

Adorno's Critique of Aesthetic Intentionalism & its Limits

**Critical Review of *Notes to Literature: Combined Edition* by Theodor W. Adorno
Ed. Rolf Tiedemann, Trans. Sherry Weber Nicholson
Columbia University Press, 2019**

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Appears in *Phenomenological Reviews*, February 2021

A prominent yet understudied feature that permeates Adorno's aesthetics is a critique of intentionalism. In this review essay, I will look at this critique and one manifestation of it, as it appears in his *Notes to Literature*.

Previously published in two volumes, Columbia University Press have combined Adorno's *Notes to Literature* in a single work for the first time, translated into English. The scope of topics Adorno treats is broad, and reading is often difficult but frequently rewarding. Topics span from epic poetry, to Dickens, the free use of punctuation and its ramifications, reviews of individual texts, to more general methodologically loaded tracts on the status of art or particular aesthetic traditions. This is not exhaustive by any measure. As such, a sufficient characterization of this wealth of topics treated by Adorno in the short space available to review would be exceedingly challenging, likely impossible. Instead, I will restrict the focus of this critical review to a common feature across many of Adorno's treatments of these topics: his rejection of intentionalism in aesthetics, in this instance, authorial intentionalism in literary works. This rejection appears to some degree in many if not all of the essays within the two volumes. It also looms large in Adorno's aesthetic theory more broadly. However, it is usefully illustrated by means of a particular formally derived critique Adorno offers, about subject-driven exposition of

narrative as an authentic and autonomous force in literary works. I will also argue that *Notes to Literature* aides in demonstrating an internal limit to Adorno's anti-intentionalism, as it appears in such works. This internal limit offers a qualified role for the creator of autonomous works, and some insight into the machinations of this role – these will be discussed below.

Intentionalism is the presupposition many would-be aestheticians bring to artworks. The presupposition is that the pure intention of the creator (the composer, artist, or author) is what bestows aesthetic value to such works. *Notes to Literature* features many instances of a prominent critique of this position, as applied to literary works. Adorno views subject-derived expositions of narratives, particularly streams of consciousness as a narrative device, as one example of formal expressions of authorial intentionalism in literature. Its widespread employment demonstrates the primacy of this intentionalism. Viewing it as an authentically expository force involves a kind of presupposition to aesthetic methodology, and to any discernment of the value to be gleaned from works. This presupposition, Adorno claims, places the individual author in a position of epistemic priority. This position is an erroneous one, as it encourages the proffering and evaluating of works without exploring the social totalities which constitute the conditions for any such individual's presentation of aesthetic knowledge. The role of the creator for Adorno is inherently mediated within the context of such totalities.

Intentionalism and its formal manifestation in subjective narrative shirks this exploration, to the detriment of the autonomous potential that literary works might possess.

One particular target of Adorno's is a manifestation of intentionalism in a particular conception of the genius. This conception gained predominance as a particular oppositional reaction to Kantian aesthetics. Kant describes the genius as "nature giving the rule to art", contrasting it with the notion of the single creator doing so, from some epistemically authoritative vantage point.

The conception that opposes Kant broadly states that as the wellspring from which aesthetic value flows, the intention of the genius offers a model of salvation, relayed through their work. The figure of the genius, so it broadly goes, is the one who oversees the total expression of their authorial or creative intention in the work, and this successful expression of that intention is the vehicle of aesthetic value for works of art, music and literature equally. On this model, appreciation of works then occurs with reference to this value. Adorno rails against this model. While Adorno ultimately agrees with Valéry's claim that great art "demands the employment of all of a man's faculties" ('The Artist as Deputy', p. 115), this is not the claim that this employment manifests the expression of the conscious intentions of the creator of that art.

Underpinning this presupposition is the wrong-headedness as Adorno sees it of aesthetic intention operating as if immediate value of a work can be transmitted, its message there to be received by an audience who can grasp it if they accept it. Here Adorno opposes an assumption shared by both Kant and those reacting to him, since they converge on the notion that this transmission can take place between agents – in Kant's case certainly, rational ones. But operating with this kind of presupposition, Adorno thinks, is to be oblivious to the inherent alienation as "a fact that irrevocably governs an exchange society". To illustrate this, in an approach characteristic of Adorno, he employs Hegelian motifs as a means of undermining of Hegelianism itself - Adorno targets 'objective Spirit' as represented in art. For Hegel, the truths purveyed through art (as well as religion and most importantly philosophy) claim to offer representational knowledge into the development of *Geist*, eventually culminating in the ironing out of all contradictions of reality. Built into this understanding, Adorno claims, of the Hegelian motive for art is that it "wants [...] to speak to human beings directly, as though the immediate

could be realized in a world of universal mediation” (‘The Artist as Deputy’, p. 116). But this claim in itself about the representational power of art, says Adorno, is a kind of utilitarian degradation of the aesthetic. In literature specifically, this degradation makes ‘word and form’ into a “mere means” - a manner of utilizing the formal presentation of the work for expressing what the creator takes to be a truth or value relayed through art.

Structurally, Adorno here shares with Hegel the basic claim that art can illustrate certain kinds of truths. But he diverts from Hegel in a qualified way, in how he sees the promise for the role of autonomous art. Hegel conceived of putting art to use in the task of Geist’s *reconciliation* by means of what the work represents. By contrast, Adorno conceived of autonomous art’s power to at best be able to illustrate the current impossibility of reconciliation, due to the inability of the work to coherently represent reality, in the manner Hegel claims it can. It should be noted that it appears Adorno sees it possible for certain kinds of non-representational knowledge to be gained from successful works of art. Autonomous art can bestow negative knowledge of reality (‘Extorted Reconciliation: On Georg Lukács’ *Realism in our Time*, p. 223). This would initially seem to clash with the claim that this is itself a form of knowledge. But rather than this constituting representational knowledge, Adorno is in some way offering the potential for a kind of aesthetic exposure to an intuition that demonstrates the impossibility of representational knowledge. This is arguably one route to the ‘loss’ that Adorno counts as the second-order objectivity facilitated by autonomous artworks. More on this below. But in the context of the Hegelian assumption, Adorno thinks that this has ramifications for critical engagement. The Hegelian optimism for the revolutionary potential of art in fact pulls the rug out from underneath the work, by undermining its formal and practical autonomy, and its applications.

In this vein, Adorno critiques subjective exposition of narrative, as a manifestation of the intentionalist's presumption about aesthetic value. This critique tracks formal characteristics intrinsic to presentations of works themselves. It is a claim about the inherent formal critical power or lack thereof that motivates his critique of literary subject-centrism, and the idea of subjectivist narrative as having expository primacy in its formal mode of presentation. It is not just that this is open to criticism as a bourgeois mode of attempted presentation, of the kind indicated above about the power of the author's intentions. Rather, this more formal critique is aimed at narrative of this kind also for its reduction of the reader or spectator to being merely receptive to such a subjective flow of consciousness. Adorno claims that the proponent of formal narrative subject-centrism identifies "nodal points of conditioned reflexes" of the would-be passive human being, qua "mere receptive apparatuses" ('The Artist as Deputy', p. 119). The work's recipient responds to intake from their sensibility by the truth-bestowing flow of an intentional consciousness in the work. The presupposition here is that exposition is granted authentic force as a mode of formal description by the author. As such it is employed as a way of receiving and interpreting a work by an audience. This is problematized due to its assumption that the audience has been given the necessary sensibility for the narrative, on a kind of presuppositionless set menu of aesthetic evaluation. The presumption here is that the audience receives a formal presentation of the sensory scheme or stream of consciousness of the 'genius at work', to which they should passively engage. The audience is a conduit to be filled up with aesthetic truths.

But this presumption exposes another facet to Adorno's critique, centered around the assumption that any subject creating aesthetic works can provide such a coherent formal exposition, by virtue of their professed narrative. The work of Proust, perhaps ironically, is valorized by Adorno for upsetting a presumption in the "prevailing consciousness" about the notion of the unity and pre-given wholeness of the person. This presumption is characterized as a false idol by Adorno ('Short Commentaries on Proust', p. 181), which Proust's works act as an 'antidote' to. A philosophical presupposition of this view concerns the power of subjective narrative. The audience doesn't receive this subject and its narrative in some necessary and uniform fashion. Nor is the self-representation of either one of the subjects involved, author or reader, of an immediate cognitively accessible character. Rather, Adorno claims that such narrative is the product and cause of further alienation. Only in genuinely autonomous works can there be an intimation of this alienation by a display of the "social relationships [that] reveal themselves to be a blind second nature" ('Short Commentaries', p. 183). Again utilizing while subverting a familiar Hegelian motif, this of second nature, social relationships limit the remit of pure thought, not in a manner that adapts pure thought to nature, but shows its perversion at the hands of the productive forces at work in it.

In this respect, something Adorno claims favorably about Paul Valéry is his capacity to buck the trend of centralizing "the triumph of subjective over objective reason" ('Valéry's Deviations', p. 161). Though Adorno takes this to be a product of the enlightenment, it is evident from his discussions of many post-enlightenment figures that he views them as capitulating to this trend, too. For example, Adorno writes that for Sartre, "the work of art becomes an appeal to the subject because the work is nothing but the subject's decision or non-decision" ('Commitment',

p. 349). This centrality has ramifications both theoretical and practical. As a result of it, “Sartre’s approach prevents him from recognizing the hell he is rebelling against”, namely the objective self-alienation that latently motivates him to make the proclamation that hell is, in fact, other people (‘Commitment’, p. 353). Indeed, Adorno’s infamous statement about the barbarism of writing poetry after Auschwitz is reaffirmed, in the context of this continued primacy of the subjective. He claims it “expresses, negatively, the impulse that animates committed literature” (‘Commitment’, p. 358). This criticism applies also to Heidegger. A ‘decision’ is demanded by Hölderlin, for Heidegger, in Adorno’s devastating excursus of Heidegger (‘Parataxis: On Hölderlin’s Late Poetry’, p. 380). Claiming this, not only does Heidegger rob and ‘deaestheticize’ Hölderlin of his “poetic substance”, it also eliminates Hölderlin’s “genuine relationship to reality, critical and utopian” (‘Parataxis’, p. 381). This is done on the grounds of the notion of subjective decision being prioritized by Heidegger, erroneously recapitulating to “the idealism which is taboo for Heidegger [but] to which he secretly belongs” (‘Parataxis’, p. 385).

Motivating this critique in all of these forms is Adorno’s broader claim that “the social totality is objectively prior to the individual” (‘Extorted Reconciliation’, p. 224). The presupposition that successful, genuinely autonomous works still somehow belong to the author misses this point. Rather, a work’s success consists “in its becoming detached from [the author], in something *objective being realized in and through him, in his disappearing into it*”. (‘Toward a Portrait of Thomas Mann’, p. 295, my emphasis). Autonomy is not bestowed upon a work due to any relation with some condition of genius possessed by the author.

Yet in pursuit of this thought, Adorno makes an intimation about what positive role the artist qua producer of works of art can have, should a work be successful in the possession and conveyance of truth content. In an ironic twist, he inverts the idea that the work is the instrument of communication for the intentions of the creator. Instead, this possession and conveyance involves the artist becoming an instrument, through which aesthetic form assumes a life of its own. It is this mode of production which ensures the artist does not “succumb to the curse of anachronism in a reified world” (‘The Artist as Deputy’, p. 117). Adorno assumes his own idiosyncratic kind of interpretivist stance towards the possibility of aesthetic autonomy. Discussing the ways in which artistic creation is subject to reification, and on the point of to whom the truth-qualities of an art work ‘belongs’, Adorno endorses Valéry’s attack on “the widespread conception of the work of art that ascribes it, on the model of private property, to the one who produces it” (‘The Artist as Deputy’, p. 118).

So Adorno postulates a kind of aesthetic virtue gained by means of a degree of liberation from the folly of intentionalism, including its formal presuppositions about subjective exposition. This liberation, Adorno notes, is a kind of recognition, namely a recognition on the part of the artist, such as Valéry’s bourgeois art *as bourgeois*, and that this recognition precludes it from conscious or intentional escape from that framework. In this sense, Adorno sees in Valéry (and also, for example, Thomas Mann) a critical platform through formal literary presentation in this “self-consciousness of [its] own bourgeois nature”. The premium is placed on a certain kind of self-knowledge, attained by a capacity for critical distance. This self-consciousness doesn’t determine the truth content of an artwork itself. Rather it constitutes a recognition by the artist that self-consciousness precisely *doesn’t* determine such truth content. Indeed, in an example of Adorno’s

often ironic and flirtatiously paradoxical prose, this self-consciousness comes by the aesthetic judgement

“tak[ing] itself seriously as the reality that it is not. The closed character of the work of art, the necessity of its giving itself its own stamp, is to heal it of the contingency which renders it unequal to the force and weight of what is real”

(‘The Artist as Deputy’, p. 118).

With some nuance, Adorno criticizes the aims of recent art, at a “retreat of productive forces [as] a surrender to sensory receptivity” - in other words, it recapitulates to viewing subjective and specifically sensorially derived authorial creativity as the primary means of producing truth. This in fact diminishes the capacity for abstraction, or for the construction of artworks as possessing a genuinely autonomous character.

This makes Adorno’s claims about Valéry and Proust somewhat ironic, but arguably productively or virtuously so. Despite Valéry’s own processual and solipsistic mode of presentation, it is so by virtue of his “advocacy of the dialectic” qua the recognition that the only freedom possible is freedom in relation to the object (‘Valéry’s Deviations’, p. 150). This in a roundabout fashion actually serves to undermine the idea that the subjective stream of consciousness is an authentic expository force for narrative truth.

Adorno writes that Valéry’s philosophical affinity to this advocacy “erodes from below [...] the illusion of immediacy as an assured first principle” (‘Valéry’s Deviations’, p. 150). Indeed,

intentionalists presuppose some primary or immediate access to the author or creator's epistemic faculties via the formal presentation of the subjective narrative. But attempts at cleanly cutting through the social conditions which engendered the work are inhibitions to aesthetic truth, for Adorno. There is a broadly ethical dimension to Adorno's rejection of this presupposition, too: "[t]he objectification of works of art, as immanently structured monads, becomes possible only through subjectification" ('Presuppositions: On the Occasion of a Reading by Hans G. Helms', p. 368).

Adorno offers the potential for a positive way out. He describes an emancipation made possible through aesthetic endeavour, when works are forced to try and re-establish a kind of objectivity which is lost

“when it stops at a subjective reaction to something pregiven, whatever form it takes. The more the work of art divests itself critically of all the determinants not immanent in its own form, the more it approaches a *second-order objectivity*”
(‘Valéry’s Deviations’, p. 152, my italics).

Developing dialectically out of its own deficiencies, this particular route to disillusionment constitutes a second-order objectivity – a kind of knowledge of one's disillusionment, through aesthetic form. This is an objectivity which, depending on how one interprets Adorno, facilitates the possibility for reconciliation, or at least the knowledge that reconciliation is presently beyond our ken or grasp ('Valéry's Deviations', p. 154). This has already been discussed by Adorno in the context of a certain kind of self-consciousness. But Adorno also discusses a kind of forbidden

mode of consciousness, which, if we had access to it, would allow us access through art and literature to a genuinely different and non-reified mode of approaching our genuine needs ('The Handle, the Pot, and Early Experience: *Ui, haww' ich gesacht*', p. 473). One might interpret this forbidden mode of consciousness as something necessarily inaccessible, like Kant's intellectual intuition. Or one might interpret it as something contingently improbable, an obfuscated mode of consciousness which might come to be available to us under certain productive conditions. Regarding this difference of interpretation, I remain non-committal about, for the purposes here. But this second-order objectivity partly constitutes an acknowledgment of some kind, of this mode.

What might this second-order objectivity amount to, in the context of the work? Herein I argue lies an important internal limit to Adorno's anti-intentionalism. The loss of the subject as an authentic expository force can lead to a realization that objectivity by this means constitutes a "loss", Adorno claims ('Valéry's Deviations', p. 152). Adorno then claims that the subject's pursuit of this "critical path is truly the only one open. It can hope for no other objectivity" (Ibid.). The ramifications for this in aesthetics is that the construction of works "no longer conceives itself as an achievement of spontaneous subjectivity, without which, of course, it would scarcely be conceivable, but rather wants to be derived from a material that is in every case already mediated by the subject" ('Presuppositions', p. 371). This is not mediation by the purely spontaneous, *causa sui* subject, à la the presupposition of the intentionalist. Rather, the creator of the genuinely autonomous and truth-contentful work of art must be in some respect a "*representative of the total social subject*" ('The Artist as Deputy', p. 120, my italics).

It is only by virtue of recognizing this representative nature of works as something interpreted by the social and cultural conditions it is subject to, that art can “fulfill [itself] in the true life of human beings” (Ibid.). Adorno’s conception of the artist involves acting as a “midwife” to the objectivity inherent in the autonomous artwork - which is delineated “in advance by the form of the problem and not by the author’s intention (‘Valéry’s Deviations’, p. 168)”. Indeed, in line with Adorno’s authorial anti-intentionalism, the problem of delineating a work’s autonomous value is framed by its historical contingency, determined by the conditions of possibility that the forces of social production allow for the work to *rupture through*. It is autonomous works which can attain this expository status in relation to these forces. Put succinctly in his essay critical of Sartre and the idea of committed literature, “art, which is a moment in society even in opposing it, must close its eyes and ears to society”, while holding out the presence of “an ‘it shall be different’”, which Adorno claims “is hidden in even the most sublimated works of art” (‘Commitment’, p. 362).

Important to note here is that the success of the work in its autonomy is to some extent accidental, if viewed from a purely intentionalist perspective. Formal technique can only contribute to the intention of “what is presented”, as opposed to what the author purely intended. Its conditions of success are determined by the ability to recognize its autonomy within the context of objective social reality (‘Extorted Reconciliation’, p. 224). This includes a rupturous expression of what is concealed from reality by reifying processes, or as Adorno describes these processes, the purely “empirical form reality takes” (‘Extorted Reconciliation’, p. 225).

A paradox arises at the heart of Adorno's position about this criterion for success. It is *chance* that "proclaims the impotence of a subject that has become too negligible to be authorized to speak *directly* about itself in a work of art" ('Valéry's Deviations', p. 156, my italics). Yet at the same time as this claim about the possibility created by chance, it is this subjectivity, as

"alienated from itself, against the ascendancy in the objective work of art, whose objectivity can never be an objectivity in itself but must be mediated through the subject despite the fact that it can no longer tolerate any immediate intervention by the subject".

('Valéry's Deviations', p. 156)

This is a convoluted qualification by Adorno, merciless in its demands on the reader. In a reductive sense, the brute intentionalist model of subjective creativity is rejected. But the importance of the subject in some mediated sense remains of critical importance, for Adorno. Creators of autonomous works acknowledge "the paradoxical relationship of the autonomous work to its commodity character" ('Valéry's Deviations', p. 158).

Adorno makes the allowance that this mediation via the subject is not an enterprise which the subject remains wholly unaware of, within narrative structures. But at the same time, he frames this as an eventual culmination, in a particular mode of formal consciousness towards an "estrangement of meaning" ('Valéry's Deviations', p. 156). Adorno claims that its projection of this estrangement within an autonomous work "imitates the estrangement of the age". Artists capable of producing autonomous works come to possess some conscious disposition towards an awareness of this imitation, by virtue of their being estranged. But how to understand this disposition toward an estrangement of meaning? Adorno thinks that it comes from a particular

intuitive awareness of reification. Using Valéry as an exemplar, “[f]or Valéry’s aesthetic experience, the subject’s strength and spontaneity prove themselves not in the subject’s self-revelation, but, in Hegelian fashion, in its self-alienation. The more fundamentally the work detaches itself from the subject, the more the subject has accomplished in it” (‘Valéry’s Deviations’, p. 167). What Valéry and Adorno see interrelatedly, quoting Valéry, is that “[a] work endures insofar as it is capable of looking quite different from the work the author thought he was bequeathing to the future” (Ibid.).

Mere intention isn’t what makes a work autonomous: a presupposition of its primacy amounts to a recapitulation to the alienating forces as Adorno seems them as regnant in society. Rather, the author or creator is instrumental - “with the first movement of conception, the author is bound to that conception and to his material. He becomes an organ for the accomplishment of the work’s desires” (Ibid.). The most plausible manner of making sense of the idea that a work itself possesses desires is within the context of the claim about the artist or author as a midwife. The work embodies the hidden intuitions of a collective, expressed without ascribing any one individual’s intentions to the production of a work. Difficult as this may seem, I take it that Adorno’s point here is that autonomous works implicitly channel the hidden but genuine desires of the collective of human individuals, within their socio-historical context. Rather than representing the individuated subject, it represents the reification of the “latent social subject, for whom the individual artist acts as an agent” (‘Valéry’s Deviations’, p. 168). Once again, the representation of the social subject is of an instrumental rather than intentional kind through the aesthetic creator. Since Adorno thinks that all those under the same socio-historical conditions are bound to a mode of reification, there will be broad similarity underwriting the mode of self-alienation the representative artistic agent embodies and formally expresses, as themselves a

conduit through which the work comes to be. The self-alienating autonomous work is described by Adorno as itself possessing ‘wants’, but intuitions of these are framed by the demands of the human condition to recognize the ill, perhaps impossible fit of the forces of social production upon that condition – the blind second nature which all are forced to adopt.

The use of the term ‘latent’ in this context is important, since Adorno frames the capacity of the contingency of the subject in psychoanalytic terminology. The ego has heretofore been assumed as the origin of pure aesthetic intentions and the harbinger of aesthetic truth, by means of its transparent route to creativity. Contrary to this assumption, Adorno claims that the ego “cannot be healed of its cardinal sin, the blind, self-devouring domination of nature that recapitulates the state of nature forever, by subjecting internal nature, the id, to itself as well” (‘Presuppositions’, p. 373). Rather, the ego can only be healed “by becoming reconciled with the unconscious, knowingly and freely following it where it leads” (‘Presuppositions’, p. 373 – 4). In some sense for Adorno, the regulating ego is to some extent aware of obedience or concession to the unconscious id in the creative process. The ego wants to find out what it wants, or at least wants to become aware of what it is about empirical reality that it doesn’t want.

Once this awareness takes place, the experience of autonomous artworks gives “the sense that their substance could not possibly *not* be true, that their success and their authenticity themselves point to the reality of what they vouch for” (‘Short Commentaries’, p. 187). Or, as Adorno puts it punchily elsewhere, autonomous art “represents negative knowledge of reality” (‘Extorted Reconciliation’, p. 222-3) - not positive representational knowledge in Hegel’s fashion, but the poverty of representational knowledge to track the real. Adorno offers an explanatory metaphor for this in a powerful discussion of Ernst Bloch’s musings on ‘An Old Pot’ at the beginning of Bloch’s *Spirit of Utopia*. Emulating the conscious disposition which can be intuited through

autonomous works, Adorno self-referentially writes, “I *am* Bloch’s pot, literally and directly, a dull, inarticulate model of what I could be but am not permitted to be” (‘The Handle, The Pot, and Early Experience’, p. 472).

There might be no right living in a world gone wrong. But through autonomous works, formal glimmers exude, that give us intuitions of its wrongness. Whether these intuitions could develop more concretely, or be instantiated practically, is of course another story, one that cuts to the heart of Adorno’s immanent critique.¹

¹ I am grateful to the audience at the 2020 Society for European Philosophy – Forum for European Philosophy (SEP – FEP) International Conference for comments.