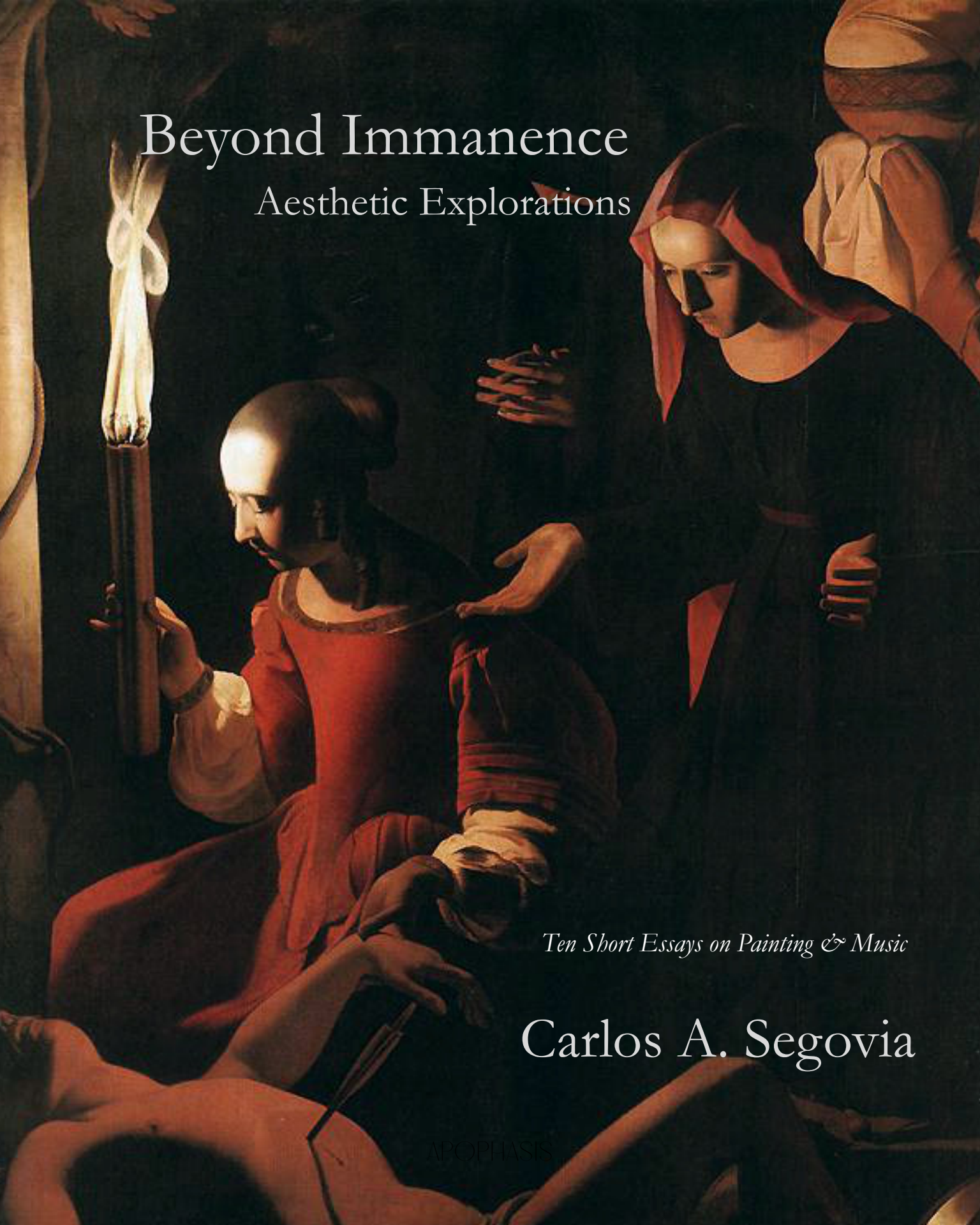




Beyond Immanence

Aesthetic Explorations

Ten Short Essays on Painting & Music

Carlos A. Segovia

APOPHASIS

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Cover image: “Saint Sebastien Tended by Saint Irene,”
Georges de La Tour (1593-1652).

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I Brancusi's Sleeping Muse

What is a sleeping Muse—a slumbering Muse?

A Muse—that is, she from whom inspiration flows: perhaps fitfully for us, yet without interruption when seen from her own side; she who therefore abides within herself in a state of perpetual wakefulness; who inhabits that realm as we shall never be able to inhabit it, for she, unlike us, neither knows nor yields to weariness. And yet she, here, sleeps....

And so, the question returns intact: what is a sleeping Muse—a slumbering Muse? All the more so because it would seem that she does not sleep through negligence, that no distracted misstep has brought her eyelids shut. She sleeps—I dare say—because we, being mortals unlike her, never quite succeed in crossing the threshold of her immortal realm, which is dream to us but plenitude of life to her.

A sleeping Muse—a slumbering Muse—may then be nothing other than the image of our own dreaming, of our desire lying outstretched in pursuit of the ungraspable—and hence, too, of our venturing beyond the given. And if it is true that one must awaken to that dream, rather than awaken from it—which would be a miserable thing indeed—then perhaps one must begin by recognizing that the dream of the Muse awaits us everywhere and at every time—yet in no pre-assigned where and at no appointed when...

II

Caravaggio's Salome

Hegel: "The death of merely immediate vitality is the emergence of spirit"—a deviation from the given, an excess, a supplement. Yet also Baudelaire: "Whoever looks from outside through an open window never sees as much as one who looks through a closed one. What is visible in the sunlight is always less interesting than what unfolds behind a pane of glass. In that black or luminous opening, life lives, dreams, suffers." Both cursed: one, as we like him; the other, as we do not. And still, a single voice.

Indeed, a single sight: Salome's, in Caravaggio.

Despite the painting being called *Salome Receives the Head of John the Baptist*, Salome does not quite look at what she receives. The head, the salver, the executioner, and the grieving maid form the immediate event, gathered at the centre of the scene; but Salome's turned head breaks with this immediacy. Her sight goes aside: it withdraws from the scene even as her hands remain bound to it. She receives the head, but her gaze has already departed from it.

A small deviation—an abyss. For what we are shown is not the spectacle before her, but the distance she creates from it: a space between eye and event. By looking away, Salome offers us an interiority that the immediate scene itself could never disclose.

The spirit—one might argue—is that taking distance, that making an aside: the movement by which the given ceases to be sufficient, by which we venture beyond immanence.

(This is somehow already there in Ludovico Carracci, in whom a turned head may open an invisible interiority. Yet it is no longer there in Velázquez, where we are invited instead into the immediate.)

III

Fra Angelico's Wings

The theme is a commonplace; the narrative, entirely conventional: a virgin receives the visit of an angel who tells her that she will bear a divine child. Fra Angelico produced several paintings on this very motif. Slight differences are perceptible from one painting to another: Adam, Eve, and the angel who expels them from paradise appear in two of the paintings, but are absent from the others; the columns and ceiling of Mary's room vary, as does the number of rooms; the angel's hands assume different positions, while Mary's remain almost identical in all of them; and, more importantly perhaps, in one of them—presumably Fra Angelico's final Annunciation painting, a fresco at the San Marco Museum in Florence—the perspective shifts completely: the scene occupies the centre of the painting rather than its right side, while a corridor extends backwards, making perspective itself appear infinite.

But there is something else, something extraordinary in this last fresco: Fra Angelico's great moment of freedom, Fra Angelico's dream... Look at the angel's wings—two butterfly-op-art wings! In fact, the painting is all there, in those wings. And one wonders whether Fra Angelico ever aimed at painting anything else.

For the angel's wings convey an opening: they bring two worlds into communication—a heavenly world and a human world, in this case. (Just like in Rothko, I am not sure whether more simply or more complexly, two different colour-worlds are arcanelly brought into contact.) Thus, they express what can be neither fully re-presented (as something already known) nor narrated, since to do so would amount to translating it into the parameters of one of those worlds—the one receiving what the other, ungiven, offers—and thereby betraying it. Put otherwise, they express what can only be pointed to as an interval through which the overflowing of one world into, and beyond the limits of, the other occurs—total iridescence!

IV

Titian's Imperceptible Brushstroke

Again. Or rather now, for the first time?

On the one hand, the downcast, sorrow-laden face, betraying a soul once again weighed down by an ancient, inevitable burden...

On the other hand, the force imparted, as if for the first time—now!—coursing from the taut, powerful arm to the very tendons of the foot...

The old and the new—difference and repetition.

The extraordinary manner in which this contrast is rendered would alone suffice to make Titian's *Sisyphus* a masterpiece—one that discreetly eludes the visitor: relegated to a secondary wall, to the right of the archway through which one enters a gallery dominated by Murillo's tableaux, it is easily passed by without a backward glance.

Yet there is more to it. The unbreathable atmosphere of the grotto in which the Aeolid tries his luck for the umpteenth time—notice the two infernal faces looming from the darkness, as though Hell itself had grown a pair of eyes—is abruptly interrupted at the level of his bent left knee, where, in a masterly yet almost imperceptible brushstroke—a small touch of blue—the scene suddenly bursts open onto the air beyond.

The winds blow in manifold, unpredictable, adverse directions. To find a passage amid them: Sisyphus's other lot—and maternal legacy?

"I would be hard-pressed to say where the painting I am looking at is," writes Merleau-Ponty. "For I do not look at it as one looks at a thing. I see according to it, or with it, rather than seeing it."

But if the where is thus the very first of the challenges—the initial risk—that confronting a painting entails, what, then, are we to say of the *when*?

A young woman lies naked—fainted, dead?—upon a chaise longue. The dark green, with slight ochre inflections, of the walls contrasts with the light streaming through the window, whose curtains a disquieting, undetermined being—child, adult, dwarf?—pulls open with decision, one might even say with violence. As though saying: "Behold!"

But what are we given to see in Balthus's *The Room*, if not our own having arrived late, too late, at an event whose meaning is withheld from us even as its effects are laid before our eyes? What has happened to the young woman? And for what reason? There is no way of knowing it. Extreme disynchrony. (Of which perhaps only the cat watching the scene from atop a small console jealously hoards the secret.)

If in *The Street*—a neutral space in which asynchronous characters and events are superimposed upon one another, hence their mutual indifference—Balthus plays with the idea of asynchrony, here he instead introduces that of disynchrony, which is but another, yet equally disconcerting, variant of time's disjunctive nature. One of the infinite pricks of the enigma, therefore, by means of which the spirit makes its way forward—as one rolls a die—always groping its way in the dark...

VI

Oteiza's Empty Edge & Redon's Unseen Béatrice

There are two ways of dealing with space: to occupy it or to empty it, to fill it or to let it breathe—and, in so doing, allow us to breathe within it. For Oteiza, sculpture explores this latter, subtractive possibility. Yet there comes a point when, by dint of emptying not space alone, but the things themselves, the invisible becomes paradoxically visible, like when, for instance, an absent edge made present in its absence, and through that absence, gives form to what the viewer does not perceive.

Redon follows a different, yet not unrelated, path. Take his 1897 *Béatrice*, where a pale profile seems neither to emerge from nor to recede into the surrounding field, but to hover at an uncertain passage where figure and atmosphere cease to be distinguishable. Less represented than evoked—summoned, as it were—through a haze of greys, greens and yellows, who, then, is this Béatrice? Neither someone whose identity might be recovered nor a fantasy whose unreality could simply be affirmed, she is a non-figure trembling at the limes of the visible. (Blanchot: “She was almost too present; yet not present; but not absent, either.”) Béatrice is thus neither wholly there nor wholly elsewhere; she seems to come forth, that is, from the very field that threatens to dissolve her. And this perhaps is why her image feels less like the representation of a vision than the occurrence of one: her face is not placed before us but seems to arise within the act of seeing itself, thereby haunting the boundary at which something becomes perceptible, only to withdraw again as soon as we attempt to grasp it.

Now, is this not precisely what a Vision is—not so much the revelation of an invisible object as the moment in which the visible itself becomes porous to what exceeds it, “the sheer radiance of what cannot be figured,” to borrow from Clémence Ramnoux?

VII

La Tour's Saint Sebastian

Something strangely brings me back to it again and again. Its fathomless silence, perhaps. A silence different from that of the darkness in which the figures are immersed: a more intimate, inward silence that seems to have withdrawn into the figures themselves. Nothing is hurried; nothing quite moves.

And yet the stillness is traversed by a rhythm. The hands bear witness to it. They form an asymmetric diagonal succession: the first figure holds hers to her own face; the next brings them together in prayer; the next opens them towards the fallen saint, as though to attend him; and finally, Saint Irene, bending over Saint Sebastian, touches him with extraordinary delicacy. Face, prayer, approach, touch: four positions, four moments, as though a single gesture had been fractured into its successive instants.

There is something faintly Cubist in it, one might discern—less the simultaneity of different views than the fragmentation of movement across distinct positions. Each pair of hands retains something of what precedes it and anticipates something of what follows. Once more: the painting is still, yet movement passes through it.

An invisible music inherently linked to time—since the gestures do not unfold in space but in an interior cadence—thus emanates from the painting. As though La Tour had discovered how to make silence itself resonate—and, in that resonance, to make visible a music that can only be heard by the eye...

VIII

A Chord in Tenebræ

One need not step out from La Tour's invisible music to hear what, within music itself, remains inaudible to whoever grows certain beforehand of what music is—the unheard-of whose distant echoes María Zambrano likens to “an Angel who makes himself felt by effacing himself.”

From one tenebrism to another.

Suppose, then, that the source of light which momentarily rends the night—if only to bereclaimed by it—is a D-minor chord doubled and inverted, as two stars—at once nascent and dying—reflecting one another and each of them itself in its own mirror; a mysterious gravitational field defying the very concept of music as scale and architecture, rendering its spectral instead.

From one tenebrism to another: from La Tour's to that of the French Baroque lute.

Why, though, this new chord—why make it resonant, rather than any other? (And the word resonance may well be what is essential here—the desire, that is, to prolong for an instant the life of what inexorably dies, a desire embodied by the plucked strings, yet also secretly preserved by that chord even when it becomes silent, latent, tacit.) Perhaps no other chord epitomizes as finely this mirror-play of absence and presence, of simultaneous wounded exposure and sober inwardness, of frailty and certainty offered in such a sorcerous admixture? Perhaps no other one breathes as much?

Resonance, of course, is likewise achieved by the paired strings and enhanced by a body that resembles a camera obscura, where light filters itself only to disappear within while creating, in the meantime, an image that does not quite correspond to the world outside but returns it to us in a form that is no longer familiar: fractured, yet all the more powerfully for it. Such a bewildering paradox!

One among many. For the writing is less a notation than a choreography, a map of textures and an open-ended navigation—again—into the unheard-of: open-ended in rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic terms at once. Rhythmic: more often than not, the rhythm is fractured, atomized. Melodic: “there is little cantabile to be found” (Baron); “the melody glides as if overice, evading the obvious” (Lislevand). Harmonic: what time joins and disjoins, hence the gathering and the scattering of what persists, of what occurs and of what might be anticipated—as much as of what is bygone, never comes to pass, or remains unforeseeable—discloses itself from up close as well as from afar, now retrieved, then lost, in its fullness or in fragments—or, better said, in all those forms that overlap, defer, and depose one another. (Char: “sun and night, cast in one and the same gold, traverse and range through the spirit’s realm.”)

Listen to Le Vieux Gaultier and you might quietly cross into that camera obscura.

To Dubut *le père*, and you shall sensuously drift amid resonances.

To Dufaut, and you will enter, spellbound, a labyrinth of tonal veerings.

IX

Refraction, Diffraction, Choses Luthées

Deviation and difference—one could argue—unfold here as fireflies sparkling through vesperæwhile night gathers at the world's edge. Echoing, perhaps, the idea of *égarement*?

Descartes, too, gives it voice in making doubt thought's *maîtresse*, and astonishment before the unexpected the first of the soul's passions. The chevalier de Méré, Mademoiselle de Scudéry and Madame de La Fayette would draw similar ideas into the collective imaginary, as would later Crébillon in *Les Égaréments du cœur et de l'esprit* (approximately: The Strayings of the Heart and the Mind). (Yet if one looks more closely, would it not be unfair to stop there? How, then, should one read Nerval, Baudelaire, Rimbaud or, even, Blanchot and Derrida?)

Take the two terms theorized by Descartes in 1637 and coined by Grimaldi around 1665 (but introduced into France shortly thereafter by Galloys and Fabri), respectively:

Refraction—the bending of light as it passes from one material into another.

Diffraction—the bending of light as it moves around obstacles or through narrow openings.

Might one not, then, view as singular cases of diffraction the aforementioned harmonic, melodic and rhythmic fracturing characteristic of the French Baroque

style *luthé*—which we know today as style *brisé*, or fractured style, but was originally called *luthé*, or lute-like? And might one not, likewise, reimagine as a particular case of refraction the form par excellence of the French lute repertoire, that is, the suite, composed of an unmeasured prelude followed by a freely chosen number of so-called dances, of which the principal ones—Froberger *mediante*—were the *allemande*, the *courante*, the *sarabande* and the *gigue*?

Or does an unmeasured prelude not amount to a casting of the dice of the possible? And does the *allemande*, with its solemn rhythm, not say: “I accept what I have experienced”? And the *courante*, with its frequent counterpoints, does it not return to interrogate it, since questions always remain unformulated even in the face of what has been fully assumed? And the *sarabande*, for its part, does it not, with its *lenteur*, allow one to feel anew the experienced in all its emotional intensity? And does not the *gigue*, lastly, bind it together, so to speak, so that one may continue one’s way?

Put otherwise, does the suite, then, not offer an aesthetic ontology of experience, distinct, therefore, from a dramaturgy of experience (the sonata) or a politics of experience (the concerto), but also from a mere psychology of experience (as in the case of the Romantic *étude*)? In the sense that it formulates the question variously, each time otherwise—hence its multiperspectivism—of what something is and of how it may be re-experienced. (Compare with Plato’s genuine use of cross-examination and division in relation to the question: what is this?)

X

The Subjective Fold

Neither mere musical form as we tend to understand it, nor musical project serving, unlike the sonata and the fugue, a logic of variation rather than a dialectic, whether architectural or dramatic, of specular or independent motifs—as Ernest Ansermet suggested long ago in an otherwise brilliant essay now sadly unread—the *suite* appears instead as a distinct aesthetic *cum* pragmatic transcendental field in which experience is at once re-perceived and subjected to the manifold possibilities of its re-experiencing, so that what something was, what it gives itself to be, and what it might yet become, remain suspended within the same unfixed constellation.

It thus represents a temporal and an ontological fold.

Music overall is, of course, nothing but a fold—a subjective fold made of sound, affects, time, and thought. Yet today’s reduction of music to acoustics plus the immediate feelings that its rhythmical and textural shifts provoke in us menaces two of those components: time is emptied of tension; thought, altogether discarded—immediacy and immanence leave no room for either.

Gisèle Brelet’s lucid words remain, however, as valid as ever: “music seems to draw thought towards the boldest of all imaginable hypotheses: that by which thought makes itself the substance and essence of the world.”

Thought, that is, the navigational analysis and the contemplation of the first-order affects that the world leads us to feel, to which a series of second-order affects are added when those first affects become perceived in turn—when the perceived becomes the object of a second-order perception, thus allowing the

experienced to turn back upon itself. Ultimately, the aesthetic (re-)begins there—as does what we call subjectivity.

Neither desert nor crypt, the latter is not what we must get rid of, yet it is not where we must enclose ourselves in turn.

Neither the misery of the Dionysian without the Apollonian nor the misery of the Apollonian without the Dionysian—the two ingredients of our modern malaise. Rather—as Balthus beautifully said apropos painting, always poised between the spirit of novelty and the awareness of tradition—subjectivity begins afresh each time, starts anew with each gesture by means of which a tentative, open-ended synthesis of time is operated, folding what has been into what is and what might yet be.

“It is as though she were dead, buried alive beneath the flower-laden folds of her wedding dress.”

External Images and Audio Files, by Chapter

I

Brancusi, *Sleeping Muse* (1910). Art Institute of Chicago

II

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Salome Receives the Head of John the Baptist* (1609–1610).
National Gallery, London

Ludovico Carracci, *Christ in the Wilderness, Served by Angels* (1608–1610). Gemäldegalerie, Berlin

Diego Velázquez, *Three Musicians* (1618). Gemäldegalerie, Berlin

III

Fra Angelico, *Annunciation* (1440s). San Marco Museum, Florence

Mark Rothko, *Untitled* (Black, Red over Black on Red) (1964). Centre Pompidou, Paris

Titian, *Sisyphus* (1548–1549). Prado Museum, Madrid

Balthus (Balthasar Klossowski de Rola), *The Room* (c. 1953). Private collection

Balthus (Balthasar Klossowski de Rola), *The Street* (1933). MoMA, New York

VI

Jorge Oteiza, *Empty Edge* (1958). Reina Sofia Museum, Madrid

Odilon Redon, *Béatrice* (1897). MoMA, New York

VII

Georges de La Tour, *Saint Sebastian Tended by Saint Irene* (c. 1649). Louvre, Paris & Gemäldegalerie, Berlin

VIII

Ennemond Gaultier (fl. 1620), *Prélude in F-flat minor*, by Hopkinson Smith

Pierre Dubut, le père (fl. 1630), *Allemande in D minor*, by Claire Antonini

François Dufaut, (fl. 1630), *Sarabande & Double in G minor*, by André Henrich

François Dufaut, *Five Pièces in D minor*, by André Henrich Prélude

Allemande

Courante

Sarabande

Gigue

Texts in Conversation, in Chronological Order

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Carlos A. Segovia is a British-born Spanish philosopher and writer, working on contemporary philosophy at the crossroads of the philosophy of mythology and the philosophy of art.

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Yet convinced that higher education is undergoing a form of intellectual exhaustion, he has turned to more alternative and experimental venues in which thinking may still be pursued as a form of art and a way of approaching the unknown. He collaborates regularly with Incite Seminars and works as a private philosophy tutor in Berlin.

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