Negative Aesthetic Education

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Institutional educational experience today is framed by several impositions of value: the value of certifications earned by school pupils; the market value of a particular degree from a particular university; the value of a module or class in terms of the above; the value of an individual teaching session in terms of the above; the value afforded to the educational experience by students (rated through means such as student satisfaction surveys and module evaluations); and, the value afforded to the personal development of the student, usually conceived in terms of how this might increase their employability. If an element of educational experience is seen to have no value or, worse, is seen to compromise any of these values, it should be excised. Education today is thus conceived and perpetuated in terms of value.

In both polite and political conversation it would be abhorrent to suggest that education could and should also operate in the absence of value. 'Negative' education does exactly this. The 'negative' here is not thought dialectically. It is not ultimately a resource for the development of 'positive' education, even if that positivity is in the form of criticality, such as in Stewart Martin's 'An Aesthetic Education against Aesthetic Education' where 'art becomes the location of an immanent critique of aesthetic education'[1] or Robert

Kaufman's 'Negatively Capable Dialectics'[2] where he defines what he calls 'negative romanticism' as being concerned with 'art's and philosophical aesthetics' participation in the exercise and development of critical thought, in the growth of those imaginative efforts animating a critical poetics and aesthetics that in turn may[...]offer their own contributions to extra-aesthetic thought and praxis.' The 'negative' in negative aesthetic education is instead thought existentially, as that which exceeds or exists before or without value.

The argument that follows is made in terms of aesthetic education, rather than a more general concept or practice of education because only aesthetic education has been explicitly and consistently concerned with the development of social harmony through shared values. The majority of educational policy and practice today is framed by a market-value-oriented form of aesthetic education. It is aesthetic because it is not simply to do with the development of knowledge and skills but also the development of the disposition of the individual towards the social. That disposition is one which emphasises qualities such as resilience, independence, employability, competitiveness, wealth and success. Although governments and educational authorities and institutions may not define the development of these qualities in terms of aesthetic education, historically and philosophically it is where they are at home.

Most thinkers of aesthetic education tend to agree that its function is the education of citizens in shared social value. Traditionally aesthetic education has been conceived in terms of social progress, commonality and moral good but modernity and neo-liberalism have created a shift of emphasis where independence, autonomy and competiveness have

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become at least as important as a more explicit ideological commonality. Commonality now exists in shared conformity to the values of the market, which superficially emphasises themes such as deregulation and freedom, while regulating that very deregulation through the logic of value.

To teach value today is then, first of all, to teach the shared social value of qualities such as the ability to make oneself a competitive candidate for employment or create objects (including art and educational 'products') which can be measured in terms of what could broadly be understood as social or market value. Education exists to make oneself - or to be made - valuable, which implicitly means *more valuable than someone else*. The problem is that many of these social values which are framed in terms of freedom, individuality, flexibility, lack of oversight, and so on, conspire in such a way as to negate that which does not conform to them, so that rather than there being a plurality of significant endeavours, there is a hierarchy of value, where the most powerful taint or extinguish those which become less valuable or even valueless. Despite its emphasis on individuality, neoliberal aesthetic education is still an education in shared value and social harmony, where it is this emphasis on individuality itself that has become the basis of that harmony. The 'individual' and how it can be measured has become the nexus of shared social value. This essay argues that the response to these problems cannot be thought in terms of a return to previously conceived notions of aesthetic education but instead must be conceived in terms of a negative aesthetic education.

Herbert Read, the proponent of 'education through art,' wanted to educate for an aesthetic way of being and suggested that aesthetic education's purpose should be the evolution of a 'discipline' or the realization and following of set 'laws of beauty.'[3] As such it is no surprise that his *Education Through Art* was published by Faber and Faber when it was under T.S. Eliot's control. Read rejects what he thinks of as Kierkegaardian perspectives on art and education and instead finds his precedents in both Plato and Schiller. For all three a harmony or totality of the State, Nature and individual is the ideal political outcome of education. This unity is also desired by Plato in *The Republic* where the child is understood as being 'most malleable and takes on any pattern one wishes to impress on it.'[4] Plato's interlocutors agree that one should not 'carelessly allow the children to hear any old stories, told by just anyone, and to take beliefs into their souls that are for the most part opposite to the ones we think they should have when they are grown up.'[5] For Plato, the influence of art is not simply its use in conveying knowledge but also in shaping children's souls.[6] Plato does not banish artists or teachers from the Republic, only the poet who tells stories which corrupt its shared moral value.

Echoing Plato's position, Read states that, 'the general purpose of education is to foster the growth of what is individual in each human being, at the same time harmonizing the individuality thus educed with the organic unity of the social group to which the individual belongs.'[7] In doing so he consciously ties himself to what he considers a Platonic and Schillerean tradition of aesthetic education. Schiller himself wrote that, '[t]aste alone brings harmony into society, because it establishes harmony in the individual...All other

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forms of communication divide society…only communication of the beautiful unites society, because it relates what is common to them all…It is only the Beautiful that we enjoy at the same time as individual and as race, that is, as *representatives* of the race.'[8] This universal, harmonious, common, and racially or humanistically specific conception of the aesthetic as the beautiful reveals it as that which joins the universal and particular, the social with the individual. Equally, for Read, 'individuality' and 'difference' are also a form of particularity in terms of an organic social unity (which would ideally be harmonious) rather than indicative of singularity (which would not be thought of in terms of unity or harmony). Singularity exceeds systematic and totalizing thinking, existing instead as an occursive or visitant incidence.[9] To adapt an expression from Susan Howe's poem 'Thorow' in her book *Singularities,* a singularity is not a particular representation of a universal truth but a 'rivet in the machine of a universal flux.'[10]

It is possible to read the difference between singularity and particularity into Paul de Man's criticism of Schiller's aesthetic education, which he accuses of effectively teaching the metaphor of an organic society and in doing so being unable to teach philosophy. de Man's summary of the consequences paves the way towards thinking a negative aesthetic education which does not suffer those limitations. For de Man, 'Schiller's considerations on education lead to a concept of art as the metaphor, as the popularization of philosophy.'[11] This means that 'the aesthetic belongs to the masses. It belongs, as we all know – and this is a correct description of the way in which we organize those things – it belongs to culture, and as such belongs to the state, to the aesthetic state, and it justifies the state.'[12] However,

while the undesirability of this consequence is paramount for de Man, it is perhaps also helpful to be reminded of Adorno's concern that moving away from an all-consuming logic of harmony might cause what he refers to as an 'allergic reaction' which 'wants to eliminate harmonizations even in their negated form' and that end up forming 'the self-satisfied transition to a new positivity.'[13] It would be easy to conceive of the 'avant garde art world,' for example, as simply being another, alternative (although analogous), system of values. Subcultural value systems provide a subcultural aesthetic education, not a negative aesthetic education, even if they might be more explicit in creating space for it. Of course, Adorno was referring to aesthetic harmony rather than social harmony but given that aesthetic education from Plato and Schiller to Herbert Read and beyond, has continuously conflated the two, this warning can and should also be read in a social context. Rejecting harmony must not simply lead to another form of positivistic totality. To replace one set of values with another (morality with individuality, for example) is still to be in thrall to value. Negative aesthetic education does not propose a new set of universal values relevant to all particulars but rather emphasises a regard for the singular.

The articulation of the concept of negative aesthetic education is an attempt to formulate an aesthetic education which rejects value. It is not intended to absolutely replace aesthetic education and the values articulated therein - which would be a functional impossibility anyway, because shared values are to some extent always implicit in a shared social context. However, negative aesthetic education offers a way to think without value and thereby loosens values' grip on the context of education. So much of life

has no explicit or easily assignable value, therefore to ignore this fact in education would be to act as if knowledge of value was sufficient to the task of making one's way through life. But what do we do when life feels valueless and that valuelessness has been taught to us as being an evil or ill? And what if we are drawn to doing or experiencing something that makes no sense or seems to have no value? Or we are subject to a sublime or horrific act at which we balk assigning any 'lesson' to?

The existentialists provided responses to these questions (the most obvious examples being texts such as Gide's *The Immoralist,* Camus's *The Outsider,* and Sartre's *Nausea*) but they are far from the only ones to do so.[14] In fact, the responses (if not 'answers') to these kinds of situations provide much of the content of what we call art in its broadest sense. This is not just true in terms of what is considered avant-garde or experimental art, although it is significant to note that these forms of expression are rarely the subject of aesthetic education, perhaps precisely because they frequently puncture or ignore many and sometimes all conceptions of value. Importantly, negative aesthetic education is not constitutive of a dialectical negation of values but rather an existential non-attendance to them. Negative aesthetic education attends to that which exists outside of the remit of value, as well as exceeding and putting into question any dialectical formulation. Materials for a negative aesthetic education could just as easily be found in a late Faulkner novel or Derrida's *Glas* as in obscure contemporary sound art or prehistoric cave paintings. The task here is not to elevate art or a particular kind of art or philosophical aesthetics in terms of a hierarchy of value; instead, negative aesthetic education opens

itself up to being considered pointless, a waste of time, and entirely useless, for no other reason than in the context of value *it is all of these things and more besides.* But by being all of these things it is also a lesson in them, which is to say, a lesson in existence which exceeds positive formulation. Negative aesthetic education makes the point that much of existence has no value and that this is no bad thing (nor is it 'good'). It is an education in that which has no explicit value and yet is, despite that, an undeniable aspect of existence. A space must remain for the unvaluable within the context of education because without it the fate of a value oriented education will continue to be marked by its existential insufficiency: its abstraction of, and disconnection from, lived experience. [15]

Education is about form: teaching forms, learning forms, being held accountable for forming forms. Experience always exceeds form and yet in education is usually reduced to it. Its value is assigned 'within'. The argument that "experience is educative" only works inasmuch as experience is reducible to form and memory (of form). So how then can one speak of experience outside of form and memory in the context of education? Of course there are many repeatable ostensibly physical/ metaphysical gestures which continue to work within given educational structures and for many this would be considered their primary or crucial function, however, if education is for all intents and purposes the researching, teaching and learning of repeatable gestures it would never be conceivable outside of the logic of the subject and the telos. That is to say, never conceivable outside of the linear development of a quantifiable individual towards a predetermined end, even if that end is defined as the development of qualities such as flexibility and resilience. This is

why negative aesthetic education attempts to draw attention to the accidental imprint, the inspirational moment, the absence of (self) certainty, the getting-carried-away, *without* recourse to form, *without* the necessity of reflection, *without* quantifiable linear progress or development. I use the word 'negative' because I do not think it is possible or even desirable to think these incidences of existence in terms of a positivistic education. At best, one might think of them as helpful in the development of a 'negative capability' but they must also be regarded in their own right and find their own languages to articulate their significance: a significance which is never just escape or entertainment. These incidences are *significant* without being of *value* because they are worthy of attention without necessitating a further usefulness or justification in terms of equivalence. Value implies equivalence to a standard; significance only implies meaning, which may or may not have an equivalent. Value is always measured in a determinable context while significance can exceed not only a determinable context but determination altogether. This is why negative aesthetic education attends to significance rather than value.

Within the context of educational policy and practice the debates are always over different structures, different forms, different methods. The non-structural would have no place, the historical only being significant in its reducibility to form. The historical here is understood as *that which occurs*. Reduction of that which occurs is not an evil and it is certainly not to be dismissed because without reduction there would be no sciences, no engineering, no medicine, no political institutions. Reduction is a tool which can be used for good or ill. Generally, in the context of education it is a tool at least superficially intended

for good. There is no possible disavowal of this and it is not itself the problem. The problem is that education today is too good at serving its abstracted purpose. The relationship between structure and historical experience is aleatory, meaning that it is dependent on or produces unforeseeable occurrences. But what is the name for that which evades structure or exists without the thought of it?

To answer this question this essay goes through several stages in its articulation of negative aesthetic education. I have begun by critically outlining aesthetic education as it has heretofore been conceived in socio-political thought, and will now proceed in untangling a regard for the singular from positivistic social and cultural harmony. This notion of the singular will then be considered in terms of the unsociable; or, that which does not find its place in social value and progress. Despite its unsociability and irreducibility to value, an aesthetic regard for singularity will reveal a conception of ethics which can only ever be possessed as a dispossession. This dispossession will be posited not only as a frequently ignored condition of existence but also as a key subject of negative aesthetic education. Because all that can be possessed is also conditioned by dispossession, Keats' concept of negative capability and its emphasis on 'being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason,'[16] is helpful in giving a name to our educability in the condition of dispossession. And, to be able to think these questions in socio-political terms, the more recent use of 'negative capability' by Roberto Mangabeira Unger is used to illustrate the possibility of conceiving of institutions and social dispositions which, I argue, might facilitate and open towards negative aesthetic education.

Singularity

Politically interested educational philosophy has a tendency to reduce the remit of the ethical to the socio-politically moral (which is actually what Kierkegaard still refers to as the ethical: *det etisk*) and in doing so, shuts down an opening towards one of the most significant aspects of the ethical: that of the regard for the singular (the singular here is not a person or existent, it is a singular incidence of existence which does not exist under any general concept). As an alternative, a negative aesthetic education which offers a regard for the singular would not always subvert the political but would act alongside, outside, or without it. The aesthetic component of this kind of education is not that of Plato, Schiller or Read, all of whom rely not only on universal harmony but on harmony between the individual and the state, however supposedly free or democratic. Negative aesthetic education rejects the possibility of either of these forms of harmony. Ethically speaking, negative aesthetic education would not only be an education in the singularity of 'others' in their creative forms of expression but also an education in singularity as the development of a kind of Keatsian 'negative capability' or what Blanchot calls 'passivity.'[17] Without an education in the ethical significance of the aesthetic outside of social value, the singular is subsumed by the particular (as well as its concomitant notions of a self-present subject). This is because the uniqueness of their incidence is simply considered (and taught) as

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reflective of other particulars within a finite universal. Negative aesthetic education attends to the singular rather than the particular. The singular defines that which, unlike the particular (most commonly thought of as the *citizen* or even the *human*) cannot be conceived in terms of the universal, nor be brought into harmony with it. A negative aesthetic education in singularity would remind us that politics, morality and laws do not exist for themselves but rather *for and because of* singularities – singularities which adapt or change them in their unique incidence.

In *The Hypocritical Imagination* John Llewelyn develops the concept of regard for the singular through his readings of Kant, Merleau-Ponty and Levinas. He gives the example of the singular regard towards the work of art and the artist and argues that even though, for Levinas, there is no 'ethical saying in the case of a still life or a landscape painting in which no people are portrayed'[18] the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty can be utilized to extend the remit of Levinas' ethics, which concomitantly reveals how he thinks Levinas's ethics can extend or escape the remit of Kant's critical philosophy. For Llewelyn, '[t]he artist is above the law in that, like the legislator and as legislator, he or she reminds us that the law is not made for the sake of the law.'[19] As such, art is not just legally or politically subversive but rather before or without law and politics. Art 'reveals the thing as something that commands us to regard it as an end in itself.'[20] Thus, the deontological obligation or duty that things in themselves command, can, as in the case of Llewelyn's reading of Cezanne, demand an explicitly aesthetic response. However, as Llewelyn states, this is not all it is: '[Cezanne's] brush-strokes fulfil a responsibility regarding the world, a

responsibility to hold it in regard. That these are the enactment of an aesthetic response does not mean that they do not at one and the same time execute an ethical responsibility.'[21]

For Llewelyn the aesthetic response is itself an example of ethical responsibility outside of law, where, for example, '[t]he phenomenologist and the painter say to us: Wait a moment. Attend. Pay attention. Regard the regard.'[22] The law can open towards negative aesthetic education by legislating for its own retreat. The law can also be interrupted, forgotten or left aside by a singular incidence or work of art which is already before or without the law and in no way absolutely reducible to it. This impossibility of absolute reduction or synthesis is what Llewelyn draws on in the conclusion to his chapter on Merleau-Ponty and singularity, writing that 'meaning is anarchically grounded in the invisible pertaining to ethics' and that 'there is a trace of the ethical invisible in the visible...'[23] This relationship between the visible and the invisible (which we might also see as being to do with sociability and unsociability, as well as the particular and the singular) is what Llewelyn and Merleau-Ponty both define as a chiasm. Merleau-Ponty wrote in his working notes that were posthumously published as *The Visible and the Invisible* of

the idea of *chiasm*, that is: every relation with being is *simultaneously* a taking and a being taken, the hold is held, it is *inscribed* and inscribed in the same being that it takes a hold of. Starting from there, elaborate an idea of philosophy: it cannot be

total and active grasp, intellectual possession, since what there is to be grasped is a

dispossession…[24]

Here the chiasm marks the simultaneity of the visible and the invisible but it could also be seen to mark the simultaneity of the social and the unsocial, the particular and the singular, without reducing them to the same or forcing them into an artificial dialectical process. In these terms, while aesthetic education might be described as having the aim of possession by a culture or species - an inscription of one's culture and its values into oneself - negative aesthetic education would aim to be the grasping of dispossession. That is to say, the grasping of a lack of self-certainty, an immense ignorance, and the singularities of existence which have no equivalent.

Merleau-Ponty suggests that one could or should '[m]ake an analysis of literature in this sense: as *inscription* of Being.'[25] Claude Lefort, himself greatly influenced by Merleau-Ponty's teaching as well as the editor of his works, refers to the sentence preceding that on the '*inscription* of Being', which relates the idea that 'Being is what requires of us creation for us to experience it.'[26] If this is the case then singularity is bound up in thought, speech and expression, presenting, in the same incidence, a possession and dispossession. As such, in every social act there also exists an element of unsociality which exceeds it but which also exists as a trace within it. Aesthetic experience bears the trace of negative aesthetic experience, and the danger is that aesthetic education usually glosses over or is entirely ignorant of this fact. To experience Being is to inscribe Being through creation. Being is not

naturally self-sufficient and harmonious, and the artist, philosopher and teacher reveal this. Some explicitly, some implicitly. Bringing to mind Deleuze and Guattari, Lefort calls this experience of being the 'nomadic life' because no organic unity or harmony is offered and instead of harmony there is a 'whirlwind' and instead of organic unity there is an 'uprooting and implanting.'[27] Lefort then goes on to make a special reference to Merleau-Ponty's teaching, at once doing justice to its singularity but also indicating a way towards thinking the chiasm in teaching practice:

> The questions with which Merleau-Ponty was dealing gave me the feeling that they were living inside me before I discovered them. And he himself had a unique way of asking questions. He seemed to invent his thought while speaking rather than teaching us what he already knew. That was a strange and troubling spectacle...had I taken note of this experience I would have been led to consider closely the relationship between teaching and philosophy.[28]

As Lefort implies, Merleau-Ponty's teaching style is itself the presentation of a nomadic life of possession and dispossession. Lefort suggests this experience may well be the case for 'each person already, without his knowing it.'[29] However, the apparent invention of thought while speaking should perhaps not be taken only as an example of how one should engage in negative aesthetic education (although it might also be useful in this way) but rather as

an example and analogy of the relation between singularity and experience (the inscription of Being).

The philosopher and teacher are possessed by their own philosophical thought in at least two chiasmic ways: first, in terms of that possession (and dispossession) being a condition of experience, and, second, in being carried away by the very thinking of that condition. The pupils are not exempt from this experience of possession and dispossession. However, they and their teachers are most often taught that possession *by and of* the social and its values is the goal of their education. This is the case even if that possession is the possession of a *socially valuable individuality*. This model of education, historically grounded in aesthetic education, must attend to its negative, non-dialectical neighbour. If we do not learn to recognize the existential condition of our dispossession then education can only ever be an education in value.   There is no value in negative aesthetic education, which is precisely why it is so important to attend to it.

Unsociability

In Kant's 'Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent' (1784) his Fifth Thesis is that, '[t]he greatest problem for the human species, whose solution nature compels it to seek, is to achieve a universal civil society administered in accord with the right.'[30] Art, culture and social order play a large part in achieving this because, '[a]ll the culture and art that adorn mankind, as well as the most beautiful social order, are fruits of unsociableness

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that is forced to discipline itself and thus through an imposed art to develop nature's seed completely.'[31] It is possible to apply at least three interpretations to this passage. First, that art is analogous to social order and acts as a glue to hold societies together; which seems the most and perhaps only truly Kantian perspective. Second, art exists to articulate man's inherent unsociableness so that he can maintain his separation from other men. Third, and most complex: both of the above. This last interpretation suggests that art (as well as culture and the social order) is a means through which man can communicate *and* alienate himself. Thus it could express the chiasmic idea of a shared value and that which cannot be shared at the same time. This unsocial sociability is not antinomical or dialectical but existential. By this logic, the putting in common of art also reminds us of that which cannot be put in common. The problems this poses to almost any form of cultural harmony are manifold, as are the problems posed to the idea of art as complicit in it. This relationship becomes especially pronounced when thought in terms of social progress and that which Kant sees as crucial to maintaining social progress: war. However, it is not simply on the grounds of social order that Kant advocates the importance of war but also in terms of individual freedom. According to Kant, even though war and preparing for war are the greatest evil they are also necessary both in terms of social liberty and progress.[32] It is precisely the evil of focusing on war that inspires progress, seemingly undialectically, because it can never be overcome or replaced if progress is to remain possible. The attention given to war and the attention given to progress are suspended in relation to one another; totally incompatible and yet complicit. Unlike the dialectical moment of the

unsocial sociability *internal* to society, the impasse a society meets with *external* existential threat does not lead to harmony: it simply persists.

Against Adorno and Horkheimer's reading, which perceives Kant's thinking of social progress as dialectical, it seems that, because of its relationship to external existential threat, it is rather subject to a kind of generative impasse, where resolution is annihilation. Progress requires the maintenance of opposition as a prerequisite and the danger that Kant sees as being necessary for mankind's powers not to slumber is that of a general existential threat. Progress is the product of a shared social fear rather than individual and plural experiences and efforts. For him, culture is the product of social progress, which only occurs in states subjected to external danger. If there is no threat, either from war or unsociability, then there is no progress and no culture. This existential chiasmus, rather than dialectical or antinomical impasse - where cultural progress at once relies on and attempts to overcome unsociability, while also relying on consistent external existential threat – is the mark of a negative aesthetic education. It reveals harmony as a social illusion which ultimately relies on that which exceeds its values and coherence. Negative aesthetic education is asocial, non-cultural and outside the dialectical limit of social progress thought through the relation between society and its unsociable citizens. In negative aesthetic education, the unsociality of the singular exceeds the social rather than providing a resource for its progress. The war that Kant requires to sustain social progress towards greater harmony is already existent *within* that society. However, just as the relationship between the social progress and war does not enter the dialectical process, neither does

the unsociable. Unsocial sociability is a condition of existence, not a dialectical resource leading to social harmony. Aesthetic education teaches the frequently useful illusion of harmony that allows society to move away from unsociability towards shared value. Negative aesthetic education attends to the fact that unsociability, and that which exceeds the social and its values, will never cease to exist.

Kierkegaard's description of the Tragic Hero from *Fear and Trembling* can be aligned with Kant's argument that social progress is only possible in the context of a threat of war. To give oneself up for the greater good, or to exist and act in the light of the possibility of that happening, generates a certain perspective on the individual's *particular* relation to the social. The severance from the social and ethical that Kierkegaard's *singular* Knight of Faith elicits is an example of what Kant describes as 'a fall to unredeemable corruption.'[33] By stepping outside or beyond prescribed social and ethical norms, the Knight of Faith also steps beyond systems of value. Meaning becomes entirely singular and therefore redundant in terms of Kant's agenda of shared social progress, which is why, '[t]he true knight of faith is a witness never a teacher.'[34] The Tragic Hero, on the other hand, sacrifices himself in terms of shared values which could easily include collective existential threat. Action, for Kant and the Tragic Hero, can only be afforded value if it is understood by and in the social sphere. There is no space for that which cannot be understood as social progress or social good, while at the same time the threat of war is insisted upon as its presupposition. For Kant the necessity of prescribing a preference is clear: better war than unsociability. This is based on a more general preference for understanding and

universality to which Kierkegaard's Knight of Faith does not conform: 'A human being can become a Tragic Hero by his own strength, but not the Knight of Faith. When a person sets out on the Tragic Hero's admittedly hard path there are many who could lend him advice; but he who walks the narrow path of faith no one can advise, no one understand.'[35] Meaning can either be understood by others (for the Tragic Hero) or not (for the Knight of Faith). Without an already existing social and ethical context for meaning which plays into its value system, meaning falls flat as far as social value is concerned.

In Kant, passion becomes the friction which exists between states rather than individual passion in the leap of faith towards singular valueless meaning. Passion for Kant is facilitated by collective existential threat whereas for Kierkegaard it is simply a condition of existence. It is precisely unsociability - which Kant suggests that art should discipline so as to be able create a beautiful social order - that Kierkegaard might be seen as wanting to preserve. This form of unsociability would not be thought primarily in terms of what might be called anti-social behaviour (although it could be, especially if perceived in terms of the social), the emphasis being rather on a de-prioritisation of the social and sociable than a direct attack on it. Ironically, Kant's emphasis on sociability might have negative consequences for artistic progress because art which speaks to an already existing context within which it can already be understood runs the risk of not offering much that is new. Art might then at best be a form of diplomacy or trade between constituent groups or individual members of a state. In this sense, Kant seals off society from *singular* unsociable passions with the help of art and culture, allowing instead for a form of passion to be

generated by *particulars* as collective meaning in the face of the threat of annihilation. The singular is lost to the particular of the collective and the collective and its progression is shaped by potentially fatal competition with other collectives. The Tragic Hero therefore finds himself sacrificed as a particular to Kant's sociability and shared value while the Knight of Faith takes the leap of singular, unsociable and valueless meaning.

Negative Capability

The term 'negative capability' was first coined by John Keats in a letter to his brothers, George and Thomas (dated 21st December 1817) in which he wrote:

> I had not a dispute but a disquisition with Dilke, upon various subjects; several things dove-tailed in my mind, and at once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously - I mean *Negative Capability*, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason - Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half-knowledge.[36]

This was his only explicit, recorded use of this concept and whether or not the opposition between Shakespeare and Coleridge that Keats draws is fair, the definition of the concept remains relevant and applicable. Li Ou explains Keats' definition of negativity in *Keats and Negative Capability*, writing that,

> To be negatively capable is to be open to the actual vastness and complexity of experience, and one cannot possess this openness unless one can abandon the comfortable enclosure of doctrinaire knowledge, safely guarding the self's identity, for a more truthful view of the world which is necessarily more disturbing or even agonizing for the self.[37]

This description helps to articulate negative capability as an educative concept outside of the terms of positivistic knowledge accumulation and value accommodation. It allows greater access to truth but this truth cannot be understood in the traditional language of aesthetic education or value-oriented education more generally.

Negative capability has much in common with Merleau-Ponty's concept of the chiasm in the sense that 'what there is to be grasped is a dispossession.' It is the capability of being able to comprehend and exist in a state conditioned by dispossession. Negative capability is part of that which is educated through a negative aesthetic education. As such, there is an interesting paradox in the fact that while Shakespeare is now taught in schools as the pinnacle of English cultural production - offering no explicit values to be educated in

- the entire educational system is conditioned in total opposition to the negative capability which, for Keats at least, underpins Shakespeare's work. One must possess particular knowledge of Shakespeare to be able to afford value to one's education in terms of a grade achieved. But can this possession of knowledge of Shakespeare also translate into the possession of a dispossession that his work makes possible? To be educated in negative capability would be to increase ones capability in 'being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.' It would be correct to say that to increase one's negative capability should increase one's capacity for negative aesthetic education and it would be equally true that negative aesthetic education might increase one's negative capability. In this way, negative capability creates the conditions for its own educability.

John Dewey writes of both Keats and Shakespeare in *Art as Experience* in terms of negative capability, suggesting that it is a philosophy which 'accepts life and experience in all its uncertainty, mystery, doubt, and half-knowledge and turns that experience upon itself to deepen and intensify its own qualities – to imagination and art.'[38] However, Dewey does not try, here or elsewhere, to think art thoroughly in relation to education. Attempting to fill this gap, Richard Shusterman, in his *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, conceives of aesthetic education - like Herbert Read - in terms of an 'organic unity,' albeit one which is a 'non-repressive unity or harmony in difference.'[39] He thinks of the individual but only ever in terms of the organic society. As such, there is room for the social individual (or Tragic Hero) but not the unsociable singularity (or Knight of Faith). Even so,

Shusterman's argument implicitly separates him from thinkers of unity and shared value learned through tradition, such as T.S. Eliot, for whom, 'The population should be homogenous; where two or more cultures exist in the same place they are likely either to be fiercely self-conscious or both become adulterate.'[40] But even though Shusterman's organic unity is distinct from Eliot's, it does not sit well with Dewey's understanding of Keats's 'negative capability,' nor with negative aesthetic education. This is because negative aesthetic education: sees all unity as provisional; it prioritises the singular; and, one of its major functions is precisely to disrupt, ignore and forget the social and its shared values.

Li Ou also uses Keats' reading of *King Lear* to show that 'negative capability is not confined to aesthetics.'[41] Roberto Mangabeira Unger is clearly of the same perspective and illustrates the concept's applicability outside of a literary context in his *False Necessity: Anti-necessitarian social theory in the service of radical democracy*.[42] For Unger, 'we may use the poet's turn of phrase to label the empowerment that arises from the denial of whatever in our contexts delivers us over to a fixed scheme of division and hierarchy and to an enforced choice between routine and rebellion.'[43] As such, negative capability is not the denial itself but the empowerment that follows it. Saying no to established social value might then be the product of and pave the way to a negative aesthetic education. Of course this would not entail a wholesale dismissal of society, education, and its values. And so for Unger this does not lead to 'anarchy, permanent flux or mere indefinition,' giving the example that 'the actual institutions and guiding doctrines of the liberal bourgeois democracies are less entrenched and more favourable to negative capability than the

arrangements and dogmas of the European absolutist monarchies they succeeded.'[44] Value-oriented institutions and their dispositions could then be read on a scale in terms of how receptive and open they were to that which was not of explicit or obvious value to them and which might even threaten them with change. This is why institutions can be perceived as being able to provide an opening towards, and an education in, negative capability. The same would be the case for educational institutions and negative aesthetic education.

If, as John Llewelyn claims, artists remind us, 'the law is not made for the sake of the law,' the law itself must be constructed somewhat in light of negative capability. Unlike in Kant, the unsociability associated with negative aesthetic education and negative capability is not papered over with culture, acting as a resource for progress. Instead, these negatives are to be attended to outside of the logic of value and progress, not because this somehow affords *another* value but because existence and experience exceeds value *anyway*. An education which attends only to value and not to that which exceeds it can only ever be indoctrination. It follows that where we learn as well as what we learn must be conditioned and somewhat constituted by negative capability. As such, negative aesthetic education might help to make and facilitate Unger's point that, '[t]he citizen lives out in practice what the foundational view of human activity proclaims: the truth that his connections, desires, and insights cannot be definitely contained by the conceptual or institutional framework within which they provisionally operate.'[45] Negative capability has much more longevity than the provisional institutions which either limit or protect it. The sooner institutions - perhaps particularly educational institutions - understand and accommodate this fact, the

sooner the many neglected aspects of real life which do not simply confer socially accepted value can be attended to.

In a way this political aspect of negative aesthetic education and negative capability is the most practically important and therefore also the most complex. Without a more fully articulated idea of how institutions and education systems 'in general' can account for, accommodate and facilitate negative aesthetic education, it cannot begin to fulfil its potential. However, because Unger shows that it is already possible to begin to conceive of these kinds of institutions in terms of political theory, it follows that experiments in practice should almost certainly be analysed and thought in terms of negative aesthetic education.

Concluding Negative Postscript

Negative aesthetic education is the interruption of (the value of) shared social value, especially any illusory harmony of presence or fantasy of organic unity. It is another point from which decisions in and on existence can be made, which itself points toward the problem of whether we make decisions or decisions make us. In a way, it is - as de Man accuses Schiller's aesthetic education of being - for the masses. However, it would have more to do with what Rousseau conceives of in *Emile* as education outside of society than how education is currently valued, albeit without his emphasis on its chronological situation before the development of reason and preparing the ground for it. Instead,

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negative aesthetic education would have to exist alongside – and, to some extent, probably have to be protected by - positive education. Roberto Unger's emphasis on institutional changes which more openly accommodate negative capability is one way of articulating this necessity.

This negative aesthetic education would exist partly to develop our negative capability; partly to protect and emphasize a regard the significance of aesthetic experiences which have no apparent social value and are even marked by their unsociality; and, partly to make sure that *we do not* accept ideas of organic social wholes or cultural harmony and, equally, that *we do not* fall into the trap of thinking we can or should become self-sufficient or wholly competent agents. In a context where both of these conflicting but mutually manipulated views are common currency, this form of education as a denial is perhaps not without importance. And yet this rhetoric may give the impression that negative aesthetic education would somehow negate positive education when this is not the case. It is rather a refutation of the implicit negation of the singular and the valueless, imposed by the logic of a positive totality of organic unity and shared value. The problem is not simply unreflective patterns of thought but also positive 'solutions' to these patterns of thought which privilege either the individual or competing versions of organic unity of varying complexity (for example: social democracy, the invisible hand, participative democracy). One way of thinking negative aesthetic education would be as a reflection on the decisions which find their centre of gravity asymmetrically in the occursions of singularity outside of what we tend to think of as our 'selves': what Derrida calls 'the

decision of the other…the absolute other in me.'[46] In a sense negative aesthetic education, like aesthetic education has been supposed to be, is an education in a culture, the difference is that the culture in question is a 'universalizable culture of singularities',[47] and it is anything but harmonious.

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[1] Stewart Martin, 'Aesthetic education against aesthetic education', *Radical Philosophy*, 41 (Jan/Feb 2007), 42.

[2] Robert Kaufman , Negatively Capable Dialectics', *Critical Inquiry* , 27.2 (Winter 2001), 384.

[3] Herbert Read, *Education Through Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1958), 283-284.

[4] Plato *Republic* in *Complete Works*, ed. J.M. Cooper (Cambridge: Hackett, 1997), 377a-b.

[5] Ibid., 377b.

[6] Ibid., 377c.

[7] Herbert Read, *Education Through Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1958), 8.

[8] Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man,* trans. R. Snell (New York: Dover, 2004), 138.

[9] For a more thorough engagement with these terms see Emile Bojesen, Of Remuant Existence, *Philosophy Today* 59:3 (Summer 2015).

[10] Susan Howe, *Singularities* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), 41. See also Ming-Qian Ma, Articulating the Inarticulate: Singularities and the Counter-Method in Susan Howe, *Contemporary Literature* 36: 3 (Autumn, 1995), 466-489.

[11] Paul De Man, *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1996), 154.

[12] Ibid., 154.

[13] Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory,* trans. R. Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1997), 159.

[14] A provisional list of indicative and easily sourced examples to provoke thought in this direction might include: William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*; Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*; Alfred Jarry, *Ubu Roi*; Susan Howe, *That This*; the paintings of Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock; the compositions and performances of John Cage and Derek Bailey; the films of Nuri Bilge Ceylan and Béla Tarr; the choreography of Merce Cunningham.

[15] See, for example: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/260726/Cultural_Education_report.pdf

[16] John Keats, *The Complete Poetical Works and Letters of John Keats*, (Cambridge: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1899), 277.

[17] See Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans A. Smock (London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986).

[18] John Llewelyn, *The HypoCritical Imagination: Between Kant and Levinas* (London: Routledge, 2000), 173.

[19] Ibid., 173.

[20] Ibid., 178.

[21] Ibid., 178.

[22] Ibid., 178.

[23] Ibid., 181.

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[24] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible,* ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 266.

[25] Ibid., 197.

[26] A misquote which actually reads, 'Being is *what requires creation of us* for us to experience it.' Ibid., 197 (original emphasis). Quote cited in text from Claude Lefort, *Writing: The Political Test,* trans. D.A. Curtis (London: Duke University Press, 2000), 249.

[27] Ibid., 249.

[28] Ibid., 249-250.

[29] Ibid., 249.

[30] Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace and other essays*, trans. T. Humphrey (Cambridge: Hackett, 1983), 33

[31] Ibid., 33.

[32] Ibid., 57.

[33] Ibid., 67.

[34] Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. A. Hannay (London: Penguin, 2005), 96.

[35] Ibid., 78-79.

[36] John Keats, *The Complete Poetical Works and Letters of John Keats*, (Cambridge: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1899), 277.

[37] Li Ou, *Keats and Negative Capability* (London: Continuum, 2009), 2.

[38] John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1934), 34.

[39] Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 83.

[40] The following sentence on the same page has also received significant attention: 'What is still more important is unity of religious background; and reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable.' In T.S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods*, (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1934), 20.

[41] Li Ou, *Keats and Negative Capability* (London: Continuum, 2009), 187.

[42] Interestingly, the currently rare application of Unger's work in academic contexts has found a way into another relatively complementary contemporary critique of value. See: Mick Wallis & Joslin McKinney (2013) On Value and Necessity: The Green Book and its others, *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts*, 18:2, 67-79, DOI: 10.1080/13528165.2013.807170.

[43] Roberto Unger, *False Necessity: Anti-neccessitarian theory in the service of radical democracy* (London: Verso, 2004), 279.

[44] Ibid., 279-280.

[45] Ibid., 579.

[46] Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship,* trans. G. Collins (London: Verso, 2005), 68.

[47] Jacques Derrida, 'Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of "Religion at the Limits of Reason Alone"' in Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, ed. G. Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), 18.