



“The residues of freedom, [...] tendencies toward true humanism”: thoughts on the role of the humanities at the beginning of the twenty-first century¹

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Abstract

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Remarks from Kant’s third critique, “The Critique of Judgement”, are taken as guidelines to develop a view on works of art as vessels of knowledge and judgements about what the world appears to be, can be and ought to be. In itself, Kant’s remarks amount to a justification of the study of the arts, i.e. it is for the sake of a world where human beings may experience other human beings as companions in the project to sustain human life. The viability of such an endeavour is borne out by, for example, a recent performance of Beethoven in a most adverse context, and by the fact of international treaties in the past decade against some of the most serious violations of human rights. These treaties could not have been possible were it not for the artistic explorations of the tragedies of these violations.

1 Adapted from a paper originally read at a conference on “What are the humanities for? Valuing and re-valuing the humanities in South Africa”, Potchefstroom University, 12-14 September 2002. (12 September 2002 was the 25th commemoration of the death of Steve Bantu Biko.) I am indebted to Johann Rossouw and Calvin Seerveld for incisive remarks which, due to lack of space in this article, will hopefully bear fruit in future work.

Opsomming

“Oorblyfsels van vryheid [...] neigings tot egte humanisme”: gedagtes oor die rol van die geesteswetenskappe aan die begin van die een-en-twintigste eeu

Opmerkings deur Kant in sy derde kritiek, “The Critique of Judgement” (Die kritiek van die oordeelsvermoë), word gebruik as riglyne om ’n siening daar te stel dat kunswerke aangewend kan word as kanale vir kennis van en oordele oor hoe die wêreld skyn te wees, wat die wêreld kan wees en wat dit behoort te wees. Op sigself beskou, kom Kant se opmerkings neer op ’n regverdiging van die bestudering van die kunste ter wille van ’n wêreld waarin mense ander mense kan ervaar as metgeselle in ’n projek om menslike lewe te ondersteun. Die lewensvatbaarheid van so ’n onderneming word onder andere bewys deur ’n onlangse uitvoering van Beethoven in ’n uiters ongunstige konteks, en deur die feit dat internasionale verdrae teen sommige van die ernstigste skendings van menseregte gedurende die afgelope dekade gesluit is. Hierdie verdrae sou nie moontlik gewees het nie as dit nie was vir die artistieke verkenning van die tragedies van hierdie skendings nie.

When I read Adorno’s studies on Gustav Mahler for the first time in 1979 in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, the following words struck me in particular:

Chained to culture, the work of art wants to burst the chain [and] show compassion for the shabby remains [of culture]. Every measure in Mahler makes the arms wide open (Adorno, 1973a:187/38).

The original German, *Barmherzigkeit üben am schäbigen Rest; jeder Takt ... öffnet weit die Arme*, immediately made me think of my Potchefstroom mentor, colleague and friend, Theo van der Merwe. In an attempt to account for myself my curious response to Adorno’s text, I realised to what extent Theo’s own life and work was a veritable embodiment of this phrase. I remembered an incisive remark by him, when I was working on an assignment on Karl Mannheim under his tutorship, that it is a curious thing that the ideology of planning strives to guarantee freedom from want but does not venture to look for the one lost sheep. He was, of course, pointing to the issue of power relationships in almost any modern society. Experts plan the future, and individuals have to adapt their individual needs and prospects to the parameters of the master plan, and they have to be “educated” to do so because the planned parameters are the best rationally devised options. Experts care for

the average, and assume that almost everybody is capable of meeting the “minimal” demands of the average. Those who cannot, are “negligible”. Experts are only interested in majorities. Compassion is incommensurable with planning expertise. And when Christ’s followers succumb to the ideology of planning, they are wont to forget about the lost sheep and the lost coin. Theo van der Merwe brought Hendrik van Riessen’s critique of the ideology of planning to my attention, specifically its disparagement of human beings in their work. In contrast to this view Van Riessen called for a respect for what each human being may become in terms of God’s intention with her or him. “We may not deprive a human being of her calling. That will be an impairment of her humanity when we think and act in her behalf in such a way that her freedom becomes redundant” (Van Riessen, 1966:52; my translation – JS).

Thus when I read Adorno’s characterisation of Mahler’s work, I was surprised to recognise something I have already experienced in the life and work of somebody else. Theo van der Merwe lived respect for the calling of fellow human beings. My lasting impression of him will be of the philosopher, colleague and friend as interlocutor, mediator and someone who takes up the cudgels for whomever and whatever may be threatened by the indifference of the wielders of power. He was blessed (or burdened?) with a sense for and a feeling of responsibility towards the precious moment (*kostelik*, he always said in a slightly old-worldish way) in all encounters. The slightest nuance of a gesture, a word or an event was savoured and consigned to the haven of Theo’s memory. That is the reason why I would like to honour his memory with a reflection on the redemption of, as Theodor Adorno has formulated it, the residues of freedom and the tendencies towards true humanism as they are traceable through works of art. In doing so, I want to pay homage to his profound respect for the inexhaustible variety of creation and of history, as well as his deep concern to understand whence the spirit that drives the human sciences.

1. From concerto to concerted action

It is generally known that Beethoven’s G major piano concerto (Opus 58) was whistled down at its first performance in Vienna in 1807. The reason for the public’s reaction to this work was that it did not follow the established pattern of the genre. Instead of a festive introductory section for the orchestra before the entry of the soloist, this work started with an understated announcement of the key, a single G major chord, as well as the first theme, by the soloist, after

which the different sections of the orchestra took up the theme from different points in the tonic and developed it to land *tutti* on the G major key from where it is given over to the piano to lead further.

These few bars contain some of the most revolutionary moments in Western music. Beethoven pushes the logic of the concerto as musical form to its limits. It is as if Beethoven were saying: if the concerto has come to mean the celebration of the capabilities of one particular instrument and one particular voice, why, then, cannot this voice – this artist as individual – be heard and seen to set the tone for the whole event or happening? Beethoven’s response, as can be seen from the performance indications, is demured. In the G major concerto we do not encounter the soloist who pitches himself *bravura* and *fortissimo* against the orchestra to wrestle and maintain the lead (as we can say of Tchaikovsky’s B minor concerto). The piano part of Beethoven’s G major concerto is a rather reluctant, even coy, step in the direction of the artistic, social and, ultimately political emancipation of the European, subtly confident of his/her own significance and not saturated by his/her own emotionality or inner life.

Theodor Adorno’s characterisation of Beethoven’s music is very apt in this regard. He says:

[For Beethoven] humanity means: you ought to behave like this music behaves. [It shows you the way towards] an active and busy life, in the service of others, not narrow-minded – a life of solidarity (Adorno, 1994:28).

What is at stake in this respect is a notion of art which implies that art represents in artistic formations that which lies beyond current concepts, however sophisticated these concepts may be. The short and the long of it is that this is Kantian language: “the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good” (Kant, 1793:258; see Kant, 1968). Of course, we have to know what *beautiful* and *the morally good* mean in this context, and how they are linked with *humanity* and *solidarity*.

2. Beethoven, Kant and beauty

2.1 The morally good

Let us start with *the morally good*. When Kant speaks of the morally good in the context of his aesthetics, he is much more allusive than in his treatises on morals. A good cue is his reflections on the training of artists and the general education of people who want to have meaningful commerce with the arts. He mentions “a lasting

commonwealth”, and refers to the “happy combination” (of “law-governed constraint” and “the force and rightness of a free nature”) (Kant, 1793:262). If one elaborates on this notion of “a lasting commonwealth”, and connects it to the well-known precepts of Kant’s view of morality, one can define *the morally good*, with some latitude, as the happy relationship (cf. Kant, 1793:198, 263) between individual desires and the truly common good of all. Many nuances of Kantian moral notions reverberate in this definition. And it is not a matter of stretching the imagination too far to hear Beethoven’s G major concerto resonating with Kantian ideals. The individual has to act in such a way that his/her acts enable the free acts of other individuals. Other persons’ freedom is the precondition for one’s own freedom. The lasting commonwealth is a space where people respect one another as aims and do not reduce them to means. The morally good is the (result of the) concerted effort of equal actors or agents, firstly in constantly critical dialogue with themselves over their own values, and secondly, as Habermas reformulated Kant, in constant dialogue with one another about their mutual vulnerability (cf. Habermas, 1988-1989).

2.2 The judgement of beauty

But what about the *beautiful*? Although one can have strong reservations about Kant’s subjectivism in this regard, his views are nevertheless important in the context of the project of the modern, i.e. the project where humanity has to take care of itself and its world. Judging something to be beautiful says at least as much of the one who is making the judgement as it says of the thing judged to be of that quality. Kant’s anatomy of the judgement of beauty shows the following: to make a remark about beauty is to express “a universal voice” (Kant, 1793:26), which means it is signifying the presence of a unique configuration of logical understanding and productive imagination at play (Kant, 1793:29-31). Through the experience of beauty the presence of possibilities not yet catalogued, categorised and labelled, announces itself in the awareness of a human being, thereby enhancing the already established richness of nature as it has become known in the laws of the natural sciences and the legislation of moral reason. The beauty of a flower or of crustaceans enlivens the mind not only to standard ideas of beauty, but in a curious way also to ideals of beauty (Kant, 1793:59-60), the “archetypes of taste” (Kant, 1793:54) or an “aesthetic idea” (Kant, 1793:56); in short: a kind of awareness that the observable configuration is in some way, in its pleasantness, also a sign (a cipher – *chiffre* is Kant’s word for it – or

a symbol) of what ought to be the case, not only in the world at large, but specifically among human beings.

2.3 Kantian questions to be answered

Reading Kant’s stringent anatomy of aesthetic judgement, one easily wonders if Kant is not becoming bewitched by his own conceptual world. That is indeed the case, but that is not our concern here. If this piling up of traditional aesthetic concepts in a new and unfamiliar sequence is bewildering, there is a way out of the apparent conceptual quagmire. Let us just pause to remind ourselves of the big questions of life that Kant wants to be answered by philosophy. The first question, *What can I know?* has been answered in the first critique, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, but in a double-gearred way. Although there is the vast domain of nature and its causal laws that can be known by theoretical reason, there remains the profound realm of reason itself and its bearing on what we ought to do – the second big question that philosophy has to answer, and which is undertaken in Kant’s various writings on ethics, culminating in the second critique, *The Critique of Practical Reason*. Again that answer is double-edged: although we have come to know the absolute and very stark moral law in its formulation as the almost inhuman or superhuman categorical imperative, there remains something more, something deeper to be said. And this, I surmise, is Kant’s saving grace. After the question, *What ought I to do?* comes the question, *What may I hope?* Disenchanted the world through rigorously logical knowledge is not enough. Prescribing action motivated by rational principles regardless of feelings, circumstances or any investment of whatever kind, is not enough. The future can only be human and humane if whatever we know and do as human beings, is known and done fittingly, tastefully, appropriately, with, so to speak, “a sixth sense”. It is not enough to act in such a way that one’s action becomes a universal example. It is not enough to respect other people as the aims of their own life projects, and not to demean them always as means to one’s own ends. Morals without imaginative style is lifeless morality, perhaps immoral. The obverse also holds: imaginative style without morality is decadent. What is necessary, is the exercise of reflective judgement, i.e. to be able to find the universal significance to a given unique experience. That becomes possible when the mind is able and aware of its capability to grasp “aesthetic ideas”, which is, in the last instance, what works of art is all about. We need art because our profoundest ideals, the “rules for the proper use of our freedom”, have not been realised yet. “The lasting

commonwealth”, according to Kant, is a mere ideal, not historical reality. Although noble, it is in danger of turning from ideal to something evanescent. In art it is redeemed beyond current fashions and concepts. It is not so much denoted as connotated. As future, as something beyond the present historical configurations, art is the keepsake of open possibilities.

That is the reason why Kant (1793:192) defines a good or “spirited” work of art as something that has

... the ability to exhibit aesthetic ideas; and by aesthetic ideas I mean a presentation of the imagination which prompts much thought, but to which no determinate thought whatsoever, i.e. no [determinate] *concept*, can be adequate.

2.4 Experiencing beauty deepens our knowledge of the world

According to Kant there is a continuity in our experience of natural beauty and our experience of artistic beauty. As such the experience of beauty deepens our knowledge of the world as a system governed by laws which also, and paradoxically, accommodates human beings and their abilities to exceed mere causal nature by sublimating mere nature to ciphers in nature for the meaning of human life as freedom. In Kant’s view, artistic beauty is second to natural beauty – artistic beauty is an approximate appropriation of nature, realising its purposiveness. (In this respect Kant’s anthropomorphism and his modernist subject-centrism get the better of him: he holds the belief that nature finally is meant to make the fulfilment of human life possible. Nature is geared towards the human and moral “lasting commonwealth”. That, however, is a story for another occasion.)

3. Art and the humanities

This is the point I wish to make through Kant: In order for us to have a proper understanding of (fine) art, Kant calls for a “cultivating [of] our mental powers by exposing ourselves beforehand to what we call *humaniora*; they are called that presumably because *humanity* means both the *universal feeling of sympathy* (*allgemeine Teilnehmungsgefühl*), and the ability to engage universally in very intimate communication (*sich innigst und allgemein mitteilen zu können*)” (Kant, 1793:263).

Regardless of the circulatory aspect to Kant’s argument here (*humaniora* are preparatory to commerce with the fine arts while the fine arts are in a certain sense foundational to the *humaniora*), what one should recognise in this programmatic formulation of Kant is the two major concerns of the project of the modern, viz. “the universal feeling of sympathy” and “the ability to engage universally in very intimate communication”. This is the heart of Kant’s concern about what we may hope, and it is the heart of our current concern about the humanities.

If I may allow myself to rehabilitate and redefine Kant’s notion of the “universal feeling of sympathy”, I shall say that it means the cultivated ability of the educated and informed modern (or postmodern) individual to relate to instances of humanity especially outside or beyond his/her immediate experience, and to recognise not only him-/herself in an other, but also to recognise the other as the other, without reducing or assimilating the otherness of the other to the self. Habermas’s reformulation of the notion of “the ability to engage universally in very intimate communication” is in line with the previous statement. The kind of communication that is required does not only entail the ability to converse and understand in terms of more or less universally shared meanings, or to convey uniquely individual experiences so that their ultimately common human roots can be understood, but also to be able to hold a conversation about meanings that have to be understood in order to maintain conversation. Communication is not only about sharing, but also about what sets apart and cannot or ought not to be shared (cf. Habermas, 1988-1989). Kant’s further commentary on these two modern priorities accommodates this extended sense:

When these two qualities are combined, they constitute the sociability that befits [our] humanity and distinguishes it from the limitation [characteristic] of animals (Kant, 1793:263).

- ***Geselligkeit* or *Glückseligkeit* as elements of sociability**

In the first edition of the *Critique of Judgement* (1790) Kant referred to “sociability” as *Geselligkeit* (i.e. convivability, companion-ability), and in the second edition (1793) he used the word *Glückseligkeit* (i.e. blissfulness, supreme happiness). The goal of the project of the modern, as Kant understood it, is to work towards, and in a society where human relationships are sustained by communicative interchange, sometimes as precondition and sometimes as a result of acting out of respect for the potentialities of what it means to be human.

- **Kant: Individual desires and the common good of humanity**

Perhaps I am crediting Kant with too much. His ethics has been accused of being too formalist, harbouring the civil coldness that made Auschwitz possible (Adorno, 1967:354). Kant's transcendentalist idealism has turned the human subject into an all devouring monster of meaning: everything other than the conscious human subject has only that kind of meaning that is a priori present in the mind of the subject – a kind of epistemological colonialism. In spite of these valid criticisms, I think it can be said in Kant's defence that he also had an incisive view of the most crucial problem in the project of the modern, namely how to attain a sustainably viable relationship between individual desires and the common good of humanity.

Kant recognises the problem of universalised particularity and true universal interests. In his essay on the meaning of Enlightenment/enlightenment, he famously distinguished between the private use of reason and the public use of reason. It is very telling that he links the *private* use of reason to *public* institutions such as the state, the military and the revenue office. What this means is that, according to Kant, reason in these institutions is harnessed by a limited goal or a particular interest, ultimately to force people to conform to certain rules. These rules are tailored to maintain the functions of the limited domain of government, defence or revenue. They are applied in an equal way across the board. They are universalised from a limited position, and cannot be said to embody the real universal good of humankind. In a more recent context, it cannot be said that what is good for General Motors (or Enron, or the USA for that matter) is also good for the world. What is good for the world has to be ascertained against a norm that really fits the world, and in terms of Kant's distinction, that has to be done by the really public use of reason, i.e. in a public forum beyond the confines of particular institutions and their peculiar dynamics of interests. Kant puts his money on philosophy, Habermas invests in public discourse and civil initiatives, John Rawls invents the experiment of the veil of ignorance. What it all boils down to, more or less, is that mature, educated and informed, responsible people as companions or interested participants in whatever process in society have to think about the exigencies of the environment in which they act in terms of the most vulnerable among them.

- **The choice between consumerist and reflective thinking**

To solve the thorny issue of a “happy combination” of individual desires and the common good is to negotiate the relative significance of all interests, all consequences and outcomes, all inputs and responsibilities with a guaranteed voicing of the challenges to the weakest among the participants. The crucial issue in this respect is the choice between consumerist thinking and reflective thinking. Do we dispose of the insistent and insoluble individual case by subsuming it under a manageable general procedure, subjugating it to a class to which it does not really belong, and therefore submerging it under the indifference of bureaucratic disposal techniques, and thereby, effectively, eradicate it? Or do we acknowledge the insistent and apparently insoluble case, tracing its significance with patience and imagination, in order to accommodate it, shift our own parameters to have this case as a neighbour, and reinforce our conviviality?

4. Humanities after Auschwitz

This is the cue that the critique of ideology has taken up from the project of the modern. When power can be maintained by controlling public knowledge, consumerist knowledge wipes out the traces of that which does not fall into the categories. The world is portrayed in the image of the stakeholder(s) in power, i.e. the one or the few who stand to gain from the control over resources, decision processes or interests. Whatever cannot be identified with the powerful, is perceived, evaluated and branded as the hostile other, and needs to be played off the field or the market, locked up in its own space, banned to the ghetto, or exterminated.

- **The critique of ideology**

The critique of ideology takes up the cudgels for the non-identical, for those who cannot identify with the universalised particular interest. The critique of ideology displaces the hero as the botched up embodiment of the common good and protests the annexation of the space of the common good. It is forced to tone down the optimistic language of the project of the modern. Instead of imagining the “lasting commonwealth” in terms of ideals, depicted by artistic figures, the critique of ideology focuses on the fact that the realisation of the “lasting commonwealth” is in limbo, and what needs to be addressed is suffering without a voice. Beauty has to be understood as an index of the true and the false human interests in the evolution of society. Beauty is ambivalent: it may serve as the symbol which reminds humanity of what is still to be attained, but it

may also serve to mask and decorate current injustices. Playing Mozart in Auschwitz may be an expression of the victim's longing for conviviality, but it can also be the cynic dress-up of barbarism. Adorno realised this, and issued his verdict: to write a poem after Auschwitz will be barbaric. One could not be found to be an accomplice in covering up the unspeakably horrific place/event by decorating it. Therefore Adorno chose the dissonant, in art, and in his intellectual work (cf. Adorno, 1972:78-9). He confronted the ultimate *Ungeselligkeit* of his time with its own shocking lack of humaneness, for the sake of a sociability that is more becoming of a redeemed humanity.

Today critical thought (which does not abandon its commitment even in the face of progress) demands support for the residues of freedom, and for tendencies toward true humanism, even if these seem powerless in regard to the main course of history (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1992:xi-x).

The evolution of modern society has resulted in very skewed structures and processes. Too many pay the price for the progress enjoyed by too few. This is a platitude, but unfortunately the hard and oppressive reality for large parts of the world, and exacerbated by globalism today.² To be involved in the study of human

2 A random quote from Joseph Stiglitz, a former vice-president of the World Bank and Nobel Prize laureate, bears this out:

Part of the social contract entails 'fairness', that the poor share in the gains of society as it grows, and that the rich share in the pains of society in times of crisis. The Washington Consensus policies paid little attention to issues of distribution or 'fairness'. If pressed, many of its proponents would argue that the best way to help the poor is to make the economy grow. They believe in trickle-down economics. *Eventually*, it is asserted, the benefits of that growth *trickle down* even to the poor. Trickle-down economics was never much more than just a belief, an article of faith. Pauperism seemed to grow in nineteenth-century England even though the country as a whole prospered. Growth in America in the 1980s provided the most recent dramatic example: while the economy grew, those at the bottom saw their real incomes decline. The Clinton administration had argued strongly against trickle-down economics; it believed that there had to be active programs to help the poor. And when I left the White House to go to the World Bank, I brought with me the same skepticism of trickle-down economics; if this had not worked in the United States, why would it work in developing countries? While it is true that sustained reductions in poverty cannot be attained without robust economic growth, the converse is not true: growth need not benefit all. It is not true that 'a rising tide lifts all boats'. Sometimes, a quickly rising tide, especially when accompanied by a storm, dashes weaker boats against the shore, smashing them to smithereens (Stiglitz, 2002:78).

endeavours, therefore, has lost nothing of its edge as Kant has defined it more than two hundred years ago. The cultivation of the capabilities to understand in a profound sense, and to communicate in a very intimate fashion in order to facilitate *Geselligkeit* or a lasting commonwealth, is still the most justifiable option for humanity. But is it still viable after two hundred years?

- **The political relevance of art**

Most probably this question can, however, be asked: How on earth can one play Beethoven’s piano music today, and be of good faith that the social parable contained in its performance can change the world in the direction of a “merry gathering of the different”, as Adorno once defined the utopia of the lasting commonwealth?³

Daniel Barenboim did just that, quite recently. In Ramallah, in a bombed Palestinian school hall, for approximately 100 students. He played Beethoven sonatas. The Jew, for the Palestinians. Testifying to the world of the “residues of freedom, and ... tendencies toward true humanism” contained in a German’s music, admonishing Jews, Palestinians, and the world, to give peace another try.⁴

3 “Das Gefühl der Internationale lag mir von Haus aus nahe, auch durch den Gästekreis meiner Eltern, mit Namen wie Firino und Sidney Clifton Hall. Jene Internationale war kein Einheitsstaat. Ihr Friede versprach sich durch das *festliche Ensemble von Verschiedenem*, farbig gleich den Flaggen und den unschuldigen Grenzpfählen, die, wie ich staunend entdeckte, so gar keinen Wechsel der Landschaft bewirkten. Das Land aber, das sie umschlossen, und das ich, spielend mit mir selbst, okkupierte, war ein Niemandsland. Später, im Krieg, tauchte das Wort auf für den verwüsteten Raum vor den beiden Fronten. Es ist aber die getreue Übersetzung des griechischen – Aristophanischen – das ich damals desto besser verstand, je weniger ich es kannte, Utopie” (Adorno 1973b:23-24; italics added).

4 Cf. <http://www.danielbarenboim.com>; item on Barenboim playing in Ramallah under “news” on the homepage. He expressed his views on the political relevance of music in his acceptance speech when he received the Prince of Asturias Award (together with Edward Said) on October 25, 2002. Among other things, he averred:

Concord is expressed in music as harmony. An orchestra requires musicians to listen to each other; none should attempt to play louder than the next, they must respect and know each other. It is a song in praise of respect, of the effort to understand one another, something that is crucial to resolve a conflict that has no military solution. The political solution may still be far off at the present time, which strengthens my belief that a person's essential obligation is to reflect, to act within his own means. I believe an independent movement uniting both people could be born in this way, and it would help by contributing to vanquishing the hate that stands between them nowadays. [...] We live in a world of permanent contrasts, between

But how does this act translate into any kind of “social” or “political action”? Let me illustrate by an example. I want to use a poem by Paul Celan. Not the poem that forced Adorno to retract his statement on poetry after Auschwitz,⁵ viz. “Death Fugue” (*Todesfuge*), but a poem from the same book (i.e. *Mohn und Gedächtnis* [Poppy and Remembrance] published in 1952):

Aspen tree, your leaves glance white into the dark.
My mother’s hair never turned white.

Dandelion, so green is the Ukraine.
My fair-haired mother did not come home.

Rain cloud, do you linger over the well?
My soft-voiced mother weeps for all.

Round star, you coil the golden loop.
My mother’s heart was hurt by lead.

harmony and dissonance, between injustice and rational behaviour, between the denial of the right to expression and dialogue, between the darkness of violence and the splendour of humanism. We find arguments to remind us that the history of man provides permanent example of the negative side of these equations every day. / Many centuries ago, in the Kingdom of Asturias, the Holy Man of Liébana, made one of the most splendid contributions to Western culture. He evoked a celestial Jerusalem in his work within the framework of a vision of the Apocalypse. However, a different paradise was being forged not so far from here, with the contributions of Muslims, Christians and Jews. / The fact that two friends, two brothers, have managed to launch our small project, the fact that you are here today paying tribute to this effort, leads us to ponder the more positive side of human nature, and brings us hope that perhaps between us all, between you and us, we might provide the Palestinian and Jewish peoples with something without which man cannot live: hope in a better life, which should unquestionably manifest itself in a Jerusalem on earth where men can coexist, keeping their identities, creating a bridge between west and east. (Cf. <http://www.fpa.es/ing/2002special/02/04/index03.html> as well as Barenboim’s and Edward Said’s exchange of views on this in Guzelimian, 2002.)

It is interesting to compare Barenboim’s sentiments about music with Adorno’s very similar views on chamber music (cf. Adorno 1973a:271 ff.). Of course, this comparison of music with an ideal society begs the question, viz. how was Auschwitz possible in spite of Mozart and Beethoven? Friedlander (1993) and Todorov (1996) have attempted to answer this question in depth and detail, and my paper is a small attempt to cut grafts from their work.

5 Cf. Adorno 1955:31: “... nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch, und das frißt auch die Erkenntnis an, die ausspricht, warum es unmöglich ward, heute Gedichte zu schreiben”. “Das perennierende Leiden hat soviel Recht auf Ausdruck wie der Gemarterte zu Brüllen; darum mag falsch gewesen sein, nach Auschwitz ließe kein Gedicht mehr sich schreiben” (Adorno, 1967:353).

Oaken door, who hove you off your hinge?
My gentle mother cannot return.

(Translation: John Felstiner [Felstiner, 2001:49].)

This poem mourns the brutal death of Paul Celan’s mother at the hands of the Nazis. It is a poem about a traumatic loss – the theme of Celan’s entire oeuvre. It is an attempt to find a face to whom he can talk intimately again. The loss of a significant face threatens his language. The loss of the significant face can annihilate words, and consequently his own self. To find language to express the unthinkable – the senseless death of a Jewish woman – is a very conscious act of protest. Celan chose to write in German, and not Yiddish. He chose the language of the perpetrator to articulate his sense of void, attempting to force the German language to work through (*durcharbeiten*) the unspeakable itself⁶: to transform from murderous language of command to language of mournful silence.

5. Humanities as *diakonia*

Where does this leave us? How can the Kantian injunction to come up with a reflective judgement redeem any residue of freedom or support any true humanity? I surmise that a possible reflective judgement on Celan’s poem may be that this poem is ultimately about a world in which mothers are murdered for no reason at all by people who have no cause at all to commit such crimes. Or more positively: this poem is about the integrity of life, where mothers are present, where their faces are significant to illicit the most constitutive kind of communication one can think of – the sharing of life between a mother and a child.

6 *Durcharbeiten* in Lyotard’s sense:

Words, phrases in the act of writing, the latent nuances and timbres at the horizon of a painting or a musical composition as it’s being created [...] all lend themselves to us for the occasion and yet slip through our fingers. And even inscribed on a page or canvas, they ‘say’ something other than what we ‘meant’ because they’re older than the present intent, overloaded with possibilities of meaning – that is, connected with other words, phrases, shades of meaning, timbres. By means of which precisely they constitute a field, a ‘world’, the ‘brave’ human world [...], but one that’s probably more like an opaqueness of very distant horizons that exist only so that we’ll ‘brave’ them. If you think you’re describing thought when you describe a selecting of data, you’re silencing truth. Because data aren’t given, but givable, and selection isn’t choice. Thinking, like writing or painting, is almost no more than letting a giveable come towards you (Lyotard 1991:18; cf. also p. 26, 29, 74 and 173).

This poem is not a treatise on being human. It is an allusive, *diaconical*⁷ act of commemoration. As such, its communication happens beyond the realm of definitional, lexicographical and standardised, conceptual language. It is the kind of language “that prompt[s] much thought”, but we are at a loss for definite concepts. But not completely, and not for all time. The horrors of the twentieth century precipitated the expected volume of recorded memories, and, true to pattern, the recording of these memories subsided after a time.

- **Memory cannot be forced underground**

Most unexpectedly, however, life did not return to normality after a time. The extent of the horrors of the twentieth century was too vast to be absorbed in its aftershocks. The trauma of victims persisted this time, they were even transmitted generationally.⁸ Grandchildren show the symptoms of grandparents. At least Western society had to learn to cope with a past that did not want to go away.⁹ Memory had to be rehabilitated. Memory had to be reworked in order to make it bearable.¹⁰ Memory cannot be forced underground. Unbearable truth and conspiracies of silence are social and political time-bombs. Too much memory and too little memory is foolishness. If the public realm becomes filled up, even saturated by memories of unspeakable atrocities, artistic catharsis may channel the need for social justice up to a certain point, but at a critical stage the aesthetic energy has to impact on the need for legal transformation.¹¹

7 Cf. Pop (1964:102 ff.).

8 Cf. Danieli (1981).

9 Cf. Ernst Nolte, “Vergangenheit, die nicht vergehen will.” (In Augstein *et al.* 1987:39 ff.)

10 Cf. Rösen (1998); Todorov (1996:254-296).

11 Hannah Arendt suggests as much. Cf. Arendt on the rights to have rights (Arendt, 1986:462-463) and the need for representations of redemption. She warns against a “type” of cultural observer for whom “beim Anblick dieser Filme oder beim Lesen jener Reportagen [of the organised mass destruction of human beings – JS] aufgeht, [...] daß die Macht des Menschen größer ist, als sie sich einzugestehen wagten, und daß man höllische Phantasien realisieren kann, ohne daß der Himmel einstürzt und die Erde sich auftut. / Das einzige, was nicht realisierbar bleibt, ist zugleich dasjenige, was allein die traditionellen Höllenvorstellungen erträglich machte: das Jüngste Gericht und die Vorstellung eines absoluten Maßstabes der Gerechtigkeit, verbunden mit der unendlichen Möglichkeit der Gnade“ (Arendt, 1986:686).

- **The unsayable calls for words to be heard**

Artistic expressions such as Celan’s, or the gesture of Barenboim, remind us of the unsayable that is calling for words to be heard and to be understood so that something can be done about it. The world must be transformed so that mothers can be safe and nurture their children. The ultimate *diaconical* act will be to afford victims, all lost sheep from the flock of the human race, proper acknowledgement and recognition, to unburden them of their burden of unrecognised suffering, to assist them in the healing of their trust in the world, and to let them have a future again – to confirm them in their rightful place among others inhabiting the world.

It took us two hundred years to see, learn and start to do something about this. Kant wrote his treatise on perpetual peace in 1795. Hannah Arendt realised that history run amok cannot be influenced for the better by pressing for more morality, applying moral norms to more situations. According to Arendt politics had to do with the imaginative, productive reflective judgement. Through “anticipatory anxiety” the universal feeling of sympathy could be rehabilitated: the call was for people to imagine themselves in the shoes of a victim, and then think of what the world must be in order to be safe and a real haven for human beings.¹² This call brought the experience of otherness within grasp of many, at least touching people in the public realm. Activists and non-governmental organisations like the Red Cross, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch took up a sensitised public opinion and worked through international agencies to establish international treaties.¹³ Two hundred years after Kant’s admonitions to cultivate the mental powers to effect a lasting commonwealth which is befitting of humanity, humankind indeed did take the first reluctant and coy steps to ensure a world that is safe for mothers and children. Or as Van Riessen formulated it as a critically concerned Christian: “We may not deprive a human being of her calling. That will be an impairment of her humanity when we think and act in her behalf in such a way that her freedom becomes redundant” (Van Riessen, 1966:52). Beethoven’s music, Celan’s poetry, Anselm Kiefer’s paintings,¹⁴ Joseph Beuys’

12 Arendt (1986:680-681).

13 Cf. Ignatieff (1999); Robertson (2000).

14 Cf. Saltzman (1999).

sculpture¹⁵ (to name but a few) are not in vain. Because these works of art are performed, read and exhibited we have international conventions against genocide and torture. The impunity of heads of state is a thing of the past. Torturers cannot sleep soundly today because the screams of their victims do reverberate¹⁶ – through the work of artists, in memories, in human endeavours such as narrative histories and therapies, critical hermeneutics and critical jurisprudence. A survey of work in these disciplines show how they are informed by the work of artists in the first place.¹⁷

- **Profound understanding and honest communication**

To be informed by works of art in the humanities does not make the world a good place or a beautiful space to live in. We are far from that. However, we do make progress, precious little steps that must be cherished. Today, as in Kant's time, we are still faced by the problem of breaking through universalised particular interests to attain proper universal good. We still struggle to turn ethnic imperatives into truly ethic imperatives. We say "Never again!" on 21 March, or on 27 April, maybe on 12 September if we remember Steve Biko. But what do we mean when we say it? That we vow that these things will never happen to us and ours again, or do we also imply that we vow that we shall never be party to any such atrocities? Do we reconstitute ourselves as intersubjectively responsible and re-member-ed people through such rituals? It is of the utmost importance that we cultivate our capabilities to understand adequately and profoundly, and to communicate our most intimate awarenesses. These are crucial enzymes of the body politic.

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15 Borer & Schirmer (1997).

16 Lawrence Weschler (1998:237-246).

17 Cf. e.g. Johan van der Walt (2002) and Linstead & Höpfl, eds. (2000).

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