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There has always existed in the world, and there will always continue to exist, some kind of metaphysics. Immanuel Kant ¹

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, that resignation in the face of reality had crippled it in itself, becomes a defeatism of reason after the attempt to change the world miscarried . . . Having broken its pledge to be as one with reality or at the point of realization, philosophy is obliged ruthlessly to criticize itself. Theodor Adorno ²

We have art – lest we perish of the truth. Friedrich Nietzsche ³

The present volume represents an attempt to reassess the relationship between certain issues in contemporary critical theory and the question of Enlightenment. I take my bearings by reference to claims about the self-canceling nature of Enlightenment rationality as formulated in the opening essay of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* ("The Concept of Enlightenment"), and move conceptually from there to address the ways in which their concerns can be reevaluated in light of an aesthetic critique modeled along lines sketched out

¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965), B xxxi.

² Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), p. 3.

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), sec. 435.

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in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. More broadly, I hope to account for the predominantly "aesthetic" forms in which a critical self-consciousness carried forward from the Enlightenment has survived the critique of enlightened reason that seemed to have reached an impasse in Horkheimer and Adorno's essay. I place the term "aesthetics" in quotes so as to indicate its incomplete and problematic association with what we regard as autonomous works of art.⁴ When Nietzsche wrote the words cited in the epigraph above, when he claimed even more notoriously that "art is worth more than the truth – for life," and when in *The Birth of Tragedy* and subsequent texts he said that the existence of the world could be justified only aesthetically – it was not only particular artworks that he had in mind, but a project designed to reclaim the world of appearances from what he thought of as the Platonic foundations of the Enlightenment.⁵ But so too Kant's theory of aesthetic judgment is independent of the specificity of works of

⁴ Theodor Adorno: "The autonomy of art is not something given *a priori*, but is the result of a process that is constitutive of the concept of art." *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. C. Lenhardt (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 26 (henceforth cited as AT). Cf. Michel Foucault, whose remarks indicate a clear discontent with the restriction of the category of the "aesthetic" to works of art: "What strikes me is the fact that in our society, art has become something which is related only to objects and not to individuals, or to life. But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object, but not our life?" ("On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress," in Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, eds., *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983], p. 236). At some level, the source for this discontent is Nietzsche's claim that art is worth more than the truth for life.

⁵ What Friedrich Nietzsche called "perspective" was essential to this project. In his view, Platonism (and Christianity) means "standing truth on her head and denying perspective, the basic condition of all life." *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), p. 2. Martin Heidegger takes up Nietzsche's claim about art in *Nietzsche, I: The Will to Power as Art*, trans. David Farrell Krell (New York and San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), pp. 140–41. Heidegger's remarks on the "new interpretation of sensuousness" (pp. 211–20) are also of help. At the same time, Heidegger insists that Nietzsche had not arrived at a sufficient understanding of the nature of "truth" to warrant the position he holds. For his part, Heidegger argues that the decisive shift in Plato's thought came with the application of the word *eidos* to the world of forms: "We, late born, are no longer in a position to appreciate the significance of Plato's daring to use the word *eidos* for that which in everything and in each particular thing endures as present. For *eidos*, in the common speech, meant the outward aspect [*Ansicht*] that a visible thing offers to the physical eye. Plato exacts of this word, however, something utterly extraordinary: that it name what precisely is not and never will be perceivable with physical eyes." "The Question Concerning Technology," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), p. 20.

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fine art.⁶ As Jacques Derrida remarks in speaking of Kant,⁷ “art” is a misleading title for what lies at stake in the question of aesthetic reflection, which seeks instead to validate the “subjective” moment – the moment of affect, of pleasure or pain – that goes unaccounted by the conceptual frameworks associated with cognition and morality.

In contrast to most contemporary theory, which is interested in subsuming artworks under a series of worldly discourses, my interest is in discovering the ways in which aesthetics is itself the forgotten discourse of the world. It is forgotten, I suggest, to the degree that our confidence in the validity of affective modes of apprehension has been weakened. If I begin with Horkheimer and Adorno, this is because their work is representative of a particularly influential interpretation of the Enlightenment and its consequences as a pervasive disenchantment or world-loss. Although “The Concept of Enlightenment” was originally published in 1947, the principal questions broached in it remain central for critical thinking today.⁸ (In an essay entitled “What is Critique?”

⁶ Kant: “Taste is . . . merely a critical, not a productive faculty; and what conforms to it is not, merely on that account, a work of fine art. It may belong to useful and mechanical art, or even to science, as a product following definite rules which are capable of being learned and which must be closely followed.” *Critique of Judgment* (henceforth, *CJ*), trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), sec. 48, p. 175. Heidegger remarks that the *Critique of Judgment* has been influential “only on the basis of misunderstandings.” *Nietzsche, 1: The Will to Power as Art*, p. 108.

⁷ Jacques Derrida writes that “a seminar would treat of art . . . It would thus answer to a program and to one of its great questions. These questions are all taken from a determinate set. Determined according to history and system. The history would be that of the philosophy within which the history of the philosophy of art would be marked off, insofar as it treats of art and the history of art: its models, its concepts, its problems have not fallen from the skies, they have been constituted according to determinate modes at determinate moments.” “Parergon,” in *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 18. Behind Derrida’s resistance to the objective determination of art stands Heidegger. In the Epilogue to “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Heidegger writes that “almost from the time when specialized thinking about art and the artist began, this thought was called aesthetic. Aesthetics takes the work of art as an object, the object of *aisthesis*, of sensuous apprehension in the wide sense. Today we call this apprehension experience . . . Yet perhaps experience is the element in which art dies. The dying occurs so slowly that it takes a few centuries.” “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 79.

⁸ For one understanding of the case for Adorno against poststructuralist theory and criticism, see Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 1990), especially pp. 227–52, “Adorno in the Post-

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for instance, Michel Foucault argues that the problem of *Aufklärung* remains the central problem of modern philosophy, the part of our cultural history from which we cannot clear free.⁹) Indeed, it could be said that Horkheimer and Adorno's essay has cast a long shadow over contemporary intellectual debates about the autonomy of the subject as an independent center of feeling and value, as well as about the social and political orders that this notion of subjectivity founds. Horkheimer and Adorno gave a very powerful description of the self-negating tendencies at work in the particular forms of self-reflection that came to dominance during the modern Enlightenment. They suggested that the emancipated society promised by the procedures of Enlightenment – reason's democratic hope – failed to defend the possibility of reciprocal recognition among subject-selves against the ongoing threats of rationalization, reification, and domination. In spite of the Enlightenment's efforts, or on Horkheimer and Adorno's account, because of them, the progressive goals of the Enlightenment remained unrealized: "In the most general sense of progressive thought, the Enlightenment has always aimed at liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty. Yet the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant."¹⁰ For these and related reasons it has been thought, at least since Romanti-

modern." Seyla Benhabib sets the issue against a somewhat broader background: "In their critique of modernity and liberalism, communitarians and postmodernists unwittingly echo many of the themes of the first generation of Frankfurt School thinkers and especially of Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The uncovering of the darker side of the liberal ideals of economic growth and scientific progress, the memory of non-instrumental human relations, and even the critique of the repressive subjectivity which is always thought to accompany the domination of nature are among the themes, by now well known, of this work." See Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community, and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 69–70.

⁹ Michel Foucault writes: "I would like right away to note, in approaching this problem which makes us brothers with the Frankfurt School, that to make *Aufklärung* the central question at once means a number of things." "What Is Critique?" in James Schmidt, ed., *What Is Enlightenment?: Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 391. Foucault's essay was originally given as a lecture at the Sorbonne in 1978. On the hidden importance of aesthetics to Foucault's earlier work, see Peter Bürger, "The Return of Analogy: Aesthetics as Vanishing Point in Michel Foucault's in *The Order of Things*," *The Decline of Modernism*, trans. Nicholas Walker (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), pp. 48–54.

¹⁰ "The Concept of Enlightenment," in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1972), p. 3.

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cism, that any continuation of the ethical and emancipatory goals of the Enlightenment, and certainly any project committed to an ethical praxis grounded in mutual recognition and respect, must overcome Enlightenment rationality.¹¹

This volume appeals to Kant's *Critique of Judgment* in order to suggest that we cannot so clearly position ourselves on either side of the debate concerning the Enlightenment and its consequences. As I hope will become clear over the course of what follows, the question of our relationship to the Enlightenment is better understood in terms of the difficulty of locating any position that would be categorically inside or outside the Enlightenment, inside or outside objectivity, inside or outside critical or systematic thought. Our current position is itself a consequence of the non-closure of the Enlightenment. Similarly, this volume represents an effort to challenge the view that the pursuit of constructive social and ethical goals requires an anti-Enlightenment stance. But it proposes to do so without summoning us to return to Enlightenment rationality, either in its orthodox, transcendental versions or in the more recent "communicative" variant endorsed by Jürgen Habermas. These challenges are entered on several grounds, all of which share in their underlying orientations a notion of subjectivity that is based on principles that can broadly be called "aesthetic." The first of these is that many of the concerns of contemporary intellectual culture, including, but by no means limited to, the preoccupations of Frankfurt School critical theory, of Franco-American poststructuralism, and of the neo-pragmatist language philosophies fashioned from elements of Wittgenstein, Dewey, and Heidegger, can themselves be seen as the consequences and continuations of a process of self-criticism that originates within the Enlightenment, rather than as cancellations of Enlightenment

¹¹ The connections between Romanticism and the critique of the Enlightenment have been made from a variety of different directions in recent criticism. Two of the most fruitful instances are Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), and Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *L'absolu littéraire: Théorie de la littérature du romantisme allemand* (Paris: Seuil, 1978), trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester as *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1988). Whereas Cavell thinks of Romanticism as a response to Kant, Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe stress the links between Kant's aesthetic theory and Romanticism, saying that "an entirely new and unforeseeable relation between aesthetics and philosophy" articulated in Kant makes possible the "passage" to Romanticism (*The Literary Absolute*, p. 29).

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thought. Calls either for a “return” to the principles of the Enlightenment or for their rejection thus represent significant self-misunderstandings on the part of some of the most critical of the inhabitants of the present age.

In connection with this first claim, my task will be to spell out how the Enlightenment can be understood as having such “consequences,” principally by articulating the ways in which the Enlightenment project as formulated by Kant was structurally incomplete. Kant’s articulation of the problem of aesthetic judgment, which stems from a reflection upon the separation of the spheres of cognition and morality, represents an effort to reconcile the terms that his own system of critical philosophy had set apart; but in discovering that there was no point beyond the system from which to reflect upon it, this was also the point at which the Kantian critical system encountered the impossibility of achieving closure. Kant’s admitted inability to arrive at a proof of the theory of aesthetic reflection, and thereby to complete the system of critical philosophy, can help account for what has remained uninterpreted in the relationship between the fundamental ambitions of Enlightenment rationality and those subsequent modes of thought that claim either to have turned away from Enlightenment rationality altogether or that urge a return to its principles. If we can understand Enlightenment rationality as something whose central ambition to be at once systematic and complete was left unfinished, then it can be argued that the lingering controversy over the Enlightenment itself represents a moment in the ongoing transformation of self-consciousness, but also a continuation of subjectivity even if by other, aesthetic, means. At the very least, this can help us refute what may be left of the idea that we have – for better or worse – reached the “end of philosophy,” the “closure of metaphysics,” or the “end of history.”¹²

To be sure, the rapid succession of “unmaskings” that has characterized critical engagements of Enlightenment thought can tempt us to short-circuit the process of reflection. Consider the fact that each in a line of prominent thinkers – each one prematurely believing himself to be the last – seems to have been

¹² These notions originate as consequences of Hegel’s thought. They have been explored in, among other places, Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).

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complicit with the metaphysical project that each proclaimed to have rejected. Nietzsche, for instance, rejected the Hegelian concept of the rational whole in favor of an aesthetic critique of reason that offered “art” as a way to redeem the world of appearances. But in spite of his commitment to the appearing world (or perhaps because of that commitment), Nietzsche remained a Hegelian, bound also to the idea of the closure of history to the extent that he accepted the principles of his own “eternal return of the same.” In fact, Nietzsche’s “eternal return” has been seen by Paul de Man as a rearticulation of the figure of prolepsis that de Man finds at work in the Hegelian philosophy of reflection.¹³ On Heidegger’s account, by contrast, Nietzsche was merely an “inverted Platonist”; Nietzsche’s notion of “will to power” still remained within the framework of Western metaphysics. But Derrida has in turn marked Heidegger himself as operating within this framework. Having caught a glimpse of just how ineluctable this problem has been, Richard Rorty has subsequently suggested that we simply circumvent Western metaphysics and dispense with the project of “overcoming” altogether.¹⁴ Rorty addresses the heroic efforts of his predecessors to overcome the past by recommending irony as an alternative to the “sublime” desire for a final overcoming. In Rorty’s account, the philosopher of the historical sublime yearns for “a future which has broken all

¹³ In “Sign and Symbol in Hegel’s *Aesthetics*,” Paul de Man reads Hegel’s notion of the re-collection of experience through reflection as an instance in which thought projects the hypothesis of its own possibility into a future under the expectation that the process enabling thought will eventually meet up with the projection. *Critical Inquiry*, 8 (1982).

¹⁴ Richard Rorty, “Deconstruction and Circumvention,” in *Essays on Heidegger and Others, Philosophical Papers Volume 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 85–106. Cf. Stuart Hampshire, who has written “one cannot pass by a situation; one must pass through it in one way or another.” “Logic and Appreciation,” in William Elton, ed., *Aesthetics and Language* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1954), pp. 162–63. As Michael Fried has nonetheless argued, Hampshire’s distinction between “logic” and “appreciation” fails to hold for modernist works of art – which is to say, for precisely the kind of works that I would link with the reflective criticism generated by Kant’s third *Critique*. “Once a painter who accepts the basic premises of modernism becomes aware of a particular problem thrown up by the art of the recent past, his action is no longer gratuitous but imposed. He may be mistaken in his assessment of the situation. But as long as he believes such a problem exists and is important, he is confronted by a situation he cannot pass by, but must, in some way or other, pass through; and the result of this forced passage will be his art.” Fried, *Three American Painters* (Cambridge, MA: The Fogg Museum of Harvard University, 1965), p. 9.

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relations with the past, and therefore can be linked to the philosopher's redescription of the past only by negation." As he goes on to say, "this quest for the historical sublime – for proximity to some event such as the closing of the gap between subject and object or the advent of the superman or the end of metaphysics – leads Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger to fancy themselves in the role of the 'last philosopher.' The attempt to be in this position is the attempt to write something which will make it impossible for one to be redescribed except in one's own terms – make it impossible to become an element in anyone else's beautiful pattern, one more little thing."¹⁵

As this passage suggests, Rorty's account of the history of philosophy is told with an irony that prompts one to ask whether it can itself be distinguished from cynicism. Already Hegel identified something like cynicism as a possible consequence of the process by which enlightened thought seeks to correct itself: "To see that thought in its very nature is dialectical, and that, as understanding, it must fall into contradiction – the negative of itself – will form one of the main lessons of logic. When thought grows hopeless of ever achieving, by its own means, the solution of the contradiction which it has by its own action brought upon itself, it turns back to those solutions of the question with which the mind had learned to pacify itself in some of its other modes and forms. Unfortunately, however, the retreat of thought has led it, as Plato noticed even in his time, to a very uncalled-for hatred of reason (misology)."¹⁶ More recently, the successive unmasking of theories has impelled some critics to regard cynicism as the most powerful antidote to the Enlightenment desire for a further or final unmasking. As Peter Sloterdijk remarked on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, the cynic attempts to deflect the possibility of any further disenchantment by claiming that disenchantment is itself the truth of the Enlightenment. The conclusion to be drawn from the history of the Enlightenment is that "new values have short lives . . . Just bide your time . . . Our lethargic modernity certainly knows how to 'think historically,' but it has long doubted that it lives in a

¹⁵ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 105–06.

¹⁶ *Hegel's Logic*, trans. William Wallace (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 15–16.

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meaningful history."¹⁷ The unhappiness that accompanies these doubts is thus mollified by the awareness that history can never be brought to an end; the baleful consciousness of reflection is mitigated by the cynic's joyful wisdom. As Sloterdijk argues, the figure of thought best suited to describe these conditions is Nietzsche's "eternal recurrence of the same" (*ibid.*). This is, for the cynic, the principle that can transform unhappiness and even resentment into "joyful knowledge."¹⁸

But how and why attach the name "aesthetics" to a position that, in its discovery of the non-closure of the Enlightenment, stands in such close proximity to what many would characterize as nihilism?¹⁹ The germ of a response can be identified in Kant's third *Critique*, where Kant describes as "aesthetic" those judgments that take their bearings by the subject's particular pleasure and/or pain and that refuse to yield the knowledge of any "thing." In an effort to find a way of thinking that does not subordinate particulars to

¹⁷ Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. xxvii. As Sloterdijk also observes (p. 40), the figure of the "eternal return" contains in a nutshell the psychoanalytic insight into the "truth" of the logic of unmasking: what I criticize in others is what I myself am. In Nietzsche's terms, it is the "Romantic" artist who is able to draw creative strength from dissatisfaction with himself. *Will to Power*, sec. 844, p. 445.

¹⁸ Nietzsche's "eternal return" and Slavoj Žižek's analysis of retroactive performativity provide alternatives to the vision according to which the project of critical reflection eventually cancels itself or becomes exhausted when confronted by the apparent endlessness of its task. Rather than see, e.g., Derrida's work as reverting back to the metaphysics from which he attempted to clear free, we can instead read Kant's analysis of reflective judgment as exposing the very difficulties that are essential to deconstruction's understanding of indeterminacy. So seen, the philosophical past can never be "overcome" (much less "circumvented"), if only because the assertive posture demanded by "overcoming" presupposes a self-consistency that can never be assured. But by the same logic of fate we could say that the Enlightenment quest for absolute knowledge is ironically fulfilled by the very failure of that project. As Žižek writes of Hegel, "the true Absolute is nothing but the logical disposition of its previous failed attempts to conceive the Absolute." Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 100. Žižek goes on to say, the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is "the presentation of a series of aborted attempts by the subject to define the Absolute and thus arrive at the longed-for synchronism of subject and object. This is why its final outcome ('absolute knowledge') does not bring a finally founded harmony but rather entails a kind of reflective inversion" (p. 99).

¹⁹ While Kant is often regarded as standing at the origin of modern aesthetic theory, it should be recognized that he has important predecessors in these matters, including Baumgarten, Wolff, Hume, and even Gracián.

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universal categories, Kant's theory of reflective judgment begins from the affects. Aesthetic reflection originates in "pleasure" and "pain," which are not so much positively constructed experiences as ways in which the subject responds to the contingency of the world.²⁰ Indeed, the description of affect as something other than a positively constructed and determinable experience that the subject "has" suggests that pleasure and pain are moments of passion, something the subject undergoes. Recall Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis of pleasure as originating in the separation of individuals, which is to say, in loss. Pleasure, they suggest, begins in sacrifice to another.²¹ The point is not that "pleasure" and "pain" need to be situated within a network of overlapping frameworks – social, cultural, and historical – but rather that there always remains something that these frameworks cannot adequately determine. As we shall see in connection with Kant, this is a "something" that may be described in terms of the qualitative dimension of our relationship to the representations formed in making cognitive and moral judgments.²²

To think of affect in this way allows us to see a closer link between Kant's theory of aesthetic reflection and postmodern positions that are often thought of as standing in opposition to Kant. For Jean-Luc Nancy (whose links to Kant are mediated by Heidegger) for instance, the "something" that cannot be captured by the determinative reasoning of cognitive and moral judgments points to the subject's openness to whatever may happen to it from outside. Affect indicates a form of passivity, a mode in which the subject is capable of being affected from without: "Pass-

²⁰ Heidegger offers a succinct account of the genealogy of "experience" in "The Origin of the Work of Art," beginning with a clarification of the relationship between beauty and form: "The beautiful does not lie in form, but only because the *forma* once took its light from Being as the isness of what is. Being at that time made its advent as *eidōs*. The *idea* fits itself into the *morphe*. The *sunolon*, the unitary whole of *morphe* and *hulē*, namely the *ergon*, is in the manner of *energeia*. This mode of presence becomes the *actualitas* of the *ens activa*. The *actualitas* becomes reality. Reality becomes objectivity. Objectivity becomes experience" (p. 81). On Adorno's engagement with the issue of "experience" in *Aesthetic Theory*, see Jameson, *Late Marxism*, pp. 127 ff.

²¹ As such, pleasure is distinctively non-natural: "Nature does not feature enjoyment as such; natural pleasure does not go beyond the appeasement of need. All pleasure is social – in unsublimated no less than in sublimated emotions. It originates in alienation." *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 105.

²² The best discussion of qualities remains that of Charles Altieri in *Act and Quality* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981).