Research Article

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Whither Rough Ground? On the "Ordinary" of Ordinary Aesthetics

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Abstract: This article is a criticism of the narrative self-understanding offered by advocates of Ordinary Aesthetics. Even though the frustration with the philosophy of art (in contrast with philosophical aesthetics) is, in many ways, an overdetermined result, the sense of the ordinary as available through the withdrawal of this art-centred concern is misguided. This article argues that the reported death of art and the seemingly consistent suggestion that "anything goes" do not relieve contemporary philosophy from its being situated precisely in the wake of these practices of sense-making. I claim that Ordinary Aesthetics is dealing in an illusory conceit to the extent that defences of Ordinary Aesthetics are indebted to a demand that aesthetics may be a living field of philosophical inquiry today only if the fate of artworks is deleted from that narrative. Arguing this point requires an account of the idea of the death of art, associated with Hegel but perhaps more recently with Danto, and I sketch how Danto's account does not cohere with the account provided in Ordinary Aesthetics. But because the claim of Ordinary Aesthetics amounts to a claim about the capacities of human sense-making independent of historical trajectories and a sense of the ordinary as that which is just available to a timeless abstraction of the human sensorium, my criticism of Ordinary Aesthetics requires a deeper defence of the relation of the faltering of narratives of art with the philosophical effort to make sense of ordinary experiences. Doing so requires that I provide alternatives: what I regard as two related though quite different philosophical approaches, namely, Cavell's Ordinary Language Philosophy (which is startlingly absent from defences of Ordinary Aesthetics) and the program of a philosophical aesthetics elaborated in Adorno.

Keywords: Ordinary Aesthetics, Cavell, Adorno, aesthetic theory, Ordinary Language Philosophy, Danto, philosophy of art

After the leaves have fallen, we return
To a plain sense of things. It is as if
We had come to the end of the imagination,
Inanimate in an inert savoir.
[...]
The greenhouse never so badly needed paint.
The chimney is fifty years old and slants to one side.
A fantastic effort has failed, a repetition
In a repetitiousness of men and flies.
Yet the absence of imagination had
Itself to be imagined. The great pond,
The plain sense of it, without reflections, leaves,
Mud, water like dirty glass, expressing silence

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> Of a sort, a silence of a rat come out to see,
> The great pond and its waste of lilies, all this
> Had to be imagined as an inevitable knowledge,
> Required, as necessity requires.
> —Wallace Stevens, "The Plain Sense of Things"

History, perhaps even especially recent history or, grandly, the idea of historicity itself, may be, as Stephen Daedalus remarks in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, a nightmare from which we are trying to awake. Joyce's alter-ego, perhaps even unbeknownst to such a *recherché* writer, is reiterating some thoughts on historical reiteration found in the famous opening of Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* tract, namely that "the tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living." Though many may be inclined to leap at the opportunity to abandon the present as an ongoing outcome of a "tradition of all dead generations" and begin anew, this fantasy is checked by ordinary reality. The fantastic effort fails in everyday life, but it might be thought to be untested in terms of our imaginative or artistic capacities. In this article, I frame recent scholarship gathered under the title of "Ordinary Aesthetics" as precisely an attempt to slough off the dead weight of philosophical history, allegedly because it had become too occupied and entrapped by its obsession with art works. The promised innocence of rebirth envisioned in the fantasy corresponds to the sense in recent literature that this kind of return to (paradoxical) new origins can be actualized in a specifically aesthetic form of attention to everyday, ordinary, experiences (e.g. of recovering maligned beauty in nature from its theory-driven deniers, of appreciating the variety of sensuous qualities of boredom or wage labour). I argue that, even though the frustration with the philosophy of art (in contrast with philosophical aesthetics) is in many ways an overdetermined result, the sense of the ordinary as available through the withdrawal of this art-centred concern is misguided. Rather than thinking that the ordinary can be recovered by leaping back across the fate of the work of art, this article argues that the reported death of art and the concomitant suggestion that "anything goes" do not relieve contemporary philosophy from its being situated precisely in the wake of these practices of sense-making. I claim that Ordinary Aesthetics is dealing in an illusory conceit to the extent that defences of Ordinary Aesthetics are indebted to a conception that aesthetics may be a living field of philosophical inquiry today only if the fate of artworks is deleted from that narrative.

As a burgeoning field of aesthetic inquiry, Ordinary Aesthetics, sometimes known as "Everyday Aesthetics" or the "Aesthetics of Everyday Life," appears to be an overdetermined result. Momentarily leaving aside narratives of the end of the work of art, which anticipate some of the theses of Ordinary Aesthetics ("OA"), advocates for OA, such as Arnold Berleant, narrate its rise as a result that is responsive to trends that are internal to the trajectories of works of art (focusing on visual arts).[1] Others, such as Yuriko Saito, hold that aesthetics does not depend upon a set of "special objects" (meaning here works of art) and is made richer by embracing the diversity of what might be said to be naturally ordained to human experience.[2] Peter Quigley and others have argued that turning towards everyday experiences entails turning *away* from the abstruse dead-ends of "theory" and towards a revitalization of the concept of beauty, which, in turn, can offer salutary results and interesting pathways for the Environmental Humanities or Eco-Criticism.[3] Finally, from a slightly separate angle of approach, Graham Harman recently defended an aesthetics of Object-Oriented Ontology that seems to dovetail with OA advocacy. Harman understands this work to "salvage treasures from the wreck" of Kantian formalism, places aesthetics as "first philosophy," and, thus, partakes of a governing narrative to jettison the self-imposed restrictions of epistemological-aesthetic traditions in order to appreciate the "non-relational autonomy or closure of objects from their contexts."[4] These related expansions of the field of aesthetics in many ways claim a revanchist and therapeutic aim: taking *back*, as it were, the rough ground of the ordinary in aesthetics, recovering what is supposed to be an everyday plain sense of experienced things, appears to answer a complex need across philosophical and humanistic disciplines.

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1 See Carlson and Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*.
2 Saito, *Aesthetics of the Familiar*.
3 Quigley and Slovic, *Ecocritical Aesthetics*.
4 Harman, *Art and Objects*, x, 1, 3.

According to a pervasive narrative in this scholarship, one that I will refer to as the "governing narrative," OA and its interdisciplinary family relations (such as Eco-Aesthetics) make good on several contemporary demands through a recovery of a sense of "aesthetics" that had been neglected or submerged beneath a complex interweaving of misguided epistemology and the exhausted attention given to the philosophy of art. This can be seen in the way that Berleant identifies Kantian aesthetics as having introduced a plethora of "obsolescent concepts" that have served to mire aesthetic theory "in the framework and concepts of the eighteenth century."[5] One need not be fully immersed in the new phenomenological wave of Object-Oriented Ontology ("OOO") to appreciate how, in relation to works of art, Harman's account of OOO trades on a similar vision of the obsolescence of a traditional framework while at the same time alighting upon moments in Kant, Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and others that preserve the thought, restored through OOO, of an inexhaustible excess, a surplus in the real object above its various relations of experiential exchange. Harman goes so far as to say that OOO corrects an error that German Idealism succumbed to in inheriting Kant: "Kant's notions of finitude and the thing-in-itself should have been retained, while simply removing their restriction to cases involving human beings."[6] Though lacking the tone of correction, Saito remarks on the irony that a newfound venture, created, as it were, anew, is merely a matter of being faithful to an older conception of aesthetics, the general science of perception, in Baumgarten's thought.[7] Quigley, too, frames his zealous defences of beauty as a heroic kind of "rear-guard" action or "reactionary gesture" in wishing that it to be read as a "return of the repressed."[8] Other defences of OA (e.g. Leddy 2012: 132–135) also include the attempt to restore "aura" within the experience of ordinary objects that Benjamin famously sketched as a remnant of a disintegrating sense of the sacred in the profanation of artworks, amplified in the era of mechanized reproducibility, a concept he exiled almost immediately to a lost time.[9]

Given the alliance of views risen up in defence of OA, it seems *prima facie* unappealing to wonder if the governing narrative motivating the several accounts of OA and its theoretical fellow travellers can and should be criticized. I am taking up this effort here, but not in the name of defending the some one of the old "formalizations" or "narrowings" ascribed to traditions of theory or artworks. I think it is neither likely nor desirable that we have our history *à la carte*. Asking after the sense of the "ordinary" in OA, here, is to ask specifically whether it promises or recommends an ability to merely "turn back the clock" of history by voiding the post-Kantian line or the evident exhaustion of trajectories of art practices and starting afresh. Exhaustion is not the same as error, and I take it as a central datum of this tradition that it betrays a potentially unsettling truth of a history of art practices and the historical conditioning of what is imagined to be the human sensorium. My point concerns the relation of aesthetic with this history of practices, a tradition of art whose sway has been repeatedly affirmed as defunct. Framed this way, the most salient interlocutors for OA are those who have diagnosed and responded to the death of art, the demise of a certain narrative of confinement, and to reflect upon the presence of what might be regarded as the dead weight of tradition, the ghost of art's collapses, still present at the feast of OA. Thus, it appears necessary to consider trajectories that develop out of the death of art, and I will consider a few lines that evolve out of Hegel through Adorno and, quite differently, Danto. Instead of valorising an untimely leap into the fantasy of an uncorrupted moment pairing aesthetic innocence with ordinary objects, in a matter of speaking, the ordinary *is* that which suffers this corruption. Aesthetics is not established in flight from this history but, rather, in inheriting it. I take myself to be bolstered in asserting this position by Stanley Cavell's engagement with aesthetic problems and the condition of works of art through the lens of Wittgensteinian Ordinary Language Philosophy. The relevance of an Ordinary Language pursuit of an idea of the "ordinary" is also, surprisingly, neglected by the OA and OOO accounts mentioned earlier, and one of the tasks of this article is to situate a kind of confrontation between the ordinary in OA and after Cavell.[10]

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5 In Yuedi and Carter, *Aesthetics of Everyday Life,* 5.

6 Harman, *Art and its Objects*, 20.

7 See Saito, "Everyday Aesthetics."

8 Quigley, *The Forbidden Subject*, 10, 11.

9 Leddy, *The Extraordinary within the Ordinary*, 132–5. For "aura," see Benjamin, *Illuminations,* 222–3.

10 It is not always fair to equate Harman's OOO account with OA philosophers. My intention of including OOO up until this point has been to illustrate a central governing narrative that has influenced (indeed, "overdetermined") both OA and OOO views, although, out of fairness to the differences in approaches, I will desist from urging their similarities upon the reader.

Naïvely put, I am asking whether it is possible, let alone desirable, to accept the governing narrative of OA, shepherding a return to an idea of aesthetics purified of the excrescences that have become attached to it (i.e. the narrow landscape of works of art, "theory," and the need for erudite critics to serve as cultural gatekeepers). Pursued along this path, the governing narrative presumes a model for thinking of aesthetics as a neutral and ahistorical conception of the human sensorium to which experiences are given in a mode called "ordinary," and that these should be regarded as opening onto a sense of the "ordinary" as that which serves an operation of recovery from the heady decades of confining aesthetics to increasingly diminishing corners of experience. A slightly baffling way of putting the question I am raising here is to ask when the ordinary is available for a specifically aesthetic form of reflection or sensuous exposure. This is liable to be confusing because its sounds like it is asking whether it is always possible for anyone to reflect on her sensory experiences. We may feel restrained to respond: always, or, whenever in the presence of objects and given to such reflection, which can be heard as tantamount to saying "in everyday situations."

The question is more interestingly heard as asking for the conditions when it is possible to identify such reflection as aesthetic, and I am supposing that it might be possible for aesthetics to fail to describe such reflection. Consider the following case: a young movie critic reflects upon her account of a new film and judges that her account is "interesting" or "incisive." Such descriptions of her reflections, however, if they are to mean anything, will come out in her audience's reception of her account. Obviously, different normative factors will come into play if she, or anyone, describes her reflections as being about the taste of watermelon rinds, the sounds made by foxes, or about *this* object *here* and *now*.[11] These comparisons reveal some of the relevant and unavoidable conditions when any person reflecting on her experiences could *mean* that her reflections are aesthetic ones, a meaning which can be communicated to others and subject to the commitments that such a communication implies. The young critic's reflective description of her account can be mistaken for several reasons, it is boring rather than interesting, it traffics in stereotypes rather than incisive wit. It would be an evasion of the point for her to console herself with a private assurance that "at least my reflections are interesting *to me*."

With this case of the young critic, I am rehearsing some considerations modelled on the considerations that informed Kant's own theorization of judgements of beauty (and the differences of commitment between saying that something is agreeable as opposed to beautiful). Notably, the claim that to remark of an experience that it is "beautiful" is subject to a commitment that would be incoherent to limit to a personal sense ("beautiful to me") without requiring that it hold also of anyone in the same position. This is the heralded Kantian conception of the judgement of beauty as made on subjective ground and compelling universal agreement, speaking with a particular voice that is also representative of human community. The Kantian argument is controlled by the idea that "beauty" is not a determinate, objective, concept that can be directly sensed, and, hence, that the judgement of beauty is a reflective rather than determinative judgement. My point in unfurling this Kantian background is to question whether OA can or should accept this grammatical baggage about "beauty," the contestable worldly presence of "aesthetic qualities," or, indeed, being convinced of a subjective ability to speak on behalf of a community. More to my point in what immediately follows: is the sense of the aesthetic available ordinarily one that must be judged specifically through a mediation by works of art? What would such a necessary mediation indicate?

Philosophers often explicitly frame the development of OA by referring to the career of the art-centred paradigm of aesthetics after Kant.[12] This identification of a sensitive historical locus in Kantian aesthetics is entirely correct. In the 30 or so years separating Kant's third critique and Hegel's lectures on aesthetics, we move from a thought that celebrates the organized exteriority of nature in Kant to the Hegel's celebration of its replacement at every point of interest by the *Anthropos*. Some (e.g. Robert Pippin) have claimed that Hegel

11 In using this last set of descriptions, I am hoping to echo the emphasis in the "Sense Certainty" chapter of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* placed on similar indices. I am grateful to Ian Rhoad for drawing my attention to the relevance of this chapter of the *Phenomenology* in a discussion of this article.

12 Leddy's, *Extraordinary in the Ordinary*, like Harman in *Art and its Objects*, presents a narrative of the basis of OA or OOO approaches to art as specifically drawing from Kant (Leddy even includes Hegel, albeit as a negative foil consistent with the governing narrative mentioned in the text).

announces the advent of artistic modernism,[13] but I would underline his lack of patience with natural beauty. In his prefatory remarks, Hegel underscores that his topic is the philosophy of (fine) art and that the purpose of this emphasis is to "at once exclude the beauty of nature."[14] There are at least two important questions that follow from this: the first is to ask about Hegel's own motivation to centre aesthetics on the fine arts; the second is to ask of OA what is being affirmed in the claim that aesthetics has been *confined*, unjustly or arbitrarily, to art, disconnected from nature and experiences of the ordinary? What is at stake in this depiction of false imprisonment?

Sketching a response to the first of these two questions, Hegel's argument against natural beauty has at least two steps. In a thumbnail sketch, the first step is that any appreciation of natural beauty as such is done from a distinctly human perspective, a point that Kant would surely agree with, that what we are appreciating is not really the natural scene as an external reality but rather the natural externality is an obscure mirror of *our own capacities for* judgement. If some natural scene is beautiful, it is so because it shows us distinctly human capacities, which, for Hegel, are more satisfactorily exercised in the fine arts. We appreciate ourselves in appreciating nature, but this activity is not satisfied by natural externalities alone. For Hegel, we are driven to engage human attempts at expanding or testing sense-making practices, although, famously, we have been fatefully fixed, for a time, to a restless dissatisfaction with accomplished artistic modes of sense-making. Not discounting the history of this fixture, we are no longer fixed to art, generally, as a sense-making practice. The second step (one that features in some OA conceptions about the defamiliarization that seems to be internal to aesthetic appreciation as such)[15] is to recognize that, when we enter into the attitude of appreciation, we are also *denaturalizing* the scene and we intuit something that is no longer, say, the abode of woodland animals but rather a dimly reflected abstract concept. Here is Hegel's way of putting that point: "In this connection 'natural' cannot be used in the strict sense of the word, for as the external configuration of spirit, it has no value in simply existing immediately as the life of animals, the natural landscape, etc."[16]

Before advancing to the question concerning the specific determination of aesthetics as having been unjustly captive to the philosophy of art, it is essential to recall that, for Hegel, the Idea as presented in art was not the *exclusive possession of art*, but rather that art and philosophy (and religion) all shared a similar vocation of making adequate the collective self-understanding of some collective "we." Positing the intersection of these different spheres of human practice, objective spirit, must be acknowledged as guiding the notorious thought from Hegel that the time for great art is already over, that it can no longer fulfil the vocation that drove it away from the appreciation of natural beauty. Instead of lingering with a false promise for reconciliation between matter and idea, the foregoing *telos* of artwork is replaced by reflection on the human. "In this self-transcendence art is nevertheless a withdrawal of man into himself, a descent into his own breast, whereby art strips away from itself all fixed restriction to a specific range of content and treatment, and makes *Humanus*, its new holy of holies."[17]

Some OA theorists seize this proclamation of the end of art and, following Arthur Danto's compelling interpretation,[18] view this as the prescience of the eventual liberation of aesthetics from the art conventions. In a phrase that Danto frames as the truth of the end of art, OA theorists might leap at the prospect that, now, "anything goes."[19] Down this pathway, the end of art thesis easily becomes a premise for the advent of OA,

13 See Pippin, *After the Beautiful.*

14 Hegel, *Aesthetics,* 1.

15 See Haapala's contribution to Light and Smith 2005.

16 Hegel, *Aesthetics,* 167. Heidegger intensifies this point in *The Question Concerning Technology*, in describing the Rhine, what it means for that river to be viewed as a "water power supplier": "In order that we may even remotely consider the monstrousness that reigns here, let us ponder for a moment the contrast that speaks out of the two titles: 'The Rhine' as damned up into the *power* works, and 'The Rhine' as uttered out of the *art* work, in Hölderlin's hymn by that name. But, it will be replied, the Rhine is still there in the landscape, is it not? Perhaps. But how? *In no other way than as an object on call for inspection by a tour group ordered there by the vacation industry*." (Heidegger *apud* Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies*, 150, my emphasis.)

17 Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 607.

18 See Michael A. Principe's contribution to Light and Smith, *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*.

19 In their critical introduction to Danto, *The Wake of Art,* Gregg Horowitz and Tom Huhn situate Danto's claim on the end of art as ushering in a vivified attention to pluralism: "Danto sees the reawakening of the everyday in art as the end of art's history, since

especially in Berleant's narrative of aesthetics as progressive actualization of engaged experience.[20] But there are multiple and conflicting arguments condensed in different ways of casting the consequences of "anything goes." It should be granted that both the OA theorist and Danto agree that aesthetics ought not be confined to a narrow region of possible experiences. Both argue that there is no conceptual boundary filtering aesthetic experiences from those that had heretofore been nearly exclusively within the domain of exhibiting works of art. As illustrated earlier, the OA theorist takes this to mean that aesthetic evaluations and concepts are now liberated into the ordinary domain of any everyday experience. For Danto, however, it is artists who are now liberated from prior constraints of form, presentation, or appearance. Artists, according to Danto, are now "free to make art in whatever way they wished, for any purposes they wished, or for no purposes at all. That is the mark of contemporary art."[21] Even though both the OA theorist and Danto share the premise that denies any special ontology wherein categories of aesthetic or artistic evaluation have their proper home, Danto's claim is that this liberation is not of the everyday into a domain formerly occupied by artworks but, rather, an inverse influx of artists coming to inhabit everyday regions. He describes as art's becoming "post-historical" in the sense that contemporary art has closed the grand narrative of art's (Western) historical tradition that, for Danto, came to a head with modernism and had its final flourishing in the abstract expressionism of the 1960s. But championing post-historical art practices is not the same thing as valorising the aesthetics of ordinary experiences against the grain of history. For Danto, the post-historical condition of art is just that "there is no a priori constraint on how works of art must look – they can look like anything at all."[22] Yet his claim still privileges a kind of historically educated mode of critical discernment that searches for the work of art. This critical pursuit has become even more removed from being ordinarily available precisely because "there does not even have to be an object to look at, and if there are objects in a gallery, they can look like anything at all."[23] In other words, if anything is potentially indiscernible from a possible work of art, then, rather than making any ordinary experience the (restored) home of aesthetic considerations, Danto's direction of thought seems to throw into question whether aesthetics has any place within the contemporary (i.e. in his terms "post-historical") world.[24]

Considering this narrative of the end of art and its possible relation with OA seems to have returned us to the initial question of whether philosophical reflection on the ordinary can be described as "aesthetic." This question is harder to answer if we understand the OA narrative as insisting that aesthetic reflection can be understood as a retrieval of categories of experience that had been stymied by the narrow occupation with the fine arts. The line of thought from Danto (contentiously extending a thought of Hegel's) is that the post-historical condition makes the blurred difference between "ordinary" and "artistic" experiences in need of further philosophical interpretation. In the post-historical condition, a traditional sense of aesthetics has no place. Contrarily, if OA is indebted to the claim that contemporary aesthetic considerations must be cut loose from recent decades of art theory, then OA needs an account of what remains after subtracting arts from the aesthetic. In coming to a clarified understanding of the possibility of OA today, we must first clarify the relation

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through it art wins the struggle to achieve self-definition and self-determination by means of giving up the pursuit of a visible distinction between itself and the rest of the world. With the everyday no longer the 'other' of art, art neutralizes its philosophical mission and, as Danto says, anything goes. What follows is pluralism." (*Wake of Art,* 58) I quote at length to draw the reader's attention to the lineaments of the governing narrative of OA even here. For Danto's own account of this development, see, among others, chapter 5 of his *The Wake of Art*, "Art after the End of Art." It is also important to recall that Danto's concerns about the end of art are often buttressed by the millenarian suspicion that true life after history is perhaps right around the corner. See Danto "The Work of Art and the Historical Future," 15. I only wish to emphasize here the apparent mutual entailment of an end of art with one of history, since I am claiming that it is not accidental for OA to wish to avoid the history of artworks.

20 See Berleant's contribution to Yuedi and Carter, *Aesthetics of Everyday Life*.

21 Danto, *After the End of Art*, 46.

22 Ibid., 47.

23 Ibid., 48.

24 See Danto, *After the End of Art,* 131–3. As mentioned earlier, one way of pursuing Danto's line of thought is to say that he is pursuing a particular interpretation of Hegel's philosophy of art, which, according to some more recent accounts (see Bertram 2019), places *more* demand for philosophical reflection and interpretation, rather than cutting away the overgrowth of theory. Construed this way, Danto's program is an effort of reading the historical end of art in a direction that runs contrary to the OA narrative.

between philosophical reflection on works of art (and, if Danto is right, their end) and ordinary reflection on human sense-making practices. For example, was the tradition of High European Modernism merely a cage for human practices of sense-making or is its fate tutelary or somehow indicative of a contemporary situation of human sense-making? Put another way, this is a limiting case of a broader question of the relation between the abstraction of the human sensorium (what might be called bodily sensory capacities in their exposure to an environment) and the historical practices of making sense, conceiving, experiences, including here the fact that these practices are linguistic and that languages are historical artefacts.

A family of prominent interpretations for understanding the significance of the fate of modern art through abstract expressionism runs through the work of Adorno, Cavell, or, even, the work of T. J. Clark and Michael Fried. One broad thesis that gathers these divergent interpretations of the history of artworks in the narrative governing OA is that such works are not capable of being understood apart from philosophical reflection on the conditions of human capacities of sense-making *and vice-versa*. I will recount here some of the thoughts featured in Adorno's work in order to lay the challenge most directly before turning to a similar claim in Cavell. Adorno is committed to the view that works of high modernism reveal what has become of conditions of sense-making, the conditions of the very possibility of philosophical reflection. In the words of one of his current readers: "To say that these practices are the condition of possibility of philosophy should be taken as equivalent to saying that they provide the condition of possibility for our being or becoming self-conscious about who we are, what the world we inhabit is like, and how these two fit together."[25] A history of modernist works of art reveals, *in nuce*, an internal and agonistic, exhausted, relation over portraying conditions of experiencing the world under the aspect of its disenchantment by modern rationality.

The succession of modernist modes suggests that antecedent modernist works had not successfully dispelled the multiple ersatz enchantments of representation ("picture thinking" in Hegel's phrase), anthropomorphism, religious longing, utopian futures, and so on. This line of thinking explains without being committed to Clement Greenberg's view of modernism, which emerges quite explicitly at times in Fried and Cavell, as successive interrogations of the necessities of an artistic medium. What else is the drive towards this successive self-emptying of the minimal commitments necessary for achieving, say, a painting, if not the suspicion that each iteration is still haunted by remnant enchantments? More to my point, is this not what is desired for a kind of liberation of artwork from its captivity to an illusory confinement?

The "end of art" thesis, viewed under the influence of Adorno, becomes a project of reiterated and multidimensional efforts to achieve a disenchanted world, in other words, a project for arriving at a natural world *through* reflection on the historical stations of artistic creation. In some ways, Adorno's account can be made to fit within a map of OA's governing narrative. For both Adorno and the governing narrative of OA, natural beauty stands apart from the historical trajectory of artistic becoming and, thus, serves as a fulcrum for redemptive critique of what has become all-too conventional within a bifurcation of an experience of artworks and ordinary life. For OA theorists, that which is natural, often equated with an idea of what is *ordinary*, can be discovered by abjuring the artifices and fads of the art world, which are supposed to have led to the dead end of history and "anything goes." Conversely, for Adorno, natural beauty stands apart from what is ordinary, if this latter term refers to that which is readily available as daily experience, since natural beauty stands for what *does not yet exist* in everyday life. It is a normative summons or appeal to recognize the "fact that nature, as it stirs mortally and tenderly in its beauty, does not yet exist."[26] An experience of natural beauty does not serve as a gateway *back into* a pre- or post-history of a naïve human sensorium from which agglomerations of human artifice have been excised like a cancer from an otherwise healthy body. Instead, the experience of nature beauty induces a sense of shame for what has become ordinary, a sense of shame that stems from a dedicated reduction of future possibility (i.e. the not-yet-existing as a cipher for nature) to that which exists: "The shame felt in the face of natural beauty stems from the damage implicitly done to what does not yet exist by taking it for existent. The dignity of nature is that of the not-yet-existing."[27]

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25 Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies*, 145–6.

26 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 74.

27 Ibid.

Rather than being an independently healthy body, retrievable in its integrity beneath distorting conventions, ordinary human consciousness participates in a pathological tendency to frame the promise of a transformed future to present human utility, rendering spirit into commodity "and what is today called meaning participates in this disaster."[28] The dignity of the non-existent, of nature as a task, has been carried as a germ *within* "the hermetic character of art," its illegibility from the perspective of ordinary consciousness, "art's renunciation of any usefulness whatever" is an "afterimage of the silence that is the single medium through which nature speaks."[29] In short, instead of rendering aesthetics *loquaciously conversant in everyday life*, Adorno's thought urges a focus on that which cannot be made to speak in ordinary terms of human use: "The task of aesthetics is not to comprehend artworks as hermeneutical objects; in the contemporary situation, it is their incomprehensibility that needs to be comprehended."[30]

Running in the opposite direction of the governing narrative of OA, Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* describes the promise of modernist artworks as tending *towards* the condition of non-human nature, redeeming the latter from its corruption under the regime of modern instrumental rationality, and approximating a "language of divine creation."[31] (1997: 78) This promise, however, cannot help but be seen as somewhat paradoxical since it acknowledges the conflicted sense in which human beings are tasked with expressing the non-human and non-conceptual, intending to have no intention, redeeming via human artistic intervention a world damaged by humans, committed to a self-determining being-in-itself that does not yet exist reflected through a subject's intention:

> The being-in-itself to which artworks are devoted is not the imitation of something real but rather the anticipation of a being-in-itself that does not yet exist, of an unknown that –by way of the subject—is self-determining. Artworks say that something exists in itself, without predicating anything about it.[32]

This interpretation of the yet non-existent organizing *telos* of artworks could hardly be further from the thought that the history of modern art points to the possibility that "anything goes." Indeed, nothing can be said to "go" anymore: "The sole path of success that remains open to artworks is also that of their progressive impossibility."[33] Adorno's text parts ways from the OA emphasis on recovering ordinary experience *outside* of the history of art forms. The license proffered by OA to indulge in a sense of the ordinary as given apart from artistic mediation will be resisted by Adorno since such an exteriorization *arrests* the liberating project of properly disenchanting human experience as well as its objects from instrumentalizing rationality. This corresponds to the method of a Negative Dialectics, which seeks "implicit history" as "possibility" as a means for penetrating "hardened objects," "the possibility of which their reality has cheated the objects and which is nonetheless visible in each one."[34] Evidently, the divergence here occurs precisely when the idea of the "ordinary" comes into view.

This line of thinking will be confronted by the question of why anyone would desire a "total" disenchantment unless one already glimpses a disaster at the heart of everyday life. A parallel disbelief would follow from hearing that the ordinary is a space liberated from the empty historical closures of specialized artifice, that is, unless one already judges the history of arts to be unilluminating sound and fury. Tracking Adorno's reading of the history and unfulfilled promise of modern art is a way of pressing the question of whether a recovery of the conditions of sense-making and the experience of the everyday is independent of the work of art. The claim of OA rejects this denial and claims that it is now and always possible, for human beings to be able to reflect on their experiences and conditions of sense-making. The question now becomes: what sort of perspective could be

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid., 118. The image of making what is silent in nature loquacious is one of the points of emphasis in Horkheimer and Adorno's account of the rise of scientific instrumental rationality in the first chapter of Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

31 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 78.

32 Ibid., 77.

33 Ibid., 202.

34 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 52.

achieved that would facilitate a judgement about what is called "ordinary" for an ecumenical audience and not merely for those who are already part of the congregation of OA or the Frankfurt School?

We can now indicate the relevance of Cavell and post-Wittgensteinian accounts of an aesthetics of the ordinary that neither abandons the history of art forms nor breaks with all communicative possibility. The project of an Ordinary Aesthetics after Cavell and Wittgenstein is one that holds that the ordinary, everyday, is a space of recovery and also a space that calls for an eventual becoming, a promise of return through an attention to the ordinary that not only is restorative but also evokes an "eventual" every day, the promise of which diurnally arises as unfulfilled, and that recognizes and valorises modernist conventions without framing nature exclusively as that which has been excluded from human convention.

The course of my argument so far anticipates an account of the "ordinary" as it intersects with considerations of conventions and an idea of what might be natural. It ought to be noted that these are not to be regarded as external to some idea of an aesthetics or a philosophy of art, but rather, precisely as the object of any reputed "Ordinary Aesthetics" worthy of its name.[35] Here I hope to thread a needle, the aperture of which stands in the *locus* identified by both the governing narrative of OA and Adorno's aspirations for possibilities disclosed in the hermeneutical resistance of artworks. Identifying this aperture of intersection, I am suggesting, is bundled up with questions of when the ordinary can be identified, more specifically, when it dawns as a restorative measure, when it marks an antecedent departure and measures steps for recovery, or, simply, when something (an object or phrase) appears *as* ordinary.

These "specifications" may strike the reader as being overly precious with the notion of the "ordinary" since they all seem to overlook the tautological response: something appears to be ordinary in ordinary situations. But this response does not lend itself towards any perception or appreciation of what it would mean to accept such situations, such conditions, as ordinary. If anything, emphasizing the tautology makes it more difficult to understand how the ordinary could ever be an emphatic presence in experience. Accounting for the ordinary, in this way, draws upon an unspoken sense of the extraordinary, a rhetorical colouring that is added, in OA discourses, to the idea that artworks have increasingly come to inhabit only extraordinarily recherché objects and contexts. So the ordinary is that which is without artifice, something plainly there at the end of imagination, as Wallace Stevens sketched an idea of "The Plain Sense of Things," "inanimate in an inert savoir." "Yet," as the poet goes on to claim, "the absence of imagination had/itself to be imagined" and imagined as an "inevitable knowledge." To the extent that the governing narrative of OA falls under the persuasion of its readiness to equate the ordinary with that which is inevitable in experience, it is because we are apt to think of the ordinary as *given* to the registers of the human senses. Hence the conventions of artworks, which seem to be so many baseless strictures, appear as incredibly evitable.

The line taken by Wittgenstein, Cavell, and even Stevens in "The Plain Sense of Things" is just that the given is always mediated by language. Our exposure to the world is partially insulated by the idea that the world is not a collection of ordinary things but that even these ordinary things are interpellated and interpreted by what Wittgenstein and Cavell call "forms of life." So, the first step to take in accounting for the ordinary, following Saito's recommendation nearly to the letter, is not to think of it as a specialized region of ontology but (breaking here with Saito) to envision it as the discovery of a mutual attunement in language.[36]

Underscoring the givenness of forms of life, rather than the givenness of the objects of experience, is meant to have a disarming epistemological effect. This is what Cavell describes as the moral of scepticism. If the ordinary is something that comes into awareness as a mutual attunement, it is thoroughly crossed by lines of communication and the presence of at least imagined others. This crossing dispossesses me, as a representative for anyone, from having any exclusive or private command over the conditions of what is ordinary. Indeed, even

35 For examples of the varieties of such examples from the perspective of literary studies, see Guetti, *Wittgenstein and the Grammar of Literary Experience*; Perloff, *Wittgenstein's Ladder*; Altieri, *Reckoning with the Imagination*; Eldridge, *The Persistence of Romanticism*; and Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary*. It will be noticed that the position of the present author does not always agree with the portraits of the "ordinary" in these works, which, for example, follow the OA theorist's attitude that the ordinary is just to be equated with that which is capable of being antecedently identified as normal or even humble, instead of as the revenant of human condition – to be described in the text further.

36 On the idea of attunement as "agreement in judgment," see Cavell, *Claim of Reason,* 30–3.

in moments of privacy or personal experiences, the "conditions" delimiting the ordinary are given within an ongoing and incomplete inheritance of language. Such inheritance is incomplete, even for one who might entertain the self-regard of being a native speaker, "the inheritance of language is essentially never over and done with – though any number of accidents, or say fixations, inner or outer, may put an end to it."[37]

Even if Cavell is right to take a broadly Kantian Copernican turn away from the givenness of objects towards a givenness of forms of life, repeatedly alerting his readers to the moral of scepticism that follows from this reorientation (i.e. that "the existence of the world and others in it is not a matter to be known, but one to be acknowledged" and that we are repeatedly confronted now with the question of how to acknowledge the world and others across our epistemological separateness from directly being present to them, their being transparently readable for us), it remains to be seen why this should render the ordinary (even as the discovery of mutual attunement) to be something preciously withdrawn from "ordinary" contexts. Cavell's Wittgensteinian account of our relation to the ordinary is one that is "ordinarily" misaligned, frequently claiming a point that it is characteristic of human beings to disavow the human conditioning of their relation to language, the world, and others. This accusation holds, *a fortiori*, of questions or theses that are recognizable as having a philosophical or sceptical gist, but it is not the exclusive possession of a group of people that might be somehow identified ahead of time as "philosophers," or a collection of thoughts called "metaphysical." One relatable example can be found in Cavell's 1986 Tanner Lecture, "The Uncanniness of the Ordinary,"[38] where he likens a search for the ordinary to Poe's policemen in "The Purloined Letter" who are unable to find the desired letter simply because it is not hidden. Cavell adduces this passage from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*: "The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and ordinariness. (One is unable to notice something – because it is always before one's eyes.)" (§129). It may already be obvious to the reader, but I will note anyway that, in the analogy with "The Purloined Letter," Dupin – the detective who "solves" a royal difficulty by being able to see what is in front of everyone's eyes, who liberates everyone involved in the caper by introducing another letter to beguile the beguiler of Poe's tale, and where the case is known to be "solved" precisely because the coercive designs of the unprincipled villain, antecedently known to all involved as the villain, are now relieved of their force – stands in the place of Cavell's image of the Ordinary Language Philosopher. The latter is not characterized by her acquaintance with all that might be hidden within arcane system but just by her ability to discern what lies in plain view, including a use of language that seems to arrest everyday life in a state of suspended philosophical vigilance; the Ordinary Language Philosopher is then able to provide other words (even in this case, words that would serve as a reminder for the villain to recall a previous encounter with Dupin) that disengage the suspension of everyday life and lead to a return to the familiar as if from out of a period of exile from it. It is not necessarily the case that the substitute words (i.e. Dupin's facsimile of the purloined letter) contain "ordinary" terms (indeed, Dupin's contains a verse from an eighteenth-century poem by Crébillon) but the "ordinary" names that which is achieved through the method preferred by the Wittgensteinian philosopher.

I run the risks of presenting the potentially hyperobtrusive parallels between the Ordinary Language Philosopher and Dupin because they provide further substance for Cavell's judgement that Wittgenstein "speaks to us quite as if we have become unfamiliar with the world,"[39] a tone that will, on one hand, serve as a rebuke to the tautology of the ordinary as that which is given ordinarily, but, on the other, will only bear compelling evidentiary weight if one judges that human beings *are* capable of becoming lost to what might be thought to be most proximate to humans. If we are able to claim this proximity for works of art, as artefacts of human production if not always the comprehensive result of deliberate human intention, then, at the very least, we should suppose that OA's and Adorno's lines of thought approach a willingness to accept this depiction, since, for the former, it bespeaks the decades – if not centuries – long trend in various art worlds, and, for the latter, it would seem to be expressed by the famous opening lines of *Aesthetic Theory*, that it is "self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore."[40]

37 Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary*, 132.
38 In Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary*, 153–78.
39 Ibid., 165.
40 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 1.

Following Cavell's line of elaborating the consequences of this thought will sponsor a description of the ordinary as *uncanny* and will call for an adjusted sense of the identity of what is said to "return" from out of estrangement.

> The return of what we accept as the world will … present itself as a return of the familiar, which is to say, exactly under the concept of what Freud names the uncanny. That the familiar is a product of the sense of the unfamiliar and of the sense of a return means that what returns … is never (just) the same.[41]

As that which is accomplished by and through the ordinary, to speak of a "return" is perhaps a misleading phenomenological marker, since not only is that which returns "never (just) the same," and, hence, a putative return of what had not been *there* in the first place, but, also, the one who returns from this holiday or exile is *given* something that could not have been experienced before. In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein notes a sense of achieved "peace" as the therapeutic *telos* of his philosophical method, and not only that but as "the real discovery" [*Die eigentliche Entdeckung*], which is implicitly contrasted against the illusory discovery of a "system of rules" [*Regelsystem*].[42] To risk stating the obvious again, which is a curious risk to run in the context of how the obvious is exactly what escapes notice, the ordinary can be said to resemble nothing so much as a revenant of human condition, the return of repressed boundaries or forms of agreement in language and judgement that are gathered together in the wild "whirl of organism" called human forms of life.[43] The question, to conclude, is how the Cavellian conception of the ordinary can be made to intervene in the differing visions of OA and Adorno with respect to its relation to aesthetics.

One of the more clearly illustrative moments of *Philosophical Investigations* commences with Wittgenstein describing a scenario in which a conflict emerges between the mandates of an alleged philosophical account of language and the actual practices of language use. Wittgenstein presents a parable of walking on ice as figurative of the ineptitude of a particularly rigid requirement of a "crystalline purity of logic"[44] if employed as a general idealization for the human conditions of walking. "We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need *friction*. Back to the rough ground!"[45] Although comparatively coarse, as any moment of providing a bird's-eye view over the terrain of *Philosophical Investigations* is likely to be, this figuration of walking on ice as precisely misrepresenting an idealized space for philosophical investigation also details that which is being investigated, that which I described earlier, following Cavell (following Emerson), as human condition.

But which ground is suitably rough for our purposes? How shall rough ground be recognized? What is "walking" in this figuration? My brief account of Cavell's engagement with the notion of the "uncanniness of the ordinary" already presented reasons to suspect that we cannot just identify the rough ground by that which it is not. It is fruitless, on this account, to try to secure the ordinary in advance by insisting upon its contrariness to that which is extraordinary. The "ordinary" human drive towards inhumanity is not the least reason for the uselessness of this negative understanding. We are also in a position to highlight that the ordinary is not a region of an ontology; it is something that emerges in a "real discovery" and is better described as an attained relation to given forms of human life. This point must be kept in mind, since it will seem perfectly acceptable to OA theorists and Wittgensteinians alike to portray that the ordinary is that which must be turned to in order to undermine the confinements of abstruse conventions. The difference here is that there is no objective highest common factor in accounting for the "ordinary" for a Wittgensteinian mode of thought, whereas, for OA theorists, the ordinary is identifiable both in negative terms (i.e. the objects of experience that have been neglected in aesthetically prioritizing the work of art) and as oriented by a highest common factor (i.e. everything that could feature in the science of the human sensorium).[46] The rough

41 Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary*, 166.
42 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §133.
43 Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 52.
44 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §107
45 Ibid.
46 Other highest common factor criteria can be easily supplied if the kind of OA approach is tailored towards, say, OOO or Eco-Aesthetics.

ground is not guaranteed to be any ordinary object that one is likely to encounter, since the sceptical holiday from human condition might exactly be one where I am deeply attentive to exactly and only the given experiences of so-called ordinary objects: Moore's envelope, Descartes's ball of wax, a slanting chimney of unknown custodianship, the lilies of a stagnant and dirty pond. Though "ordinary" in an OA reckoning, the Wittgensteinian will need to pursue how an attention to such objects can draw one back to the ordinary. But there is also a critical edge to the Wittgensteinian–Cavellian thought in relation to OA.

Following Adorno's line on the situation of artworks, we can say that nothing about the ordinary is self-evident, given without having found oneself lost to it. Perhaps it is subject to the same confusion concerning 'nature' as a given and fully present totality as opposed to 'nature' as marking the specific dignity of that which is unfolding. In any event, philosophy becomes a self-conscious and -revelatory project in the light of the ordinary appearing as that which unfolds from out of and releases human subjects from resistant fixtures. This indicates how the development of philosophical practice apes the fate of artworks. "The absence of imagination had/itself to be imagined." Similarly, for Cavell, it might be said, how a certain register of objects arises to epistemologico-aesthetic prominence is not determined objective by the objects, but, rather, as the governing narrative of OA indicates, only through a historical exposure to what is now being isolated as illegible in modern art and aesthetics. We can hardly judge whether William Carlos Williams, for example, as a poet of occasionally "ordinary" items such as a famed red wheelbarrow, would have had the same reception were it not for the high-flying exertions of his contemporaries T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. Surely the same could be said for Beckett in the wake of Joyce. But neither Williams nor Beckett is disclosing the *same things* as earlier poets and writers who attended to, say, the low and the common: Wordsworth, say, or Clare.[47]

Cavell discusses a similar conditioning of experience by the achievements of conventions in artworks in describing when we can identify music as improvisatory. Focusing on an ability to hear something *as improvisatory* is a fecund topic to consider in reflecting on the possible discoveries of ostensible freedoms available only (or against?) in the presence of formulaic conventions.

> In listening to a great deal of music, particularly to the time of Beethoven, it would, I want to suggest, be possible to imagine that it was being improvised. Its mere complexity, or a certain kind of complexity, would be no obstacle. … One can hear, in the music in question, how the composition is *related* to, or could grow in familiar ways, from a process of improvisation; as though the parts meted out by the composer were re-enactments, or dramatizations, of successes his improvisations had discovered …. If this could be granted, a further suggestion becomes possible. Somewhere in the development of Beethoven, this ceases to be imaginable.[48]

The capacity to hear music as a development whose genesis is improvisatory success is claimed by Cavell to only be possible "within contexts fully defined by shared formulas," a place where "full, explicit improvisation traditionally exists."[49] Surely, we might place ourselves, however unwillingly, in a position to listen to several trombonists and flautists freestyling, but without the control of a governing work (given in advance or alighted upon haphazardly in a discovery of a common interest in exploring, say, "Freebird"), their free flights will not be heard as improvised music.[50] Continuing Cavell's thought: "The context in which we can hear music as improvisatory is one in which the language it employs, its conventions, are familiar or obvious enough."[51] The

47 For an insightful work on a long tradition of environmental poetics that deepens a connection from Clare to Ashbery, which nonetheless portrays "paying close attention" – a hallmark of the Wittgensteinian as much as for Poe's detective – as only rarely achieved in the tradition, see Fletcher, *A New Theory for American Poetry*, especially: "On this account Ashbery writes with a special way of paying close attention. You will say, all serious activities, including the activity in and around a poem, are surely attentive. But in fact most poetry is deliberately inattentive. It dwells in memorized formulas (ballads); it dwells in romantic exaggerations and hyperboles ("My love is like a red red rose"); it dwells in the great generalized traditions of myth, those stories appearing everywhere as the loosely ordered *structures* of poetry and literature; it dwells in a studied indirectness and obliquity which are the very opposite of attentively observed reality." (193–4)

48 Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?,* 200–1.

49 Ibid., 201.

50 Rawls argues a similar point in "Two Conceptions of Rules" regarding the ability to steal a base outside of the controlling context of a game of baseball. "Stealing a base" without this context can only be running.

51 Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?,* 201.

use of "improvisation" is functioning here not only as a guiding convention for what might be called the praxis of the musician, but also describes an element of what an audience would be hearing. This thought also fits the measures of Adorno's claim that the experience of beauty in nature and nature's silence bears within it an implicit context for the evaluation of modernist artworks.

Now, a depiction of the human sensorium as a network of capacities that are essentially untrained and uninformed by conventions will find it difficult to account for the claim that someone cannot *hear* music as improvisatory without a controlling context of convention. We can also radicalize the thought, following either the Adorno path outlined by Bernstein or the Cavellian line that describes the given as the form of life in language, that even the sensuous exposure to something called ordinary, a spoon at six o'clock in the morning or a mushroom on a log a few steps off of a trail in a park, cannot even arise but for the control of the contexts of life-damaging instrumental reason (Adorno) or the whirl of organism profoundly crossed (and double-crossed) by language that are human forms of life (Cavell).

This is not to suggest that Cavell's and Adorno's visions of the ordinary are equal. Cavell shares Adorno's conviction that the place of art works for philosophy now is no longer self-evident, and Adorno clearly anticipates a thesis so central to Cavell's work that "all philosophical critique is today possible as the critique of language."[52] The two philosophers, who both began their professional lives studying music albeit in quite different social and cultural contexts,[53] both single out the late works of Beethoven as a demarcating point for an end of subjectivity, or expressive spontaneity, in the face of conventions.[54] Adorno, in a 1937 essay on "Late

52 Adorno, "Theses on the Language of the Philosopher," 38. As has been pointed out to me by a reviewer of this article, there is much in Adorno's "Theses on the Language of the Philosopher" that tracks with Cavell's reading of late Wittgenstein. Part of this correspondence is to revise a dichotomy of form and content, that language replicates a concrete historical unity with real objects, and that linguistic reality runs contrariwise to what Adorno calls the "idealist demand" (*ibid.*: 36) to search for an adequation of language and object. Undoubtedly, Cavell would not describe this demand as an idealist's alone but would characterize it as part of the panoply of scepticism. Adorno does, however, go to lengths that I think Cavell would be reluctant to follow, for example: "In the absence of a unified society there is no objective language and therefore no truthfully communicative language" (*ibid.*); "Today the philosopher confronts disintegrated language. The ruins of words are his material, to which history binds him; his freedom is solely the possibility of their configuration according to the force of truth in them. He is as little permitted to think the word as pregiven as to invent a word." (*ibid.*: 37) Indeed, it is the extent to which Adorno has Heidegger targeted in this critique of the "language of the philosopher" that might be said to be the boundary that Cavell, a dedicated reader of Heidegger, fails to follow Adorno in detail.

53 For a useful comparison of Adorno and Cavell in terms of their philosophical relation to music, see Smith, "We Look Away and Leap Around." Smith's article rightly notes a "common concern" between the two that appears in an overlap of the ethical and the transcendental that appears through reflecting on historical accomplishments in music while also, more particularly, noting how this shared concern is inflected in different directions for Adorno and for Cavell (who Smith takes to come off the worse for departing from Adorno's line).

54 Alternatively, the next few paragraphs might have centred around their readings of Beckett's *Endgame*: Adorno's essay, "Trying to Understand *Endgame*," and Cavell's "Ending the Waiting Game: A Reading of Beckett's *Endgame*" (in his *Must We Mean What We Say?)*. Much of what I say later in the text is germane to Cavell's points of emphasis in his interpretation of *Endgame*, the sense in which there is a tremendous effort of learning how to go on, to mourn, and, in doing so, finding oneself compelled to remember, repeat, and work through (i.e., the three foci of Freud's 1914 essay "Erinnern, Wiederholen, Durcharbeiten") the past, including, for Cavell, an emphasis on mythic-Biblical prehistory. In Cavell, as always, the work is done primarily in a relation to what one says. Adorno's reading is not non-linguistic, but his concerns are clearly more expansive than Cavell's. Even if Cavell mentions the catastrophe of nuclear war, Adorno is much more thoroughgoing in his recognition of a global catastrophe, a pervasive disaster, that renders all philosophy of consciousness, subjectivity, existentialism, to be ridiculous. I think that Adorno would include most of Cavell's work here, although, as an anonymous reviewer has patiently emphasized to me, there are compelling readings of Adorno as a kind of Cavellian moral perfectionist. I think I would add, "in spite of himself," but there is no room to defend that secondary point here. One of the central ambiguities that prevents me from pursuing this point further in the text is Adorno's claim late in his essay is an ambiguous differentiation between hell and a messianic condition. "In [*Endgame*] the distinction disappears between absolute domination, the hell in which time is banished, in which nothing will change any more – and the messianic condition where everything would be in its proper place. The ultimate absurdity is that the repose of nothingness and that of reconciliation cannot be distinguished from each other." (Adorno, "Trying to Understand *Endgame*," 152) Immediately following this thought is the sense of hope emerging and disappearing, which seems to correspond with a kind of Cavellian diurnalization of the everyday (see Guetti, "Ends of Life"), though Adorno goes on to remark that the perspective of consciousness as somehow already surviving its own end (a possibility already sketched out in Adorno's reading of post-Kantian Idealism, Europe after Auschwitz, or what can only be abbreviated as Late Capitalism). In closing this long footnote, I would only point out that I would continue to insist, against the

Style in Beethoven," detects subjectivity only in the "irascible gesture with which it takes leave of the works themselves"[55] or in the fusion of tensions that "[leave] the naked tone behind; that sets the mere phrase as a monument to what has been, marking a subjectivity turned to stone."[56] Adorno portrays Beethoven's late style as a heap of conventions, a "fractured landscape" through which subjectivity flits only as the light that permits an appearance, "not in order to express itself, but in order, expressionless, to cast off the appearance of art … [leaving] only fragments behind, and [communicating] itself, like a cipher, only through the blank spaces from which it has disengaged itself."[57]

> Thus in the very late Beethoven the conventions find expression as the naked representations of themselves. This is the function of the often-remarked-upon abbreviation of his style. It seeks not so much to free the musical language from mere phrases, as, rather, to free the mere phrase from the appearance of its subjective mastery.[58]

For Cavell, it is the experience of late Beethoven that bears testimony to the thought that "it is as if our freedom to act no longer depends on the possibility of spontaneity; improvising to fit a *given* lack or need is no longer enough."[59] Cavell's thought is to say that the exhaustion of a prior regime of relating subjectivity to convention only indicates a space for an as-yet-unavailable "rediscovery" of music that could compel a recognition of its having inherited this fragmented soundscape and its attendant subject. Though "the entire enterprise of action and of communication has become problematic" and "[t]he problem is no longer how to do what you want, but to know what would satisfy you," the present choice (the choice within this present, one present to the conditions of what has become of conventions of meaning) "seem to be those of silence, or nihilism …, or statements so personal as to form the possibility of communication without the support of convention – perhaps to become the source of new convention."[60]

Of course, not everything could fill in here as a continuation. Indeed, "nothing" might go here, and it is possible that our experience of concert music that could be regarded as having been composed in mourning the wake of Beethoven is at an end. What would "walking" mean here or discovering our ability to "go on"? At minimum, it must be remarked that Cavell's depiction is not aiming at a new, more thoroughly Enlightened, disenchantment of the world through the work of art. Indeed, Cavell is not seeking to relieve a world of its pseudo-enchantments but, rather, always at a "rediscovery" that is never a mere return. In line with the dispossessing or disarming consequences of the givenness of forms of life, which lead to an acknowledgement of separateness in my relation to any other, any possible world that I and others could inhabit, Cavell (from the promptings of Thoreau as much as those of Kierkegaard's Johannes de Silentio) depicts the world as the object of a doubled activity, heard in the homophones "morning" and "mourning": the world is to be "regained every day, in repetition, regained as gone."[61]

This final point is hardly generalizable, apart from whatever can be generalizable in the sense that walking unaided, just as waking (as both awakening and grieving), requires an ability to go on with and through these histories of exposure. Nothing could be a lasting response without exemplifying how one goes on or gets up every day. At times, Cavell frames a lesson after Emerson, Marx, or Nietzsche that, so far, we are

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helpful suggestions of the same anonymous reviewer, that Adorno seems to remain with a kind of separation of form or convention from reality insofar as he is given to say that the totality of disaster that *Endgame* attempts to portray has "become a total *a priori*, so that bombed-out consciousness no longer has any position from which it could reflect on that fact." (Adorno, "Trying to Understand *Endgame*," 122)

55 Adorno, "Late Style in Beethoven," 566.

56 Ibid., 567.

57 Ibid., 567, 566. The reader will remark upon the consistency here of the thought that art is approaching the condition of an as-yet-non-existent nature through a mimesis of silence and fragmentation.

58 Adorno, "Late Style in Beethoven," 566.

59 Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 201.

60 Ibid., 201–2. The main thought of this paragraph appears to me now to echo a similar contrast set up in two essays by Shuster (see his "Some Notes on Philosophy and Redemption" and his "Education for the World"). Shuster latches onto a different pivot from this articulation of an aspirational but ungrounded relation to the possibility of discovering meaning in conventions. In the latter, Shuster frames these two essays, rightly to my ear, as composing a whole, focusing on the form in which philosophy, as a practice, may continue or find its end (may be terminable or interminable) in the wake of comprehending the kinds of losses that occasion philosophical work and those losses that sustain it.

61 Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary*, 172.

not thinking for ourselves, and thus live in a kind of uncreated stasis called "conformity" before the advent of properly human history.[62] Cavell's thought is not one of redeeming a world or a nature à venir through the silence of artworks or even through a project of critical or negative dialectical thought, because the ordinary, exactly as what *might* be attained through self-recovery within forms of life, requires (first and last) presence within a world that is beyond recovery by morality, metaphysics, or even works of art (especially after the "break" in a relation to the world of movies described in *The World Viewed*). Since such a world is only ever experienced as gone, since it is always something to be recovered, we might look towards some of Cavell's earliest accounts of tragedy, especially the final 20 pages of "The Avoidance of Love,"[63] where he is attempting to square or at least counterpoise a diagnosis that we are "ineluctably actors" in worldly events and also that we have rendered ourselves as an "audience" to these events, or take our agency here as completely theatricalized (awaiting lines and assignments).[64]

I will conclude with two extended citations from "The Avoidance of Love," which perhaps present Cavell at his most directly despairing (not only because of the war in Vietnam) shorn of the Romantic-Transcendentalist promises that console the lectures from the 1980s (*This New Yet Unapproachable America* and *In Quest of the Ordinary*).

> What we do not know is what there is to acknowledge, what it is I am to make present, what I am to make myself present to. I know there is inexplicable pain and death everywhere, and now if I ask myself why I do nothing the answer must be, I choose not to. That is, doing nothing is no longer something which has a place insured by ceremony; it is the thing I am doing. … Tragedy, could it now be written, would not show us that we *are* helpless – it never did, and we are not. It would show us, what it always did, *why* we (as audience) are helpless.[65]

> If a tragedy would not know how to look, which could bring presentness back, still it knows something: it knows that this ignorance is shared by all modernist arts, each driving into itself to maintain the conviction it has always inspired, to reaffirm the value which men have always placed upon it. It knows that, to make us practical, our status as audience will have to be defeated, because the theater no longer provides a respite from action, but one more deed of inaction, hence it knows that theater must be defeated, inside and out. … It knows that this requires that we reveal ourselves and that, as always, this is not occasioned by showing me that something happening is relevant to me … but by showing me something to which I am relevant, or irrelevant. … Our tragic fact is that we find ourselves at the cause of tragedy, but without finding ourselves.[66]

From this Cavellian position, one might summarize the criticism of OA by saying that it is in danger of capitulating to the already prevalent sense that we are destined to be an audience to the world and others by surrendering to and extending a condition of theater as basic to the human sensorium. One can summarize this position's criticism of Adorno by accusing him of capitulating to philosophical spectatorship precisely by insisting on our tragic role and foreclosing any possibility of awakening, meaningfully, to presence. Although it is not a quiet spectatorship, not by any means. The reader might be able to perceive the self-accusation that is part of the opening lines of the introduction to *Negative Dialectics*: "Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed. The summary judgment that it had merely interpreted the world … becomes a defeatism of reason after the attempt to change the world miscarried. … [P]hilosophy is obliged ruthlessly to criticize itself."[67] Pursuing this line further, however, would lead to a separate and long consideration, one that is clearly central to Adorno's aims in *Negative Dialectics* and an ongoing desideratum of the Wittgensteinian philosophical practice that Cavell inherits: the end of philosophy.[68] At the very least, it

62 See, for example, Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary*, 111–2, 142.

63 In Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 267–353.

64 Ibid., 346. Of course, a different track would have been to embrace the sense of a quest of recovery (a broad project Cavell outlines under the moniker, "Moral Perfectionism") rather than a passion of losses (the intertwining of scepticism and tragedy). In some sense, these are two sides of the same coin in Cavell, and Shuster's, "Nothing to Know" compellingly argues a case for understanding Adorno precisely as a Cavellian Moral Perfectionist.

65 Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 346.

66 Ibid., 349.

67 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 3.

68 As mentioned in a prior note, Shuster's, "Some Notes on Philosophy and Redemption" focuses on shading the opening line of Adorno's, *Negative Dialectics,* and, with it, early thinkers of the Frankfurt School tradition (especially Marcuse) in more Cavellian

can be said that OA is not capable of envisioning an end (and, hence, a renewal) of its descriptive practice.[69] From both Adorno's and Cavell's perspectives, as I have cashed them out here, that is a measure of its distance from what has become of the ordinary.

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colours regarding an "end" to philosophy. My sense is that Shuster and I agree very deeply on how to read Cavell but we will discover that we have different ways of scoring what Adorno says about "philosophy" in its relation to redemption or damaged life.

69 The same could be said for Danto's vision of the philosophical criticism necessary for post-historical art.

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