

Was There Art in Eden?

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Introduction

It is no coincidence that each of the so-called masters of suspicion – those whose thought is commonly taken to shape contemporary thought: Marx, Nietzsche and Freud – looked to ancient Greece as a golden age of artistic inspiration.¹ For each, early Greek civilisation represents a wellspring of aesthetic vitality, a full appreciation of which is lost to later Western thought. And even so apparently atheistic a thinker as Nietzsche is content to allow to Homer and to Hesiod that their inspiration is properly conceived as divine: ‘What is essential in art remains its perfection of existence, its production of perfection and plenitude: art is essentially *affirmation, blessing, deification of existence*’.² For Nietzsche, the decline in the Western understanding of art began with Plato’s devaluation of the artist to mere copyist of nature. And the Christian appropriation of the Platonic approach – to art as to life – is a clear manifestation of man’s loss of a sense of his own dignity and worth, values that Nietzsche believes are most clearly expressed in early Greek art. It is this

¹ In Section Four of the Introduction of the *Grundrisse*, Marx speaks of Greek art nostalgically as expressing the ‘truth’ of the ‘childhood’ of our civilization, ‘its most beautiful unfolding’: Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans Martin Nicolaus (London, 1973). Freud’s love of antiquity is well-known, attested by the extraordinary art collection he took out of Vienna in 1938. A recent study has linked his love of these sculptures to the development of his theory – particularly the theory of the Oedipus Complex: Janine Burke, *The Sphinx on the Table: Sigmund Freud’s Art Collection and the Development of Psychoanalysis* (New York, 2006). Nietzsche’s veneration of Greek art is expressed at great length throughout his works, from the earliest: see *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans Walter Kaufmann (New York, 1967).

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans Walter Kaufmann and R J Hollingdale (New York, 1967) Book IV, Section 821. See Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans Robert Fitzgerald (Garden City, 1961) 127, and Hesiod, *Theogony, Works and Days*, trans M L West (Oxford, 1988) 3-4, 22ff on the divine inspiration of art.

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‘Platonic inversion’ that propels man in the slide into scepticism and nihilism that Nietzsche so forcefully diagnoses.³

The question of this paper is posed against the background of this admixture of loss and alienation sometimes dubbed the ‘postmodern condition’. The question concerns the role and status of the transcendent in art and is approached by way of the philosophy and theology inspired by the ‘masters of suspicion’. Do notions of transcendence still have a role to play in our understanding of art? How is such transcendence to be conceived in this sphere, if notions of divine inspiration no longer hold sway? And what is the relation of transcendence to immanence, to which it has for centuries been opposed? In this paper I propose that (our postmodern condition notwithstanding) notions of transcendence still have a role to play in art and that this role is so fundamental as to suggest a continuity with ancient views of art as divinely inspired.

The Limits of an Immanent Aesthetic

Nietzsche is notorious in religion and theology for his diagnosis of the death of God in modernity. Yet Nietzsche’s condemnation of the Platonic approach to art has in large measure to do with this issue of the divine inspiration that he took to be necessary to the flourishing of the artistic. (This discussion is thus of a piece with a larger retrieval of Nietzsche’s views for thought on religion that has been taking place over the last decade or so.)⁴ Plato’s views on art waver somewhat across his corpus, but the prevailing view denies the artist any claim to have somehow touched the transcendent. Initiating a grand tradition of thought on art that has only lost its hold in the last century, Plato famously argued that art is a simulacrum, a second-order reflection of a perfect order which is manifest only in the thought of the Forms – which is to say, the thought of God. Indeed, art rests at a second remove from reality, in that it is a copy of a copy

³ Nietzsche’s belief that art is the highest expression of the will to power, as the means by which man ‘stamps becoming with the character of being’, is presented in *The Will to Power*, *ibid*, Book III, Sections 616-617.

⁴ See for example Merold Westphal, ‘Nietzsche as a Theological Resource’, *Modern Theology* 13:2, 1997, 213-226.

of the Forms, the first-order copy being the world of appearance.⁵ Thus the interpretations that Homer inspires provide no knowledge; strictly speaking, they are irrational, since the purveyor of the arts cannot know whether or not what he or she is saying is true – nor even exactly what it is that he or she is saying when speaking on this subject.⁶

The identification of the thought of the Forms with the mind of God shows how easily Platonic ideas could be incorporated into early Christian thought. So too, Plato's notion of the simulacrum may be adopted to express the idea that God's handiwork in the days of creation is reproduced (albeit on an infinitely reduced scale) in the labours of the artist. In the Christian context, the idea of a relation between the divine and human artist has generally served to dignify the artistic, in particular for its ability to reflect and embody the beautiful. For Augustine, the grounds for this positive assessment have to do with the normative judgement that is essential to art, to the assessment of beauty of form. The artist has the ability to improve on nature, observing the internal harmony and symmetry of parts to the whole. In order to appreciate such harmony, artist and spectator alike employ an understanding of an ideal order that can only be given by 'divine illumination'.⁷ The medieval Neoplatonists inherited from their Academic forbears a fondness for metaphors of the 'divine light' under which the thing of beauty is perceived, and saw it as expressing

⁵ Plato, *Republic* in *The Dialogues of Plato*, 3rd Edition, trans B Jowett (Oxford, 1892) Vol 3, 598-601. Distinguishing between four levels of cognition in the *Republic*, Plato places imagining – and by implication the imaginative *techne* – at the lowest (*ibid*, 509-511). But elsewhere, he is more circumspect about allowing any authentic content to the arts. In the *Gorgias*, for example, he speaks of painting as a pseudo-craft, a 'knack' of the decorative, without genuine value (Plato, *Gorgias*, 463-65, *Dialogues*, Vol 2). Interestingly, the low cognitive content of the arts allies it to certain religious phenomena: like the diviner, who may receive genuine knowledge as a result of possession by a divinity, the artist may be possessed of a madness (*mania*) courtesy of the Muses (Plato, *Meno* 99c, *Dialogues*, Vol 2). Be that as it may, the criterion for judgment of the value of the art produced is truth, understood as resemblance to reality.

⁶ Plato, *Phaedrus* 532c, *Dialogues*, Vol 3.

⁷ Augustine, *De Musica*, trans WF Jackson Knight (Westport, 1986) IV, xii, 34.

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an affinity of human soul to divine source.⁸ The Platonic emphasis on the contemplation of form implicit in such a philosophy of art made it highly sympathetic to the artistic revival of the Renaissance, as to later Romanticism.

Pulling in the opposite direction, however, one might also cite an abiding distrust of artistic pretension in the history of the Church, and repeated restatements of the iconoclastic sentiments of the early generations: there must be no possibility of confusion between the activities of divine and human artistry. The work of nature is of a different aesthetic order from that of the artist, if indeed the notion of the aesthetic can legitimately be applied to divine creation: might God not suffer limitation if governed by a requirement to adhere to aesthetic principles? And how might the principles governing divine creation be known, in any case? To dispel the possibility of confusion, Christian thought regularly revisits this Platonic distinction between the two conceptual spheres: the transcendent – the realm of the eternal and the absolute, of God – and the immanent – the realm of the transient, of Man.⁹ On the iconoclastic approach, artistic creation cannot be thought to straddle this divide.

It is undoubtedly in an iconoclastic frame of mind that Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God was made. It bespoke late modernity's alienation from traditional notions and models of transcendence. The iconoclastic sentiment forcefully expressed by Nietzsche is widely considered at the root of the 'turn to immanence' in the grip of which contemporary thought remains. Received wisdom

⁸ The source of these metaphors may be traced to the Neoplatonic School of Plotinus, who in several essays of the *Enneads*, speaks of the experience of beauty as the participation of the soul in divinity. The beautiful thing is unified by its ideal form, which is an expression of the One Principle underlying all, and an emanation of the Divine Mind. Plotinus, *Enneads*, trans Stephen Mackenna (London and New York, 1991) I, i, 8 and I, iii, 2.

⁹ The dichotomy of transcendence/immanence feeds iconoclasm by supporting the claim that the sacred (a reflection of the transcendent) should be protected from the incursions of the artistic (a reflection of the immanent). But it may also provide a means by which the icon may be preserved: by asserting the impermeability of division between icon (transcendent) and idol (immanent). See for example, Jean Luc Marion, *The Idol and Distance: Five Studies* (New York, 2001).

has it that the art world was one of the earliest and most enthusiastic advocates of this turn. Twentieth century art is nothing if not iconoclastic; therein lies the artists' newfound reputation for radicalism. The major aesthetic movements of the last century – abstract, expressionist and symbolist, among others – take art to be governed, not by faithfulness of representation of an external reality, but of expression of an inner reality. On the face of it, then, this art represents an about-face from Platonic views of art, from the view of art as simulacrum of a higher reality and from the view of the artist as purveyor of beauty. It represents a rehabilitation of the imagination, with a decidedly un-Platonic concern for the conditions of creativity, originality and inventiveness of expression.

That said, the contemporary demand for a purely immanent aesthetic remains constantly challenged by the perennial artistic quest for depth of content – a quest that at times takes on distinctly religious or mystical overtones. The religious nature of the quest starts to reveal itself where the artist seeks structures and forms for the expression of the inner reality at issue: to show that this reality has a significance that transcends the merely particular. It becomes more apparent where the artistic sensibility reiterates some of the qualities of the sensibility of the divine: where the inner reality is perceived as fleeting, indeterminate and barely articulate, for example. The artist, like the mystic, is commonly seen to struggle with themes that are refractory to expression or illustration. It is also apparent where these themes have to do with the reconciliation or harmonisation of such dualities as intuition and experience, cognition and emotion, consciousness and unconsciousness – and ultimately, with the reconciliation of man and his world. And finally, the religious nature of the artistic quest is especially evident where these themes are figured by appeal to symbolic forms that are themselves steeped in a hermeneutic tradition: in the symbology of light and dark, purity and impurity, ethereality and sensuality, and the like. The hermeneutic governing the interpretation of these symbols in the West cannot escape its religious inheritance. The artist has not the power unilaterally to disavow this history.

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So it is that the modern artist continues to struggle with questions of sublimity, ultimacy, ideality and the like – in short, with questions traditionally delineated as religious. And one finds the theorist of art appealing to concepts that have been all but abandoned elsewhere in the humanities: of harmony and coherence; unity and wholeness; purity and truth, for example. Consider, by way of an example, how art critic Allan Kaprow discusses the ‘purist’ aesthetic of Piet Mondrian and its ‘aura of theology’:

One can indeed venture to guess that it was Mondrian who identified purity for us in modern painting and, further, that he alone was able to carry its method of execution so far beyond itself that the method became a purification rite ... The answer for him lay at the ‘heart of the matter’, in the continuous and polarized forces of the universe, not in the seeable world. But the seeable painting was to reveal it, however momentarily, for nothing else would. So he set himself the task of creating a visible vocabulary for what until then had been invisible.

The task was a test of his imagination as much as his insight – his ultimate creative act, without which he would never have made his point. This utterly simple hypothesis – that in the perpendicular relations of two straight lines, varying in length and width and axially aligned with the ocean’s horizon and with the force of gravity, the Truth is revealed – gave his work of coherency that the work of his contemporaries did not have. The equation is, above all, easy to see, and it is easy to feel from this cruciform relationship a vague Christian meaningfulness ...¹⁰

For many contemporary philosophers and theologians – as for the artist and art critic themselves – the artistic is a realm where concepts of the exaltation and ennoblement of the ‘spirit’ of man remain viable, where notions of rebirth and redemption, beatitude and sacrifice still have meaning.¹¹ For some, it is the only such realm. The artist is then charged – as by Nietzsche and again by Heidegger – with the burden of answering those questions of ultimate concern that

¹⁰ Allan Kaprow, ‘Impurity’ in Jeff Kelley (ed) *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, (Berkeley, 1993) 29-31.

¹¹ Such a view of art dates to a series of publications of the 1930s and 1940s, among which John Dewey’s highly influential *Art as Experience* is perhaps the most important. In this work, he proclaims the ‘consummatory’ role of art as a celebration of the highest of cultural values. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York, 1935).

have left the modern philosopher foundering.¹² For Nietzsche, art performs the function of reconciling man to his existence, since ‘only as an aesthetic phenomenon can the world be justified to all eternity’. Art is portrayed as a redeeming and healing enchantress; she alone may transform the terror and absurdity of existence ‘into imaginations with which it is possible to live’.¹³

Leftist Thought and the Concept of Transcendence

As an example of these tendencies in modern art, let me consider a debate that proved highly influential upon leftist thought of the twentieth century: the struggle between realist and formalist principles in art in early Soviet Russia. Interestingly, one finds religious or quasi-religious motifs employed on both sides of this debate. On the one side, the realists claimed that Man – the New Man, the Man in the process of creating himself – deserves an art that represents the highest in him and that reflects the enormity of his aspirations. This is an art that allows Man to see himself as heroic, as God-like. The egalitarian principle underlying this approach is so thoroughgoing as to flatten the differences, not merely between Man and Man, but between Man and God also (though notably not between Man and woman; the gendering of this paragraph is intentional). The quasi-religious aspect of this ruggedly materialist aesthetic is manifest in its desire to sacralise this world above all else. It is perhaps evident also in its propensity to dogmatism, in its willingness to impose a vision of transcendence upon a populace, rather than to let it grow organically.

On the other side, the futurists reclaimed the Russian spirit of iconoclasm as the basis of an aesthetic principle. (The irony of this stance deserves comment.) Their destruction of received imagery was the artistic equivalent of the negative theologian’s ‘no, not that, not

¹² So, for example, in a remarkable essay ‘The Origin of a Work of Art’, Heidegger presents art as a pivotal medium of truth by which we may understand ourselves. Art, he says, ‘lets truth originate’; ‘it is the becoming and happening of truth’: in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans Albert Hofstadter (New York, 1971) 71, 77.

¹³ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, *op cit*, Section 5 and Section 7.

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that, not that' to the perennial desire for representation of God.¹⁴ The avant-garde artists' experimentation with colour, form and texture may be interpreted as one of the finest expressions of the freedom of these purely this-worldly artistic elements. It is a refusal to allow the artistic to be co-opted to an ulterior religious or political motive – a refusal, that is, of art's status as icon. The authenticity of the artistic medium lies on its surface and so is apparent for all to see. In this respect as in others, the avant-garde art of the early twentieth century upheld the most precise egalitarian principles that fuelled the revolutionary Left from the beginning. In this they shared with their realist comrades 'an almost Messianic belief in the power of art to transform the world'.¹⁵

But, here as elsewhere in modernity's journey into immanence, one is entitled to discern a finer statement of a principle of the transcendent. Just as the negative theologian may be charged (by Jacques Derrida, for example¹⁶) with denying all merely human speech of God so as to preserve from desecration a higher sphere that is more properly Godlike, so too the abstract artist may be considered to promote his or her own principle of the absolute, of purity of form. The abstract artist, like the Desert Father, is drawn to a desert landscape (the blank canvass) so as to give the infinite the chance to speak in its own terms. So Kazimir Malevich speaks of his break with the image as 'a blissful sensation of being drawn to a "desert" where nothing is real but feeling, and feeling became the substance of my life'.¹⁷ In this desert landscape, the aesthetic sensibility must find its own sources of fertility and growth; received models no longer obtain, no longer constrain. The notion of the aesthetic returns once more to its place of

¹⁴ See Bruce Chatwin, 'George Costakis: the Story of an Art Collector in the Soviet Union' in *What am I Doing Here?* (London, 1990) 163.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 154. This may have allowed the abstract artist a refuge for longer than might have been expected in the political turbulence of the early Soviet state; abstract art was nevertheless banned by the 1930s. By the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934, the State had instituted Socialist Realism by fiat.

¹⁶ Derrida argues that negative theology thus incorporates a 'hyperessentialism' that it infinitely positive, not negative, as 'negative theology' implies. Jacques Derrida, 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials' in Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (eds) *Derrida and Negative Theology* (New York, 1992).

¹⁷ Quoted in Chatwin, *op cit*, 163.

origin in Platonic conceptuality, staking a claim in respect of purity of form itself.

Extrapolating beyond the artistic, leftist thought in general remains thoroughly preoccupied with such questions of the relation of the immanent to the transcendent, materiality to ideality, immediacy to ultimacy, man to spirit (however conceived). Such concerns continue to fuel a utopian element in leftist thought that has survived the postmodern 'scourge'. Recent liberatory movements – feminism and postcolonial movements, for example – have been charged with a dual task not dissimilar to that which challenged the early Soviet revolutionaries – and have adopted related concepts of transcendence to address it. They are required to give their constituency a voice, to speak of their experience of what is, but at the same time to deny that voice for the sake of something incommensurably higher. If they deny the present, it is for the sake of the possibility of a future which is radically other than that which presents itself. The tension between the immanent and the transcendental is given a powerful contemporary statement in this dual political motif: on the one hand, the need of the critic to immerse him – or herself in the violence of the present so as to serve as advocate for those who are its victim; on the other, the need to dissociate oneself from the politics of negation and confrontation, to carve out a conceptual space in which to think of a future utterly undetermined by such violence. The postmodern in general is challenged by this dialectic of immanence and transcendence. The fate of received concepts of transcendence are here of central concern: if modernity's turn to immanence resolves into nihilism, by what values is humanity to be 'saved'?¹⁸

How, then, to think of the transcendent, of what absolutely exceeds the here and now, from the vantage of the present? How to envisage a beyond, while taking seriously the contours of the here and now from which it must (somehow) emerge? How, in particular, can a utopian vision erupt from the depths of the scepticism and alienation that is

¹⁸ I refer to Heidegger's famous exclamation that 'only a God can save us'. Martin Heidegger, 'Only a God Can Save Us: *Der Spiegel's* Interview with Martin Heidegger', *Philosophy Today* 20:4, 1976.

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the legacy of modernity? If leftist politics is to be something more than merely a wrecking party (which arguably, futurism and postmodernism have at times become) this question of what exceeds the limits of the present is a pressing one and must be concretely addressed. But how to address that which, *ex hypothesi*, lies beyond the horizon of the seen? For Derrida, as for Emmanuel Levinas, this futural aspect of the transcendent makes it *transcendental* in the full Kantian sense: it is a condition of possibility of the lived present which is nevertheless incapable in principle of self-disclosure in the present.¹⁹ The transcendent manifests only as a *trace* in the present. How, then, to take hold of the present as a blank canvass on which an outline of an ideal future is to be traced?

Differing Concepts of Transcendence

I will grant that my discussion is wavering ambiguously between (at least) two concepts of the transcendent. These might be termed metaphysical and temporal transcendence – or, with Luce Irigaray, vertical and horizontal transcendence. Irigaray distinguishes between (on the one hand) the projection on the part of man of ideals of self theorised to be universal, absolute, necessary, eternal and therefore divine in the received (Platonic) sense, and (on the other) the creation of a ‘horizon of the infinite’ which will nurture and sustain a sense of the possibilities of one’s becoming. This is ‘a path into infinity that is always open, *in-finite*’ and is divine in the sense that it points to values that are ultimate, ideal and transcending.²⁰ These differing concepts of transcendence have not been clearly distinguished here, and it is not, I suppose, sufficient to note in my defence that the Christian tradition has long been content to obscure their differences.

¹⁹ The preoccupation with this theme in the work of both these philosophers – especially in Derrida’s later writings – are what have attracted many theologians and philosophers of religion to them. See for example John D Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington, 1997) Chapter 2.

²⁰ Luce Irigaray, ‘Love of Same, Love of Other’ in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans Carolyn Burke and Gillian C Gill (Ithaca, 1993) 104. In theorizing the latter of these, Irigaray proposes what she calls a ‘sensible transcendental’, a concept of the spiritualization of the flesh in which the divine is manifest.

These differing models of transcendence may be identified in many different fields or disciplines: in philosophy, theology, aesthetics, ethics and politics, among others. The difference between these two models, for example, has been explored in the last century in debates over the possibility of presenting a visionary aesthetic. It is expressed in the difference between two forms of purity that may be discerned in twentieth century art: on the one hand, the search for a vision of the higher sphere, of the laws governing nature or the spirit underlying matter; and on the other, the search for an ideality of form, for the ultimate geographical simplification, which takes flight beyond materiality into a mystical beyond. The former search is associated with Mondrian and the latter with Malevich. Each expresses an appeal to the transcendent, the former in its gesture towards something deeper or higher, and the latter in its gesture towards something new or novel. It is the latter which expresses the futural dimension which, I have suggested, lends it to the service of a visionary aesthetic.

There are nevertheless evident similarities between metaphysical and temporal notions of transcendence, which justify the common term – and go some way in justifying the Christian tendency to conflate them. Three of these similarities, in particular, point to the critical role that concepts of transcendence continue to play in contemporary thought. The first I have mentioned: the transcendent has consistently been spoken of – and addressed – as what lies beyond the limits of the sayable, of the presentable and the comprehensible. This property has earned it the title of the ‘other’ in philosophy and theology: the transcendent escapes our attempts to define and determine it. It is not subject to, nor an object of, the imagery or other representational forms we invoke in reference to it. It has a certain conceptual autonomy in relation to our conceptual and representational categories. This represents a continuing Platonic theme in contemporary philosophies and theologies (even those at the furthest remove from the received Platonic agenda): the other transcends.

The second common feature arises as a result of this distance of the transcendent, and concerns the stance that the transcendent demands. The transcendent is the object, not of knowledge, but of faith. One

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does not – indeed, one cannot in principle – place faith in that which is fully self-disclosed, which is an empirical object like others. Whether this faith is expressed in prayerful silence or in Dionysian joy, the stance of faith towards the transcendent is one of a profound ‘yea-saying’, a ‘come!’ or ‘amen!’. Levinas speaks of it as the expression of an ethical demand and is experienced as the obligation that one feels in the face of the other, the stranger, who appeals to one with a silent plea and ethical demand for justice. This stranger appears phenomenally as exteriority, which ‘introduces into me what was not in me’.²¹ By way of my obligation to, and responsibility for, the other, ‘I bear witness to the infinite’.²²

The third common feature supplements the ontological and ethical dimensions of this philosophy of the other with an epistemic dimension: this stance of faith towards the transcendent is necessarily unfounded.²³ It has no basis or foundation in the justifications that may be offered for it on the basis of present evidence. Faith does not seek evidential support; it is a sensibility that thrives only in the absence of criteria. Basil Mitchell describes this faith by way of an analogy with the faith of the freedom fighter in his or her accomplice, also figured as a stranger. While unfounded, it is nevertheless a faith on which one will stake one’s life. And it is in a particular sense necessary since, in the final account, one’s aims cannot be achieved without it. It is a condition of possibility of thought and action in the present.²⁴

²¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, 1979) 43.

²² Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans Alphonso Lingis (The Hague and London, 1981) 149.

²³ Paul Moyaert has written most convincingly on the unfounded nature of the act of faith in the transcendent, both secular and religious, and my discussion here is indebted to his. Paul Moyaert, ‘On Faith and the Experience of Transcendence: An Existential Reflection on Negative Theology’, in *Flight of the Gods: Philosophical Perspectives on Negative Theology* (New York, 2000) Chapter 13.

²⁴ See Antony Flew, R M Hare and Basil Mitchell, ‘Theology and Falsification’ in E D Klemke (ed) *To Believe or Not to Believe: Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*, (Fort Worth, 1992) Chapter 6.

The notion of faith that I am defending here is, in short, non-representational, pre-reflexive and other-directed. This concept of faith implies an object. Characterising this object in human terms, both Levinas and Mitchell (in a rare moment of agreement between continental and analytic philosophical traditions) identify him or her as a stranger. Their point is to suggest that the object of faith is ultimately unknown; it is not something familiar to us as other objects may be. This object is transcendent, not only in the sense that it is other, but also in the sense that it is the proper condition for the existence of the faith that it inspires in me. While the other remains always and necessarily other to me, the faith that I have in the other is nevertheless something that is properly my own and defines me for myself in relation to others. In this sense the other constitutes me as who I am in relation to it. My faith in the other – and, as its ‘transcendental condition’, the other itself – is fundamental to me in this way.

It is commonly held that, in taking Cartesian doubt to its logical conclusion, the so-called masters of suspicion have undermined our entitlement to faith, to appeal to the transcendent. Their legacy, viewed positively, lies in the exhaustive reappraisal of concepts of immanence that their thought has inspired. Viewed negatively, their legacy is a wave of doubt and nausea such as accompanies any journey on high seas (to borrow Nietzsche’s metaphor). An alternative perspective has, however, recently begun to take shape, which pays greater heed to the utopian, prophetic and epiphanic modes of their thought – which focuses, that is to say, not only Nietzsche’s ‘new seas’ but also on the islands where one anchors along the way. This perspective demands, not the abandonment of transcendence for immanence, but a different conception of the nature of each and status of each in relation to the other. The concept of the transcendent as the proper object of faith goes some way to meet this demand.

Conceiving the transcendent in these terms serves to underscore the intimacy of the relation between transcendence and immanence: the fact that transcendent and immanent are *pre*figured, each in the other. It is only by acknowledging the point at which we stand that the

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transcendent is ‘let be’ as such, as other to all that we presently are. But equally, it is only by acknowledging what exceeds the here and now that a faithful orientation to the present may be lived. The situatedness of self is a precondition of experience, of knowledge and of communication; the transcendence of the other is a function of this situatedness, the fact that we are, as Heidegger claims, ‘thrown’ into a world of the other. The possibility of perspective is a function of the self’s ‘pre-reflexive being-in-the-world’; the situatedness of the self is a transcendental condition of subjectivity and of intersubjectivity.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty has developed such a model of transcendence in arguing that selfhood, situated in *intercorporalité*, is a condition of both subject and object: ‘... the question is always how I can be open to phenomena which transcend me ... how the presence to myself which establishes by own limits and conditions every alien presence is at the same time de-presentation and throws me outside myself’.²⁵ The identification of self as one is at the same time an openness to the presence of the other; the givenness of one to other is in a certain sense primordial. But importantly for Merleau-Ponty, this notion of givenness is not a concept of transcendence in the traditional sense – that is, an ideality divorced from the empirical world. Rather transcendence is rooted in corporeality, in one’s spatio-temporal presence in the world. The notion of transcendence can be used to describe the way in which one’s corporeality is lived in relation to that of others. Here Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy clearly influences that of Irigaray, for whom the sensible transcendental ‘means ethical fidelity to incarnation’.²⁶

²⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans Colin Smith (London, 1962) 101. Merleau-Ponty refuses to consider this as a model of transcendental consciousness; however, the concept of the transcendence he is working with assumes its incorporeality by definition. For this reason, his model is described by John H Smith, from whose analysis I borrow in this paragraph, as a ‘peculiar nontranscendent transcendental condition of subjectivity and intersubjectivity’: John H Smith, ‘The *Transcendence* of the Individual’, *Diacritics* 19:2, 1989, 91. Smith employs Merleau-Ponty’s notion of intercorporeality in the service of a model of the transcendence of the self; I follow Derrida and Levinas in attributing transcendence to the other.

²⁶ Irigaray, *op cit*, 217.

Art as a Gift of Creation

With this concept of givenness – and of the ‘gift of the self’ – I return to the question of art posed earlier, of the role of the transcendent in the figuring of the aesthetic in modernity and postmodernity. If the artistic is in some measure an expression of, and reflection upon, a life lived in search of meaning and value, then it is as dependent as any other aspect of our experience on an act of faith. Even conceived most minimally, the artistic is an orientation towards the future, towards the possibility of renewal – of oneself, of community – through the medium of the visual. The artist, as I understand him or her, works to build (or to challenge and so to rebuild) some minimally shared framework of meaning, the foundations of an edifice of common and communal significance. The assumption of the possibility of shared meaning is itself the surest sign of a belief that we must not give in to the violence of the present, to scepticism and alienation. The artists’ despair, such as it is, can be recognised (as that of an artist) only against the background of the faith in the possibility of its expression, and so of its significance, both to the artist and to the community. This faith of which I speak is an expression of trust in the possibility of art as a medium directed towards future, and higher, possibilities. It is thus also an expression of trust in one’s neighbour. It bespeaks a trust that the other will take what is given with the care and respect with which it is offered. This trust, like the faith it reflects, is necessarily unfounded.

On the approach I am outlining here, contemporary art may be seen, not merely as an excursion into immanence, but equally as an expression of a faith in the transcendent. Far from a mere simulacrum, it is something infinitely valuable: a gift that the artist offers, a quintessentially human gift of creation. This is the reason why art emerges only with the Fall (and it is worth pondering the differences between the Greek and Christian mythic pasts on just this count).²⁷ There could be no art in Eden, where human creation is

²⁷ Nietzsche’s view in fact owes more to the Christian worldview than he admits: his death of God philosophy follows Hegel in theorizing the implications of man’s abandonment by God in the wake of Christ’s death. It is in this sense what Hegel

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largely redundant and faith, gratuitous. At the end of the century which invented the postmodern condition and the beginning of this new century, art is best conceived as an expression, not of God's boundless presence, but of God's enduring absence. It is only where the certainty of God's loving presence is not available to us that faith is needed. In truth, it is only there that faith is even possible, if by faith one means a certain spirit or sensibility toward an uncertain future, by contrast with a life lived in the abiding comfort of an eternal present. Art arises where the discernible signs of God's presence in this world elude us (to say nothing of her goodness). Only here can the visual field support the radical indeterminacy of the artistic. It is in this abyssal space – in the place of the lost Eden, if you like – that the gift of creation exists.

described in the last paragraph of *Faith and Knowledge* as a 'speculative Good Friday' philosophy. See W G F Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, trans Walter Cerf and H S Harris (Albany, 1977).