Finding the Self in the "Oceanic Feeling"

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DRAFT

My work on the ocean began after experiencing a series of traumas. With language as my communication fractured, and my 'old self[1]' stripped away, the world around me no longer made sense within its specific rational order. The first space that allowed me to breathe again was seeing and feeling the ocean's power and embrace. In the presence of the ocean, I did not find healing. Instead, I felt lost, empty, uncontained and stripped of everything. Yet, those emotions recognised what I felt in my core, my pain was recognised and reflected in the ocean. Experiencing these feelings made me feel recognised by the ocean's brutality. I realised something both terrifying and tender: a moment of suspension between dissolution and belonging. It was the beginning of what Sigmund Freud[2] called the *oceanic feeling,* which is a sensation of eternity, of being one with the external world as a whole. Freud dismissed this as a regressive illusion, the residue of infantile consciousness, but in my own encounter, the ocean was not regression; instead, it was return. It was a sense of belonging to something larger than the destruction.

This paper examines the philosophical and aesthetic dimensions of that return. Through my drawings of the ocean, which are created with layers of charcoal and erasure, I investigate how the ocean functions as a liminal space[3]: a threshold between destruction and recognition, between violence and belonging. Drawing on thinkers such as Adorno, Horkheimer, Benjamin,

[1] I decided to add some of my 2021 research here to give a bit on psychoanalytical context of the lost self.
Trauma destabilises one's sense of self to such an extent that identity can feel permanently erased. Duma (2008) describe "mental paralysis" or tonic immobility as an immediate response to sexual assault that suspends the capacity to act or reason, creating an enduring fracture between body and consciousness. This paralysis often extends into the aftermath of trauma, where victims experience what Foa and Rothbaum (1998) term *cognitive numbing*: a state of dissociation, depersonalisation, and emotional detachment characteristic of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Survivors frequently describe this as a disappearance of the "old self" and a struggle to re-enter the world as an integrated being. As Gavey and Schmidt (2011) note, the trauma of rape "goes right to the core of one's being," leaving victims feeling that "the old self no longer exists." The result is a liminal existence - neither who one was before nor fully someone new - marked by memory fragmentation, guilt, and estrangement from the body (Abrams, et al. 2009). My own art practice begins from this psychological rupture: the ocean becomes the first place where such erasure can coexist with belonging, where the lost self begins to take shape again.

[2] *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930).
(Freud 1930, 11)

[3] This aesthetic often elicits feelings of unease and familiarity, as viewers may recognize these spaces but struggle to pinpoint why (Lasky 2023).

Derrida, Habermas, Nietzsche, and Freud, I argue that the ocean's vastness mirrors the collapse of Enlightenment reason[4], yet also opens an ethics of relation and recognition beyond trauma[5]. The ocean becomes both material and metaphor: a site where the boundaries of the self dissolve, where divine violence purifies, and where communication emerges again from silence.

The Oceanic Feeling and the Sublime of Non-Being

The "oceanic feeling" represents a tension between rational consciousness and pre-rational unity. Freud cites Romain Rolland's description of it as a sense of being one with the external world, but admits he personally did not experience it[6]. However, as we know, Freud's circle of research was self-centred and ethically questionable. Outside of his circle, one can find an experience in which the dissolution of boundaries before the ocean does not signify regression; it becomes a philosophical mode of *undoing*, a necessary annihilation of the bits of fabricated self, built as a defence after the trauma had broken the core.

In this sense, my experience aligns more with the tradition of the sublime than with Freud's clinical suspicion. Immanuel Kant described the sublime as the feeling that arises when the moral being fails to comprehend the infinite, in which the power of nature is in vivid contrast to the superior power of our reason[7]. Yet, reason in its instrumental form begins to collapse in the wake of the ocean. The waves overwhelm, the horizon[8] dissolves, leaving a state of acceptance and surrender, which is neither an authoritative master act nor an understanding investigation but an aesthetic aura[9].

My work diverges from Kant's conception of the sublime, which demands that we abandon sensibility to attend to rational ideas and turn away from the body toward transcendent reason.

[4] the modern belief that the world can be fully mastered through rationality and control

[5] opening the possibility of an *ethics grounded in relation and recognition*. In this context, "relation" refers to forms of understanding rooted in empathy and intersubjectivity rather than domination, and "recognition" refers to the act of acknowledging both the self and the other within shared vulnerability. The collapse of reason, therefore, becomes not an endpoint but a condition for renewed ethical connection beyond trauma.

[6] For Freud, it reflects a vestige of infantile narcissism and an inability to maintain ego boundaries.

[7] (Rohlf 2024)

[8] Derrida (2002, 255) describes the horizon in his third aporia as a space that keeps its distance, and acts as both an opening and a limit that defines either an infinite progress or a waiting and awaiting.

[9] While acknowledging that the overwhelming nature of the ocean could foster nihilism, I urge one to get comfortable in the state of no way forward, because we follow rules and controlling systems dictating the way of living and embracing and recognizing the loss could reveal moments of hope which is unrecognizable to the trained eye.
Here, the "aesthetic aura" refers to an experience that cannot be explained or possessed through reason but can only be *felt*.

Instead, I align with Friedrich Schiller's opposing understanding: where Kant saw the sublime as division and separation of our faculties, Schiller understood it as "energetic beauty," an intensification of their working together. For Schiller, the sublime "disturbs the soul" and thereby "occasions it to produce harmony, reinvigorating and thus reuniting the powers of the soul." This describes what I find in the ocean; not separation from experience but a deepening of it, where dissolution and belonging coexist in what Schiller called the "esthetic condition."[10]

Schiller argued that freedom emerges within experience, not apart from it. Where Kant believed moral autonomy required freedom from the sensuous world, Schiller insisted it is "something to be achieved and maintained in and through experience." My oceanic encounter embodies this: the ocean does not ask me to transcend the body or flee into pure reason. It creates a space in which sensuous and rational powers operate without constraint, where determination articulates rather than constrains freedom. This is the morality of Schiller's sublime, not domination of the senses by reason, but their integration through disruption.

Ingrid Jonker's writing offers a poetic and existential lens through which the oceanic feeling can be reinterpreted beyond Freud's psychoanalytic boundaries. Her poetry transforms personal suffering into a collective language of loss and recognition. Jonker's work, much like the ocean, oscillates between tenderness and destruction, embodying what Walter Benjamin might call the aesthetic of ruin: a beauty born from fragmentation. She confronts violence not through ideology but through empathy, turning the sea into a witness to South Africa's psychic and political trauma. Her life ended when she walked into the sea at Three Anchor Bay[11] in 1965, a gesture often read as her final merging with the vastness she wrote about. In this sense, Jonker's life and death philosophically embody the very threshold my work seeks to explore: the ocean as a liminal site where grief, violence, and transcendence converge, and where the boundary between self and world dissolves into both annihilation and recognition.

Kant uses the ocean as a metaphor for metaphysics, saying that 'metaphysics is a dark shoreless ocean, marked by no beacons'[12]. He furthermore describes land to be the phenomenal world accessible to humans and the ocean as the uninhabited world. Nietzsche's seascapes in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* evoke the collapse of morality and reason. He uses the ocean as a powerful

[10] (Barnouw 1980)
[11] The very same ocean I have been drawing.
[12] (Kant 1992)

metaphor to describe the death of god, nihilism, resilience and the dangers of exploration. The sea becomes an emblem of a terrifying and infinite freedom which cannot be dominated[13]. In the loss of mastery, found only after being unarmoured by an abuse of power, nihilism could pose a possibility of meaning not arising from control but the acceptance of the contingency.

For Theodor Adorno, this surrender is not passivity but truth[14]. In *Aesthetic Theory* and *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer describe how Enlightenment reason, seeking to dominate nature, reverts into myth and violence[15]. Art, they argue, resists this instrumentalisation by preserving non-identity. Beauty becomes resistance, and form becomes critique. The ocean's boundlessness thus mirrors what Adorno called "truth-content", the fragment of reconciliation that remains within suffering[16].

Instrumental Reason and the Return of the Violent Sublime

Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of instrumental reason diagnoses the violence embedded in modern rationality, entangled with mythical cycles of violence. The Enlightenment, they argue, sought freedom through mastery over nature, but this mastery produced new forms of domination. Jürgen Habermas later explains that, in becoming instrumental, reason turns back into myth[17]. The ocean resists this logic: it cannot be measured, contained, or owned. In confronting it, one faces the limits of control and the recognition that the rational self cannot master the forces that shape it.

Walter Benjamin's *Critique of Violence* (1921) pushes this insight into the political realm. Benjamin distinguishes between mythic violence, which founds and preserves law, and divine violence, which destroys law without founding new domination[18]. Mythic violence is cyclical, redemptive only through control; divine violence is rupture, a 'pure means' without ends. The

[13] (Mickey 2025)
[14] Adorno understands "surrender" not as weakness or resignation but as a form of *critical awareness*. In *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), he argues that genuine art requires the artist to yield control, allowing truth to emerge through form rather than through intention or mastery. This kind of surrender resists the domination of instrumental reason; it reveals truth precisely because it refuses to force meaning or impose order upon experience.
[15] (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002)
[16] (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002)
Adorno's notion of *truth-content* (*Wahrheitsgehalt*) refers to the fragment of truth embedded within a work of art that resists total understanding. In *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), he proposes that authentic art carries within it a moment of reconciliation that persists even amidst suffering and contradiction. By mirroring this, the ocean's boundlessness becomes a metaphor for that residual truth: a space where pain and beauty coexist, and where the possibility of understanding arises precisely through what cannot be mastered or explained.
[17] (J. Habermas 1987, 108)
[18] (Benjamin, Critique of Violence 1996)

ocean, in a way, embodies a divine violence[19]. Its waves annihilate without reason, without morality, without intent. Yet within that annihilation, there is a strange redemptive purification: a clearing in which meaning might emerge anew. In trauma, one experiences the collapse of law; the undoing of order. The ocean, in mirroring that collapse, offers not comfort but recognition: it performs destruction without cruelty, chaos without moral calculus. Many scholars on violence suspend ethics in the hands of a distant authority. This does not necessarily apply to the ocean as its violence is not tied to personified violent intent.

The process of drawing the stormy ocean mirrors this. Each work begins with precision: the measured grid, the darkened horizon, yet ends in dissolution. Charcoal resists obedience; it stains the hand and erases the plan. In that resistance, the artwork enacts a form of divine undoing. It performs what Benjamin calls a rupture in the cycle of mythic justification, making visible the threshold between control and surrender[20].

Liminal Space and the Possibility of Justice

If Benjamin's divine violence opens a clearing, Jacques Derrida's *Force of Law* (1990)[21] lingers in that opening. Derrida argues that every foundation of law begins in a moment of violence, in what he calls the mystical foundation of authority[22]. Justice, unlike law, is *undeconstructible*, always to come (*à venir*). It is never fully present, because to be present would mean to become law, and thus violence again. The ocean enacts this same aporia. Each wave writes and erases simultaneously; each line of the horizon is deferred. Justice, like the sea, is an infinite movement; it cannot be possessed, only approached. In my work, this manifests through repetition: drawing after drawing, the same sea reappears, yet never the same. It is an aesthetic of différance[23]; meaning made visible through endless deferral.

[19] In Walter Benjamin's *Critique of Violence* (1921), *divine violence* refers to a moment of pure, non-instrumental rupture; an act that destroys unjust systems of law and power without creating new ones. It is not physical or vengeful violence, but a metaphysical interruption that reveals the possibility of justice beyond human authority.
[20] (Benjamin 1968)
[21] (Derrida 2002)
[22] (Derrida 2002, 242)
[23] Derrida's concept of *différance* describes how meaning is never fixed but constantly deferred and reshaped through difference

Derrida's thought also intersects with Benjamin's *angel of history*[24], who faces the wreckage of progress while being blown forward by a storm[25]. The artist stands before the ocean in the same position: looking at the debris of reason, unable to turn away, yet carried forward by the winds of necessity. For me, the ocean became both the wreckage and the storm. It is the site where trauma's violence meets the possibility of ethical renewal[26].

Towards Communicative Reason: The Ocean's Call

If the Enlightenment's instrumental reason is turned violent through domination, Habermas's theory of communicative action reclaims reason as dialogue through the intersubjective search for understanding rather than control. He defines communicative reason as the intersubjective coordination of action through reason-giving[27]. This concept resonates deeply with the way I conceive of my art practice.

The ocean drawings are not monologues; they are invitations. Viewers often respond viscerally through silence, breath, or emotion that precedes language. In those encounters, communicative reason reappears not as discourse but as shared vulnerability. It is the possibility of mutual recognition beyond the logic of trauma. Derrida's "justice to come" thus meets Habermas's "dialogue of understanding": both point to an ethics grounded in relation rather than mastery.

Violence, Longing, and Recognition

The brutality and softness of the ocean remain the most honest image of my inner life. It carries the storm and the stillness, the violence and the belonging. In front of it, I learned that loss does not have to end in absence, that the self can dissolve and still exist. Through trauma, I came to understand the storm of progress that leaves wreckage in its wake and what Derrida described as justice that never arrives but demands we continue.

In my work, each drawing is an act of mourning and of renewal. The charcoal that stains my fingers becomes the residue of survival. The sea's endless undoing enacts an ethics of

[24] Benjamin's "angel of history," from his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1940), symbolizes humanity's relationship to the past. The angel looks back upon history and sees not progress, but a single unfolding catastrophe (the accumulation of wreckage and suffering) while a storm, representing progress, propels him irresistibly into the future.
[25] (Ferris 2008)
[26] *ethical renewal*: a reawakening of empathy, responsibility, and relation to others.
[27] (Habermas, Brewster and Buchner 1979) (J. Habermas 1987)

openness: a willingness to stand before what cannot be controlled and to recognise oneself in it.

If Enlightenment reason sought mastery, the ocean teaches surrender. If trauma fractured the self, the oceanic feeling reveals that the self's dissolution can also be a form of belonging. To face the ocean is to confront the impossibility of closure, to accept, as Habermas and Derrida both suggest, that understanding is always incomplete, justice always deferred, and recognition always fragile. And yet, in that fragility lies our humanity.

Through the ocean's endless undoing, I find not peace but recognition of the fragile hope that in this violent world, we might still meet each other in the waves.

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