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SEQ CHAPTER \h \r 1
Norm.

Radical Encounter as an Aesthetic and Social

What first affects me when I become aware of the presence of another subjectivity is a vague feeling of being challenged. The Other's look rends my world, for it reveals a subjectivity that exists outside my world (insofar as that subjectivity does not represent itself to itself as being located within the coordinates of my one world): no sooner does the Other look at me than I recognize that the Other has an understanding which, because it is located in a place I do not occupy, transcends my own. As the Other tears open a hole in my world, I feel my world leak into hers, for I become aware that the Other constitutes her world differently than I constitute mine (that is, imposes a different frame on what makes up my world than I impose upon it). I have no access to the Other's frame; so, as the Other looks at me, I am aware that what makes up my world is being taken possession of by a subjectivity different than my own.

Thus, the Other surpasses me. Others present themselves as an Opening through which the Transcendent comes into my world. In my exchanges with Others, I learn that they possess an understanding that derives from a different place than that which I occupy and a different history than my own. On occasion this difference is so complete that I recognize the utter incommensurability of our worlds. (I recognize, that it to say, that the Other's understanding of the world cannot be translated into the terms I use to understand the world.) Others manifest themselves as different from me by presenting thoughts which I could never conceive or (what is more troubling), by understanding what I say in ways that I would never have foreseen. Others respond with a delight or disgruntlement that astonishes or annoys me, or with an incomprehension that strikes me as so implausible that it frustrates me. The Other is apprehended as a stranger – someone whose response to what I offer to our conversation sometimes surprises me by its very difference from the way that I understand my contribution. This Otherness pursues me and penetrates me as an alien presence. The Other addresses me when I want to hide, calls on me, appeals to me or challenges me even when I desire to participate in no exchange, and judges what I have to say.

The surprise, delight or disgruntlement I feel registers the Other's transcendence. Knowledge of the Other, and the recognition that the Other's world is not my own, puts my world into question. The Other's command, as it comes from an Other to my self, undoes my sense of autonomy and makes me realize that I am bound. Wherever Others presents themselves, a naked need – and a majesty – exposes itself: a need, and a majesty, that shatter the sufficiency of the realm of instrumental relationships. By searing me with their presence, they draw my thinking out of the imperium of the self. By subjecting me to an alien order, the Other troubles me, throws me out of kilter, disturbs my coincidence with myself – indeed the command of the Other transforms me into something I know to be askew of my self. The look of the Other causes a doubling of the self by making me aware of limitation and determination and, more importantly, by making me aware that I am always beyond what I know myself to be, something other than what is known through my self's self-presence.

The Other makes me a *self*, for the self is relational – indeed a relation whose extreme condition reveals its essence: that it is, at heart, a relation most accurately described as that of being possessed. ("Car 'Je' est un autre," Rimbaud wrote in "Lettre

du voyant”).) The self is always preceded by an origin, by an Other that it does not really know and over which it has no control. The self is the effect of forces, of ways of being and modes of knowing that it cannot assimilate as self-knowledge – of forces that it cannot assimilate into the self’s imperium. The Other’s eruption into my world makes me aware that the Other is that agency which makes self-presence impossible. Furthermore, the command of the Other also reveals to me my essential appalling nullity, for it points up that it is through the Other that I am created. The Other exposes my vulnerability, my destitution, my defencelessness against its command.

These remarks I have made are all simple, perhaps even crushingly obvious, observations about our experience of the Other. I make them in this paper on aesthetics because only the experiences of attention to the depths of another human being (including, importantly, erotic experience) and the religious experience of the grace, through which we are endowed with a supernatural, ethereal lightness of being, can compare with the strangeness we encounter through aesthetic experience. I am at home and in that all-too-common state of distracted, wandering attention: my mind turns now to consider what I have to prepare for tomorrow’s class, now to recollecting a point I wanted to bring to the attention of a PhD candidate whose thesis I am supervising but neglected to raise when I was speaking with her earlier in the day, now to an overlooked duty entailed by administrative responsibilities, now to planning my agenda for work on the film I am currently making, and now to deliberating on the contents of an article I was reading just before I set out for home in the early evening. A piece of music comes on the radio – a wondrous, but strange, performance of J.S. Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier*, by João Carlos Martin’s (1964). My world is transformed through a power that reaches down from the furthest Beyond into my depths. My mind is gripped by a form, and I cannot command my thoughts to let go of it, so alien is it to me; yet, though it is utterly alien to this world of quotidian concerns, I respond to it from my innermost, and ownmost, depths. That alien, intrusive form dominates me completely, and everything that belongs to my everyday world is eclipsed by my attention to this form.

This artistic form invades my everyday world and, through its destructive, negative power, it unworlds me. It comes from Beyond. It is an unintelligible presence in my world: I cannot fathom it using the principles that I use to understand the everyday world, for its majesty belongs to an order that my intelligence cannot comprehend. It leaves my thinking in ruins, for neither the methods nor the concepts I generally employ when seeking understanding have any relevance. I can engage with it only through conceptless sensation – through a pure, idea-less grasp of its dynamism (or, rather, through as close to idea-less sensation I am capable of). Because it ruins my thinking and unworlds me (removes from me the world I can so easily delude myself into thinking I am the master of), it humbles me.

When a piece of writing, a painting, or a piece of music conforms with our understanding, when the principles of its design are apprehensible, we call the work “pretty,” or “fine,” or “attractive,” or “nice.” With these terms, we indicate that we find the work pleasing; but we also imply that such a work is not a true work of art, the construction of which must remain elusive, ungraspable, incomprehensible, and which must possess at least an element of what is strange, bizarre, perhaps even malformed or downright ugly. As every true encounter with an Other discloses something that remains remote and unassimilable, so every aesthetic experience reveals something that is strange, something that speaks from another place than that which understanding comprehends. Just as every true encounter with an Other is a paradoxical relationship, having an aspect of what is so intimate, so personal, and so near that the relationship is

tantamount to a total identification and, at the same time, an aspect of what is infinitely remote and impersonal so, too, aesthetic experience opens us to an element which reaches into our innermost being, but, at the same time, remains in the Beyond – to an element that has an infinite strength that can never be exhausted, an element that cannot ever be made present to us by being represented within thinking.

Like our encounter with an Other, aesthetic experience reveals a realm that is at once searingly near (inasmuch as it presents itself through no intermediaries, not even the concepts of propositional thinking, so brute is its mode of address and so great the momentum that is the composite effect of its uncanny weight and its eruptive velocity) and troublingly remote (inasmuch as it cannot be made present within thinking). The aesthetic experience, like moral response, opens us to the ineffable, infinite mystery of the Other. It is this mystery that accounts for the sense of terror that true artworks elicit (an experience Enlightenment and Romantic theories of the Sublime highlighted). Just as I cannot reduce the Other to my own terms, or to the status of a phenomenon that appears within my own world, so I cannot reduce a true work of art to a series of signs that I can comprehend; I cannot make a work of art truly my own (even, as I can testify, when I am, as they say, “its maker,” i.e., even when I am the conduit through which the Transcendent has made itself manifest). Because a work of art always remains remote, something Other, it continues to fascinate me for as long as I have discipline and sensory/emotional energy enough to continue to attend to it.

Like the Other, a work of art remains transcendent, even when an interest that arises from affection draws us to it. A work of art, therefore, is never exhausted, never ceases to surprise us, even when we think we know it quite well. It remains elusive – in fact, grows ever more elusive – as we get to know it better. Just as the strangeness that discloses itself in our encounter with Others puts our worlds (our values) into question, the alterity of an artwork disrupts and transforms our being; and just as my encounter with an Other exposes my vulnerability to me, so an artwork makes me aware of the poverty of my being.

Further, the acknowledgment of necessity is common to both moral and aesthetic experience: in the moral sphere, necessity results from obedience to the Other’s unconditional command, while in the aesthetic realm, necessity is inherent in the demand for order and harmony (an order that, strangely enough, cannot be grasped in any way other than through rapture). This overlap of moral and aesthetic phenomena adumbrates the fact that every experience of the radiance of beauty is an experience of the goodness of some particular being. That is the reason that both moral and aesthetic experience require a revolutionary metaphysics of the concrete particular, not a metaphysics of the universals. What is more, in both the moral and aesthetic realms, the acknowledgment of necessity engenders feelings of love and, even, of reverence – this love for necessity is something nearly all parents experience, as their hearts fill with reverence for the role they are commanded to fill. In both realms, this love points towards the delight in obedience to what is Higher. The analogousness of aesthetic phenomena and the phenomenon of true human encounter makes clear why one can even feel a measure of carnal arousal at the experience of the beauty, whether in the human world, the natural world, or the made world (of *poiesis*).

Of course, the nearness of a work of art is not identical to the nearness of the Other. There is not in the experience of a work of art the same recognition that there is in the encounter with Others of that shared vulnerability that is the source of moral obligation. We owe a work of art only attention, not concern; and even this demand is less than unconditional. I can ignore the aesthetic demands of a work of art, if I choose,

without seeming perverse or even philistine (though I do become somewhat less, somewhat poorer, if I do so often). But I cannot ignore the moral obligation that the Other imposes on me. Nor is the remoteness of a work of art identical to the remoteness of the Other. Others' remoteness relates to the height from which their moral commands are issued, while the remoteness of a work of art derives from its terrifying strangeness. If anything the remoteness of a work of art is even greater, for there is no possibility of establishing a relationship of reciprocity with an artwork, while our encounter with an Other engenders the illusion of holding out that possibility (if only as a regulative ideal).

Like the Other, a work of art demands attention – it demands, as Simone Weil remarks about attention, that one suspend one's thought, leaving it detached and empty, ready to be penetrated by the Other. It demands what that philosopher of religion called "de-creation." Aesthetic experiences open us to what comes from Above: to what is remote, impersonal, necessary, and wholly outside the circuits of selfhood. This practice of attention is an exercise in an activity requisite to a sense of moral obligation, for it is through attention that the depths of the Other are disclosed – aesthetic experience provides valuable models of attention opening up the depths of what is utterly other. What is more, the decreation that aesthetic experience demands a model of the sacrifice required by submission to the Other's command.

Attention is creative. The attention requisite to aesthetic experience does not simply register what is given to see, but creates what it beholds. Aesthetic attention has a role in engendering its intentional object and so helps to bring even the remotest elements of form, those from the furthest Beyond, into proximity with one's ownmost being; it does so through discerning, even through its remoteness and its strangeness, the necessity of an artwork's form. A work of art really cannot be self-reflexive (that is, it cannot represent itself within itself), for there is no metalevel available for self-representation – the sort of distance that metalevel would require would be incompatible with the raw, strange, brute character of the experience of a work. But even if an artwork cannot incorporate its achieved form as an element it represents, it can manifest the productivity which created that result. But it is likewise through the experience of my creativity that I recognize my responsibility for the human person I elicit through encounter. The experience of artworks helps me understand, within my exchange with an Other, the creativity through which I elicit the Other and through which the Other elicits me. Aesthetic experience helps me understand that the attention involved in moral response brings out the human person in the Other's alterity, a humanity formed as we recognize the Other's desire for the Good. Accordingly, the practice of aesthetic attention strengthens the practice of moral attention, for the spiritual activity of attention (or what, using a more technical language we might refer to as the noematic act) is very nearly identical in the two cases, differing primarily through effects of having somewhat different intentional objects. Reciprocally, the practice of moral attention strengthens the practice of aesthetic attention.

Thus, aesthetic experience discloses attention's creativity – indeed, the operation of creativity is the subject of all aesthetic experience, and without aesthetic experience we should have little acquaintance with the nature of creativity. This acquaintance is necessary to understanding community. For community arises through strangely mutual process: in the same act by which my attention solicits – or better, calls into being – the Other's humanity, as the Other's mirrors my recognition of his/her desire, and need, for the Good, the Other, by turning a human look towards me, calls my humanity into being. My act of creating the Other actually creates me. The Other's solicitation of my humanity occurs even when the relation between us is asymmetrical – even when the attention

that the Other pays to me is not equivalent to the attention which I give to the Other. For, if I attend to the Other, I can apprehend even the Other's indifference towards me as a human response.

The Other solicits me, calls my self into being. Thus, human being emerges through a relationship with Others: I become human through recognizing the Other as human. My recognition of the Other's essential humanity constitutes the Other's anthropogenic capacity, which in its turn renews my humanity – that is how thorough-going the mutuality of this relationship is. The form of thinking that allows us to understand such mutual relatedness emerges only in moral, aesthetic and, most profoundly, in erotic experiences; this explains why aesthetic experiences have moral importance.

Acknowledging the mutuality of our creating the Other and the Other's creating us requires another mode of temporality than the homogeneous, extended temporality of modern science, modern experience, and narrative. The temporal mode within which this acknowledgment unfolds has characteristics that might seem, *prima facie*, to be antithetical: first, in this temporal modality, the present must contain traces of the past and the future; and, second, in this temporal modality, the present must be ek-static (that is, the present must rupture itself from past and future to stand forth in presence). I shall deal with these characteristics in turn.

The temporal mode in which acknowledgment of mutuality of our creating the Other and the Other's creating ourselves can occur must be a temporal mode in which what is before, namely the self that solicits the Other, comes later than what comes after, namely the Other that is called forth. The (antecedent) humanity of a subjected self is required to summon the Other – for in order to issue that summons, the self must already be a fully human self. The Other, by responding to the call, brings me to understand my dependence on other human beings – to understand that I come forth as a new being in relation to this particular Other. The self is created by the Other by the same act as it is subjected to the Other, and it is through this subjection that the self becomes truly a subject (that is, to put the matter more technically, this subjection converts an antecedent *an sich* into a successor *für sich*). Before coming into relation with the Other, before acquiring the knowledge that one's being is dependent on the Other, one is not truly human. But a fully human self must issue the call to the Other – yet that fully human self can only come into being through (or subsequent to) that call (and the Other's response). A fully human self has to issue the call to the Other, yet its humanity issues from – succeeds – the activity of the Other. Such a process can only occur in a time in which the origin can also be the successor, and this condition can be met only by a time in which the past and the future belong to the present – a time in which the future creates the past within the moment of presence, even as the past solicits the future in the very moment of presence. The present of this temporal modality must therefore, like Henri Bergson's *durée*, be a specious present that contains traces of past and future within itself.

Aesthetic experience shares this temporal modality with the moral response, for in aesthetic experience, too, what comes after solicits what comes earlier, because what comes earlier is contained within what comes later and decides how it will come forth into presence. Here is an example of the twisted temporality of an aesthetic object: the principle upon which an object's being is based is both presupposed by and derived from the object. For the poetic principle, insofar as it is unique in every poem, designates a particular configuration of experience that gives a poem its shape and that, reciprocally, comes into being through the poem itself. It is primarily because they are

characterized by this temporal mode that artworks elicit a sense of necessity.

Yet though this temporal modality is one in which the present must be pregnant with a past contingent upon (or issues from) the future, it is also a temporal modality in which the present ekstasically ruptures from the past and future. For, like the Other, a work of art is remote, and can speak of and from the Beyond – accordingly, a true encounter with the work of art does not occur in the time of the everyday (any more than an encounter with the Other does). A phenomenological analysis of our experience of Others or of works of art reveals that those experiences belong to an entirely different temporal dimension than our ordinary experiences of the world. In the truest, deepest moments of encounter, one lives not in the spatialized time that physicists know, but a time of ek-stasis, a time that makes the present stand forth. In our encounter with the strangeness of Other persons, or with a work of art, the moment of presence stands forth as an accomplishment of existence, an escape from the flow of undistinguished, unmarked, instants-in-succession; the present presents itself as a moment of pure creativity. Thus the ek-static present ruptures reality by separating itself from the past and from all possible futures (whose traces it nonetheless contains). It appears therefore as a moment of origination, of engenderment, that produces a sensation of primality, of firstness, of being-without-precedence, being that cannot be named or conceptualized. This moment is unique, in as much as its being is without precedent; further, our consciousness of this moment is also a self-consciousness (this is what is indicated by Bergson's linking *durée* with subjectivity) – a half-brute, half-unaware mode of intuition that cannot be separated into consciousness of self and consciousness of the other (even though, paradoxically, the self and its other are not identical here, any more than they are elsewhere) exactly because consciousness does not attain true self-representation.

The temporal mode aesthetic experience elicits is not a narrative temporality that involves a process of retention and synthesis, of belonging, of assembling, a recovering of the past within the present; nor is it a temporal mode characterized by sheer consecutivity. Rather, the time that artworks make us aware of is a time composed exclusively of a first moment, a moment of primal self-sensing. It is not the same time as that in which we experience the world of objects ready-to-hand, for it is not the time of the same, a time of repetition without difference, a time constituted by moments that can be strung out in succession and that could be reshuffled. It is, rather, a time of discontinuities, a time whose past cannot be resumed in the present and whose future can never arrive, even though its present is replete with futures pregnant with the past. It is a time in which each new moment is wholly other to all other instants; it is a time that presents itself, therefore, as the continuous “coming-on of novelty,” to use William James' resonant phrase. It is a perpetual flux, without habit or horizon, a time whose future is unforeseeable and ungraspable, because it is always novel, a future for which alterity is not contingent on accidental features – indeed, it is a future which, as ek-stasis, is constituted in its very essence as alterity and which, therefore, comes upon us as mystery.

The moment that constitutes this temporal process is fragile and evanescent. It belongs to no world; it comes to me from the Other (or from the Otherness that is a work of art) and, as it remakes itself from moment to moment, it issues new commands to me that, because I am not wholly distinguished from it (that is, because I am not wholly distinct from that strange Other) transforms in my innermost being; thus, the novelty of the moment, fully experienced, has a power similar to that of the work of art to which I give my rapt attention. The ekstasical character of this future novelty unworlds me –

unworlds me in the here and now, for it draws me out and saves me from habit-formed being-in-the-world, even as it escapes presence and passes into alterity. The encounter with this Otherness, in moral and aesthetic experience alike, is therefore salvific. The lesson of both moral and aesthetic experience is that we live outside ourselves, in time. The ekstastic instant separates – separates by an infinite chasm – what we are from what we will become; by opening this infinite abyss, it teaches me my powerlessness, since I have no capacity to affect an unreachable future. Likewise, from the ek-static character of either moral or aesthetic encounter, I learn that my becoming is not determined from within myself, but by the Other (or by the work of art), and so I learn my powerlessness, my nullity in the face of what I encounter.

We live in a time that seems to have surpassed art, when the state apparatus – the universities, the media, the discourse around culture that the episteme of the time makes available to us – has consolidated itself around efforts to authorize popular entertainments (i.e., distractions from the rigours of encounter): commercial pop music; novels in popular genre forms; and popular films, inevitably in narrative modes, so that they might reinforce the time of protention and retention. The great artistic achievements of our time suffer a neglect unprecedented in recorded history.

At this very same time the world's most powerful state teeters on the brink of social collapse. The poor of this state live in conditions of appalling squalour in the midst of the greatest concentration of affluence ever recorded. That the neglect of art and a widespread social immorality have reached their apogee together, in the same time and place, seems to me no coincidence. The appalling social conditions in which we live are surely the result of the fragmentation that Tocqueville long ago recognized as posing the principle threat to the American liberal polity. I propose that such a fragmentation goes hand-in-hand with the failure to develop the potentials of encounter (or those modes of consciousness that can recognize those potentials).

What we see in America constitutes the most cogent argument for acknowledging that there is a connection between aesthetic experience and the good life (just as there is a connection between the deleterious effects of the cultural industries, formed in the very heartland of the American empire and its impoverished moral order). Both aesthetic experience and the experience of moral obligation exercise modes of consciousness that modernity does not recognize, and to which, accordingly, it affords no scope. As these faculties decay, both aesthetic and moral experience wither.

. The latter experience is more troubling precisely because it highlights how my world is seized and reconfigured in theirs – reveals, that is to say, my loss of control over what I understand as my world.

. In his denial of the Otherness of aesthetic experience, and his affirmation that aesthetic judgement (even while universal) has only subjective grounds (i.e., concerns only the subjective content of experience and not the object itself), Kant announces the beliefs

that would become the common sense of modernity. Thus, against the sort of position that I propose here, Kant argues: “Therefore by means of beauty regarded as a formal subjective purposiveness, there is in no way thought a perfection of the object, as a purposiveness alleged to be formal but which is yet objective. And thus to distinguish between the concepts of the beautiful and the good as if they were only different in logical form, the first being a confused, the second a clear concept of perfection, but identical in content and origin is quite fallacious. For then there would be no *specific* difference between them, but a judgment of taste would be as much a cognitive judgment as the judgment by which a thing is described as good; just as when the ordinary man says that fraud is unjust he bases his judgment on confused grounds, while the philosopher bases it only clear grounds, but both on identical principles of reason. I have already, however, said that an aesthetical judgment is unique of kind and gives absolutely no cognition (not even a confused cognition) of the object.” (*Critique of Judgment*, §15.) The idea that because a judgment is non-cognitive, it must have only subjective grounds is an idea that much of this essay is directed against, just as much as it is directed against Kant’s further conclusion that aesthetic and moral judgments have utterly different natures.

. The idea of distance proposed in Edward Bullough’s “‘Psychical Distance’ as a Factor in Art and as an Aesthetic Principle” (*British Journal of Psychology*, Vol. 5 (1912): 87-117), and canonical in modernist art theory to me misses the mark: Bullough’s argument mistakes distance for strangeness, for the radical fact that artworks speak to me from another order, an order that does not belong to this world. In doing so, it somewhat trivializes the remoteness of an artwork.

. The anthropogenetic dimension of encounter, the realization that, contrary to the liberal-modernist theory of society, one is not self-sufficient when one is alone, that one cannot be conscious of oneself as a self unless one recognizes the others as selves, was broached by Hegel in the section of *The Phenomenology of Spirit* devoted to analyzing the Master-Slave; however, Hegel’s phenomenology was directed towards mediation, while I insist the moral relation between self and Other is a relation in which any form of mediation is impossible, the encounter with Other being an experience of fundamental alterity.