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James H. Donelan

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

*Self-Consciousness and Music in the
Late Enlightenment*

How can I say I! without self-consciousness?

– Friedrich Hölderlin, “Judgment and Being”

No other philosophical concept so clearly defines the end of the Enlightenment and the beginning of Romanticism as self-consciousness, the process by which the self becomes aware of its status as a thinking, knowing entity, and the precondition, according to the Idealists and Romantics, for all knowledge. In a limited sense, the concept goes much farther back into the history of philosophy, to Plato or even Parmenides, and one could even make a case for the presence of poetic or musical self-consciousness in the Homeric epics. However, by the seventeenth century, Descartes appeared to have made the definitive statement about self-consciousness with the *cogito*, the well-known “I think therefore I am” argument of the *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Enlightenment philosophical investigations after Descartes generally turned outward, toward the systematic acquisition and organization of all possible knowledge about the world, following Newton’s and Leibniz’s mathematical models of understanding, the alphabetical tendencies of Voltaire, Diderot, and the *Philosophes*, or the British empiricists’ distrust of metaphysics. Immanuel Kant, at the time an obscure professor at the University of Königsberg, returned to the problem with the *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1781 by focusing his considerable analytic power on knowledge itself and separating it into two central categories: a priori knowledge, that which is known prior to experience, and a posteriori knowledge, that which is known as a result of experience. From this extremely dense and arcane examination of a priori knowledge, Kant deduced that consciousness, as a necessary precondition for any cognition, began with the self-awareness of the subject: the “I” that thinks.

In the same year – 1781 – Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, no longer content with his position as the court composer to the prince-archbishop of Salzburg, asked to be released from the archbishop’s service while in Vienna.

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Mozart, at twenty-five no longer a child prodigy, soon acquired students, gave concerts, and wrote an opera and a symphony for both public performance and publication. For the next five years, Mozart would continue to write at an extraordinary rate, making a good living (contrary to legend) as a public performer of instrumental music, with revenues from sheet music publication as well as from commissions and performances.

Kant's publication of the first critique and Mozart's release from the prince-archbishop's service have no direct connection to each other, yet they represent the beginning of a new era. Soon, philosophers would follow Kant toward the creation of a renewed, more complex, and stronger version of the individual consciousness as a motivating force, generating a belief in the power of the self-conscious, independent mind that persists even in these modern and postmodern times. Following Kant, the Idealist philosophers, especially Fichte, Schiller, Schelling, and Hegel, claimed self-consciousness as the center of their philosophical systems and the basis for all other knowledge; in different ways and to varying degrees, they also claimed that the self-conscious subject gives order to the world. Meanwhile, Beethoven, acutely aware of Mozart's accomplishments, created a powerful persona of himself as composer-hero, leading to a form of self-consciousness in music. Hölderlin and Wordsworth also turned inward to their poetry, describing in deeply philosophical terms the poet's vocation and position in history and developing a new self-consciousness in poetry.

What connects these events, and can criticism articulate a meaningful and useful description of this connection? Marshall Brown's answer to this question takes the same starting point, the role of consciousness in Kant and Mozart. According to Brown,

at every period in history a subterranean network of constraints governs the organization of human thought. Different fields develop and change in parallel not because they affect one another but because the infrastructures of mental activity affect all of them. In this respect, the relationship of music and philosophy is no different from the relationship of literature and philosophy. The infrastructure is the precondition of thought and is by definition unconscious and unarticulated. Because it lies outside the limits of the individual disciplines, it cannot really be formulated within any of them. Hence arises the necessity of comparative study.¹

Brown's recognition of the necessity of studies like this one is gratifying, as is his desire to examine the "intellectual infrastructures" of the eighteenth century without using political, economic, or social history as an ultimate cause. However, the mutual illumination he seeks between music and philosophy, and between music and literature, does not necessarily

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require a concept of infrastructure, conceptual or otherwise. Rather, the relationships among music, philosophy, and literature, some direct, some mediated, take place in historical time as part of an entire matrix of communicative structures that is far from subterranean. These structures do not precondition the creation of philosophy, poetry, or music; they are the result of reciprocating relationships among these individual modes of discourse.

I intend, therefore, to explore the relationship between self-consciousness and music in poetry, music, and philosophy as a series of exchanges in form, structure, material, and metaphor in the works of four central figures: Hölderlin, Hegel, Wordsworth, and Beethoven. These exchanges all took place in the early Romantic period, which I define (somewhat arbitrarily) as the years immediately following the publication of Kant's critiques to the end of the first flourishing of Romanticism, that is, from about 1795, when Schelling, Hölderlin, and Hegel worked together on philosophical projects, to 1831, when Hegel died in Berlin. This time also spans virtually the entire productive lives of Hölderlin, Wordsworth, and Beethoven, as well as nearly all the major English Romantic poets, Schubert, Schopenhauer, and a number of other luminaries. I choose these four as the subject of close examination because they had a lasting and widespread effect on culture and because their works so clearly demonstrate the various manifestations of self-consciousness.

I use the word "manifestation" cautiously, because the concept of self-consciousness already contains a complex relationship between abstract idea and concrete actualization. Self-consciousness, as a philosophical concept, begins with the recognition of the boundary between the self and the nonself, and recognition of the subject as an active force in the world, thereby already inscribing the issue of interiority and exteriority in its own definition. During that progression, the self must confront the limits of its domain, the point at which pure self-consciousness ends and consciousness of an other – or an external world – begins. That external element must have material substance, be real, not imagined, so that the self can recognize it as something other than mere thought. This moment, in which the self recognizes its own existence through juxtaposition with the material nonself, constitutes an *aesthetic* moment, a crucial and highly debated concept in Idealist epistemology. I argue that for the Romantics, the category of the aesthetic emerges after pure sensation but before cognition and defines the conceptual space necessary for Romantic theories of absolute music (music without any descriptive program); consequently, absolute music became the paradigmatic art of the aesthetic itself.

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Before I begin exploring the connections between self-consciousness, aesthetics, and music, I must acknowledge some of the difficulties and limitations of comparative study. Besides the obvious problem of the overlapping and often misleading terminology in different fields of humanistic study (the word “absolute,” for instance, has distinct yet related meanings in musicology and philosophy), the various methodologies for each field depend on long-standing traditions of interpretation that do not transfer easily, if at all, from one field to another. As Scott Burnham has amply demonstrated in his work on Beethoven,² we do not hear a Beethoven symphony without also hearing, directly or indirectly, a two-hundred-year tradition of interpretation of that symphony. Likewise, the aggregate image of what commentators from Marx to Kojève to Lukacs to Adorno have said about Hegel inevitably looms over any encounter with his texts, as do the corresponding images of Hölderlin and Wordsworth created by their interpreters. These traditions form an inevitable part of our understanding, yet they have a tendency to limit our discourse to clearly defined areas. Any comparative study, therefore, must demonstrate a heightened awareness of both these disciplinary boundaries and interpretive traditions and develop, to some extent, a common critical language.

Fortunately, this language already exists in the complex critical texts by some important participants in Romantic intellectual life, including the prose works of Hölderlin, the music criticism of E. T. A. Hoffmann and A. B. Marx, and the aesthetic writings of Hegel. My objective is to add to our understanding of these works the critical terms and ideas held by their creators and their contemporaries and to describe how these ideas continue to affect our understanding of early Romanticism. Moreover, almost everyone discussed these matters openly and frequently, rarely denying themselves the pleasure of a debate on any of these matters on the grounds of too little expertise. An accurate picture of the circumstances in which a particular work of music, poetry, or philosophy originated must therefore take into account the prevalence of these interdisciplinary discussions in late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century life. Certainly, as Harold Bloom, among many others, has said, poetry begets poetry, music begets music, and philosophy begets philosophy; the fifth chapter of this study in particular investigates how Beethoven’s awareness of his position within Viennese classicism influenced the formal structure of his late works.

Artistic creations that philosophers read, see, and hear often contain the conceptual structures that they make explicit in their essays and lectures. Hegel’s philosophy, as I intend to show, depends in crucial moments on a central metaphor of music, as does Hölderlin’s poetry. Understanding how

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this metaphor works will involve finding out what music really was, and what people thought it was, at the time this metaphor came into currency. The relationship between Idealist philosophy and Romantic art therefore does not devolve into a series of cause-and-effect sequences of influence; rather, it forms a dialectical matrix of reciprocation between abstract ideas and concrete works.

Although the relationship I describe between self-consciousness and music appears most prominently during the early Romantic era, a brief examination of the currents in philosophy and music of the late Enlightenment helps explain the sudden introspective turn evident in virtually every field of cultural activity in the early Romantic period. In particular, Kant's development of a consistent philosophical system connecting self-consciousness to aesthetics began the Idealist school at almost the same moment that Mozart's extraordinary genius and curiously ambivalent attitude toward Enlightenment principles led to sweeping changes in musical culture. These separate developments in philosophy and music converged on a common set of problems concerning the relationship between the self and music that would later become extraordinarily important in Romantic aesthetics. I begin with Kant, whose epistemological developments continue to reverberate through both philosophy and criticism; I then describe how his immediate followers, Fichte, Schiller, and Schelling, continued on the path toward Idealism. Finally, I discuss, extremely briefly, the profound changes Mozart brought to Enlightenment music aesthetics and their relation of Idealism.

KANT, SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS, AND AESTHETICS

As Andrew Brook has astutely pointed out, Kant did not articulate a specific position with regard to the two concepts that later achieved central importance in Idealist philosophy, *Bewußtsein* and *Selbstbewußtsein*, "consciousness" and "self-consciousness" and may have even regarded them as unproblematic.³ If he did, he was clearly mistaken – no other Kantian concept, not even the categorical imperative, has created as much continuing discussion, with many disputes and few resolutions. However, Kant more probably considered the problem of self-consciousness secondary to his greatest concern: the transcendental deduction, Kant's proof of the means by which the mind categorizes knowledge. Kant found this so difficult to describe that he entirely rewrote his explanation of it for the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Although Kant claims in the preface to the second edition that the revised version merely clarifies the principles

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outlined in the first edition, both versions are routinely reprinted and studied.

Briefly, Kant's epistemological position is as follows. A priori knowledge enables the subject to acquire the necessary conceptual structure to gain its counterpart: a posteriori knowledge. No amount of internal thought can determine the weather outside as much as a glance out the window can, nor can even the deepest thought probe the activities and qualities of things the mind itself did not invent without experience of them, yet understanding what one sees requires a preexisting ability to categorize those perceptions. A posteriori knowledge therefore results from the interaction of the mind and sensory information, allowing the subject to understand, manipulate, categorize, and describe the world. From this distinction between a priori and a posteriori knowledge, one can deduce the existence of natural faculties, a set of innate abilities to categorize perceptions into classes, such as quantity, shape, and size. The proof of the existence of these a priori categories is a *deduction*, because it follows from a series of logical propositions, as opposed to an *induction*, which would be inferred from a set of concrete data. Likewise, this deduction is *transcendental* because of the commonality of human experience; the fact that all people make these categorical distinctions the same way demonstrates that the categories are universal.

Kant's version of the subject (the "I that thinks"), which possesses these faculties and combines perceptions into cognitions, receives several overlapping names, including "the synthetic unity of apperception." A concise explanation of the term appears in the second edition of the first critique, in §17 of the Transcendental Logic:

The supreme principle for the possibility of all intuition in reference to understanding is that everything manifold in intuition is subject to conditions of the original synthetic unity of apperception. . . . They are subject to [this] principle insofar as they must be capable of being *combined* in one consciousness. For without that combination, nothing can be thought or cognized through such presentations, because the given presentations do then not have in common the act of apperception, *I think*, and thus would not be collated in one self-consciousness.⁴

Kant makes several subtle distinctions in this paragraph, mainly in response to Hume's devastating claim that the subject is merely a convenient fiction: the name given to a bundle of nerves. First, Kant distinguishes mere empirical apperception, the singular experience of an individual on realizing that he or she exists and is conscious of something, from transcendental apperception, the knowledge that this apperception exists over time and for everyone. Kant then determines the existence of the transcendental

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aesthetic, the knowledge that perceptions occur and are organized according to a priori categories. Both apperception (intuitive awareness of the self) and perception (what one receives as a result of the cognitive faculties) combine in the intuition of a singular self-consciousness, which collates (in German *zusammenfassen*, which also means “collect”) apperception and perception into a full, conscious knowledge of the self and its relation to the external world. This ability to combine makes self-consciousness a *synthetic unity*, that is, an understanding made from the synthesis of perception and apperception.

As Brook explains, Kant’s transcendental deduction divides the process of making the transcendental deduction into three distinct elements: encountering the object of one’s perception, recognizing the experience of perceiving, and becoming aware of the self as an entity independent from the experience of a particular perception. Brook refers to the awareness of the last element as “apperceptive self-awareness,” to distinguish it from empirical self-awareness, the awareness of the self derived from the mere consciousness of a singular experience. In other words, apperceptive self-awareness represents the continuous self-knowledge of the subject over time, whereas empirical self-awareness merely allows the subject to intuit its existence at a particular moment through a particular experience.⁵ Kant’s description of the synthetic unity of apperception therefore does not mean that self-consciousness merely arranges the presentations given to it by several faculties (as Hume claims); it cognizes those presentations into knowledge about them, and from this acquisition of knowledge over time, it deduces a continuous self.

This description of self-consciousness has greater efficacy than Descartes’s and Hume’s previous versions. It clarifies the relation between objects of perception and the conscious subject by means of a mediating term, *Vorstellungen*, or “presentations,” thereby separating the physical problems of sensation (how sensory information is acquired, the material characteristics of objects, etc.) from the metaphysical problems of perception, cognition, and the self. Knowledge about an object in this system therefore contains three elements: the sensory encounter with an object, the formation of a presentation of that object by means of the faculties, and the recognition of that presentation by the conscious self. The object, or “thing-in-itself,” becomes, in a strict sense, unknowable; we can only know about things through presentations, which are necessarily different from the things themselves.

What are the consequences of this idea for the understanding of art? In the first critique, Kant has relatively little to say about it, being primarily

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concerned with perceptions in general and the field of epistemology as a whole. Nevertheless, a possible starting point for Kant's third critique emerges in a footnote to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Here, Kant finds fault with the use of the word "aesthetics" to mean the philosophical investigation of the principles of art:

The Germans are the only people who have come to use the word *aesthetic[s]* to designate what others call the critique of taste. They are doing so on the basis of a false hope conceived by that superb analyst, *Baumgarten*: he hoped to bring our critical judging of the beautiful under rational principles, and to raise the rules for such judging to the level of a science. Yet that endeavor is futile. For, as regards their principle sources, those rules or criteria are merely empirical. Hence, they can never serve as determinate a priori laws. . . . Because of this it is advisable to follow either of two alternatives. One of these is to let this new name *aesthetic[s]* become extinct again, and to reserve the name *aesthetic* for the doctrine that is true science. . . . The other alternative would be for the new aesthetic[s] to share the name with speculative philosophy; we would then take the name partly in its transcendental sense, and partly in the psychological meaning.⁶

Kant refers to Alexander Baumgarten's *Aesthetica*, and objects to his empirical approach for determining the principles of art because its method of categorization is arbitrary. Kant claims that by proceeding from empirical, rather than a priori, principles, Baumgarten has used a limited data set and drawn conclusions inductively, resulting in an inherently weak system. He also perceives a terminological problem in Baumgarten's work. By using the word *Ästhetik* to signify the principles governing art, Baumgarten narrows the meaning of the word considerably; for Kant, it should mean something more like "sensitivity." Here, Kant wants to restore that meaning to the extent that he can use the term to describe raw, precognitive sensory information.

However, these overlapping meanings of the word "aesthetic" reveal the dilemma that Kant attempts to resolve in the third critique. Observations of aesthetic objects, like observations of any other object, result in presentations, making aesthetics (in the artistic rather than the general sense) into the relation between the observing subject and the presentations of aesthetic objects rather than the relation between the subject and the objects themselves. However, aesthetic objects defy, on certain levels, the processes of identification and categorization Kant had assumed to be true of objects in general in the first critique: aesthetic objects resist assimilation to a determined set of relations because the experience of the aesthetic, by definition, begins and ends with the initial sensation caused by these objects. In other words, as aesthetic objects rather than objects of use, the normal set of

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relations is somehow suspended or diverted, remaining in the area of pure sensibility, that is, the area of the aesthetic in Kant's original sense.

Kant recognized the need to describe the consequences of his epistemological theories in more detail, first publishing the *Critique of Practical Reason* in 1786 to establish an a priori system of ethics and completing the series with the *Critique of Judgment* in 1790. In the *Critique of Judgment*, also known as the third critique, Kant addresses the problem of aesthetics in detail by dividing the overall faculty of judgment into two types: aesthetic and teleological. Aesthetic judgment enables us to experience the beautiful and the sublime in art; teleological judgment enables us to perceive the purposeful design of nature. Aesthetic objects, in Kant's well-known words, are "purposeful without purpose," revealing intention in design, yet remaining without practical utility, whereas nature's objects serve particular functions within God's plan for the universe. The point of this distinction between artificial and natural objects is to distinguish the conceptual basis for artistic beauty from the enjoyment of natural beauty, thereby placing artistic beauty clearly within the human sphere and giving us hope of discovering its principles. According to the preface of the *Critique of Judgment*, the faculty of judgment, like reason and ethics, should be founded on a priori principles and bridges the gap between understanding (pure reason) and desire (practical reason), the areas of mental activity described the first two critiques.⁷ In other words, judgment must be founded on principles that are neither learned by empirical means nor subjugated to some other faculty. Ultimately, we do not create judgments according to custom, nor do we create them because it is reasonable for us to do so in one way or another. We create judgments independently of reason or desire or else we create them falsely, that is, we substitute conclusions we have reached by other methods for true judgments.

To describe these true judgments in the third critique, Kant uses the adjective form of the word *Ästhetik*, *ästhetische*, in Baumgarten's sense, to mean judgments pertaining to aesthetic objects, especially in the section titled "Deduktion der reinen ästhetischen Urteile," "Deduction of Pure Aesthetic Judgment."⁸ Although Kant's reinstatement of the meaning of *Ästhetik* that he intended to dismiss, or at least qualify, in the *Critique of Pure Reason* may seem like a reversal of his position on the term's meaning, this section of the third critique actually represents a new direction in his thought. His use of the word combines both meanings and places the category of aesthetic judgment in a privileged area *before* cognition to reconcile the apparent contradiction between the universality of aesthetic judgment, that is, the general agreement on what is beautiful, with the

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impossibility of proving aesthetic judgments by means of deduction from the a priori principles in the first critique. This contradiction justifies the deduction of a separate, a priori faculty of judgment:

But a feeling of pleasure (or displeasure) and of satisfaction can be combined with a perception, which accompanies the representation of the object and serves in place of its predicate; thus, an aesthetic judgment, which is not a cognitive judgment, can originate. Such a judgment, if it is not a mere judgment of feeling but a formal judgment of reflection, in which everyone senses this satisfaction to be necessary, must have an a priori principle as its basis, which in any case may be a merely subjective principle (if an objective principle is impossible for judgments of this kind), but also as such requires a deduction, so that we may understand how an aesthetic judgment could make a claim of necessity.⁹

At the center of this difficult passage lies the heart of Kant's argument for a separate faculty of aesthetic judgment: judgments that are both objective (in the sense of being universally accepted) and subjective (in the sense of being empirically unprovable) must originate in some faculty between the necessity of logic and the freedom of the individual. If aesthetic judgments were entirely objective, their creation would be available to examination by reason; if they were entirely a matter of individual freedom, they would be idiosyncratic and completely dependent on individual preferences. Neither is the case; thus, we possess a separate, a priori faculty of judgment.

Aesthetic judgment occupies a position somewhere between a priori and a posteriori knowledge, as both the result of experience with the external world and part of an innate faculty. An encounter with an aesthetic object does not involve the sheer inventions of the perceiver's mind but a presentation of something external to it, the result of an actual experience. On the other hand, the aesthetic object does not perform any function for the perceiver other than merely to be perceived; the perceiver does not categorize it further in terms of function. Because works of fine art do not do anything except exist as objects of perception, their presentations do not progress further into analysis by the faculties for qualities unrelated to the perception already experienced. When looking at a painting, for instance, we do not think about how much it weighs, whether we can lift it by ourselves, whether it will fit on the wall over the couch, and so on as part of our aesthetic contemplation of the painting – examining it for practical purposes, or even for physical characteristics, such as weight or dimension, unrelated to its appearance as a painting remains superfluous to its role as an aesthetic object. As art, we judge the painting in terms of its beauty, and nothing else.