

Liberation of Language and Suspension of Subject in T.W. Adorno's *Notes to Literature*

Alžběta Dyčková

Department of German and French philosophy, Faculty of Humanities
Charles University in Prague
Pátková 2137/5, 182 00 Praha 8 – Libeň, Czech Republic
Email: betka.dyckova@gmail.com

Abstract:

This article aims to explore the connection between freedom and language in T.W. Adorno's *Notes to Literature*, presenting freedom as a liberation of our way of thinking that has the potential to arrive at an unrestrained interpretation of art and representation of the intellectual experience. I also attempt to show some of Adorno's insights into language and freedom in *The Essay as a Form* and their role in his essays about Valéry and Proust. Namely I focus on the problematics of the suspension of the subject of the artist within the production of the work of art. Through showing the connection between Adorno's insights into problematics of language, freedom and suspension of subject I hope to contribute to the explication of one of the constructive steps of Adorno's philosophy.

Keywords: Theodor W. Adorno, Jean Paul Valéry, Marcel Proust, freedom, language, subject of intellectual experience

Introduction

Language and freedom are matters that generally stand at the center of T.W. Adorno's philosophical attention. While the problematics of the second has been widely elaborated by both him and secondary literature, the first remains unclear. Adorno has never developed or presented a coherent theory of language and his remarks on this topic remain fragmentary. Nevertheless, it was a crucial topic for him. In his early short text *Thesis on the Language of Philosopher*, he even states that "all philosophical critique is possible nowadays as a critique of language." (Adorno, 2016, 38) Though it is disputable, whether he actually follows through with this statement and whether his whole work can be perceived purely as a critique of language. It might be better to adopt a more cautious approach and understand Adorno's work mainly as the critique of thinking that is inevitably bound to language. Philosophical thinking, according to him, necessarily has to operate with concepts. (Adorno, 2008, 192) What exactly is to be understood under "concepts" (*Begriffe*) and whether they fully overlap with terms, words, or categories Adorno does not tell, no matter that all of these concepts are frequently used by him (Müller, Gillespie, 2009, 93). He understands concept as a "function of thinking" or a "thought", a certain entity whose properties are partly bound to the characteristics of the subject matter it belongs to. (Adorno, 2004, 135, 136)

Adorno claims that the subject matter of thought cannot be fully evaporated into a concept, nevertheless at the same time, the concept carries something non-conceptual of the subject matter in itself. Philosophical language whose constitutive elements are concepts can therefore point beyond itself. Philosophizing is dependent on language despite not definitely being reducible to language in a strict sense. Simply put, we can understand language in Adorno's work as a mode of expression through concepts, whatever they exactly are. Our use of language informs the way we think and vice versa – therefore, when Adorno talks about ways of thinking, he primarily talks about a wide sense of textuality, in the meaning of every aspect that makes text a text, and representation within concepts. (Comp. Richter, 2010, 2) I will not attempt to reconstruct Adorno's philosophy of language and make this problem clear as it is a topic too dense to be captured within the few thousand words of this article; instead, I will take several insights that are directly linked to language and try to make sense of them within the scope of their selected use in Adorno's essays.

My aim in this article is not to provide an exhaustive reconstruction of the whole problematics of language and freedom within *Notes to Literature*.¹ I rather want to support the general claim of many Adornian scholars that Adorno's negative notions are in the end not solely negative but also constructive on one specific example. In order to do so, I will take a closer look at the constructive element of Adorno's notion of freedom in his approach to language and show how Adorno's expressions follow his own methodology in selected essays of *Notes to Literature*. I will employ some of the points about the nature of liberated language in *The Essay as Form* and connect them with insights from two other essays of Adorno's – namely the *Artist as Deputy* and *Short Commentaries on Proust*. The goal of this endeavor is to explore the potential of Adorno's own method, once he takes the constructive steps using the liberated language. I want to show what Adorno achieves by employing his method, and also inquire whether this employment of his method can retrospectively shed light on aspects of his attitude towards language.

In the first part of this article, I describe Adorno's approach to freedom and I do so only briefly as his conception of freedom, as I have mentioned in the beginning, has been already widely described both by himself and by secondary literature.² Simply put, Adorno makes sense of freedom negatively and understands the meaning of freedom as a liberation from ideological restraints that we internalize in the late-capitalist situation. Throughout the essays of *Notes to Literature*, this concept of freedom is mostly developed within the scope of Adorno's insights into language (or if you wish, the ways in which we can philosophize). Freedom is here approached mainly as a sort of a tendency of a philosopher to liberate himself of intellectual prejudices and fossilized ways of thinking that block alternative reflection on art and reality in general. I will connect Adorno's vision with four main points he makes about the philosophical language of the essay – namely the non-fixed nature of the meaning of a concept, the refusal of reduction of thoughts to principles, implications regarding the inability of language to capture the totality of reality and Adorno's idea of how to approach the complicity and multilayeredness of objects through the language. I will also try to link the thoughts about freedom and language to some of

Adorno's notions about the tasks of philosophy throughout his body of works beginning with the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and ending with *Aesthetic Theory* and intertwine the contents of these tasks as they answer the question for the motivations of Adorno's project.

In the second part, I will introduce the concept of suspension of a subject as it appeared throughout Adorno's essays *Artist as Deputy* and *Short Commentaries on Proust*. I will present it in order to provide an example of Adorno's implementation of his own method. My aim is to describe this phenomenon as it is mediated by Adorno through the interpretation of the short prosaic work of Paul Valéry *Degas Dance Painting* and the interpretation of short passages from Marcel Proust's *In Search for a Lost Time*.

From that, I will conclude that the way Adorno presents the idea of suspension of subject, which is loosely dispersed over the aforementioned essays and may not catch the reader's eye at first, is presented exactly in accordance with his idea of mediation of the important insights into art that the essay is supposed to accomplish. Adorno's insights derived from interpretation of Valéry and Proust can also help to retrospectively shed light on the role of subjectivity of the essayist. I will show that the essayist is truly free at the very moment when he neglects his subjective input and that this retrospectively helps to explain both the methodology presented in *The Essay as Form* and the link between individuality, subjectivity, freedom, and language. I will also claim that Adorno achieves insights into the process of creation of artwork (and essay) by means of following his own methodology and that he could not reach these insights without it. I will therefore suggest that it can serve as an example of one of the possible constructive outcomes of Adorno's idea of essayistic method par excellence.

1. Liberation of language

In the final notes in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Adorno and Horkheimer talk about philosophy as "not a synthesis, a basic science, or an overarching science but an effort to resist suggestion, a determination to protect intellectual and actual freedom" (Adorno, Horkheimer, 2002, 202), putting the problematics of freedom at the center of philosophy's attention. This effort of philosophy once practiced by Adorno takes a negative course as he considers it to be the only way in which to approach the concept of freedom, criticizing mostly Kant's way of thinking about the autonomy of reason in his third antinomy. Philosophy ought to forget thinking about freedom and unfreedom in absolute terms and grounding freedom in human nature. Statements such as "either there is a will or there is not; either the will is free, or it is not free" are the results of us being "trained to equate philosophical thinking with logical thinking." (Adorno, 2006, 190) What is needed then is a negative dialectical turn, a recognition that this sort of approach is not necessary. The will can never be absolutely free or unfree. Reason has to always struggle with its own heteronomy – or at least it has to do so after it realizes this heteronomy. Therefore "freedom itself and unfreedom are so entangled that unfreedom is not just an impediment to freedom but a premise of its concept." (Adorno, 2004, 285) Freedom and unfreedom cannot be thought of as

mutually exclusive opposites, especially after recognizing that both concepts lack any kind of firm ontological grounding. Adorno points out that “in ourselves, by introspection, we discover neither positive freedom nor a positive unfreedom. We conceive both in their relation to extramental things: freedom as a polemical counter-image to the suffering brought on by social coercion; unfreedom as that coercion’s image.” (Adorno, 2004, 223) Freedom therefore can and should be thought of solely in terms of the liberation of the individual from coercion imposed on him. The late-capitalist ideology, according to Adorno, mostly exhorts the individuals to pay all of their attention and direct all their energy into the management of their life within the institutionalized frames of society in which they live. Philosophy’s task is to try to help people to liberate themselves from the idea that this is the only right way of thinking, acting and living. Therefore Adorno can state that “philosophy’s freedom is nothing but the ability to help its unfreedom to express itself.” (Adorno, 2008, 190)

The problem of freedom is closely linked with and developed within Adorno’s insights on language in several aspects. First, Adorno points out that “we cannot formulate and define the concept of freedom once and for all, as philosophers have almost invariably done, so as to be able to confront the changing events of history with this immutable concept. The concept of freedom is itself the product of history and has altered with history.” (Adorno, 2006, 180) In Adorno’s view of language, this applies to all concepts. They are not “fixed *χωρίς*, in isolation from the object, but thrown in with them, abandoning the delusion that concepts that had been created for themselves also existed intrinsically in themselves.” (Adorno, 2008, 192) No concept has eternal fixed meaning, and in order to approach the problematics of freedom, it is crucial to recognize that this observation applies to its concept as well – the connotations of the concept of freedom as well as problems that people have to face when it comes to dealing with the notion of freedom change throughout the course of history. Adorno marks as the current problem of western society the one of liberation from ideological constraints. The everchanging nature of concepts is also the reason why essayistic writing refuses to define them, despite traditional philosophy’s insistence.

Second, freedom is not only to be understood solely as a tendency to liberate one’s spirit from the socially imposed coercion of late-capitalist ideology, but also as a tendency to liberate our use of concepts from established ways of thinking that block the alternative display of reality. In the *Notes to Literature* Adorno approaches the problem of freedom specifically along the question of how one is to strive for a mode of philosophizing that would not be constrained by unconscious intellectual prejudices caused by the traditional philosophy and ideological bias. When it comes concretely to the unfreedom of language, the concern of the philosopher is to recognize premises and rules of thinking that he might be taking for granted while there is no necessity to do so. After reflecting on them he is to get rid of them and exercise philosophical expression that is liberated from them. Liberation of language, therefore, as it was already mentioned, is closely linked to liberation of thoughts.

In terms of the language of the essay, there are three more important interconnected areas in which language has to liberate itself from the prevailing methodological tendencies of

philosophical expression – these three areas and the two previously mentioned points, constitute the central methodological features of liberated language of essay.

The essay does not reduce its observations to a principle. Adorno points out that “the specific moments are not to be simply derived from the whole, nor vice versa.” (Adorno, 1991, 14) The essayist is not supposed to look for rules and patterns of the objects of his essay. In other words, he should not attempt to paint a bigger picture and framework of things he writes about; instead, he should approach his object so closely “that the object becomes dissociated into the moments in which it has its life instead of being a mere object.” (Adorno, 1991, 14) Only then can some of the specific organic everchanging aspects of the object have a chance to get mediated within concepts.

The bigger picture can also not be sketched because language cannot claim the ability to capture the totality of reality. The essay does not identify the order of things with the order of ideas, in other words, it reflects that not everything in the world is thinkable and therefore directly expressible with concepts. On the contrary, what the essay strives to capture, is beyond words, and without understanding that, it can never even attempt to do it. Adorno locates this unsayable in the realm of what was considered “transient and ephemeral” since the times of Plato and challenges the traditional notion that it would not be worthy of philosophizing. (Adorno, 1991, 10) This realization then becomes one of the main aspects that philosophy has to bear in mind and integrate into its method – for instance within the already mentioned reflection of the non-fixed meaning of its concepts.

The last important aspect of philosophical writing Adorno strives for consists in denouncing the third cartesian rule of conducting the thoughts “in such an order that, by commencing with objects the simplest and easiest to know, I might ascend by little and little, and, as it were, step by step, to the knowledge of the more complex.” (Descartes, 1951, 15) The essay does not proceed from the simplest to the most complex. Adorno believes that in philosophical prose, language from its very beginning has to be as multi-layered as its object. The object is complex non-systematic and everchanging, so the thought that is trying to capture it has to accept the game and try to express the object by likening itself to it. The essay “thinks in fragments, just as reality is fragmentary, and finds its unity in and through the breaks and not by glossing over them.” (Adorno, 1991, 16) Adorno’s texts, therefore, accent the partial insights instead of total ones because totality cannot be expressed through language directly and systematically.

All of this necessarily results in a use of language that cannot be systematic, simple, and straightforward. Adorno’s prose is therefore not very reader-friendly. (Comp. Plass, 2007, 1-6) His texts are very often less organized than it might seem to be necessary, they are dense, and Adorno uses numerous foreign terms in them. Many insights that he has tend to emerge only briefly and instantly vanish again, just to appear again dozens of pages later in a different context, described in different words, without a thorough explanation. However, the non-organization and density of Adorno’s texts are way more necessary than they may seem. The possible insights and experiences of truth are dispersed and appear in fissures of reality and philosophical insights (at

least the kind of philosophical insights that Adorno follows) have to happen through the expression of what the essayist peered in fragmentary fissures and have to be also presented analogously to them. Adorno's style of expression nevertheless undergoes changes throughout his essays, depending on the work of art he is interpreting at the moment.

The relationship between language and freedom is mutually supportive – a liberated language enables unrestricted thinking about freedom; however, not only about it. Once all the artificial walls built up throughout the history of philosophy are torn down, the thinker becomes able to reach something of immense significance: he “makes himself into an arena of intellectual experience [*geistige Erfahrung*], without unravelling it.” (Adorno, 1991, 13) Intellectual experience presents the center of Adorno's philosophical attention, as he considers the philosopher's task as an effort to “transcend the concept through the concept itself, without yielding to the delusion that he already has possession of the matter to which the concept refers.” (Adorno, 2008, 188) Intellectual experience mediates the non-conceptual. Concepts can refer to intellectual experience, however, since its nature is non-conceptual, they can never express it directly. What philosophers should strive for is to “assemble concepts in such a way that their constellation might shed light on the non-conceptual.” (Adorno, 2008, 192) This additionally serves as an answer to the question of how to make oneself an “arena” of intellectual experience. The philosopher should, guided by this specific philosophical intuition, assemble the fragmentary material in the moment when he encounters its fragments in the cracks. Once he follows the previously listed methodological insights, he might have a chance to succeed.³

Adorno specifies this task of philosophy in his later *Aesthetic Theory*. There he states that “[...] art requires philosophy, which interprets it in order to say what it is unable to say, whereas art is only able to say it by not saying it” (Adorno, 2002, 72) and points out that interpretation of art is a possible way to accomplish the task of representation of the non-conceptual – the same non-conceptual carried within a concept that was mentioned in the introduction of this article and in the last paragraph. However, the task articulated in *Aesthetic Theory* can be adopted by philosophy only if it takes seriously the earlier one from the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* – true interpretation of art is possible only if it is merged with the struggle for liberation. These three mentioned tasks of philosophy, namely struggle for the liberation of the individual, mediation of the non-conceptual, and interpretation of art, therefore, fit together like pieces of a puzzle and function in a mutually reinforcing manner. Language has to be liberated in order to attempt to display the non-conceptual and this non-conceptual can be displayed by philosophical interpretation of art.⁴ Interpretation of art then becomes the subject of the essay. Adorno assumes all of these tasks of philosophy as his own in the *Notes to Literature* where he imposes them as the aim of the essayistic form and makes several attempts to realize them in practice.

2. Applications of unrestrained thinking in Adorno's essays: insights about suspension of the subject of the artist

Adorno's method separated from the rest of his *oeuvre* provokes to be rejected. *The Essay as*

Form in itself may not be truly persuasive because it is not, and it is also not meant to be, the best example of the essayistic form. It remains mainly a methodological text that does not prove itself through its own form, nor presents exhaustive scholarly arguments to support its thesis or any kind of fixed criteria to be followed. Nevertheless, the fact that Adorno renounces presenting arguments and criteria is not a scheme through which he would attempt to insure the irrefutability of his conception through its unprovability. Assessment of the worthiness of Adorno's insights into essayistic form simply requires inquiry into the works that directly follow Adorno's methodology; in other words, to recognize the potential of the essayistic method we have to turn our attention directly to Adorno's essays about art to see how the method proceeds in practice and how does it develop itself within them. The display of the application of the essayistic method, of course, still cannot and does not want to serve as an argument in a classical sense that would aim to prove the validity of Adorno's thesis; it rather attempts to show how (and that) the thoughts of *The Essay as Form* further develop and to inquire how may Adorno, in the end, create a constellation that would shed light on the non-conceptual.

I will try to show an example of the application of Adorno's essayistic conception in his reflection of two of the great authors he interprets in his essays, namely Paul Valéry and Marcel Proust. The choice might seem a bit surprising considering that Valéry regarded himself to be Proust's antithesis. However, Adorno highly valued both Proust's and Valéry's work and believed that something in their works can be brought to convergence. Both of their names emerge throughout his texts repeatedly and their thoughts and observations mix with Adorno's. In his essays about Proust and Valéry, Adorno tries to present the insights that he believes both of the authors had but could not present entirely directly. He shows these intentions through a multitude of their appearances while, faithful to the methodology of *The Essay as Form*, weaving his own thoughts, Proust's, and Valéry's together like threads of carpet. (Comp. Adorno, 1991, 13) In this fashion, he strives for a fragmentary revelation of their experiential content.

2.1. Valéry: putting the subject aside in order to mediate the true content of art

According to Adorno "great insights into art come about either in utter detachment, deduced from a concept undisturbed by so-called *connoisseurship*, as in Kant or Hegel, or in absolute proximity, the attitude of the person behind the scenes, who is not an audience but rather follows the work of art from the point of view of how it is made, of technique." (Adorno, 1991, 100) Valéry, as an excellent poet, who is known to have spent several hours every day writing down his reflections on art, is one of the best possible examples of the latter case. From Adorno's remarks, it becomes apparent that it is one of the main reasons why Valéry is regarded so highly by him. It is because Valéry's immediate closeness to the artistic production in combination with his highly developed reflective skills allows the explications of the finest aesthetic insights.

Valéry is trying "to carry out the spiritual process that is strictly immanent in the work of

art itself” (Adorno, 1991, 101) – this is, as it was mentioned, is a part of one of the main tasks of philosophy, and Adorno’s aim is to illustrate Valéry’s effort because Valéry still “does not philosophize about art but breaks through the blindness of the artefact in the windowless [...] activity of form-giving.” (Adorno, 1991, 100) Therefore the interpretation of his work and the representation of what we can glimpse in it is still a task of a philosopher. According to Adorno “it is the moment that is obscure in literary works, not what is thought in them, that necessitates recourse to philosophy.” (Adorno, 1992, 112) Philosophical interpretation is separated from art. The essay is not art, even though it may resemble it through the fact that it “works emphatically at the form of its presentation.” (Adorno, 1991, 18) This presentation, as it has to respect its object, may resemble this object, although it can never directly replicate it. Direct imitation of art by philosophy and any aspiration of philosophy to become a work of art is, in Adorno’s words, “doomed from the outset.” (Adorno, 2008, 188) Thoughts in the essay can and should weave themselves together with the experiential content of art, however, their possible resemblance does not imply their identity. The neglect of the subjectivity of the author of either essay or work of art indeed is one of the features that inform essayistic form as much as the artistic one and it is something that essayistic and artistic form share, although it does not render them as identical.

Valéry’s short prose *Degas Dance Drawing* which he wrote as a tribute after the death of his good friend, is a remarkable short text that seems to present loose associations of Valéry’s thoughts about Degas and the meaning of his work. While interpreting this text, Adorno abstains from sharing his own thoughts on Degas’ work and focuses solely on Valéry’s insights. Valéry generally weaves his thoughts around Degas in the spirit of respect for his technical abilities and life driven by the necessity of training his artistic craftsmanship. Great works of art require, according to both Adorno and Valéry, all artistic faculties constantly trained and developed. No great work of art happens without years of training in artistic craftsmanship. This dedication of an artist to his own work goes so far that the subject of the artist has to be, in a way, put aside. His feelings and personality are not the subject matter of his art – great art is not at all meant to be an expression of the self of the artist. According to Adorno, Valéry “knows better than anyone that it is only the least part of his work that, belongs’ to the artist; that in actuality the process of artistic production, and with it, the unfolding of the truth contained in the work of art, has the strict form of lawfulness wrested from the subject matter itself.” (Adorno, 1991, 104; comp. Adorno, 1992, 110) If something universal is to be revealed in the work of art, the work of art has to stand for far more than an expression of artist’s individual feelings. Adorno points out that what Valéry “demands of the artist, technical self-restriction, subjection to the subject matter, is aimed not at limitation but at expansion. The artist who is the bearer of the work of art is not individual who produces it; rather, through his work [...] he becomes the representative of the total social subject.” (Adorno, 1991, 107)

This thought goes beyond the idea of an artist as a servant to society. Adorno, interpreting Valéry, says that “by submitting to the requirements of the work of art, [artist] eliminates from it everything that could be due simply to the contingency of his individuation.” (Adorno, 1991, 107)

According to Adorno, it is derived rather from Valéry's reflection on the process of creation of the work of art and the experience of unfolding the meaning that can be revealed in the course of the creation of the work of art itself and which transcends the artist himself. If something more than the artist himself is supposed to appear in his work of art, the artist has to renounce his own self to his work.

2.2. Proust: the discovery of irrational universality through the loss of one's own critical distance

The insights grown from the interpretation of Valéry reappear in Adorno's reflections on Proust that were published five years later. However, the problematics of loss of subject is approached here in a completely different manner, namely in the form of defense of Proust's snobbism in Adorno's *Short Commentaries on Proust*. The absence of direct critical distance throughout Proust's representation of French aristocracy at the turn of the century is reflected by Adorno as one of Proust's major strengths. According to Adorno "only someone who has succumbed to social relationships in his own way instead of denying them with the resentment of one who has been excluded can reflect them back". (Adorno, 1991, 180) Proust, therefore, manages to become "a critic of society, against his will and hence all the more authentically." (Adorno, 1991, 176) This factor in combination with Proust's dense texture allows him to bring forth the experience of something general in reality as though some reference to it "had been interspersed throughout existence, chaotic, mocking, haunting in its dissociated fragments." (Adorno, 1991, 181) Thanks to his immediate closeness to what he depicts, Proust's work gets far beyond the point of individuation and becomes capable to depict something that Adorno marks as irrational universality. According to him, Proust manages to arrive at a representation of something that no scientific method could ever capture. He manages to portray "a life bereft of meaning, a life the subject can no longer shape into a cosmos." (Adorno, 1991, 181) The meaninglessness of life that Proust lives and depicts carries within itself a necessity of contingency – a necessity of absence of meaning that from its nature eludes all coherent systematic representation. For Adorno, it is Proust's mastery of presentation that captures this important element of reality and proves its relevance at the same time. Proust's subjective force is so powerful that it turns his subjective insights of something that is uncapturable for science into objectivity. In other words, Proust, whom Adorno does not hesitate to label a narcissistic reactionary, has to lose himself in the society that he depicts, in order to capture it as his object. For that, he also needs to capture it with a supreme mastery that no one after him can successfully replicate. The combination of these two elements is then what makes the *Recherche* a masterpiece.

The way Adorno interprets Proust and even Proust's language alone corresponds with Adorno's insights into the liberated language of an essay in one crucial aspect. To explicate this point, the form of short commentaries instead of a general interpretation of Proust's *Recherche* is needed. Adorno defends this form in the introduction of his essay on Proust, claiming that only in this way he can "hope through immersion in fragments to illuminate something of the work's

substance, which derives its unforgettable quality solely from the colouring of the here and now.” (Adorno, 1991, 175) Both Adorno’s and Proust’s insights and observations emerge and vanish in multiple places, drawing themselves near to the way it occurs in Proust’s novel itself where the “the whole, resistant to abstract outlines, crystallizes out of intertwined individual presentations.” (Adorno, 1991, 174) Adorno thus tries to recreate the multi-layered nature of Proust’s work in order to mediate the experience indirectly presented in it. When he writes about Proust though, he does not completely abandon his own style in order to try to resemble the Proustian language. Remaining faithful to his own method in this manner while approaching Proust’s work might be the path to create a constellation of concepts in order to represent the non-conceptual experiential content hidden beyond his words. Through that the form of short commentaries also serves to accentuate the partial at the expense of the total - Adorno explicitly renounces the creation of a grand survey because he wants to show the same experience emerging throughout Proust’s oeuvre in a multitude of different contexts. After all, the *Short Commentaries on Proust*, published in 1958, were being written around the same time as *The Essay as a Form*, which was being written between the years 1954-1958. It is reasonable to believe that reading Proust and his way of mediating the experience of irrational universality found in the middle of decaying French aristocracy inspired Adorno’s method – it can also serve as an excellent example of weaving the thoughts of the interpreted work of art with essayist’s.

Proust’s extreme expression of subjectivity may seem to stand in an opposition to Valéry’s depiction of loss of subject – maybe it is also among the reasons why Valéry considered himself to be Proust’s antithesis. However, Adorno sees Valéry and Proust arriving at the same point, just from different – and not entirely opposite – directions. Proust has to get lost in the society he depicts in order to reach and mediate the irrational truth hidden in it and he manages to arrive at the mediation of the universal experience on the basis of his exceptional craftsmanship. Yet, he loses himself in his subject matter; and he does it in a way that is not at all similar to Degas’ or Valéry’s approaches because instead of leaving his subjectivity aside, he drowns it in what he depicts. Adorno observes that the specific ways how the loss of a subject may occur can show themselves in different facets; we may assume that due to their possible unrepeatability, the forms of the loss of the subject even have to differ and they can then take the shape of emerging fragments of the truth of art spread throughout a multitude of oeuvres. This truth does not claim eternal validity, and it is subject to possible transformations within a changing historical context. All this is to be captured by the unrestrained language of the essay.

Conclusion

In the famous last paragraph of *Minima Moralia* Adorno says that responsible philosophical perspectives have to be gained “entirely from felt contact with their objects.” (Adorno, 2005, 146) Proust and Valéry both succeed in it, nevertheless, they set off from different starting points. While Proust gains the perspectives from being an integral part of the very society that he depicts

and that he adores, Valéry understands art through being an artist himself. Valéry reflects the creation of work of art from immediate closeness and therefore can experience and later mediate the necessity of loss of the subject of the artist; however, he does not lose himself in the same way as Adorno describes Proust's loss of his own self. Adorno sets himself the task of creating a space in which they can meet, and he manages to reinforce his point by connecting Proust's representations with Valéry's seemingly opposite insights into the nature of the relationship between the artist and work of art, convinced that their insights, abrupt and irrefutable, were driven by the same kind of pain. (Comp. Adorno, 1991, 144) This attempt by Adorno leads to a mutual reinforcement of his, Valéry's, and Proust's ideas and arrives at a depiction of several aspects of authentic artistic creation.

The loss of the artist's subject reflects itself in the demand Adorno places on the language of the essay and it can also help to decipher the role of the essayist's subjectivity, which is rather loosely hinted at than fully explicated in *The Essay as Form*. Once the work of art is a medium of the non-conceptual and the essay interprets it to make this non-conceptual present, it follows that also the essayist has to give up expressing his pure subjectivity in order to make himself an arena of intellectual experience. The essayist uses "concepts to pry open the aspect of its objects that cannot be accommodated by concepts, the aspect that reveals, through the contradictions in which concepts become entangled, that the net of their objectivity is merely subjective arrangement." (Adorno, 1991, 23) In order to do this, it follows that the "subjective arrangement" of the essayist has to be put aside. The thinker should become the means of the presentation of the experiential content. For that, his own subjectivity has to take a step back. The mediated content transcends the thinker as much as it transcends the artist who created its representation. The task of the essayist is to recognize the unsayable that is encapsulated in the work of art and represent it through the constellation of his concepts. The interpretation of art therefore again should not have much in common with the philosopher's subjective motives.

From that again follows more general question of the difference between art and essay and whether there indeed is a strict difference between them. But again, the essay is not an art form; it is Adorno's proposal of a new philosophical form, free from the binding laws of traditional philosophy that have been inspired by science. Essay is also "distinguished from art by its medium, concepts, and by its claim to a truth devoid of aesthetic semblance". (Adorno, 1991, 5) Adorno points out that the similarity between essay and art rises mostly from the fact that essay "can hardly speak of aesthetic matters unaesthetically, devoid of resemblance to the subject matter, without falling into philistinism and losing touch with the object a priori." (Adorno, 1991, 5) Essay, unlike traditional philosophy, therefore, takes partial inspiration from art as its methodology and art as its subject require it. Through that, it can show the full potential of artistic expression neglected by science. The scientific method cannot display the non-conceptual, while art can, however, not completely conceptually, and philosophical essay shall attempt to do so through concepts without being a kind of poetic construction of thoughts; instead, essay is to

become a proper interpretation of art revealing its non-conceptual content. (Comp. Adorno, 2004, 109) That nevertheless does not specify much clearer the difference between the language of art and language of essay. Language of art is expressive, while language of philosophical essay is conceptual, nevertheless the philosophical language cannot not resemble the expressive language of art – after all, no language can also probably completely avoid being expressive. In the end, concepts have to be expressive, once their constellation is to result into presentation (*Darstellung*) of the non-conceptual. The difference between essay and art thus lies in Adorno's unspecified term of concept, mentioned in the introduction of this article and the difference between language of art and language of essay remains not fully specified, yet existing.

The neglect of the subject is linked with freedom in the sense that the neglect of the subject of the essayist is a part of his liberation of language that enables the display of the non-conceptual. That might seem like a surprising conclusion since neglect of one's subjectivity does not probably intuitively correspond with the exercising of freedom. It should be also considered that the individuality is of utter importance for Adorno, not only because of his opposition to Nazi and Stalinist ideologies that lead to oppression of the individual but also because he believes that Kant's idea of pure reason does not do justice to the individual; the universality of pure reason according to Adorno, in the end, implies substitutability of the subject. In contrast, for Adorno, as Susan Buck-Morss formulates it, the subject of the intellectual experience is "the empirically existing, material and transitory human being – not merely mind but a sentient human body." (Buck-Morss, 1977, 83) It may therefore seem strange that Adorno, on the one hand, demands the negation of the subjectivity of the essayist and, on the other, campaigns for the importance and uniqueness of the individual. However, for Adorno, there is no direct proportion between the loss of subjectivity within essayistic expression and the threat to individuality, rather the opposite. The role of subjectivity, as we have seen in a different way in the case of Proust, is hardly that simple and straightforward. Freedom includes the capacity of neglecting one's own subjective bias – and only someone who is truly free and an independent individual can manage this.

While Adorno tries to recover the intellectual experience in the described way, he follows his own maxims. He accents the partial to the total, refrains from presenting overarching principles of his insights, does not have a claim on capturing the totality, and, as I have tried to show throughout the article, he weaves his thoughts with the thoughts of the art he talks about on multiple levels. Adorno strives to shed light on the unsayable – in this context from the perspective of its revelation within the process of creation of the work of art - and to create a texture that shows several fragmental insights into a phenomenon that eludes concepts; both by hinting to its existence through Valéry's insights and by praising the way of how Proust unfolds it in the artistic form of his *Recherche*.

At the same time, Adorno reflects that what he is trying to describe is everchanging, nevertheless, he points out that it is capturable within great works of art in some of its moments and tries to bring our attention to these moments. As a result of the essayistic method and nature

of what is depicted by it, the essay cannot even claim to do more than provide these individual insights such as the one displayed in this article. In general, it is important to understand that Adorno's insights also never claim to be final and absolute. His truths are not eternal because no such thing as eternal truth can be approached by philosophy. Philosophy as Adorno suggests shall approach the everchanging. Through that, Adorno's thinking also can manage to avoid the danger of becoming another ideology and fossilized way of thinking. Adorno's thinking cannot present this irrational universality at the scarcely accessible layer of reality coherently nor can his insights have eternal validity. Instead, Adorno presents a method of how to spot accidental moments of the non-conceptual. Beyond that, however, he provides us with an idea of its existence as something beyond any possible coherent thought construction and invites us to take a peek at some of its moments.

An essay cannot approach that which escapes systematic thinking if it strictly follows the rules of systematic thinking. The truth is to be found in one of the biggest weaknesses of Adorno's way of thinking, namely in its "mobility" and "lack of solidity." (Adorno, 1991, 20) This mobility and lack of solidity of the essayistic form shall enable it to arrive at a piece of knowledge that remains inaccessible to the traditional philosophical method. Insights into what eludes systematicity and coherence are simply possible only at the edge where the coherence of the language falls apart. The necessity of liberation of fossilized traditional ways of thinking that try to hold the language systematically together is therefore rather implicit than explicit, however, it remains a necessary prerequisite that enables the constructive step of Adorno's philosophy.⁵

Endnotes:

1. For a general hermeneutic interpretation of *Notes to Literature* see Norbert Bolz, *Geschichtsphilosophie des Ästhetischen: hermeneutische Rekonstruktion der "Noten zur Literatur" Th. W. Adornos*. 1976.
2. See e.g. O'Connor, Brian. "Freedom within nature: Adorno on the idea of reason's autonomy". Boyle, Nicholas and Liz Disley. *The Impact of Idealism: The Legacy of Post-Kantian German Thought. Volume 1: Philosophy and Natural Sciences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013: 208-231. Or Jütten, Timo. "Adorno on Kant, Freedom and Determinism". *European Journal of Philosophy* 20, no. 4 (December 2012): 548-74.
3. For details of the problematics of intellectual experience and the non-conceptual, see Foster, Roger. *Adorno: Recovery of Experience*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2007.
4. This list of the tasks of philosophy is only partial - Adorno imposes also other tasks on philosophy and suggests other ways to represent the non-conceptual as well (e.g. thorough critique of traditional philosophy). Nevertheless, I believe that these three tasks mentioned above are central for Adorno's essayistic work, and therefore it is good to keep especially these in mind when interpreting *Notes to Literature*.
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