

The Turn from the Aesthetic

By Joel Galand

Not long ago this journal published a now famous debate between Lawrence Kramer and Gary Tomlinson over what a postmodern musicology might look like.¹ Though their visions clash, both turn for inspiration to the “New Historicism,” a critical school rooted in Continental philosophy—particularly Michel Foucault’s version of Gallic poststructuralism—that has emerged in comparative literature. The literary critic Peter Brooks has recently expressed reservations about this trend in words that could easily apply to the musicological situation as well.² Brooks understands “aesthetics” both in the narrow sense as “discriminations of the beautiful and the significant” and in the fuller sense of “poetics,” which includes as well considerations of form, structure, and genre. He argues for the right of aesthetics, broadly construed, to exist as a separate endeavor, over and against ideological critique, insisting that poetics (like systems of music analysis, one might add) are the grounds on which one begins to make sense of texts. We too eagerly “go right for the interpretive jugular” (*AI*, 517). We need the structural frameworks of poetics if we are to produce work that is sharable, teachable, capable of being “subsumed in a continuing enterprise . . . and made the subject of an intelligible dialogue” (*AI*, 510). Brooks worries that today,

for the first time since the 1930s and in a vastly different form, we have an ideologization of the aesthetic; the claim that the critic can, and must, position him or herself as analyst and actor in an ideological drama, that not to do so is simply to be a bad faith participant in hegemonic cultural practices. (*AI*, 513)

Brooks’s description of an ideologized aesthetic recalls those passages in the Kramer-Tomlinson colloquy that warn us of the “narrow set of

¹ The debate was occasioned by an earlier article of Kramer’s, “The Musicology of the Future,” *Repercussions* 1 (1992): 5–18, hereafter cited in the text as *MoF*. The remaining texts were published in *Current Musicology* 53 (1993): 18–40. These include Tomlinson’s response, “Musical Pasts and Postmodern Musicologies” (pp. 18–24); Kramer’s counterresponse, “Music Criticism and the Postmodernist Turn: In Contrary Motion with Gary Tomlinson” (pp. 25–35); and a final volley from Tomlinson (pp. 36–40). They will be cited in the text as *CM*.

² “Aesthetics and Ideology: What Happened to Poetics?” in *Critical Inquiry* 20 (1994): 509–23. Hereafter cited in the text as *AI*.

social interests" lurking behind notions of "autonomous greatness" (*MoF*, 6), without clarifying whether these notions actively *perpetuate* those interests or merely *emerge* from them. The question of autonomy bears careful scrutiny, since the terms in which Kramer and Tomlinson discuss it may be taken prematurely for granted. I argue in part 1 of this essay that the postmodernist distrust of the aesthetic needs to be tempered by a recovery of what was originally at stake in the positing of such an autonomous sphere. Enlightenment aesthetic thought may prove to be more of a piece with at least some poststructuralist critical theory than Kramer and Tomlinson seem to recognize.

A second, related issue, to be explored in part 2, concerns Tomlinson's description of how we encounter others. I question his account of incommensurability between the conceptual schemes that interlocutors bring into such encounters. Our suspicion of the Enlightenment's transcendental subject has led us to a concept of radical alterity that is now *lingua franca* in much humanities discourse. I want to suggest how some aspects of alterity so conceived might be incoherent, and how others lead us after all right back to the Enlightenment project. By way of conclusion, I indicate how these discussions of the aesthetic and the ethical bear on one another.

I. Aesthetics and Truth

Much "New Musicology" shares with its New Historicist correlate the tenet that the private sphere of aesthetic pleasure is inherently politicized; to think otherwise amounts to false consciousness. One might respond pragmatically, with Richard Rorty, that a goal of liberal democracy has been precisely to protect such private spheres while seeking to enlarge the ranks of those who are able to enjoy the pleasures, aesthetic ones included, that up to now have been available only for the relatively fortunate.³

On a more theoretical level, rather than talking about the politicization of the aesthetic, we might just as well describe the aestheticization of the political, for Enlightenment thought suggests clear structural similarities between aesthetic, ethical, and even cognitive judgments.⁴ When Nietzsche claims that "existence and the world are justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon" (*The Birth of Tragedy*, sec. 24), he is pushing to its ultimate

³ Richard Rorty, "Towards a Liberal Utopia," *Times Literary Supplement*, 24 June 1994, p. 14.

⁴ The aestheticization of Truth as a salutary corrective to an apodicticity that can all too readily descend into Terror is a theme common to contemporary writers as diverse as the French political philosopher Luc Ferry (*Homo aestheticus: l'invention du goût à l'âge démocratique* [Paris: Grasset, 1990]) and the British literary theorist Christopher Norris (*What's Wrong with Postmodernism: Critical Theory and the Ends of Philosophy* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990]).

conclusion the autonomization of the sensible with respect to the intelligible—the subjectivization of the world—to which eighteenth-century aesthetics gave impetus. The moral lesson of aesthetic autonomy, as Nietzsche presents it, is this: the aesthetic form of judgment is the most authentic insofar as it *proposes* an evaluation without dogmatically *asserting* its adequacy to its object.⁵

As an *entrée* to the issue of aesthetic autonomy, consider a paradigmatic description of it by the young Heinrich Schenker:

Music needs and demands *active engagement*, enjoyment which is also mental activity when it appears to be mere enjoyment, and at the same time is genuine enjoyment which leads to mental activity. And this need on the part of music is all the more intense and justified because music is denied forever the kind of logic that is peculiar to the world of ideas, a world which in turn emanates from the world of phenomena.⁶

Schenker divorces music from conceptual truth; its laws derive from an artistic “caprice” that lends a work the *illusion* of causality. The work behaves *like* the phenomenal world—for example, it appears as if we might subject the work to lawlike categories—but this world is a fiction devised for pleasure. This pleasure may be of the highest sort, promoting intense mental activity, but the activity is bounded: it does not point beyond itself, much less to anything that could be termed “the Absolute.”

For Kramer and Tomlinson, such relatively modest claims on behalf of the music-aesthetical imagination bring with them a problematic intellectual heritage, for “modernist internalism and aestheticism [still carry] the potent charge of nineteenth-century transcendentalism” (*CM*, 20). The problem with aesthetic autonomy is its failure to “jibe with the worldliness and contextual contingency that postmodern scholars find in all utterance, musical and otherwise” (*CM*, 19). Tomlinson deplors our inability to free ourselves from “a particular kind of aesthetic engagement defined and created in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe” (*CM*, 37). Kramer similarly describes the “invest[ment of] the objects of musicological investigation with the glamour or charisma of both truth and beauty” (*MoF*, 9).

⁵ Kramer says something like this in *CM*, p. 29, as part of an argument that Tomlinson later rejects (p. 38).

⁶ “Die Musik von Heute,” *Neue Revue* 5, no. 3 (3 January 1894): 87–88; translated by Jonathan Dunsby in *Music Analysis* 7 (1988): 33–34. Later, of course, Schenker changed his views in a reversal that might be compared to the reactionary turn taken by the Romantics (see below).

Such critiques suggest that the aesthetic ties art to a version of "Truth" that is purely conceptual; after all, sensibility could hardly fail to "jibe with worldliness." Yet in the history of epistemology, aesthetic autonomy refers in the first place to the autonomy of the *sensible*. It also bears reminding that the "aesthetic engagement defined and created in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe" was often explicitly "worldly." The Jena Romantics, for example, to whom "the potent charge of nineteenth-century transcendentalism" would seem especially apt, conceived of *Kunstreligion* as an emancipatory, civic movement. The distinction between "aesthetic autonomy" on the one hand, and "worldliness and contextual contingency" on the other, is forced because notions of aesthetic autonomy were from the very first interwoven with problems both ethical (the mediation of individual and society) and epistemological (the mediation of percept and concept).

"Language," writes Kramer, "cannot capture musical experience because it cannot capture any experience whatever, including the experience of language itself" (*MoF*, 10). Observations on the limits of language have led some poststructuralist thinkers to rehearse the Kantian argument that aesthetics properly belongs within the project of critical philosophy. Language, they argue, constitutes us as thinking subjects but is cut off from "truth" as it would appear to an ideal observer. In order to conceive change, whether through scientific inquiry or ethico-political action, our minds have to be receptive to ideas that have only a speculative, hypothetical status (e.g., "the coherent," "the good," "the progressive," and even "the world"), ideas whose objective validity can never be determined by empirical knowledge. Such are Kant's ideas of reason—linguistic signs devoid of representational content that nonetheless open up to us the very possibility of ethics and of science. What awakens these ideas is an *aesthetic* sense of the rightness of a principle or the coherence of a theory. If a de Man or a Lyotard turns back to eighteenth-century aesthetics, it is precisely because a category like the sublime, in the words of Christopher Norris,

marks a crucial point of intersection between language, politics, and the discourse of representation . . . [it] figures as a strictly unthinkable category, one that can never be present to thought in some form of existing reality or phenomenal cognition, but which none the less exists (like Kant's "ideas of pure reason") in a realm of as-yet unrealized future potential.⁷

⁷ Christopher Norris, *What's Wrong with Postmodernism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 215. Hereafter cited in the text as *Postmodernism*.

It is because the aesthetic opens up to us a *purely speculative potentiality* that I consider Kramer and Tomlinson to have overly stressed its internalism and mystification, and to have one-sidedly emphasized the historical links between aesthetics and truth (in the sense of the “Absolute” or “transcendental signified”). The claim I wish to defend here is that ever since the advent of aesthetics, art has been largely divorced from truth so conceived. The link between Art and Absolute—the identification of work with the unconditioned—is less characteristic of aesthetic thought than its demystifiers claim. (*Schön ist Schein*, as Schiller put it.) Dahlhaus has written much the same thing in connection with music aesthetics:

[I]t is only Schlegel, Hoffmann, and later Nietzsche [in an early, and not particularly representative fragment] who expound a theory of “absolute music” that ventures without qualification on the metaphysical, or (to invert the formulation) a metaphysics of which “absolute music” is an organon. . . .

[Even Schopenhauer] melded the metaphysics of music with the emotional theory of aesthetics (though in an abstract form).⁸

We might flesh out Dahlhaus’s point by noting that in the eighteenth century the necessary philosophical groundwork for the “emancipation” of music from word was laid without any appeal to “transcendent expressive modes” (CM, 18). Consider Baumgarten, who coined the term *aesthetic*.⁹ The very word suggests that what matters in the experience of art is the mental state of the αἰσθητής—that which perceives. A work of art occasions mental states, and the discrimination between them forms the basis of aesthetic judgments. Baumgarten’s aesthetics marked a decisive turning point in the rationalist tradition, according to which the measure of the human mind had been the standpoint of the ideal observer for whom spatial-temporal relations (the very conditions for human sensibility) appear as strictly logical relations. One consequence of rationalism was that art—the paradigmatic product of sensibility—could be considered at best a pale copy of the intelligible. If the first stage of knowledge

⁸ Carl Dahlhaus, *Between Romanticism and Modernism: Four Studies in the Music of the Later Nineteenth Century*, trans. Mary Whittall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 38. Elsewhere Dahlhaus deems Wackenroder a transitional figure, whose musical thought constitutes an “aus der Ausdrucksprinzip herauswachsende Metaphysik” (“Romantische Musikästhetik und Wiener Klassik,” *Arkiv für Musikwissenschaft* 29 (1972): 177.

⁹ Earlier than commonly supposed, in his doctoral dissertation *Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus* (Halle, 1735), trans. Karl Aschenbrenner and William B. Holther as *Reflections on Poetry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954).

involves, as Descartes put it, "leading the mind away from the senses" toward a "clear and distinct" vision, it follows that knowledge carries a price: we give up the vividness of sensuous apprehension. Baumgarten's radical step was to divorce art from truth by insisting on aesthetic perception, a confused (i.e., not distinct) cognition, as the paradigmatic stance toward the work.¹⁰ If Baumgarten does after all compare the work of art to the world, it is not because of its referentiality but because, like the world, it appears to hang together. No longer is the order of an artwork the *reflection* of an order exterior to a finite mind; at best it *suggests* such an order by analogy. Although Baumgarten says little about music, it logically follows from his discussion that there are no longer any grounds on which to devalue music in relation to the other arts.

Far from "not jibing with worldliness and contingency," aesthetic autonomy signals the emancipation of sensuous perception, of precisely that which is contingent as opposed to what is contemplated *sub specie aeternitatis*. From there, it is but a step to Kant's demonstration that the world is radically mind-dependent. That Kant used "aesthetic" to designate both the spatial-temporal conditions of sensibility (in *The Critique of Pure Reason*) and the judgment of taste (in *The Critique of Judgment*) indicates the extent to which aesthetic autonomy figures in the critique of metaphysics. Turn now from the rationalist to the empiricist tradition. When Burke divorces poetry from imitation, discarding the slogan *Ut pictura poesis*, he implicitly replaces painting with music. He denies that the effect of poetry is to "raise ideas of things" (*Philosophical Enquiry* V.2), claiming instead that its power resides in tonal effects, in sonority. The poet is "affected with this strong enthusiasm by things of which he neither has, nor can possibly have any idea further than that of a bare sound. . . . [D]escriptive poetry operates chiefly by substitution, by the means of sounds, which by custom have the effect of reality" (V.5). Burke's analysis of reading within a psychological account of the beautiful and the sublime casts poetry in the image not of image itself but of organized sound. Wordless music becomes an aesthetic paradigm not because it is closer to truth but because it suggests a critique of the view that language represents truth conceived as *adaequatio intellectus et rei*. Poetic language has no particular advantage over music in representing nature.

Much has been written about the role played by theories of the metaphysical Absolute in the "emancipation of music." The point to be stressed here is that the philosophical arguments by which such an emancipation

¹⁰ Karsten Harries develops this point in *The Meaning of Modern Art: A Philosophical Interpretation* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 18–21.

might be justified were already in place three-quarters of a century earlier, and in a context that has nothing to do with “venue[s] of transcendence” (*MoF*, 8). Rather, the heightened aesthetic status of music is first articulated in contexts where rationalist theories of language are questioned. Norris argues that the increased privilege accorded to music during the course of the eighteenth century marks a “crucial instance of the passage from a doctrine of language founded on ideas of mimesis, self-presence, and adequate representation to one that acknowledges the ‘empty’ or non-self-identical nature of the sign” (*Postmodernism*, 213).¹¹ If this is so, then the autonomization of music—and, more globally, of the aesthetic—is not something we need to distrust automatically as a source of mystification. We can read it instead as a lucid prefiguration of themes with which poststructuralist thought at its most rigorous is deeply concerned.

It is Kant who shows us most clearly why the aesthetic paradigm comes to matter so much as the eighteenth century unfolds: the autonomy of the aesthetic brings with it a subjectivization of taste, of ethics, even of the very idea of a cosmological order. In the wake of this *retrait du monde* (Luc Ferry), the reflective aesthetic judgment assumes a paradigmatic status as that mental activity that opens up in a nondogmatic fashion the realm of ethics and science. Something like an aesthetic capacity enables concept formation. Thus, Kant posits the beautiful as an experience that invites thoughts of an order in which our efforts to realize the (mere) ideas of reason *might* not be in vain. The sublime, on the other hand, by flooding our cognitive capacities, recalls us to our higher faculties even as we recognize their limits. The cognitive dissonance of sublime experience evokes the Kantian antinomies by inviting an analogy to the clash between our facticity and our aspirations. An appreciation of the sublime, and hence an acceptance of radical finitude, marks reason’s coming of age, a coming of age Kant described in his essay “What is Enlightenment?” Our ideas can never be guaranteed by knowledge, but the gap between reason and understanding—between the intelligible and the sensible—need not be cause for despair. We must dare to act in the subjunctive; we ourselves have, in a sense, to become sublime. Art invites us to draw analogies by suggesting that the organicism we ascribe to a work might be adopted as a regulative (not a constitutive) principle with which to deal generally with experi-

¹¹ Norris makes this point in the context of reviewing Kevin Barry’s *Language, Music, and the Sign: A Study of Aesthetics, Poetics and Poetic Practice from Collins to Coleridge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

ence.¹² The political implications of the aesthetic emerge when we are moved freely, *without empirical justification*, to approach others with respect and to make humanity itself our purpose.¹³

For Kant, as for his popularizer Schiller, art remains appearance. Indeed, it is important for them that art not be a matter of truth, for the ideas of reason evoked in the *Analytic of the Sublime* are strictly unknowable. If these ideas merely traced an exterior truth, human freedom would be impossible. Kant does not subscribe to a *constitutive* "symbolist-organicist creed."¹⁴ Such a creed, which Kramer and Tomlinson seem to find at the root of aesthetic autonomy, is a Romantic—essentially counterrevolutionary—accretion to a paradigm that was developed without it. And even among the Romantics, the emphatic claim that art is a transcendent medium through which truth actually manifests itself was put forth without irony by relatively few.¹⁵

Why even this limited turn toward a metaphysical conception of art after 1800? For the later Romantics, the impossibility of attaining absolute knowledge, of reconciling our finite sensibility with the infinite, seems to have become a source of despair, to which the degeneration of revolutionary ideas in the Terror and the Thermidorian reaction surely contributed. The Romantic solution was to bypass Kant's strictures on knowledge. By becoming an actual medium for the organic attunement of mind and world, art could regain an ontological status denied it in the eighteenth-century aesthetic paradigm. The metaphysics of instrumental music could be read as a defensive reaction to critical philosophy, a move that posits a constitutive *totality* to which music would somehow give access. Norris

¹² Against the New Historicism, Peter Brooks invokes Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* as "one of the most powerful, and, for all its datedness, most persuasive arguments for the centrality of the aesthetic in culture and the need to make it a core concept in education." The reason he cites is precisely that which Kant develops: "the aesthetic is what permits human beings to emerge from the purely physical while retaining the concrete and sensuous in their composition." Brooks argues that "constantly trumping the aesthetic by the ideological and political—making the aesthetic simply a mask for the ideological—risks losing a sense of the functional role played by the aesthetic within human existence" ("Aesthetics and Ideology," 516–17).

¹³ The connections between the Kantian sublime and politics are drawn especially clearly by Luc Ferry in *Homo aestheticus*, especially in chapter 3.

¹⁴ The phrase is Christopher Norris's (220).

¹⁵ Of course, one finds passages even in eighteenth-century aesthetics (e.g., by the philosopher of the *Sturm und Drang* Johann Georg Hamann, or by various Pietists) that describe art as religious revelation. For present purposes, however, it is enough to show that the principal developments in aesthetic theory may be plausibly read in a rather different manner from the one I detect in certain New Musicological writings.

describes the reactionary political implications of a such a move in Romantic poetics:

One could . . . see the architects of later romantic tradition . . . as offering a kind of rearguard defence, a mystified doctrine of aesthetic value that precisely negates or collapses those hopes once vested in French political events. (*Postmodernism*, 216)

Here is where Kramer and Tomlinson have cause for unease: the shift from a regulative to a constitutive organicism in Romantic philosophies of art is indeed “darkly tinted” (*CM*, 23). For once the ideas evoked by art are said to constitute a truth deemed “Absolute,” it is easy to envision how the aesthetic might become ideologized. In the writings of A. B. Marx, for instance, the musical *Idee* is invested at once with a quasi-religious significance as a bearer of ethical values, and with the historically concrete aspirations of a *Vormärz* German with a sense of national mission and cultural superiority.¹⁶ Such a merging of art, truth, and ideological constraint could only arise by ignoring Kantian distinctions such as operate between empirical reality (objects of understanding) and speculative thought (objects of reason). The effects of such a confusion, Norris cau-

are by no means confined to philosophy, aesthetics or literary theory. Their repercussions may be felt in the political sphere, and never more so than at moments—like the period of German High Romanticism and its nationalist aftermath—when critique gives way to the notion of truth as residing in some single, uniquely privileged language or culture (*Postmodernism*, 216).

By recovering the original context of aesthetic autonomy—the positing of a cognitive domain apart from knowledge and instrumental reason—we discover how the aesthetic can check precisely those ideological, metanarrative impulses of which Kramer and Tomlinson are justifiably suspicious. Kramer insists that “musical autonomy, even Carl Dahlhaus’s

¹⁶ The political goals of Marx’s criticism emerge with particular lucidity in Sanna Pederson, “A. B. Marx, Berlin Concert Life, and German National Identity,” *Nineteenth-Century Music* 18 (1994): 87–107. See also Scott Burnham, “Criticism, Faith, and the *Idee*,” *Nineteenth-Century Music* 13 (1990): 183–92. My one reservation about Pederson’s study is that she never quite distinguishes between the critical, Kantian phase of aesthetic autonomy and a later tendency, to which Marx falls prey, toward conflating empirical reality and the ideas of reason into a unitary metanarrative.

'relative autonomy,' is a chimera" (*MoF*, 9). But as far as chimeras go, this may not be a bad one to hold on to. "Relative autonomy" is simply the name we give to our intuition that though art arises within a culture, it might also in an important sense stand apart and perform a critical function.¹⁷

The Romantic paradigm was, strictly speaking, short-lived. Granted by Enlightenment aesthetics, contested by the Romantics, the divorce of Art and Truth was finally upheld by Hegel. We moderns, Hegel tells us, no longer take art "as the supreme mode of our knowledge of the Absolute. The peculiar nature of artistic production of works of art no longer fulfills our highest need. . . . [A]rt, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past."¹⁸ If Hegel is correct—and the very existence of the aesthetic approach seems to bear him out—then Kramer and Tomlinson exaggerate the historical force of a metaphysics that linked art to truth. Nor should nineteenth-century aestheticist slogans of *l'art pour l'art* lead us to reject Hegel's verdict. In aestheticism—basically a version of pessimism—art becomes not a venue of "Truth" but rather a healing fiction we substitute for a world in which we are no longer at home. The aesthete seeks refuge in art (or in a life lived aesthetically) knowing full well that his refuge is a *paradis artificiel*, though one in which he hopes for a while to escape a boredom that threatens to arouse reflection. Depictions of such a life, from Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* to Huysmans's *A Rebours*, suggest a perfect lucidity regarding the mystifying powers of aestheticism. There is no need for postmodernism to show us that a self-forgetting in aesthetic contemplation is a chimera, when Mallarmé already likens even music to a feint "*pour bannir le regret*."¹⁹ The self-containment of *aisthesis*, the paradox of a bounded boundlessness, may well give us the illusion that we have escaped the temporality of the human condition. If, however, aesthetic contemplation affords us a surcease from Schopenhauer's "wheel of Ixion," then it follows that we must have an *interest* in achieving that disinterested satisfaction of which aesthetics speaks. We have to agree with Kramer here that the "epistemologically self-contained" aesthetic experience is impossible (*MoF*, 9). Aestheticism teaches us not that art is a "venue of transcendence" (*MoF*, 8) but rather that the

¹⁷ Lydia Goehr argues this point in her essay "Music has no Meaning to Speak of: On the Limits of Musical Interpretation," in *The Interpretation of Music: Philosophical Essays*, ed. Michael Krausz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 177–90. See especially pp. 188–90.

¹⁸ G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 10–11. This theme is developed in Karsten Harries, "Hegel on the Future of Art," *Review of Metaphysics* 27 (1974): 683.

¹⁹ *L'après-midi d'un faune*, 57–58. Already by midcentury it was becoming a *topos* that, though art is only appearance, its lie is one we welcome so as to make "*l'univers moins hideux et les instants moins lourds*" (Baudelaire, *L'amour du mensonge*).

search for ever more interesting experiences is enervating and destined to reach a dead end.²⁰

II. Knowledge, Power, Dialogue, and the Other

The postmodern distrust of the aesthetic stems from a particular reading of the Cartesian tradition. Descartes's entire epistemological project is suffused with the optimism that "clear and distinct" sight will make us "masters and possessors of nature" (*Discours sur la méthode*, VI.2). His chain of metaphors—knowledge as a penetrating gaze that unveils, masters, and possesses the object—suggests that to know is to violate. What lies behind the accusations of mastery that run through the Kramer-Tomlinson exchange is a Nietzschean critique of this modern conception of knowledge as will-to-power. That will, Tomlinson mentions in passing, is "rancorous" (*CM*, 38). Why rancorous, and what does this have to do with aesthetics?

Nietzsche might answer that the will is rancorous because it is powerless against "time's covetousness." He names this rancor "the spirit of revenge" (*Zarathustra* II: "On Redemption"). Aesthetic experience is the other side of the same coin. Here we seem to escape temporality; the will avenges itself on time, celebrating "the sabbath of the penal servitude of volition."²¹ Nietzsche shows us that the aesthetic taken in this sense supports a conception of knowledge as power. For him the idea of a disinterested satisfaction is risible, a myth of "immaculate perception." Aesthetic contemplation is a false antidote to desire, no balm for the rancor of the will. In fact, truly to lose oneself in aesthetic contemplation as Schopenhauer envisions it amounts to self-destruction; asceticism is his next step beyond aesthetics, a part of the same process. Nietzsche rejects such a life-denying aesthetic, celebrating instead an affirmative, procreative, erotic conception of art; Pygmalion, not Narcissus, is his hero.²²

There are many responses to Nietzsche's critique of modernity: joyous dancing (Derrida, sometimes), sober epistemology (de Man), and dour moralism (Foucault). It sometimes appears as if the third has taken hold of the New Musicology. Symptomatic is a certain tone, a "rhetoric of virtue"²³ of which this passage is characteristic:

²⁰ See Harries on "the search for the interesting" in *The Meaning of Modern Art*, 49–60.

²¹ Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* I.38. Schopenhauer probably has in mind Schiller, who describes aesthetic contemplation as "annulling time within time" (*On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. and ed. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and I. A. Willoughby [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967], 97).

²² See Harries, "Narcissus and Pygmalion: Lessons of Two Tales," in *Philosophy and Art*, ed. Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1991), 53–77.

²³ The phrase is Brooks's ("Aesthetics and Ideology," 514).

I think the subject-positions we find as scholars *do* automatically “reproduce the mastery scenario,” and I do not find Kramer’s “speech genres” responsible answers to the ethical problems entailed in these masterful claims. (*CM*, 38)²⁴

Given their critique of the modern conception of knowledge, Kramer and Tomlinson understandably want to mitigate their “masterful claims.” They find in the hermeneutic trope of interpretation-as-dialogue an attractive strategy since it builds difference and otherness into its method from the start. Their mutual appeal to hermeneutics nonetheless belies a fundamental disagreement. Kramer holds that contextual meaning is a rhetorical effect inscribed within the text. He urges us to read “within the immediacy-effects of music itself the kind of mediating structures usually positioned outside music under the rubric of context” (*MoF*, 10). During the “dialogue of listening,” the interpreter asks questions that the composer has raised “by making his music behave as it does” (*MoF*, 17). Because Kramer’s approach calls for the close reading of texts, he wants to salvage aspects of the aesthetic approach, defined as “the valorization of perceptual pleasure as knowledge” (*CM*, 32).

Kramer’s vision seems to me an appealing mediation of aesthetics and the sociology of knowledge. For Tomlinson, though, Kramer “betrays . . . modernism already when he dubs ‘criticism’ the ‘rhetorical’ and ‘subjective’ language by which we might contextualize music” (*CM*, 19). Kramer’s hermeneutics “comes closer to modernist solipsism than to true conversation” (*CM*, 21). He “evades the immense complexity of the historian’s dialogue with past subjectivities,” offering “a too-familiar modernist mastery” (*CM*, 20–21); “the art of close reading itself . . . carries with it the ideological charge of modernism” (*CM*, 22). Tomlinson does not clarify here just how we might have conversational access to past subjectivities, indeed any access at all, if not through close reading of texts. Context,

²⁴ Reading New Musicological texts such as these, it is often hard to avoid the impression that humans are being essentialized as *homo politicus*. One detects a tendency to commit the fallacy of the one-dimensional man, described by one prominent historian as follows:

In one of its forms, this fallacy mistakes people for political animals who are moved mainly by a desire for power. It reduces the complex psychic condition of man merely to their political roles and shrinks all the components of the social calculus to a simple equation of power, ambition, and interest.

(David Hackett Fischer, *Historian’s Fallacies: Towards a Logic of Historical Thought* [New York: Harper & Row, 1970], 200.)

after all, just gives us more texts. We need to turn to his book, *Music in Renaissance Magic: Toward a Historiography of Others*, for a fuller exposition of his epistemology of interpretation.²⁵

As a means of retaining some sense of objectivity while attacking objectivism, Tomlinson draws in part on Gadamer's notion of meaning as unfolding historically in a tradition of reception. Historical understanding is not a self-forgetting—as if we could reconstruct what actually was—nor an arrogant insistence on interrogating the past solely by our own lights. Tradition and reception, according to this model, mutually condition one another. Tradition is neither something to be passively transmitted nor something of which we need be altogether suspicious.

Tomlinson struggles with the opposing claims that the search for knowledge and the acknowledgment of difference make on us. We can never fully interpret the historical other because there always remains a barrier of an indecipherable subjectivity, yet the task of interpretation must go on, for to treat others as mute objects of scientific knowledge would be epistemologically impossible and morally flawed. Historians, Tomlinson cautions, should treat past subjectivities as ends in themselves, not as means to be mastered in the quest for knowledge. This is why I don't see his postmodernism as something opposed to the Enlightenment, but rather as the projection of Enlightenment values onto historiography. The moral sensibility guiding Tomlinson's efforts to assure historical agents their voices surely stems from his view of both himself and others according to some regulative idea of the universal worth of persons, a "party of humankind," as Hume put it. Tomlinson insists on the sense of the alien with which we encounter others. Indeed, it takes a supreme act of *imagination* to *think* the other, whom we can never know, in such a way as to command respect. History is a meeting place of aesthetics and morality.

Having said that much, I still think that Tomlinson lays too much stress on difference, and not only because there is nothing in difference itself to be valued for its own sake, as Terry Eagleton has recently reminded us.²⁶ Tomlinson claims that investigating occult thought can challenge the universality of the Western European view of the world. Since it is empirically demonstrable that our views have not in fact been held universally, what Tomlinson attacks is the notion that our views should be *universalizable*. His position raises some fundamental questions. What does it mean to hold a cognitive belief while not at the same time asserting its

²⁵ Gary Tomlinson, *Music in Renaissance Magic: Toward a Historiography of Others* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). Hereafter cited in the text as *MRM*.

²⁶ "Discourse and Discos," *Times Literary Supplement*, 15 July 1994, p. 4.

universalizability? How does this square with the logic of assertion (“belief that p is true” reduces to “ p is true” reduces to p)? Why can’t we respect others while still not believing them (Tomlinson’s final chapter is called “Believing Others”)? Can’t others simply get things wrong?

Tomlinson’s statements on behalf of Renaissance magic verge on cognitive relativism, though he denies this because he claims that relativism only makes sense against a static conception of absolute, eternal, unperspectivist truth:

Relativism can thrive as an idea only where there remains a belief in knowing as a process that, seen through to its end point, renders others’ concepts completely transparent to the knower. . . . In this epistemology, comparison and relativistic judgment are simply alternative routes chosen by the same possessive and dominating knower. But where knowledge is conceived instead to be the product of dialogical immersions in local situations, a process that leads in part to alienation and cedes at some point to belief—here there is no ground for relativism. More or less invidious comparativism gives way to more or less generous belief in others’ abilities to construct for themselves a meaningful and satisfying reality (*MRM*, 249).

This passage reveals a dominant theme of Tomlinson’s: others construct their own reality, and we cannot always translate their concepts into our own. For instance, between our world and Ficino’s—“constructed differently than ours”—there are limits to dialogue and communication. To ask how Renaissance magic worked technically “is an unwarranted act of translation, a forced reshaping of Ficino’s world . . . a coercive question.” “In order not to violate his world construction, we must accept [Ficino’s magic] as operating technically as well as socially” (*MRM*, 248-51). “Occult thought in the sixteenth century was precisely one way of seeing the world ‘clearly’” (*MRM*, 11), another valid way of organizing the world. Its validity is a matter of “faith . . . in people’s abilities to *construct through language and deed their own worlds*” (*MRM*, 247, emphasis mine). The shift to the plural here would indicate that different beliefs about the world amount to different worlds. It appears that Tomlinson is a kind of relativist after all—the sort who asserts that truth or knowledge is relative to a conceptual scheme.

One may counter that not only is there just one world, but that disagreements about it can bring about something like scientific progress without entailing a shift of paradigms so radical that translatability across them becomes impossible. It is enough for Tomlinson to dismiss an argument by exclaiming: “An eyebrow-raising portrait of science, this, for any-

one to offer twenty-five years after the publication of Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions!*" (*MRM*, 12). Important objections, however, have been raised over the years to the reading of Kuhn implicitly endorsed here.²⁷

Tomlinson wants us to take it "on faith" that different people construct different worlds and that differences can constitute a hermeneutic frontier beyond which we cannot or must not travel. The reference to "worlds" in the plural is, of course, metaphorical. Elsewhere Tomlinson writes of "the possibility of multiple orderings of reality that cover, so to speak, the same territory in different and perhaps incommensurable ways"; these orderings are "in some respects untranslatable" (*MRM*, 250). What he asserts, then, is not really that there are several possible worlds, but rather that there is one world (or reality or territory) observed by different people with incommensurable, only partially translatable conceptual schemes. Different schemes yield different ways of ordering reality. But, then, one may wonder, in cases where intertranslatability fails, how we are to know that it is "the same territory" that is being organized? How do we know that the same things are being individuated, only according to different concepts?

Since Tomlinson talks about the construction of worlds through language and takes untranslatability as one indication that reality has been differently organized, we might evaluate his position by adopting Donald Davidson's strategy of letting a conceptual scheme equal a set of intertranslatable languages. Davidson argues that the dualism of a conceptual scheme and an uninterpreted content (whether we call it "reality," "world," "experience," or "territory") is in itself a third dogma of empiricism, replacing the dogmas of the analytic-synthetic distinction and of a reductionism that would "uniquely allocate empirical content sentence by sentence."²⁸ These two dogmas, rejected by Quine, had been the mainstays of positivism.²⁹ The third dogma, on the other hand, buttresses the

²⁷ Israel Scheffler, *Science and Subjectivity*, 2 ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1982); Donald Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association* 47 (1973-74): 5-20; rpt. in *Relativism: Cognitive and Moral*, ed. Michael Krausz and Jack W. Meiland (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), 66-80. More recently, Paul Feyerabend has attacked on ethical grounds readings of Kuhn that are guided by the "philosophical principles of incommensurability and indeterminacy of translation"; see "Intellectuals and the Facts of Life," *Common Knowledge* 5, no. 2 (1993): 6-9.

²⁸ Donald Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," in *Relativism: Cognitive and Moral*, 72. Further citations from Davidson will be abbreviated as *Conceptual Scheme*. For a fuller but still concise account of Davidson's approach to knowledge, language, and relativism, see Simon Ervine, *Donald Davidson* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 72-154, but especially pp. 134-54.

²⁹ In "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," rpt. in *From a Logical Point of View*, 2 ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), 42.

type of conceptual relativism that Tomlinson proposes—a type that founders on paradox. On the one hand, we need failure of translatability if we are going to talk about incommensurable schemes; on the other hand, we need something neutral and common between schemes if we are even to recognize that it is language, individuation, and conceptualization that are going on. This common thing is Tomlinson's "territory" to be ordered.

Now it makes no sense to order a single object (e.g., the world): there must be objects comprised within that which is to be ordered. Davidson argues that what enables us to recognize differences "in particular cases is an ontology common to the two languages, with concepts that individuate the same objects. We can be clear about breakdowns in translation when they are local enough, for a background of generally successful translation provides what is needed to make the failures intelligible" (*Conceptual Scheme*, 74). It comes down to two possibilities: either Ficino and Tomlinson have concepts that individuate *different* things, in which case there is no reason to talk about incommensurability; or else, their concepts are individuating *the same* things, in which case we can talk about incommensurability if we really want to, but we could be talking just as well about differences of opinion, explicable error, or malapropisms. Tomlinson's untranslatable differences no longer seem so momentous. Davidson quips, "The trouble is, as so often in philosophy, it is hard to improve intelligibility while retaining the excitement" (*Conceptual Scheme*, 66).

Of course, the radical incommensurability between our "ordering of reality" and Ficino's doesn't prevent Tomlinson from describing Ficino's world in our own language, and he can locate just where our conceptual schemes differ to the point where they seem to become untranslatable. If Tomlinson gets as far as he does, if these differences can be at all noticed in the first place, it must be because they stand out against a background of banal agreement. We cannot even begin the task of interpreting speech—of correlating sentences held true by others with sentences we hold true—without attributing beliefs to others. That this is so follows from the claim that theory and language, and meaning and belief, are interdependent, a claim that Tomlinson would presumably accept. Since we cannot know what others' beliefs might be without already interpreting their words—without knowing what attitudes they hold toward particular sentences—we have to assume at the outset that our beliefs generally agree with theirs.

What I have summarized in the preceding paragraph is Davidson's "Principle of Charity," according to which interpretation only gets off the ground if we attribute to others beliefs much the same as our own:

The guiding policy is to do this as far as possible, subject to considerations of simplicity, hunches about the effects of social condition-

ing, and of course our common sense, or scientific, knowledge of explicable error.

This method is not designed to eliminate disagreement, nor can it: its purpose is to make meaningful disagreement possible (*Conceptual Scheme*, 78–79).

Davidson concludes that there is no way of distinguishing between differences in beliefs and differences in concepts. There is no way of judging, where translation has failed, whether others' concepts and beliefs do in fact differ radically from our own. Tomlinson writes of a "space of the other that is inaccessible to our understanding . . . an area of difference beyond the reach of dialogue or meaningful enunciation" (*MRM*, 247). From what vantage point could we identify which parts of Ficino's world correspond to our own, which parts differ because of explicable differences of opinion, and which parts differ because reality has been ordered according to a different conceptual scheme? How do we know in a given case whether a failure of translatability is evidence of a different scheme, or simply a false belief or different opinion concerning the same scheme? The claim that Ficino possessed a different conceptual scheme is something about which we have to be agnostic. Tomlinson writes out of genuine ethical concern for the integrity of the other. I share this concern without believing that it is necessarily coercive or hegemonic of me to suggest politely to my interlocutor that some of his concepts are obsolete or confused. We can identify common desires, and I can try to convince him that these are better met by adopting my cognitive apparatus. If I believe that *p* is true and a good thing to know, then is there not a point at which my refusal to cross hermeneutic frontiers might blend into indifference about my fellow's lot?

III. Conclusion: Aesthetics, Formalism, and Ethics

Kramer and Tomlinson agree that in the wake of nineteenth-century thought "those who sought to put the study of music on a scholarly footing were left with two options: positivistic description of historical data around the music and analytic description of the workings of the notes themselves" (*CM*, 18–19). This reductionism might be qualified by pointing out that formalism encompasses a whole range of positions, some of which lead out of the text in highly revealing ways, and not just as a "quasi-religious transcendence." Russian Formalism, for instance, verges on phenomenology in its insistence on the alienating effect of poetic language. We find similar ideas in early-twentieth-century French poetics as well, for instance, in the aesthetics of Paul Valéry, for whom a primary function of art is to open up a cognitive gap: the live metaphors of poetry remind us

of the rift between language and what is external to it. That which we use every day suddenly becomes something like a physical impediment.³⁰ As in Burke, as in the Kantian sublime, we find here a critique of language as a vehicle for the transcendent union of mind and nature. We think through language, yet poetry reminds us that language is something over which we stumble.

Music analysis too has often proceeded along phenomenological lines: for instance, one can look to music as a way to explore time consciousness or to reveal the way time might have been experienced in other ages. Such inquiries characterize the work of Hans Mersmann, Kurt Westpahl, Thrasybulous Georgiades, Jonathan Kramer, and David Lewin, to name just a few twentieth-century scholars. Heinrich Bessler tried to give an account of the history of listening inspired by Heidegger's historical approach to Being. None of these examples of musical research fits comfortably within the formalist/positivist binarism.

Moreover, among undergraduates and members of *le grand public cultivé*, formalist analysis, whatever its roots in Romantic ideology may be, can perform in itself a demystifying function. Demonstrating the extent to which compositions are *constructed*, dependent on transsubjective relational systems, is one way of resisting their immediacy effects. It is in such terms that Peter Brooks defends formalist aesthetics:

The realm of the aesthetic needs to be respected by an imperative that is nearly ethical. It's not that the aesthetic is the realm of a secular scripture, that poetry has taken the place of a failed theodicy, or that critics are celebrants at the high altar of a cult of beauty isolated from history and politics. It is rather that personality must be tempered by the discipline of the impersonal that comes in the creation of form. Form in this sense is really an extension of language, which is itself impersonal in the same way (*AI*, 522).

The aesthetic can lead to revelations concerning that about which we care deeply. Revelation arises in rifts, such as that faced when we encounter others. If Kant and Schiller cling to the subjectivity of aesthetic experience, it is because one cannot give an objective account of the other that will command respect and elicit our care and commitment. Something like an *aesthetic* idea is summoned when we are confronted with another human being. In David Bromwich's words, the aim of art is

³⁰ Paul Valéry, "Poésie et pensée abstraite," *Oeuvres* 1, ed. Jean Hytier (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), 1317–18.

to create a mood of attention. The mood impresses us with a sensation that has the force of an imperative—the command to *Stop; Stand back; Respect*, which Kant associated with moral freedom and with aesthetic judgment. Moral and aesthetic thought thus share the task of inculcating a duty to treat persons as ends. Persons, and one category of objects which, it follows, must have a peculiar power to represent the dignity of persons. We honor in works of art as we do in persons *the mere fact of their autonomy*.³¹

It is tempting to dismiss Enlightenment aesthetics on the grounds that it entails a false universalization of subjective experience that verges on an ethics of mastery and possession.³² But such mastery would involve treating the other as a thing, a tool, a means rather than an end. On the contrary, the aesthetic intuition that our rational and moral agency might be projected on to others gives us a communicative ground, a free intersubjective space for encounters, for persuasion, criticism, and influence—in short, for a discussion that, like Kant's reflective judgment, does not depend on a rule. Without saving some space for the relative autonomy of aesthetic experience, not only might we lose the critical function of art, but Tomlinson's sublime vision of a commitment to "a thousand different musics"—and to their makers—will have given up its role as a regulative demand and become an empty utopia.

³¹ David Bromwich, *Politics by Other Means: Higher Education and Group Thinking* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 227. Emphasis mine.

³² In this connection, we might bear in mind Brooks's ascription to Schiller of a "quasi-anthropological understanding of the *Spieltrieb* as a vital component of the human. Like the creation of sign-systems, the play of the aesthetic . . . is one of humanity's basic accommodations in the world" ("Aesthetics and Ideology," 516).