issues forth from my body, torn out of the depths of my flesh, an experience no one can have for me, a sound that has broken through the articulations and differentiations of established discourse. It is utterly personal, signal of a pain that will never be fully translated. And yet—it is still a signal. This animal sound cuts through the air, alerting all those who can hear it (in any sense of that term) that I am in pain, that this pain is intolerable, and that I need help. It is a gesture toward the other that the other must accept and make legible in order to bestow meaning on. Yet there is the recognition that the other can't plumb the depths from which this sound emerges.

This is why Adorno has to readmit the right of expression of suffering—the right to scream. For him, the most jarring screams were those of dissonance, ugliness, and absurdity that appeared in the arts. That is, in the very place in which one had traditionally sought refuge from the realities of a broken, damaged world.

Illustrating the paradox of a universal demand to preserve singularity is where the arts shine.

In modernist art, one tries to create a work that (ideally) is *sui generis*, but is also somehow comprehensible. Even if one eschews a decipherable meaning, one still wants

the piece to be recognized *as sui generis*, which still inscribes it in a community. This is most clear in language, which (except for Dadaist sound poems) is pure meaning. Yet poetry, as we've said, physicalizes language and rejoins the abstract concept to the experiencing, suffering body. The poem is the infinitely deferred paradox of using something universal, accessible to all (language, physical description of suffering), to try to create or capture something completely individual (the vision of the poet, the experience of the individual) which can then reflect another completely individual experience when assimilated by the reader to her own life.

Another way of understanding this is to look at the dynamic between memory and the future. Memory is one of the central aspects of Holocaust literature—not just memory in the sense that the survivor by definition is relating a memory, but in terms of illuminating the role that memory plays in politics and the formation of the individual. Memory and its lapses and its coloring individuate us, but at the same time, collective memory links us to a community. Indeed, it often *forms* that community in the first place. The observance of memory is the preservation of an irreplaceable history, an unrepeatable event. But the ethical commitment to carry on this preservation is a promise for the future.

This can also be understood in terms of Sartre's distinction between the in-itself and the for-itself. We come into the world with a specific, irreplaceable history. But this situation is universal. What really makes each of us unique is our ability to commit to an idea, to realize a project, to instantiate a value into the world. In other words, an event of the past gains its meaning through its essence being projected into the future.

This, I think, is why so much Holocaust literature is set in the past. Not, of course, for the obvious reason that the testimony of survivors must by definition refer to the past. But these stories could have been told with a voice that mirrored events that were happening immediately, “before the reader’s eyes,” so to speak. And much of this literature does. But some of the more experimental, like Perec, Sebald, and Imre Kertesz, often make memory, self-discovery through memory, and how one constructs it, into central issues of their work. Also some “straight narrative” writers like Cynthia Ozick and Saul Bellow (in *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*) make memory a central issue, in the sense of placing their stories in later decades and exploring the continuing effect of these crushing events on the survivors. My point is that the paradox is that these texts are not really about “the past” as such, but rather a call for us not to let it be repeated, which is a call to conscience for the future.

One of the essential things that testimony teaches us is that political (we will understand the work we’ve been discussing in the broadest sense of “the political”) art always comes too late. By the time that a political work penetrates the public consciousness, chances are that the specific situation that the work responded to had changed. By the time it reaches its audience, it is already testimony about something that has already happened. Therefore, all such art has to be viewed as a universal plea, a demand that the circumstances it relates not be repeated.

This is why so many writers on these topics have been inspired by their experiences to make commitments in their present day. Sartre followed *Anti-Semite and Jew* with *Black Orpheus*, and also the essay, “Vietnam: Imperialism and Genocide.”<sup>38</sup> He clearly saw that the Nazi spirit was most alive in the depredations of colonialism.

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<sup>38</sup> In *Between Existentialism and Marxism*.

And Paul Celan wrote the poem “Einem Bruder in Asien,” (“For a Brother in Asia”), which is apparently addressed to a Vietnamese person caught amidst warfare. All of these writers held the singularity of the Holocaust to be the occasion for an ethical commitment to a wider, more general future.

These witnesses give us, in turn, a summons to appear, a summons to continue their witness. Is it not clear that the mode of thinking that all these philosophers warned against makes it possible to continue to wage war against civilian populations because they are part of an “enemy nation,” whether this happens through flying airplanes into buildings or through carpet bombing, or through the establishment of check-points that treat an entire population as an enemy? Without this mode of thought, could the nation of Iraq have been substituted for any other Arab or central Asian country thought to menace the United State?

The tragedy of history, named Holocaust or Shoah, makes an appeal to us from across the decades. We, in our relative comfort and safety, are its Other, to whom the survivors and other witnesses have entrusted their testimony. As we look into the future, we commemorate them by allowing our horizon to be illuminated by Auschwitz’s dark light.

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