

Experience in a New Key

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Antinomies of Metaphysical Experience between Theodor Adorno and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe

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Abstract: This article is an inquiry into the concept of metaphysical experience through a joint discussion of two authors and philosophers with different approaches that nevertheless converge in the reclamation of the concept and rely both on the experience of death as an example. In both cases, the authors are guided by the central problem of how not to relinquish metaphysical experience to unscrutinized immediacy or a powerful conversion which enjoins subjection, putting it in contact with aesthetics and ethics at once. Theodor Adorno situates metaphysical experience as a problem of philosophy of history and devotes attention to the contemporary possibility of experiences that evoke transcendence. The transformations he identifies in the concept also lead him to propose art as a domain where metaphysical experience is alive. The implicit personal investment Adorno makes is much more clear in Lacoue-Labarthe who, in a dialogue with Maurice Blanchot, shows the experience as deeply bound up with literature and its links to subjectivity. The article argues that the main difference between the two approaches is modal and temporal from the side of the object, aside from the different modes of interrogation recognized with the labels deconstruction and critical theory.

Keywords: myth, caesura, *Erfahrung*, subjectivity, citation, Blanchot, literature, the nonidentical

1 Introduction

In his characteristically broad-minded *Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James made a plea for mystical experience, writing that without a proper understanding of what is at stake in it, our accounts of reality would be likely to suffer from an unnecessary incompleteness. Writing from the sophisticated position of mediator who pinpoints the merits of his subject without fully identifying with them, James addressed his words toward listeners of a stubbornly rational and secular conviction who could not have been favorably disposed, or readily recognized the need for bringing the precious instrument of philosophy to bear on the vague, overly particular and not quite rational domain of mystical experience. In this article, by looking at the work of two writers on the concept, I aim to make a case for metaphysical experience—which is a category overlapping with, but distinct from the former:¹ I believe metaphysical experience has an actuality as a concept, with important aesthetic and ethical stakes in play. In the following, what will offer a unifying thread will be the weight given to the potentially aesthetic dimension, along with the question

¹ In his work entitled *Starry Speculative Corpse*, Eugene Thacker makes a distinction between what he calls mystical correlation and metaphysical correlation, which situates the latter as a type of “subject-object correlation”; this discussion takes a different path that recognizes the unique and historically well-established problem constituted by metaphysical experience, which cannot be reduced to simple correlationism. Thacker, *Starry Speculative Corpse: Horror of Philosophy*, 83.

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of how to wrench metaphysical experience from mythical appropriation, often looking for those points where aesthetic experience and metaphysical experience coincide. Metaphysics and experience have rarely been easy interlocutors for each other, but they have a particular way of coming together in the presence of aesthetics, and even literature; and my discussion is intended as a contribution to the thought of this meeting through a joint discussion of the works devoted to this subject by two important thinkers, Theodor Adorno and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, whose works have previously received fruitful comparisons up to now, but not particularly one involving metaphysical experience as I aim to offer here.

Before moving on to discussions of these authors' engagements with metaphysical experience, a preliminary specification of what this article commits itself to by committing to metaphysical experience is in order. This is necessary because, let alone metaphysical experience with its evocations of grandeur, even experience can be subject to blanket dismissal in philosophical discourse, whether the motive is a certain antihumanism, nihilism, or a rationalism. It is important to realize that "metaphysical experience" carries a semantic range that is emergent with respect to its parts, demanding a slight but important change of focus from what its component words each individually signifies. The philosopher Jean Wahl, who reflected on the concept in his book of the same name, is quite helpful on this point: when it is a matter of experience, metaphysics keeps having a stake in questions of a "very general" character that give its due to the "beyond" that "meta" registers, potentially overriding specialisms associated with areas like science, religion, and art, but these questions are generated in a way that forestalls any indifference on the part of the questioners, interceding in their relation to the world and becoming a resource for an enriched commerce with it as well as with themselves. When metaphysics is brought fully into the force field of experience, it is no longer about knowledge. More precisely, experience requires that metaphysics's earliest incarnation in inquiry into suprahistorical first principles and essences—protected behind nascent motives of knowledge—is dismantled from the start with a stroke of necessary allegiance to contingency.

In their approach to the zone of proximity and tension between metaphysics and experience, philosophers as different from each other as Merleau-Ponty and Adorno pose the problem of contingency in remarkably similar terms. The phenomenologist establishes the identity of metaphysics and experience by displacing what is metaphysical from the common Platonic meaning of a sovereign backworld to the very act of the appearance of what immanently exists: "Metaphysical consciousness has no other objects than those of experience: this world, other people, human history, truth, culture. But instead of taking them as all settled, as consequences with no premises, as if they were self-evident...it rediscovers their fundamental strangeness to me and the miracle of their appearing."² For Merleau-Ponty, who questions the dogmatic opposition between being a situated and finite subject of perception on the one hand and a relation to the world with metaphysical amplitude on the other, contingency itself is the beginning of metaphysical consciousness: "The contingency of all that exists and all that has value is not a little truth for which we somehow or other to make room in some nook or cranny of the system: it is the condition of a metaphysical view of the world."³ As we will see in more depth later, Theodor Adorno, another key figure for reflection on the nature of metaphysical experience, also stresses this point from a different perspective in his writings: According to him as well, "the terms of the empirical world alone" enable metaphysical experience with all its possible associations with a certain "transcendence."⁴

In a way that mirrors this overturning of the traditional understanding of metaphysics inherent in metaphysical experience, "experience" certainly has challenges of its own. Regarding the properly philosophical sense of experience, the form it takes deeply impacts its articulation with any metaphysics, and variations like lived experience (*Erlebnis*) and what can be called long-form experience (*Erfahrung*)—with its emphasis on an unbroken historical continuity—are surely important and still resonant alternatives. As is well known, *Erlebnis* has an especially bad reputation and the exposition and conditional advocacy of metaphysical experience carried out here is not invested in the sort of unrepeatable subjective immediacy and the particular form of enchantment historically registered in it; rather, in a spirit that acknowledges

² Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-sense*, 94-96.

³ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁴ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 375.

the old but crucial disputes about the two related specters, enthusiasm and intellectual intuition, this study tries to locate metaphysical experience in the concretion of history, rather than aligning it with an unexamined notion of immediacy.⁵

Another notion of experience which has a privileged status here and in Wahl's account as well, is the trial/ordeal (*épreuve*) form, eminently illustrated in William James' engaging inventory of mystical experiences in *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Seeming to enjoy a certain affinity with notions of transformative spiritual crisis along the lines of "dark night of the soul" or states of ecstasy in general, the trial can be present in less dramatic forms that include ones that have openly physiological conditions.⁶ Making a trial of something or experiencing something as a trial—as it will turn out to be the case with a certain form of writing in the following—is not necessarily an experience that requires a transcendent object. While it is true that the contradictory experiences of death and near-death experiences are prominent examples which also happen to hold contemporary relevance, the ordeal is also not exhaustible by a category of limit experience and/or sovereignty. What is essential is that there are extreme disorientations or overturnings of worlds of reference that shade into more anonymous regions than personally and subjectively imputable ones, concordant with the displacements of metaphysical experience and the historical rearrangements that impact its objects.

Defined in triangulation with various attitudes to lived experience, *Erfahrung* and trial, metaphysical experience shows a generativity that often becomes a legitimate source for thinking involved in philosophy and literature, in addition to being subject matter for interrogation. We see this generativity at work in certain works by Adorno and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, which will provide two guiding cases in the following, in a split discussion distinguishing but also tying together their approaches. Both philosophers respond to what we might call antinomies of metaphysical experience, in a common orientation to the problem of art's own relation to it. In their individual ways, they both carve a path between a potential for essential, exigent witnessing and heavy-handed legitimation by the authority residing in moments of subjective enchantment; and both seek to bridge shattering discontinuities and mere ordinary endurance. I take the liberty to call these polarities—along with the one between the immanence of the empirical world and transcendence—antinomies, perhaps risking some looseness in application, yet also finding confirmation in the historically well-established link between antinomies and the elusiveness of metaphysical questions that only seem to be happy when logic humors them with some ambivalence. As Adorno, whose work constitutes the first stop of the debate below, writes, "the concept of metaphysical experience is antinomical, not only as taught by Kantian transcendental dialectics, but in other ways."⁷

2 Adorno's Salvaging of Metaphysical Experience

At the very beginning of his lectures on metaphysics, Adorno brings out one of the most important themes of his late works, telling his audience "that there is in fact, a concept of metaphysical experience," adding that it is "not something immediate to which one could resort, in questions of metaphysics, as if to something ultimate, absolute".⁸ In this double insistence, there is not only a characteristic objection to claims of authenticity that end up in undialectical immediacy for him but also a prelude for his whole position on the antecedents and historical possibility of metaphysical experience, as well as what he thinks might be the currently viable forms.⁹ With different connotations, bewitchment, enchantment, and finally myth are

5 In his work on Walter Benjamin, Peter Fenves helpfully summarized the problem at stake thus: "For the proponents of *Erlebnis*, the advantage of 'lived experience' over scientific experience consists in its singular, momentary, and unrepeatable quality, which disappears from view whenever attention is turned only to the recording of regularities and the corresponding discovery of laws". Fenves, *The Messianic Reduction: Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time*, 156.

6 Cf. Evans, *The Art of Losing Control: A Philosopher's Search for Ecstatic Experience*.

7 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 373.

8 Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems*, 14.

9 Adorno's *Jargon of Authenticity* is distinctive for its take on this issue, as it offers a direct criticism—as ideology—of the contemporary advocacy of a "primal experience" noncontaminated by "cultural experience" at large (apropos Friedrich Gundolf's work).

only some of the terms which evoked the target for Adorno's unrelenting critique of immediacy in his earlier work, often including positivist attitudes in the broader rubric "myth". While there are affirmative motives behind Adorno's final reflections on metaphysical experience, it is safe to assume that, as here, they are tempered with a caution regarding the pull of what he called the "mythical" and its irrational overtones. The put-downs that pepper Adorno's writing, illustrations of his deflationist streak, apply to artistic forms of sublimity as well— as he shows in his response to various receptions of Wagner's and Mahler's musical works.¹⁰

Aside from its role as a secret sharer of enlightenment in his work, Adorno's reservations about the mythical are informed by the tendencies in interwar German culture that set the stage for Nazi ideology, tendencies which generally took the form of doctrines of exaltation closely tethered to the primacy of lived experience and its ambitions of direct access to what is beyond history: the eternal, the divine, the numinous. It seems that the direction and tenor of these doctrines could not but form a backdrop for any reclamation of metaphysical experience on Adorno's part even in his postwar reflections.¹¹ As an extreme extension of this stance, and in line with his response to Auschwitz, Adorno takes the postwar condition as a landmark that deeply informs the possibility of metaphysical experience: "our metaphysical faculty is paralyzed because actual events have shattered the basis on which speculative metaphysical thought could be reconciled with experience".¹² With his commitment to a dialectical concretion that insists on the saturation of philosophy by world-historical events, he argues for the bankruptcy of the use of metaphysical categories when they are enlisted to bestow a semblance of meaning on human death in the 20th century.

The minimalist character of his exposition of metaphysical experience, and the spare examples might be partly explained by this charged background and in fact there is very little that is "naïve or casual" in Adorno's considerations of metaphysical experience, if we refer to Adorno's claim that "one can no longer speak directly of the ultimate things. The impotent word that calls them by name weakens them. Both naivety and a defiant casualness in expressing metaphysical ideas reveal their lack of grounding".¹³ The situation is compounded by a diagnosis of the nature of late capitalism as the form of an integrated society under the beacons of exchange value and real subsumption. In a characteristic statement that also applies to the historical possibility of the "right life" in conditions of social domination by exchange value, Adorno writes, "the less of life remains, the greater the temptation for our consciousness to take the sparse and abrupt living remnants for the phenomenal absolute."¹⁴ Therefore, in Adorno's late reflections on metaphysical experience, an urgency precisely created by a sense of dwindling possibility for a truthful conscious relation to the "absolute" finds scope. In fact, the contradiction between the conditions of society under real subsumption with its suppression of qualitative difference and regimentation of human experience [*Erfahrung*] on the one hand ("a law of perpetual sameness" according to *Negative Dialectics*), and the singularities implied by the category of metaphysical experience on the other, makes up a cornerstone of Adorno's rehabilitation of metaphysical experience. This contradiction is closely associated with what Adorno famously calls a "guilt context of the living," where the applicability of ethical categories like personal responsibility, and the innocence of others like willing are decisively eroded, taking with them the possibilities of the subjective fulfillment they carried. Add to this Adorno's commitment to a certain diagnosis of secularization, metaphysical experience in these circumstances becomes something that can

¹⁰ See for instance, Adorno's comment on a "fatuous sublimity" apropos a common contemporary perception of Mahler's work he takes issue with. Adorno, *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy*, 3.

¹¹ Exaltation or enthusiasm, of course, has a very important place in philosophical history since Kant's involvement in debates around rational theology. Scholars like Gustavo Benavides persuasively showed the sacrificial implications of the "vertical" dimension that found expression in doctrines such as Rudolf Otto's, a verticality that turns sacrificial because it draws attention away from the socioeconomic life as ignobly pragmatic, thereby directly justifying the starkest forms of inequality. The metaphysical and religious experience Weimar scholars favor normally work as a plea for irrationality and at the limit, is contingent on a bestowal of meaning on the pain, suffering and death of disenfranchised people. Also see the article by Marcus Boon, in *Three Inquiries in Buddhism*.

¹² Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 362.

¹³ Adorno, *Notes to Literature 2*, 183.

¹⁴ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 375.

barely survive, and not without being transformed to the core at that: “Pure metaphysical experience grows unmistakably paler and more desultory in the course of the secularization process, and that softens the substantiality of the older type.”¹⁵

However one should note that it is not entirely clear whether there is a single turning point in the attenuation of metaphysical experience, which would position Adorno’s account as a narrative of decline, or whether the loss is something different and structural; Adorno himself hints at this ambiguity in a remark referring to “a mankind stripped of its capacity for experience—if it ever had this capacity—by a law of perpetual sameness.”¹⁶ And perhaps reconciling this tension is not impossible, if one allows for an ongoing crisis of experience which would strike with retrospective wipe-out: The decline ushered in by the law of perpetual sameness is such that it makes it doubtful whether humans ever had the capacities of experience they may rightfully claim to have lost under capitalism and its ongoing domination of nature.

What is certain is that everything Adorno writes about metaphysical experience is determined by a hairsbreadth of difference that attempts to save it from the immediacy of lived experience, unhistorical enchantment, and demonstrate a continuing need for its concept right when it seems decisively outdated. The guiding principle is that one opens up a place for minimal yet difficult moral prerogatives of compatibility with right living that most prominently consist of neither causing nor lending meaning to suffering. At the expense of being a little schematic, one could argue that the metaphysical experience Adorno permits himself to preserve, is limited by a particular use of the concept of truth itself, which is in turn closely associated with actuality and viability in the face of the historical determinants named above.¹⁷

In line with these historical antecedents and snubbing any “fatuous sublimity”, a main drift of Adorno’s reflections becomes the necessity to “pursue metaphysical experience into a stratum which originally was extremely alien to it,” away from the noble and the sublime which used to claim patrimony over it, and whose revival in the old form can only be myth today. In Adorno’s discourse, this constraint results in both an extended reflection on the trivial and moments of tarrying with the deliberately morbid elements of a “base materialism” where metaphysics is more truthfully taking refuge than elsewhere. For instance, Adorno mentions “the subliminal experiences” one has as a child, around “the zone of the carcass and the knacker”; and alludes to other ways of experiencing “the most wretched physical existence” as parts of the relevant stratum in question. According to this logic, the disturbing situation almost becomes “noetic” or revelatory in William James’ terms, and through an extrapolation the concrete historical totality itself is intuited as disturbing in this zone.¹⁸ In fact, Adorno suggests that in this move may reside a gambit in which metaphysics “might win only by discarding itself.”¹⁹ Aside from these representative instances of the pursuit of a new tack around metaphysical experience, the more traditional yet penetrating analysis of what we may call “the experience of death” and the available attitudes to it at large, perhaps afford the most compelling insights on metaphysical experience in Adorno’s late work. As will be discussed further, the experience of death not only makes up a quintessential question for metaphysical experience, exposing its inherent contradictions but also links conjointly to questions of the mythical and fiction.

As metaphysical experience is so intimately conditioned by a consideration of its historical possibility in Adorno’s work, possibility in turn has a way of getting charged with problems germane to metaphysical experience. Exhibiting his historical materialist attitude to the problem of metaphysical experience, Adorno concentrates on the category of possibility where it permeates and is in turn determined by an extensive web of social conditions, and makes it bear upon the apprehensive restlessness in the face of death as the always

¹⁵ Ibid., 375.

¹⁶ Ibid., 41

¹⁷ At times, however, this same rule turns out to sanction sweeping judgments, depending on Adorno’s criteria regarding cultural manifestations compatible with the given historical context, as when he calls the burgeoning Western reception of Zen Buddhism “a thinking posture which the history stored in the subjects makes impossible to assume.” Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 68.

¹⁸ Identifying some necessary traits of mystical experience in *Varieties*, James lists them as follows: ineffability, a “noetic” function (corresponding to a moment of insight, instruction, or revelation), a transiency or unrepeatability, and finally passivity.

¹⁹ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 364.

premature ruin of realization and completion: “only if the infinite possibility which is radically contained in every human life [...] only if such a state were reached, in which we were identical to what which we are not but which we know we deeply know we could become [...] only then might we have the possibility of being reconciled to death.”²⁰ As Jay Bernstein suggests, in Adorno’s work on metaphysics there is a dual operation on the category of possibility, which in turn informs his reflections on metaphysical experience. On the one hand, possibility in its historical concreteness implies a test of relevance for the Kantian form of the category. In this context, Adorno’s position looks like a reclamation of experience as such from “possible experience,” as treated in Kant’s system where it is subordinated to legislation by the understanding: “The issue” as Bernstein argues, is one “of dissolving the understanding’s claim to hegemony over what belongs within the domain of possible experience.”²¹ Since Adorno sees himself in the position of having to do justice to the ways “metaphysical experience grows unmistakably paler and more desultory,” he believes a substantive treatment of the question would need to extend the role of the historical in accounting for structures of cognition, or to put it better, the possibilities of sense.

Metaphysical experience, therefore, indicates a way of restoring the substantive links to history and society the cognitive orientations of the Kantian transcendental structure tends to sever in the determination of the conditions of sense, and the relation between possibility and metaphysical experience is situated against this backdrop. The second prong of the dual operation on possibility resides in Adorno’s well-known confrontation with the emblematic name Auschwitz, which indicates a moment at which “life does not of itself carry the promise of possible experience, of possible meaningfulness” and where “life without experience is equally life without possibility.”²² According to these novel desiderata of engagement, metaphysical experience becomes an indispensable component of Adorno’s reckoning with his idealist forebears, serving as a way of allowing the destiny of the continuity of experience—a destiny which includes its vanishing and impossibility— itself to configure the philosophical categories of modality rather than leaving the latter to legislate with a pre-given rigidity.

In keeping with this stance, Adorno turns the rehabilitation of possibility involved into the only condition for reconciliation with death. This is where literature—and especially Proust— takes on particular importance in these reflections. The utopian overtones of a Proust passage which makes regular appearance in Adorno’s late work serve as a good illustration. The “regenerative and mystical speculation” of Proust’s narrator on the character Bergotte’s death lends confirmation to what we might call Adorno’s conceptual yearning from a moral angle and links up with a question of *Erfahrung* as a continuity of experience. In Adorno’s reading the passage hints at a reconciliation with dying and makes it depend on a rightly lived and fulfilled life which requires if not the continuity of traditional *Erfahrung*, then, another and somewhat broken one that shows some traces of the ordeal (*épreuve*) form:

All that we can say is that everything is arranged in this life as though we entered it carrying the burden of obligations contracted in a former life; there is no reason inherent in the conditions of life on this earth that can make us consider ourselves obliged to do good, to be fastidious, to be polite even... All these obligations which have not their sanction in our present life seem to belong to a different world, founded upon kindness, scrupulosity, self-sacrifice, a world entirely different from this, which we leave in order to be born into this world.²³

To Adorno such a passage entertaining a continuity between the limited real range of what is morally viable and obligations that seem to belong to a different world, goes to the heart of the moral valence of metaphysical experience, since as he would remind us, it is not something “ultimate” or “absolute,” but exists despite and even *thanks to* the impossible tensions between the trivial and petty on the one hand—which Adorno calls “adulteration by mere life”²⁴— and what “we deeply know we could become” on the other.

²⁰ Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems*, 133.

²¹ Bernstein, “Why Rescue Semblance: Metaphysical Experience and the Possibility of Ethics,” 184 and 194.

²² *Ibid.*, 184.

²³ Quoted in Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems*, 186.

²⁴ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 375.

The ambivalent dynamics of Adorno's reflections —half deflationary and half wistful— also lead him to a characteristic affirmation of epistemic fallibility. Since whatever metaphysics involved in metaphysical experience cannot be about a dogmatic perspective on the world, it stands to reason that Adorno would insist on the place of the fallible, formulating it again in antinomical terms, in that he neither accepts that metaphysical experience can be merely subjective without any objective moment, nor that it can deny the subjective a room or role for inflection. As he remarks, “a metaphysics proclaimed without recourse to subjective experience, without the immediate presence of the subject, is helpless before the autonomous subject's refusal to have imposed upon it what it cannot understand. And yet, whatever is directly evident to the subject suffers of fallibility and relativity.”²⁵

Allying a moment irreducible to conceptual constitution with the experience of chance—which appears with different functions in Wahl and Bataille as well— Adorno associates the fallibility he needs to accommodate with “a peculiar affinity to empiricism.”²⁶ Broadly stated, Adorno seems to suggest that one does not always obtain what one intends in a conceptual sense, and seemingly accidental moments of insight and conjunction hold potentials of truth that may be greater than inductive, deductive, and even dialectical certainty.²⁷ In the restricted yet potentially open space of play left to metaphysical experience Adorno situates the experience of a chance encounter or insight, then: “the essential knowledge is seen as that which does not coincide with concepts, but which, as it were, falls accidentally into my lap, and thus always includes the possibility that it might not do so.”²⁸ As readers like William Allen noted, for Adorno there is a way in which “metaphysical experience is also an experience of contingency, since it is an experience of what is there but as that which could be otherwise, that which lacks necessity and thereby appears free.”²⁹ For Adorno, this often translates to taking the side of those unprepared moments of *discontinuous* fulfillment that seem to stand side by side, resting in their evidence, with metaphysical aporia and antinomies, as it were, however distant this may be from his characteristic dialectical circumspection: “And yet it is tempting to look for sense, not in life at large, but in the fulfilled moments—in the moments of present existence that make up for its refusal to tolerate anything outside it.”³⁰ It is “happiness,” Adorno writes, that is “the only part of metaphysical experience that is more than impotent longing.”³¹ The temptation, as Adorno calls it, also speaks to his sense of the administered world and the qualitative homogeneity that it renders the norm in culture and material life. It seems that contingency and the share of the subjectively unbidden experience it ushers helps Adorno temper his sense of the impossibilities heightened by the catastrophic experiences of modernity, which to recapitulate, effectively impacted “the promise of possible experience, of possible meaningfulness” (Bernstein).

This affinity to empiricism—a peculiar one indeed—has strong links with what Adorno formulates in his late work as the philosophical anti-concept of the “nonidentical,” which has a “predominance of the object” among its materialist moments. This is especially important as it completes the antinomy with which Adorno anticipates and guards against the presumption that metaphysical experience can be what any arbitrary subjective will may want it to be: “The concept of sense involves an objectivity beyond all ‘making’: a sense that is ‘made’ is already fictitious [...] Metaphysics deals with an objectivity without being free to dispense with subjective reflection.”³² While limiting the encroachments of a dogmatic metaphysics—including that of capitalist occultation of use and singularity or subsumption—by insisting on capacities of subjective refusal, Adorno also finds it necessary to affirm the objective moment.

This dialectical tarrying seems directly to open to Adorno's aesthetic philosophy, as some of his formulations of what is germane to the artwork —“to make things of which we do not know what they

²⁵ Ibid., 374.

²⁶ Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems*, 141

²⁷ This constellational motif of insight is also present in Benjamin in the form of the felicitous left-handed stroke which can reach breakthroughs that a blinkered deliberation cannot.

²⁸ Ibid., 149.

²⁹ Allen, *Blanchot and the Outside of Literature*, 3.

³⁰ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 378.

³¹ Ibid., 374.

³² Ibid., 376.

are” and “with human means art wants to realize the language of what is not human” being only two³³—sound remarkably similar to Adorno’s determination of metaphysical experience, which poises it between unavoidable subjective fallibility and objectivity: “I would say, however, that precisely the polarity I am referring to—that, on the one hand, it is a condition of metaphysical experience that it can miss the mark, that it can be quite wrong; and that, on the other, it requires an objective moment, antithetical to it and incapable of being assimilated to it—that these two motifs together form the dialectical figure, the dialectical image, through which alone one can, perhaps, gain awareness of what is meant by the concept of metaphysical experience.”³⁴ Of course, the parallel I draw here between aesthetic experience and metaphysical experience cannot be straightforward, largely because metaphysical experience would have a troubled relation to expression, being perhaps more “inimical to art”—as Adorno calls Gustav Mahler’s “primary experience”—than the experiences art manages to process with little difficulty. Adorno’s sense that the reference that “calls them [ultimate things] by name weakens them,” has implications for art first of all.

Nevertheless, once the nonidentical and the peculiar kind of objectivity—and contingency—it implies are introduced into the fold, art and metaphysical experience find themselves located in a zone of tense exchange. If it is allowed that the deliberately overdetermined category of objects may include made and found art objects, and by implication aesthetic experience, here Adorno’s position would not be remote from the experience that finds expression in an artist like Joseph Cornell, for instance, with his yearning to transmute evanescent enchantment into relatively lasting objects by “distilling the essence of commonplace experiences,” and his own sense of a wistful “something that might have happened.”³⁵ Artists like Cornell with personal spiritual quests aside, this proximity between a desublimated metaphysical experience and aesthetics in Adorno’s work surfaces around more expected modernist figures like Proust as well. At least, this is precisely the way in which Adorno makes a point of repurposing a Kantian metaphysical idea like immortality: “The idea of immortality is tolerated only in what is itself, as Proust well knew, transient—in works of art as the last metaphors for revelation in the authentic language.”³⁶ In other words, what Adorno calls “the infinite possibility which is radically contained in every individual life,” is eminently open to a relation with objects that crystallize the longings to fulfill these possibilities, objects, though, to be found in an experience different than the uniformity promised by commodities, or, for that matter, what Adorno identifies as the brand of “transcendence in mass culture.”³⁷

On another score, although the connection between secularization and the charging of art itself with metaphysical possibilities would be too direct, another conjunction nevertheless exists here—as Lacoue-Labarthe will also be seen to suggest later. Reclaiming Adorno for a revised or minimal theology is a tricky undertaking that always runs into remarkable difficulties, notwithstanding whatever surface similarity that can be found between negative dialectics and a negative theology.³⁸ “Disdaining,” as Adorno puts it in *Negative Dialectics*, “projecting it [metaphysical experience] upon allegedly primal religious experiences,” he turns instead to aesthetics as a domain of metaphysical exploration. The claim of aesthetics on metaphysical experience might also well be that it keeps Adorno from relying on an unmediated realm of primitive experience completely immune from instrumentalizations of culture industry. A feature inherent

³³ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 156 and 105.

³⁴ Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems*, 142.

³⁵ Cornell’s discomfort with the “defeatist” tone of “terms like evanescent and nebulous” is very revealing from the point of view of the relatively enduring medium he mastered and the unrepeatable nature of the experience he wants to crystallize and make repeatable in it. See Blair, *Joseph Cornell’s Vision of Spiritual Order*, 57.

³⁶ Adorno, *Notes to Literature 2*, 184. More immediately, this statement directly applies to Adorno’s engagement with the Proust passage on Bergotte’s death cited above: “So that the idea that Bergotte was not wholly and permanently dead is by no means improbable”. Cf. Bernstein: “Artistic semblance is the successor and the materialist transformation of metaphysical illusion: if religion and traditional metaphysics demand the immortality of the soul, art, which is inevitably bound to its material medium, must reject the separation of body and soul; its hope, the hope projected in its practice, would be for the transfigured body.”

³⁷ Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, 63.

³⁸ Brittain, *Adorno and Theology*, 95. Nevertheless there are rare acknowledgments in his work of the importance of a tradition of heretical theology—Cabbala and Angelus Silesius—for recognizing “the infinite relevance of the intra-mundane, and thus the historical, to transcendence”. See Adorno, *Concepts and Problems*, 100.

to metaphysical experience, namely its tendency to snub easy expression, also makes a posing of the problem in aesthetic terms more appropriate. As Peter Gordon has noted, “Adorno clearly believed that aesthetic experience and memory [...] can serve as something like a ‘metaphysical experience’ even in the absence of religion.”³⁹ Approaching with the resources of artistic expression what constitutively defies both expression and idealistic grasp of the object has materialist rationale, in both philosophical and historical senses.⁴⁰

Thus perhaps the most significant instance in Adorno’s work of a domain of the object as an enfolder of unapologetic metaphysical valence turns out to be art. This is also borne out in Adorno’s work by the path that goes from *the promise of happiness* to art. In the context of metaphysical experience, happiness is what escapes the full thrust of Adorno’s desublimation tactics, when he writes, as we have seen, that “happiness, the only part of metaphysical experience that is more than impotent longing, gives us the inside of objects as something removed from the objects.”⁴¹ The same longing is reiterated in a different context when Adorno approaches a thought of happiness from the side of a consideration of a formal analysis of the artwork (form here understood as “sedimented content,” of course.⁴²), by making a characteristic emphasis on the possibilities of inassimilable novelty and unregimented experience that hinge on “dissonance”—which in turn seems to show an affinity to the anti-concept “the nonidentical.” The relevant passage comes from Adorno’s lectures on aesthetics, where the philosopher chooses music for illustrating what is at stake in dissonance: “if an artist, for example a composer, places their dissonances today, they are doing so not in order to duplicate the horror of the world (...) but rather, first of all, because every such dissonance, merely through its deviation from established contentions, and far more through its unused quality, its newness and expressive charge, also has an element of happiness.”⁴³ To spell out and give a more direct form to the connection established, since happiness can be a metaphysical experience, and dissonance in art can have an element of unrecognized happiness hidden in *the unused quality*, the experience of dissonance in art, and more particularly music, can imitate metaphysical experience.⁴⁴

Although the aims of this article are more general, it bears noting that the way music emerges here as a model of choice is not an accident. Apart from the space of play it offers to dissonance, music is an even more unavoidable point of reference apropos metaphysical experience thanks to its particular openness to enchantment. From Wagner, through Jazz improvisation, to Mahler, Adorno’s work on music shows a consistent investment in what he considers to be ideologically suspect modes of ecstasy obtained with technical means (metaphysics without desublimation), as well as musical *breakthroughs* that bespeak gestures toward metaphysical experience in a truer sense.⁴⁵ In the case of the latter, Adorno’s writings on music can even be explored with a view to drawing from them a possible terminology for metaphysical experience. Adorno’s essay on Mahler, which dates from approximately the same time as his engagement with metaphysical experience is significant in this regard:

If all music, with its first note, promises that which is different, the rending of the veil, his symphonies attempt to withhold it no longer, to place it literally before our eyes (...). So an adolescent woken at five in the morning by the perception

³⁹ Gordon, *Adorno and Existence*, 234.

⁴⁰ As Adorno writes in a much-quoted passage criticizing Wittgenstein, “If philosophy can be defined at all, it is an effort to express things one cannot speak about, to help express the nonidentical despite the fact that expressing it identifies it at the same time.” See Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, 102.

⁴¹ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 374.

⁴² Adorno, *Aesthetics*, 5.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁴⁴ An argument along these lines is offered by Paul Hegarty’s work on Bataille— with reference to the potentials of noise for inner experience: “the more that music approaches complete noise, the closer it is to being something like a Bataillean sacred and, more relevantly, the more it offers a means to approach something like inner experience.” Hegarty, “Violent silence: Noise and Bataille’s “Method of Meditation,””97.

⁴⁵ As Adorno writes in *In Search of Wagner*, “the aim of the Gesamtkunstwerk is not so much to express such a metaphysics as to produce it. A wholly profane outlook aspires to give birth to a sacred sphere from within itself; in this respect, Parsifal merely makes conscious the tendency of the entire oeuvre. The deceptive character of the Gesamtkunstwerk stems from this fact.” Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, 91.

of a sound that descends overpoweringly upon him may never cease to await the return of what was heard for a second between sleeping and waking. Its physical presence makes metaphysical thought appear as pale and feeble as an aesthetic that asks whether, in a formal sense, the moment of rupture has been successfully achieved or merely intended.⁴⁶

From the particular form of contingency which informs the objectivity of happiness that Adorno has in mind,—a “fulfilled moment” without the trappings of myth—to a certain aural experience with which to keep faith, it is already hard to ignore the way music offers an experience on a par with metaphysics here, implied in the relay whereby the physical presence of unbidden sound upstages, *but also resumes*, metaphysical thought. There is a mimetic metaphysics in music perhaps, and the aural repetition sought by the adolescent is also metaphysical.

3 Lacoue-Labarthe and the Problem of Citation

What he sees: the garden, the wintry trees, the wall of a house. Though he sees, no doubt in a child’s way, his play space, he grows weary and slowly looks up toward the ordinary sky, with clouds, grey light—pallid daylight without depth. What happens then: the sky the same sky suddenly open, absolutely black and absolutely empty, revealing (as though the pane had broken) such an absence that all has since and forevermore been lost therein—so lost that therein is affirmed the vertiginous knowledge that nothing is what there is, and first of all nothing beyond. The unexpected aspect of this scene (its interminable feature) is the feeling of happiness that straightaway submerges the child, the ravaging joy to which he can bear witness only by tears, an endless flood of tears.⁴⁷

Throughout his lectures and his *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno is evidently treading a fine line: despite his awareness of the danger of a lapse into irrationalism and myth, which is present in a recurrent emphasis on cultural and/or natural-historical mediation, he still wants to preserve a form of metaphysical experience, migrated as it is to strata unfamiliar to it until now, like the child’s curiosity and sobering realizations about the “Earthlings,” as well as the dissonances the work of art manages to integrate and oppose to a surrounding world marked by the reign of identity, the laws of sameness, and reductions of exchange. Even the traditional regions of metaphysical experience such as a “noetic” confrontation with one’s own death are only viable under these new conditions, the stakes extending as far—or near one should say—as the old dialectical golden apple, the absolute. For Adorno, the affective weight, the singular empirical authority as well as the moral-philosophical possibilities resonating in metaphysical experience validate its actuality and make it an indispensable point of reference across metaphysics and philosophy of history. Finally, in the way art intervenes in domains of experience marked by significant metaphysical implications such as happiness and a utopian sense of possibility, as well as through sustained engagements with figures like Proust, Mahler, and Beckett, Adorno discloses crucial affinities between aesthetic experience and metaphysical experience.

An equally penetrating take on metaphysical experience, and in particular the experience of death from the perspective of its fraught mythical consequences, is found in Philippe-Lacoue Labarthe’s work, especially the collection of texts entitled *Ending and Unending Agony: On Maurice Blanchot*. The various overlaps and differences between the work of Lacoue-Labarthe and Adorno have previously received illuminating expositions in works by Martin Jay, Artemy Magun, and Eric Voigt, exhibiting in each case a close kinship regarding attitudes to modernity, a reliance on the concept of mimesis, reflections on the fate of art, and the status of music, yet the similarities in each case being qualified by important misalignments. My strategy here follows a similar route of seeking the significant difference. In terms of the foregoing discussion, Lacoue-Labarthe shares with Adorno a lifelong interest in the category of mimesis, and his work is also marked by a certain suspicion—in the person of Wagner—regarding the capacities of enchantment at the disposal of music.⁴⁸ This in turn has to be set against the backdrop of the historically determining position he shares with Adorno on the destiny of Western metaphysics at large: “Lacoue-Labarthe explicitly

⁴⁶ Adorno, *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy*, 5.

⁴⁷ Blanchot, *The Writing of Disaster*, 72.

⁴⁸ Especially in *Musica Ficta*.

shares Adorno's conviction that Auschwitz, or more precisely what the name of Auschwitz has come to stand for, is no mere accident, no matter how catastrophic, in European history, but is instead an event whose possibility belongs to some defining aspects of Western metaphysics and history."⁴⁹

Lacoue-Labarthe has two interlocutors and sources which partly determine the course of his reflections. Of these, Maurice Blanchot's work seems to play the occasion and stimulant to each of the landmarks in his prolonged engagement with what he also ultimately calls a metaphysical experience. Yet the figure of Georges Bataille, and especially his notion of an ecstatic "sovereignty" which decouples the sacred from organized religion and outlines the contours of a communication and even community that does not presuppose liberal humanist subject is also essential to Lacoue-Labarthe's discussion; in fact, in the texts under focus here, he often refers to the two authors in the same breath, seeming to draw an equivalence between "sovereignty" and what Blanchot calls "experience without experience." Similarly, a sense of risk captured well in Bataille's work, and which Lacoue-Labarthe wants to preserve, needs a reference to both of these writers.

Nevertheless, the texts which are the immediate context and dialogic source of Lacoue-Labarthe's reflections come from Blanchot, whose inclusion here will seem less arbitrary if we also take note of some recent characterizations of his thinking of experience which may situate the French writer in terms of my concerns. Jeff Fort for one, identifies in Blanchot's work a resistance to the "shrinking of experience" imposed by "techno-industrial modernity,"⁵⁰ while William Allen finds in the "broken" and "dissonant forms of human experience" subtly deployed by the writer's work, a "negative critique of society" akin to the one Adorno attributes to the artwork and its oppositional positioning.⁵¹ Finally, Blanchot is a fruitful interlocutor in this context because his whole work is linked to the tireless ordeal and questioning of the "experience of the loss of the ability to experience",⁵² an experience toward which Lacoue-Labarthe gravitates because of an affinity formulated in autobiographical terms, not without autobiography being forced to become fiction.

That an autobiography taking up or working over an experience of death, ecstasy, and sovereignty, has a tendency to revert to fiction, at the same time iterating some established tropes and scenes of this experience (Odysseus' *nekylia* proves such a scene), is an idea that Lacoue-Labarthe also shares with Bataille, and particularly his text "Hegel, Death and Sacrifice." He finds in this text at once an insightful engagement with Hegel, and more importantly, an insightful engagement with mimesis at large, as it derives the necessity of literary representation from the experience of death itself. According to its argument fiction, and in certain cases myth, act like a necessary narrative or testimonial supplement to the inherent impossibility of being present to something which should abolish consciousness, acting in effect as a "subterfuge" that overcomes but also occludes—as here, death functions to impart knowledge in classic Hegelian fashion—the representational impossibilities posed by an experience without experience. The ambivalence on the part of fiction of seeming at once to save the experience from the oblivion that it is and at the same time erecting it into an absolute it precisely excludes, constitutes one of the driving challenges for Lacoue-Labarthe's response to the two Blanchot texts "A Primal Scene," and *The Instant of My Death*, a response defined at once by suspicion and a sense of self-implication.

At this juncture, identifying an important element of Lacoue-Labarthe's trajectory that distinguishes it from Adorno's work on metaphysical experience is in order. In contrast with Adorno with whom the shadow cast by irrational experience or Romanticism on metaphysical experience is a constant concern informing his understanding of myth, what Lacoue-Labarthe wants to insist on is the presence of a mechanism very different than illusionary immediacy. According to Lacoue-Labarthe, this mechanism can be characterized as a "work," or an unavowably heteronomous repetition which he chooses to call "citation," and it is partly a consequence of the subterfuge mentioned before. In this sense, Lacoue-Labarthe's reflections

⁴⁹ Marrati, "The Difficulty of Experience," 1226.

⁵⁰ Fort, "The Look of Nothingness: Blanchot and the Image," 221.

⁵¹ Allen, *Blanchot and the Outside of Literature*, 11.

⁵² Stocker, *Philosophy of the Novel*, 212.

distinguish a *mythical* in metaphysical experience that is not irrationality or immediacy, but precisely a *logic* of citation. Nevertheless, there is a fundamental parallelism between the way Adorno intends to hold onto a modified sense for metaphysical experience despite his reservations, and what amounts to some genuine philosophical and autobiographical self-implication on Lacoue-Labarthe's part. In essence, Lacoue-Labarthe ventures into making an affirmation essentially similar to Adorno's: only the target of his critique is displaced; it is a logic of sublimity in its laborious returns rather than sublimity as such that calls for a certain neutralization, if one will make room for an experience not delivered wholesale to the realm of myth, illusion, sheer authority, and enchantment.

The problems take on a different form, yet, rather than pursuing a historical comparison, say, between different schools of thought tagged with handy labels such as critical theory and deconstruction, I am more interested in the objective convergence displayed around the shared question of metaphysical experience. More particularly, by achieving some understanding of the reformulation of the mythical which Lacoue-Labarthe carries out, I want to ask under what conditions it is still possible for this philosopher, who is neither naïve or casual in Adorno's sense, to "subscribe" to an experience he himself calls "primal."⁵³ A subscription that is no less guarded, when a possible metaphysical status is concerned: "Metaphysical funambulism without metaphysical safeguards. Or, if one prefers: *emptied* metaphysical experience, pure exposure to nothingness [in the very movement of its absolute withdrawal]."⁵⁴ In fact, a greater part of Lacoue-Labarthe's discussion of Blanchot is devoted to outlining a degree zero, where metaphysical experience's involvement with myth understood as citation would be minimal, or at least owned up in such a way as to render it ethically less problematic. That is why a discussion on the mechanism of mythical citation, and the possibility of an experience which is cited differently—rather than one which excludes all narrative—seems to be his real candidate for a metaphysical experience: an emptied metaphysical experience has ultimately a lot to do with how one responds to its demands of telling and retelling, itself not excluding a speech.

Lacoue-Labarthe's preoccupations with a particular experience to whose claims on subjectivity he could give some form of expression, without making it an authority which demands subjection and representation, may seem to go back to his work on Paul Celan, *The Poetry of Experience*; as Paola Marrati writes, this work already shows Lacoue-Labarthe looking for an appropriate formulation despite "his lack of sympathy for empiricisms of any sort."⁵⁵ As Marrati points out, there in the context of a poem of Celan, Lacoue-Labarthe offers a definition, which will continue to have validity in the later work on Blanchot: "I propose to call what it [the poem] translates 'experience,' provided that we both understand the word in its strict sense—the Latin *ex-perire*, a crossing through danger—and especially that we avoid associating it with what is 'lived,' the stuff of anecdotes. *Erfahrung*, then, rather than *Erlebniss*."⁵⁶ A counterpart to Adorno's peculiar empiricism is found in Lacoue-Labarthe's peculiar approach to experience: there is a certain understandable recoil from *Erlebnis* here, in all its openness to a more religious construal of the experience at stake. As Marrati notes, for Lacoue-Labarthe, "'experience' is exactly what exceeds the empirical domain (...) but this transcendent 'experience,' in the sense he gives to the term, is nothing. It is a cut, a caesura, a radical but transient break with everything that can appear in space and in time."⁵⁷

The work on Blanchot, which is once again confronted with something other than "lived" as the stuff of narrative and anecdote, approaches its object in a very similar way, even broaching the possibility of using the term "ordeal"—which not only accommodates the sense of danger, but also implicitly refers to (un)repeatability:

Is it 'lived experience,' *Erlebnis*, as Heidegger would have doubtless hastened to say? (...) Or is it *ex*-perience, in the strict sense: the journey through (*ex*-) a peril (*periri*); in German: *Er-fahrung* (*fahren*, *Gefahr*, etc.)? And what relation would experience understood in this way maintain, in Latin, with *trial* [*épreuve*], in the various senses of the word: affective,

⁵³ Lacoue-Labarthe, *Ending and Unending Agony: On Maurice Blanchot*, 100.

⁵⁴ Qtd. in Bianchi and Kharlamov, Introduction, *Ending and Unending Agony*, 2.

⁵⁵ Marrati, "The Difficulty of Experience," 1233.

⁵⁶ Lacoue-Labarthe, *Poetry of Experience*, 18.

⁵⁷ Marrati, "The Difficulty of Experience," 1234.

judiciary, narrative, religious, scientific, etc.? Up to which point does experience (or trial), in the language of mysticism or philosophy, imply, as Bataille would say, “putting life itself at risk”?⁵⁸

Overall, what Lacoue-Labarthe means by experience, especially in referring to a “metaphysical experience”—however “empty”—should also be such an ordeal, and it would be correct to find a primary condition of his subscription here, in that such a putting-into-risk and lack of control as described here cannot easily authorize anything.

The same concern with a certain register of experience which takes the form of a caesura and inappropriable lapse of consciousness, dispossessing one of their sense of ownership and self-identity, finds an even earlier embodiment in a text called “L’Émoi,” written in departure from one of the two Blanchot texts—“A Primal Scene,” partially quoted in the epigram above—that are treated in *Ending and Unending Agony*.⁵⁹ “L’Émoi,” remarkably dated as “Summer 1976-Summer 1981,” is thus a precursor of the Celan book—where a poetry that “stutters” and an experience which is precisely a caesura of experience⁶⁰ are brought together. In this text Lacoue-Labarthe seems to be conveying an experience in which he himself was involved, giving a greater degree of immediacy to what later will be distanced in the contextualization attempts of *Agony*. “L’Émoi” records how an undetermined bodily syncope or moment of passing out can provide a stage for a stream of words, words with an ambiguous attribution directed with no one willing, and seeming to grow out of the body’s weakness: “It is true that I was talking. (That night, I never stopped talking, nor did I stop shivering or feeling the cold; I imagine it’s all connected, the symptoms [manifestations] were quite predictable, fully expected...) But it is quite clear too that I didn’t want to say anything. I wasn’t speaking to anyone, and didn’t make the slightest sound. I was talking without talking.”⁶¹ “L’Émoi” thus offers an exemplary instance whereby the experience that compellingly dispossesses is also an experience or ordeal of language, and indicates why Lacoue-Labarthe’s discussion of the emptied metaphysical experience where the “lived” is hopelessly inadequate, has to give such a centrality to literature and vice versa.⁶² At the same time, in both “L’Émoi” and the work on Blanchot at large, the frequent resort to couplings in which “pure” or “empty” comes to define elements like language, experience, or finally “revelation,” shows a certain wariness of alignment with determined content and doctrine: “emptied metaphysical experience,” “pure syntax,” and this: “there is no revelation, just its vertigo.”⁶³

Treating Lacoue-Labarthe’s preoccupation with lapses and moments of asubjective syncope as a search for moments of purity and unambivalent fullness would be distorting things too much, however. His position rather seems to be that an anarchic withdrawal from all authority and subjective right is already given with the experience, but not without a tireless drive to myth-making commemoration alongside. The share of the mythical is already present starting from the account that aims to point to the experience, and repeat something of its unrepeatability; it is present from the moment a caesura seems to evolve into a testimony of itself, not making do with the poverty of an indexical presence. The consequences for a literature or a poetry of experience are weighty, in that they are never put forward as sites of a pure testimony to a caesura of the subject, uncontaminated by a mythical figuration and narrative: In Ann Smock’s appropriately paradoxical terms, “this is not poetry beyond myth, or cleansed of myth, but poetry sustained by myth’s leaving it unsustainable. It demands writing, and thinking that can rise to the full height

⁵⁸ *Ending and Unending Agony: On Maurice Blanchot*, 44.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 96; see also *Phrase*.

⁶⁰ Let’s note that Blanchot’s titular formula the writing of disaster seems to make a similar gesture.

⁶¹ Lacoue-Labarthe, *Ending and Unending Agony: On Maurice Blanchot*, 112; *Phrase*, 30. A certain clinical underpinning can be given to Lacoue-Labarthe on metaphysical experience, as also supported by his interviewer Pascal Possoz, who asks about the physiological side of the experience. But Lacoue-Labarthe is understandably very cautious on this score: “it [the experience] escapes overdetermination by one or the other positive science”. See *ibid.*, 104. Nevertheless, this elusiveness should not be understood as going back on the larger philosophical gains of desublimation achieved by Adorno, and to some extent Lacoue-Labarthe.

⁶² In Marrati’s terms, what is at stake is a “nonmimetic experience.” Marrati, “The Difficulty of Experience,” 1234. Alternatively, it could be asked whether there is a mimesis of nothingness.

⁶³ *Ending and Unending Agony: On Maurice Blanchot*, 109.

of this let-down.”⁶⁴ This leaves room for even a touch of irony to enter, as Lacoue-Labarthe refers to opera in “L’Émoi,” splicing in his comment related scenes from *Tristan und Isolde* with *Pelleas and Melisande*, where pain and remorse give rise to musical embellishment (“In my deathly mythical style. So poignant is the pain of King Marke, of Golaud, it is sung”).

Thanks also to the nature of the Blanchot texts that serve as an impetus for Lacoue-Labarthe’s thoughts, the very understanding of mythical citation and concurrently what emptied metaphysical experience might be, depends therefore on literature, or what literature makes of “just a few, extremely condensed, clustered, singular experiences—in fact, a very small, infinitesimal number of them.”⁶⁵ A relevant singular experience in this case would be the one Blanchot makes the subject of his last narrative, *The Instant of My Death*, along with another Lacoue-Labarthe finds in *The Writing of Disaster* and which concerns a childhood memory of exaltation. The experience of death, as Lacoue-Labarthe repeatedly invokes in all its paradox, characterizes both of these experiences⁶⁶ with the darkly mystical qualities of the childhood memory sharing essential attributes with the Blanchot narrative involving a wartime episode in which the narrator faces a shooting squad and survives, finding a reprieve at the last minute. The famously ambiguous ending of Blanchot’s narrative is worth quoting in full:

There remained, however, at the moment when the shooting was no longer but to come, the feeling of lightness that I would not know how to translate: freed from life? the infinite opening up? Neither happiness, nor un-happiness. Nor the absence of Fear and perhaps already the step beyond. I know, I imagine that this unanalyzable feeling changed what there remained for him of existence. As if the death outside of him could only henceforth collide with the death in him. ‘I am alive. No, you are dead’ (7-9)... “all that remains is the feeling of lightness that is death itself or, to put it more precisely, the instant of my death henceforth always in abeyance” (11).

This association under an extended conception of experience of death—although no narrative death is in question in the childhood episode, it refers to “the feeling of happiness that straightaway submerges the child”—is possible partly because Lacoue-Labarthe finds at the center of both occurrences an overwhelming feeling of ecstasy making for an “analogous rhythm”: its characteristics are “a strange calm”, the sense of an “enigmatic lightness”, and an “inexplicable elation”; borrowing Henri Michaux’s words, we could identify the common structure as one of a “peace in the breaking.” As Lacoue-Labarthe tells us, “the (in) experience of death owes little to circumstances,”⁶⁷ as long as the underlying structure of ecstasy seems to remain. Indeed, consonant with this ontic variability, the experience has an ontological relevance for Lacoue-Labarthe, dislodging a sense of being, “feeling of existence,” or a “fact of being.”⁶⁸

However, the ecstatic character of the feelings that unite these cases is not the only thing they have in common, and in line with their implications for the mythical, equally central is the way these feelings are submitted to the work of a repetition that seems to live off them. In Lacoue-Labarthe’s discussion, “Literature” is a critical subset for these acts of repetition, and he even makes the radical claim that “the impossible experience of death is the authorization of Literature,” with the two different readings of the genitive involved here.⁶⁹ On the one hand, literature often acts as a representational quest for the experience, but on the other, the experience itself already and irresistibly demands some verbal reframing likely to give rise to literature. The problem is that the ruling affective tone, the imperious oneness which belongs to the singular experience itself cannot be characterized adequately unless one also discerns the essential structural complicity with citation that belongs to it, raising important questions about the attenuation of the singular and inviting an inquiry into ways of departing from singularity that are not repetitive in the citational sense. Accordingly, Lacoue-Labarthe traces the (in)experience of death he finds in Blanchot’s texts

⁶⁴ Smock, “No Music...,” 1155.

⁶⁵ Lacoue-Labarthe, *Ending and Unending Agony*, 19.

⁶⁶ For instance, when he reflects, “...And if it is indeed an ‘I’ that speaks there, which remains to be shown, it probably no longer has the slightest *con-sistency*, and nothing guarantees that it remains, or even quite simply is, itself or the same: *autos*, *ho autos*. What kind of ‘subject’ could articulate: ‘I am dead’?” Lacoue-Labarthe, *Agony*, 53.

⁶⁷ Lacoue-Labarthe, *Ending and Unending Agony*, 44.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

back to strategic examples found in Rousseau and Montaigne, thus making palpable a sense of a broken continuity, almost a tradition, in its uncontrollable reprises of a peace that comes from breaking. Lacoue-Labarthe dismisses the possibility Blanchot would not have been familiar with these precursors and seems to posit an unconscious choice on the author's part not to admit the precedence set by these examples. The way it vacates a meta-discourse that would disavow its singularity becomes characteristic of the experience. Whatever its effusive pretensions to the nonmediated and the presymbolic, the experience is not absolutely free of a relation to myth. Therefore it would not be wrong to argue that what makes for the mythical is its endless reprise and remembrance of the ecstatic experience that turns it into a founding instance, making the ecstasy authorize itself. Broadly speaking, citation consists of this uncontrollable reprise, along with its disavowal, even through the pen of writers as "immensely cultured" as Blanchot, the experience itself seeming to demand this heteronomous act of memory—and this forgetting—in a certain necessity.

As mentioned before, Lacoue-Labarthe's reservations about the literary uses to which the experience can be put—which are nevertheless constitutive for it—and his formulation of the mythical perhaps also have to do with the distance he takes from *Erlebnis*, in all its openness to a more religious construal of the experience at stake, since as he writes at various points, he has a wariness of what he terms "fideistic subjection," and thinks there is "no religion without myth," myth here understood in all its suspect evocations, notably, sovereignty at the other's expense and identitarian politics at large.⁷⁰ The only revelation he can bring himself to recognize, is that of revelation itself, repeating the gesture of neutralization involved in the idea of an "emptied metaphysical experience." But a more direct problem with citation for him, or what makes it mythical is first the fact that it seems to bring under a work of memory what could never be present, given the radical impossibility or the paradox involved in the experience: undone as a subject, one does not necessarily have the experience as much as he /she is put into question and suspension by it.⁷¹

There is an imperiousness to the recall of the event that makes it find citational relays and traverse individuals, yet never seeming to allow admission, presumably because the admission that one is only citing when one feels so light and exalted would be a straight "downer". Memory seems to make out of an experience of the impossibility of experience a founding matrix and a sanction for further representations, effectively putting it to work. The availability to fiction is inherent to this situation where remembering (rightly) somehow negates its own truthfulness.⁷² At the same time, the experience of subjective disorganization or breaking easily accrues what may look like a compensatory commemorative reaggregation—Lacoue-Labarthe makes much of Blanchot's obsessive concern with dates—with overtones of a subjective indulgence in the impossibility that one was ever "there" or ever passed through "that"—an unhomely indexical slowly turning into a possession. For Lacoue-Labarthe mythical citation becomes essential to engage if this experience will at least be acknowledged or find "attestation" in a way that is demanded by it, and not handed over to a complete oblivion; since he is neither advocating a complete suppression of an experience to which he subscribes, nor making a case for its ineffability. In this sense one could argue that the emptied metaphysical experience he sides with is a metaphysical experience emptied of the logic of citation in its imperiousness.

There are clearly ethical reasons behind this call for vigilance regarding myth. When Lacoue-Labarthe writes, "the remanence of myths, or their somber, stormy redeployment, is perhaps that to which one must not consent or what one should contest," it is not necessarily because of the eventual turn myths take for becoming clichés or mere sticky tropes in a literary sense. The endurance of myth has a broader sense than that, especially seen in the reference to "the mechanism of the citation of mythic schemata or sequences, thought as models of existence and generators of behavior."⁷³ As Lacoue-Labarthe's translator Hannes Opelz writes, "such 'mythic citations' produce figures, models, or examples that, beyond being an aesthetic feature or indeed condition of

⁷⁰ Ibid., 89.

⁷¹ Ibid., 62.

⁷² Along with Lacoue-Labarthe in his *Poetry of Experience*, Jed Rasula pursued the implications of a structure of this kind for poetry most fruitfully, referring to "the ontological impertinence in the very desire to know with daytime vision what has to stay in the dark." Rasula, *The Shadow Mouth: Modernism and Poetic Inspiration*, 199.

⁷³ Lacoue-Labarthe, *Ending and Unending Agony*, 62.

works of art, have decisive political and ethical consequences insofar as they are capable of inducing human behavior.” The ethical point of Lacoue-Labarthe’s preoccupation with emptied metaphysical experience is a vanishing influence on the part of these inductions. Myths of types, like Ernst Jünger’s soldier, myths of order in history’s and geography’s distance like the ones fascism often entertains, myths around historical events that would give them an aura of destiny, and finally myths of vocation—that of the author— could be some of the examples. Concomitantly, Lacoue-Labarthe can say “that ethics would be precisely that: to cease citing” and entertain “something like a moral law, which would consist in saying: I abstain from citation; no more figures no more models, no more examples, no more representations that guide our actions.”⁷⁴ The impossibility of this imperative granted, he has another exit formula which, despite its enigma, might be more practicable: “citing truly,” or in his resonant terms, to “declare” citation, evoking the possibility that myth is something that is smuggled into the experience, or just as likely, into the repetition that takes it up.

4 Conclusion

Considering how Lacoue-Labarthe’s final position involves a predominant attention paid to the way experience disavows company in the very place it is a repetition, citing truly would first mean undoing the show of singularity that seems to cleave to moments of exaltation. As one of the most distinguishing traits of the concept of *Erlebnis* is a crude opposition of a “singular, momentary, and unrepeatable quality” (Fenves) to what is repeatable, declaring has not a little of desublimation in it, and in terms of the temporality to which gestures, it perhaps shares a discomfort Blanchot mentions in *Disaster*, and which he calls the *fraud* of natural death: “fraudulent to the extent that it claims to present itself as distinct, definitively separate and not to be confounded, able to take place, and to take place only once, like that banality, the utterly unique, the unthinkable.”⁷⁵ Although to a different extent than Adorno who is more eager to bring “common sense and human triviality” under a metaphysical rubric, Lacoue-Labarthe also seems to arrive at a position where the horizon of metaphysical experience is not limited to shattering discontinuities, or “major moments.”⁷⁶ The two authors each seem to prefer situating the experience at play in a register of the subliminal rather than the sublime, with Lacoue-Labarthe drawing attention to “mythic schemata” and their politically insidious influence—ruling out consciousness—on behavior, and Adorno dwelling with moments of suggestive childhood experience.

Overall, one finds in Lacoue-Labarthe’s work a way of articulating metaphysical experience and ethics that is different than what one finds in Adorno’s portrayal of an upended world which gives meaningless death, the negation of possibility by non-fulfillment, fleeting hope, and eventless triviality as the fragile coordinations of metaphysical experience “today.” But then these thinkers are coming to this experience from two different sides, or their respective emphases fall on different conditions of metaphysical experience as an experience of death: Adorno is concerned more with the *anterior* obstructions against a life lived rightly found in social relations setting up the nature of the experience of death, which makes for an absence of ecstasy in favor of a measured yearning for happiness only acceptable and truthful in the asymptotic approach to the same social conditions of the life lived rightly. Lacoue-Labarthe is more interested in the *subsequent* mythical replays of an experience already determined as a “negative ecstasy” in a way harking back to Bataille and Blanchot, thanks to which he can articulate a logic of mythical citation.⁷⁷ The different uses of modality found in their works also show variations thanks to this central divergence concerning anteriority/after-time. Whereas Adorno is more interested in the experience of possibility and the contingent juttings of objectivity into subjectivity, Lacoue-Labarthe’s own personal experience as found in his own testamentary “Postface” makes him lean in the direction of that rogue category, a *haecceity* or a “suchness” of being descried against

⁷⁴ Ibid., 20.

⁷⁵ Blanchot, *The Writing of Disaster*, 70.

⁷⁶ Lacoue-Labarthe, *Phrase*, 13.

⁷⁷ The distinction is not watertight of course, as Lacoue-Labarthe himself draws attention to a strong link between the experiences he presents and the genre of war narrative, perhaps going against his own claim that the experience of death “owes little to circumstances.”

the void: “I had the fleeting intuition that what presented itself as the world was above all that it *existed* (*that* it was present), of an existence that imperceptibly preceded the full existence of everything...I suddenly recognized the condition of poetic existence. Which is not to pass through appearances (precisely, there are no appearances) but to risk standing at the place [point] of origin of that which appears, which is everything.”⁷⁸ And in this account, it is precisely the abyssal replacement of the world as something or other with the experience of the fact *that* it exists—the precedence of which is not sequential or successive—that corresponds to a metaphysical funambulism, or emptied metaphysical experience.

Although this may sound easily anticipated, a further extension of this difference is found in the authors’ respective attitudes to the register of existence. The fact that Lacoue-Labarthe has an allegiance to a tradition of thinking marked by a less constrained relation with Heidegger, has here the particular consequence that for him, metaphysical experience comes into contact with various liminal shades of “existence” and nothingness—as in the words of *A Primal Scene*, “nothing is what there is”—a contact less likely to characterize Adorno’s work with its careful avoidance of this way of putting things. This is a difference as much of substance as in the means of thinking, with the recurrent reliance on the “*fact* of existing,” and the emphasis on “*that there is* existence” also pushing Lacoue-Labarthe’s discourse to gain a more kenotic cast of nonconceptual negativity, a place where it is nothing which gives the grounds of these avowals. Here one also needs to consider the difference between a thought that proceeds through matrixial scenes, or “a very small, infinitesimal number” of them, and one that treats its object as a concept. In fact, it is distinctive of Adorno’s work that when it names metaphysical experience, it does this by explicitly referring to it as a concept, a gesture that is largely absent in Lacoue-Labarthe’s work despite an understanding of mechanisms of scenic repetition and reprise that indicates a parallel unwillingness to rest with an impression of absolute singularity.

In comparison, a zone of relatively unproblematic alignment seems to be their responses to the possible classification of the experiences in question as religious in a direct sense. Both writers are aware that their inquiries touch on a domain often shared by “mystical literature”⁷⁹ and a kind of “heretical theology,”⁸⁰ yet nevertheless they take care to differentiate the experience at stake for them from traditional forms of religious experience. Inheriting from Bataille a complex relation to religion and sovereignty as well as their relation to inner experience, Lacoue-Labarthe prefers deconstructing categories such as revelation and sacrifice, by using them under erasure and emptied of traditional content and authority. Adorno for his part departs from a diagnosis of secularization underwritten by the dialectic of enlightenment; and he points to a radical historical attrition to soul, immortality, and God as ideas in the Kantian sense, in addition to contesting faith and religion insofar as they may claim a domain of intact and non-mediated primitive experience.

Nevertheless a crucial difference emerges in the matter of the aesthetic and literary inscription of the experience. For Adorno, metaphysical experience necessarily includes subjective and objective moments, and in the domain of the artwork, “primacy of the object” and the nonidentical show up in the form of various affiliates such as involuntary memory, dissonance, and musical breakthroughs whose “physical presence makes metaphysical thought appear as pale and feeble.” In other words, Adorno shows a willingness to have metaphysical experience pass into the artwork and concede an absorption, even if this is not remainderless; what this amounts to, is a temptation to make of the work of art its own place of metaphysical experience. While the relation Lacoue-Labarthe establishes between writing and the paradoxical experience of death may seem similar at first glance, —“The impossible experience of death is the *authorization* of Literature”— this would be missing a hesitation with regard to making the experience something subject to “work.” If nothing else, there is a difference of emphasis: the status of subjective disorganization *despite the work* seems to hold a greater fascination for Lacoue-Labarthe, and solicits new a category such as a “desistance of the subject,”⁸¹ whereas Adorno gives primacy to the object and the ciphered possibilities of happiness inherent in the work of art, with the nature of pathos that characterizes

⁷⁸ Lacoue-Labarthe, *Ending and Unending Agony*, 24.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 37 and 99.

⁸⁰ Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems*, 100.

⁸¹ Lacoue-Labarthe, *Ending and Unending agony: On Maurice Blanchot*, 55

the subject being left less determined or more polyvalent: it can be a shudder as well as a happiness. This is of course not saying that Adorno performs the old dialectical sleight of hand with work serving as a locus of mediation or recuperation of the negative.⁸² Rather, this is a consequence of the highly specific—even though not free of being exemplary—character of the experience that finds scope in Lacoue-Labarthe's work and testimony, his signature concept of a caesura helping him acknowledge in fine detail the paradoxical aspects of an ordeal that demands (re)telling.

On another score, the modal and temporal terms of distinction which depend in part on different ratios of trial and *Erfahrung*, also manifest in different manners of situating metaphysical experience with respect to the political. Adorno continues a still legible tradition of the continuity of experience and a common dimension of social communicability going beyond the individual, where it is *Erfahrung* and its appropriations or failures that are decisive, and his remarks on what is viable as a metaphysical experience presuppose such a framework, especially apparent when he reflects on the realization of infinite possibility as the condition for a reconciliation with death, since the blocking of this realization is directly historical and social in the grand dialectical sense. The diminished and base forms of metaphysical experience Adorno singles out are largely explained by the anterior conditions affecting the possibility of *Erfahrung*. For Lacoue-Labarthe, the brunt of engagement on behalf of any possible political valence for metaphysical experience is carried by the notion of citation, with the strong but oblique critique it allows of authoritative models, figures, or examples that put memory into work with the result of unwitting monumentalization. Declaring citation, as the ethical and political response to an experience without experience, is oriented to what in experience is refractory to monumentalization.

With some provision for their differences, a guiding impulse of both Lacoue-Labarthe's and Adorno's reflections may be expressed by the apt Philip K. Dick line that goes "all that is colossal is fraud." These writers suspect the colossal, be it its citation or its decisively outdated promises of authenticity—perhaps not only out of a deep knowledge of historical precedents but also as only adepts of music and its successes in emotional enchantment can do. Interestingly however, in both of these accounts of metaphysical experience and its susceptibility to myth, metaphysics seems strangely alive and obstinately persisting through reversals of height and dimension, as well as the other subtractions it is submitted to, making an inroad to a metaphysics that has nothing to do either with the positing of a place and a guarantee of meaning beyond this world, or a reliably stable, subjective and individualist locus of abstract self-presence. Each of these questionings are also underwritten by the possibility of a horizon larger than what the individual slant of these experiences may suggest, Lacoue-Labarthe having to confront the tricky question of generalizability, while Adorno on his own part is already committed to "the compelling universality"⁸³ that inevitably accrued to the nightmarish episodes of the 20th century from a metaphysical perspective, with the resultant fallout for what metaphysical experience could go on to be.⁸⁴

In a parallel way, both thinkers produce instructive accounts of the possible roles repetition might assume in relation to the preferred types of experience they relay. If Lacoue-Labarthe's reflections bring him to the edge of a negative acknowledgment of continuity inherent in Blanchot's metonymic equation "that banality, the utterly unique, the unthinkable," Adorno is already willing to speculate on a possible transferral of metaphysical meaning on "common sense and human triviality."⁸⁵ Refreshing conceptions of knowledge, bottom-up from the

⁸² In his discussion of the different approaches to mimesis the two writers display, Magun writes "Lacoue-Labarthe thinks of a caesura as a moment of failure; he wants an honest negativity, a real interruption, that makes the subject withdraw from his or her work." In this specific case what Magun captures with the term "honest negativity" in Lacoue-Labarthe's attitude comes from a readier self-implication in his engagement with experience without experience. See Magun, "Negativity (Dis)embodied: Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Theodor W. Adorno on Mimesis", 141.

⁸³ Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems*, 104.

⁸⁴ Here is the part of the exchange between Pascal Possoz and Lacoue-Labarthe where the question comes up: "PP: Which nevertheless implies that he [Blanchot] wants to make a general process out of it. PhLL: Yes. PP: Allow me therefore to venture a personal question: Why are you interested in this text? PhLL: Because it strikes me that I have undergone the same experience several times, and that for me, it is indeed primal. PP: In other words, you subscribe to it . . . PhLL: I subscribe to it, provided that implies I'm also subscribing to Blanchot's deconstruction of the expression "primal scene."" Lacoue-Labarthe, *Ending and Unending Agony*, 100.

⁸⁵ Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems*, 114.

abyss, soldered to possibilities of a glimpse of the world that is there as a surging forth before being anything particular, and embodied in improbable encounters with historically indexed objects, seem to move across the two accounts. Despite all this however, inasmuch as they devote a considerable portion of their reflections to wrenching a minimal form of metaphysical experience, or a prophylactic awareness of its style from the mythical, neither of the accounts arrive at making explicit comment on what mattered to William James so much around mystical states, the possibility that metaphysical experiences might “open out the possibility of other orders of truth”, functioning as “gifts to our spirit by means of which facts already objectively before us fall into a new expressiveness and make a new connection with our active life.”⁸⁶ A philosophical inquiry might well not be free of that essential finitude which will impose unknowns and unthoughts, and regardless of the vital insights held by each account, it is warranted to suspect that finitude as well as structural coherence exacts defaults of thematization from each one, among which one might place the link between becoming (new modes of truth, new forms of life) and metaphysical experience established by James long ago.⁸⁷

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⁸⁶ James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 327, 331.

⁸⁷ This article has its origin in a seminar on Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics* taught by Max Pensky. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and the editors of *Open Philosophy* for their helpful comments.