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Authenticity and Impersonality in Adorno's Aesthetics

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The Impossibility of Poetry

Adorno's aesthetic theory bears the profound scars of his personal experience of fascism. Even after Auschwitz, he feared that modern bourgeois society is a breeding ground for new forms of fascist terror. It was said that, after Auschwitz, one could no longer write poems. But Adorno insisted that postwar art is an indispensable means for telling the truth about how the social order was fundamentally changed by that catastrophe.[1] Not to tell the truth is to be guilty of complicitous silence; yet, the unbearable truth is that society is pervasively and radically evil. As long as unresolved antagonisms still encourage authoritarian elements, Adorno insisted that post-war art must not affirm society or provide an imaginary resolution of its contradictions that real life denies.[2]

It has become commonplace to read Adorno as privileging only negative artforms. His exemplary art is negative art, which polemicizes against the perniciousness of the established social order by containing an analogue of the antagonisms in contemporary society. He attacks any utopian or "affirmative" artforms that try to reconcile people to this world or invite them to identify with it as "false" and "illusory," as an unjustified and guilty response to the horrors of existence. According to pessimistic interpretations

1. Theodor W. Adorno, "Meditations on Metaphysics: After Auschwitz," in *The Adorno Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), pp. 86-7; "Cultural Criticism and Society," in *ibid.*, p. 210; and *Negative Dialectics*, tr. by E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum Press, 1973), pp. 362-3.

2. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, tr. by Christian Lenhardt (New York: Routledge, Kegan & Paul, 1984), p. 242. Cited hereafter as AT.

of Jürgen Habermas, Raymond Geuss, Hans Robert Jauss and others,[3] for Adorno modern art must be thoroughly negative and critical of the social order, in order to make people aware of the dangers of instrumental rationality. Thus, an impossible dilemma would face all modern art today: either it lulls people into a false complacency, with comforting, but socially pernicious illusions about contemporary society, or it tells the unbearable truth about society and brings about the opposite of reconciliation.[4]

A number of criticisms follow from this dilemma: By overemphasizing the negativity of artworks, Adorno deprives modern art of one of its primary social functions: a communicative and reconciling function. He denounces theories of communicative rationality, which Habermas accords the highest value, because he thinks the indefinable content of artworks cannot be communicated directly, and thus is split off from rational, communicative practices. For all practical purposes, Adorno's concept of utopia is empty, since it can be characterized only negatively as the exact opposite of the actual world.[5] While he allows that negative artworks may contain a utopian promise, they conceal it "hermetically," in the form of "hints" and "flashes." By their very nature esoteric and indecipherable, such encoded artworks fail to communicate their utopian promise to all but a specially-trained elite. This is said to cause some embarrassment to this alleged *Marxist*-aesthete.[6]

3. Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, tr. by Frederick Lawrence, Ch. V, "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno," pp. 112-113; Raymond Geuss, "Art and Theodicy" in *Morality, Culture, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), "Art and Criticism in Adorno's Aesthetics," in *European Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (December, 1998), pp. 299, 300, 304-5; Hans Robert Jauss, *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*, Theory and History of Literature Series, Vol. 3 (Minnesota: Minnesota University Press, 1982), p. 181.

4. For an account of this "impossible dilemma," see Raymond Geuss' review article of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, in *Journal of Philosophy* (December, 1986), p. 735. See also Richard Wolin's version of this "debilitating antimony" in "The De-aestheticization of Art: On Adorno's *Aesthetische Theorie*," in *Telos* 41 (Fall 1979).

5. Geuss, "Art and Criticism in Adorno's Aesthetics," *op. cit.*, p. 306.

6. What makes this embarrassing, Susan Buck-Morss points out, is that appreciation of the truth is open only to a cultural elite, whose economic security gives them the leisure time to acquire the highly specialized training necessary to understand modernist, avant-garde works. See her *The Origin of Negative Dialectics* (New York: Macmillan, 1977), pp. 41-2. Wolin, also assuming that Adorno is a Marxist, raises the criticism that autonomous works, which are detached from the true collective, perpetuate the very conditions of unfreedom afflicting bourgeois society they were meant to protest against (Wolin, *op. cit.*, p. 107). But Adorno is trying to enforce an extreme separation between autonomous works and the blind collective. This break from mass culture can be accomplished only if avant-garde artworks resist the suggestion that they must be legitimated to prove their value. Artworks have a value *sui generis*, and are to be judged by internal standards, which may make them unintelligible to all except a few well-informed initiates.

This reading fails to do justice to those passages in which Adorno allows room for affirmative artworks that provide a concrete experience of reconciliation. He rejects the *false* appearance of reconciliation that he finds in escapist fiction, Hollywood films, and the artificially soothing images of classical works of art. But he explicitly denies in his *Aesthetic Theory* that progress in art can be reduced to the common denominator of negativity, or that his categories of negation and affirmation should be taken as absolute in ordering the historical progress of art: "This does not mean, of course, that all positive and affirmative works of art — almost the entire store of traditional works — are to be swept away. . . Philosophical criticism of unreflected nominalism debars the simple claim that the course of progressive negativity. . . is the path of progress in art."[7] While negative, modernist works may be the historically necessary expression of the alienation of contemporary modern society, this is not a permanent state of affairs. He insists that "Art wants to be, *must be* squarely Utopian."[8] Since the negative content of artworks is not only in their timeless, static properties, but also in the forceful role they play in transforming consciousness, artforms that once proved to be critical and negative at their inception, may in the long run turn out to be artificially "positive." Even Arnold Schönberg's progressive twelve-tone technique, which Adorno praised for its critical content when it first appeared, later lost its critical edge and ceased to be negative through assimilation and acceptance.[9]

Adorno's philosophy of reconciliation provides a strong component of reconciliation missing in the pessimistic reading. The ambiguity in his concepts of affirmation and negativity may be due in part to his ambivalent relation to a long philosophical tradition, ranging from Schiller, Hegel and Schopenhauer up to Nietzsche, which claims that art ought to ameliorate suffering caused by living in a problematic world. There are residual aims and ambitions of that tradition in Adorno's remark that

7. AT, p. 228; cf. also pp. 264, 332, 347.

8. AT, p. 27: "While art is driven into a position of absolute negativity, it is never absolutely negative. . . it always has an affirmative residue." (AT, p. 332).

9. Richard Wagner's diminished seventh chord met the same fate. See Frederic Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 21. Adorno writes: " . . . almost no one gets excited anymore about that twelve-tone technique that is served up at all music festivals. It is tolerated as the private activity of specialists, a cultural necessity in some not quite clear fashion, entrusted wholly to the experts; no one is actually challenged, no one recognizes himself in it, or senses in it any binding claim to truth." See his "Aging of New Music," in *Telos* 77 (Fall 1988), p. 100.

"Authentic works must wipe out any memory trace of reconciliation — but only in the interest of (true) reconciliation."[10] He straddles this tradition, one foot in, the other out, when he writes: "While firmly rejecting the *appearance* of reconciliation, art nonetheless holds fast to the *idea* of reconciliation in an antagonistic world." His ambivalence is further reflected in the contradictory idiom he uses to describe what he considers a genuine kind of reconciliation: an "unreconciled reconciliation," an "unconciliatory reconciliation."

The fact that one cannot speak of affirmative, utopian meanings in Adorno without referencing negative meanings should stand as a warning not to err too far in the direction of giving an overly optimistic reading. His aesthetics gives rise to quite divergent readings. Jameson, for instance, bases Adorno's notion of reconciliation on the possibility of experiencing a utopian state of perfect unity, in which suffering born of contradictions has been eliminated.[11] While Adorno may think through the problem of reconciliation in a genuinely Hegelian spirit, for Jameson to succeed he has to focus selectively on syntheses and unities in Adorno's aesthetic thought, and ignore his later negative dialectical method, which refuses to synthesize unities and harmonious totalities. Moreover, to downplay the negative tensions and contradictory elements, this optimistic reading has to dodge the real problem that Adorno thinks faces reconciliation today, i.e., how to write a Hegelian narrative of reconciliation in a post-war period, in which Auschwitz has ruled out the very conditions of its possibility.

Poetic Language and Conceptual Language

Adorno's project of reconciliation starts from a Nietzschean critique of conceptual language, according to which ordinary language, concept-formation, and conventional logic falsify ones unique, individual experiences. Concepts are degenerate, Nietzsche claims, because they have lost

10. AT, p. 333. Adorno also writes: "Autonomous art is not just an echo of suffering, it also tends to *diminish* the scope of suffering, the organon of its gravity being at the same time the means whereby it neutralizes suffering" (AT, p. 57).

11. Jameson, *Marxism and Form, op. cit.*, Ch. 1 "T. W. Adorno or, Historical Tropes," p. 8. See also *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, The Persistence of the Dialectic* (London and New York: Verso, 1990). Albrecht Wellmer also defends Adorno against the Habermasian criticism, namely, that Adorno failed to connect his theory of reconciliation to communicatively shared meanings in a world of rational subjects. See "Adorno, Modernity, and the Sublime," in *The Actuality of Adorno*, ed. by Max Pensky (New York: State University of New York, 1997), pp. 118, 120-123 and 126.

their power to evoke original sensations and authentic experiences. To use rational concepts, abstractions, and generalities enforces a kind of conformity of thought, a homogenization which prevents it from taking original, individual turns. Accordingly, most individuals are deprived not only of the adequate concepts they need to articulate, interpret and reflect on original, irreducibly unique experiences, but also of those very experiences. At the heart of his Nietzschean critique of conceptual language is Adorno's fear that the impulse to use concepts is linked to an impulse for self-preservation — an impulse Adorno links to instrumental reason. This impulse to control nature by dominating it manifests itself further in the social sphere, as intimations of the fascist mentality; specifically, in the way the culture industry (the American variety of fascism) and the prevailing ideology pervert ordinary language and forms of thought in the interest of dominating and enforcing conformity in social relations.

Adorno's critique of irrational approaches to epistemology prevents him from following Nietzsche in according primacy to non-discursive, non-linguistic artforms, such as music over lyric poetry, as a means of revealing hidden truths behind the veil of illusions.[12] The strong Hegelian residue in Adorno leads him to resist equating the unsayable with the irrational, and to retain a link to discursive, conceptual thought. By this, he does not imply that artistic concepts can find their equivalent paraphrase in philosophical concepts, or ultimately can be superseded by a conceptual, discursive language, but, rather, that artworks depend on philosophical analysis and interpretation, at least of the kind he is giving, which is distanced from instrumental rationality, to say what they cannot communicate. As inadequate as conceptual language may be for producing equivalent translations, it is nevertheless indispensable for cracking the encrypted code of art that blocks the retrieval and decipherment of its truth content.[13]

12. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, §6, tr. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967). Nietzsche writes, "The poems of the lyrist can express nothing that did not already lie hidden in that vast universality and absoluteness in the music that compelled him to figurative speech. Language can never render the cosmic symbolism of music, because music stands in a symbolic relation to the primordial contradiction and primordial pain in the heart of the primal unity, and therefore, symbolizes a sphere which is beyond and prior to all phenomena." Adorno inches closer to this view when he says: "the true language of art is nonverbal, its nonverbal moment has priority over the element of signification in literature, a moment that is also not completely absent from music" (AT, p. 164).

13. Peter Uwe Hohendahl, *Prismatic Thought: Theodore W. Adorno* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p. 237. See AT, p. 107.

In *Notes on Literature*, Adorno finds in linguistic artforms in particular the power to convey sensible experiences that are not filtered through falsifying concepts and conceptual schemes. Poetry, especially lyric poetry, enjoys a special status in Adorno's aesthetic theory, because it resists the repressive force of instrumental conceptual language. In this rather unfamiliar and arguably marginal genre of poetry, traditionally regarded as a vehicle for the most private, idiosyncratic, self-absorbed, and asocial expression,[14] he finds an alternative language, which quietly protests the falsifying forms of abstract language. It is typical of Adorno to analyze a singular, seemingly marginal cultural phenomena, rather than a more central one. He denies that a meaningful boundary can be fixed between marginal and mainstream, fragment and whole, the exception and the rule. For this very discrimination carries with it incipient elements of authoritarian control, which translate socially into violence against the marginalized, disenfranchised, overlooked groups, for whom Adorno had a private concern. Since fascist ideologies have by no means disappeared completely, the urge to transcend the details and assume a totalizing, totalitarian standpoint, from which to command the whole must be resisted. The world is given in splinters and fragments. The truth is in the details.

In "On Lyric Poetry and Society," one of his more neglected pieces in *Notes on Literature*,[15] Adorno gives his first analysis of poetic language in the epistemological role of offering a pure, nonconceptual language. This particular emphasis on language has been neglected by the critical literature, Hohendahl notes,[16] despite of the fact that the argument blends seamlessly with Adorno's much later assessment of language in *Aesthetic*

14. Northrop Frye, "Approaching the Lyric," in Chaviva Hosek and Patricia Parker, eds., *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 36. For many centuries, the lyric was regarded as relatively minor compared to epic poems. The content of lyric utterance resists taking a form that expresses what everyone experiences — it expresses not just what other people are unable to say, but what they are unable to feel. Adorno thinks the lyrical form tends to invite speculations about the psychology of the speaking subject, or to provoke indifference, since he thinks anything that resists generalization, that does not amount to useful, instrumental knowledge, is received indifferently.

15. "Lyrik und Gesellschaft" originally was delivered as a radio lecture in 1957, *Akzente* 4 (1957), pp. 8-26, and subsequently translated as "On Lyric Poetry and Society" in *Telos* 20 (Summer 1974). The original was reprinted in *Noten zur Literatur*, 3 vols. (Frankfurt, 1958-61), Vol. 1, pp. 79-80; see *Notes to Literature*, Vol. 1, tr. by Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991). All references will be to the English translation in *Notes to Literature*, hereafter cited Lyr.

16. Hohendahl, *Prismatic Thought*, *op.cit.*, p. 235.

Theory. A short poem by Mörike, "On a Hike," is an example of an affirmative artform that escapes Adorno's near wholesale rejection of affirmative art:[17]

I enter a village through the ancient tower
Friendly streets glow in the red evening hour
In an open window, now, and over
Full beds of flowers ever higher
Golden bell-sounds sweetly hover
And a single voice seems a nightingale choir:
That the flowers sway,
That breezes play,
And the rose' red to higher hue aspires.

Long stood I joyous, stupefied
How I left the gate, found the way
Beyond the town, I cannot say;
But here — how bright the world lies!
Above, bright purpose billows flow
Behind, the vaporous town in golden light
How roars the rushing stream, how roars the mill below
I reel in bliss, confused, misled —
O Muse! Throughout my heart has spread
A whisper of thy love.

Adorno's working method is to apply detailed literary analysis to a poem, by starting from the plain sense of words, which refer to small, concrete objects near-at-hand. This simplicity gives the poem a quality of intimacy and immediacy. No feeling is expressed that rises higher than that which can be grasped at the very moment of speech. Whereas, in the third person of the narrative epic poem, events seem to be happening without the speaker's intervention, so that the content of what is spoken can be detached from the speaker, in the first person of the lyric, events

17. The exemplary kind of lyric poetry Adorno has in mind in the lyric essay is some of the shorter, extremely compressed poems of Goethe, Mörike, Stefan George, Paul Valéry, and others. Adorno regards lyric poetry as a distinctively modern artform; his conception of the lyric excludes classical poets, like Pindar and Sappho, because, Adorno claims: "The great poets of the more distant past, who might be counted as lyric poets according to literary historical concepts of lyric poetry, Pindar and Alcaeus, for example, are very distant indeed from our primary idea of lyric poetry" (Lyr, p. 59). His demand that lyric poetry be "a form of reaction to the reification of the world," has only been met by poetry only recently, hence, poetry is "modern through and through."

seem to be happening at the moment the words are being spoken, so that the content of what is said is inseparable from the contingencies surrounding the speech act and the speaking subject.[18] The language of the lyric holds the world at a distance, by resisting the kind of abstract generalities used in coping with ordinary experience. By limiting itself to intimate experiences, evoked by concrete objects close-at-hand, the lyric retreats from falsifying abstract speech to an intensely subjective mode, which responds to the poet's innermost, subtlest nuances of feeling and positively affirms the value of immediate, individual sensations. The familiar senses of words, viewed in a new light, give them a strange, foreign, unexpected sense, which elevates them above the language of mass culture and commerce.

"On a Hike" is a notable example of an artform that escapes the dilemma supposedly facing all modern art. On the one hand, the poem meets Adorno's demand to tell the truth, by refusing to adopt a depersonalizing abstract language, thereby resisting the dominant, falsifying linguistic and mental clichés embedded in language. This "tenderest, most fragile of forms" quietly protests the collective realm of commercial existence. The critical content of the poem consists in its use of the grammar most distinctive of the lyric: the first-person pronoun "I," the purest expression of a condition of utmost, unrestrained individuation and autonomous resistance to the collective. As recent history has shown, unquestioning identification with the rules and values of the central collective can turn nasty against those excluded at the margins. By uttering the absolutely singular word "I," the poet's voice asserts itself against the threat of dispossession of voice in an impersonal system by a complete withdrawal into particularity, thereby expressing a purity from the corrupting traces of a forced collective.[19] This sharp rupture from repressive collectivism makes the lyric an example of an artform embodying much of the truth-telling function of negative art.

Yet, "On a Hike" avoids negative art's abysmal failure in reception, because it does not rely on shocking and perplexing mechanisms of dissonance and rupture to lead the unregenerated individual to reconciliation. For instance, underlying the surface sense of the line, "how roars the rushing streams," lies a utopian vision of a counter world glimpsed through the raw, untamed, indomitable beauty of nature, which holds out the promise of

18. William Fitzgerald, *Time and the Lyric Action: a Study of the Speaking Subject in Pindar, Horace, Keats and Rilke*, unpublished dissertation (Princeton University: 1981).

19. Lyr, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

redemption from the corrupting influences of the town below.[20] The sublime beauty of a roaring, rushing stream lies not in its violent threat to humans, but in its representation of a counterfactual state beyond oppressive constraints and human control. The poem conveys more than a minimal awareness of what a less oppressive world would look like, as if read off a photo negative of this bad actual world. The way the poem succeeds in escaping the horns of the supposedly impossible dilemma is by conveying a positive image of utopia through a determinate image of the sublime beauty of nature.

To allow that there is a strong component of reconciliation in Adorno is not to rush to the extreme optimistic reading. The way the poem conveys affirmative images is not, as Jameson would have it, by appropriating Hegel's seamless notion of reconciliation, in which the mind momentarily glimpses, obliquely through art, the possibility of a complete, unified world in which internal contradictions are removed.[21] As David Pan points out, Adorno bases his aesthetics on the harmonious beauty in nature as a fundamental aesthetic category, while simultaneously including considerations of contradictions which threaten this harmony.[22] The poem's promise of freedom from a repressed nature is equivocal, since it requires sacrificing the animal warmth and creature comforts in the town below ("Behind: the vaporous town in golden light"), and trembling in fear before the terrible beauty of nature in a nonrational state of stupefied confusion ("How I left the gate, and found the way beyond the town, I cannot say"). The poem's dialectical, critical edge consists of irreconcilably conjoining two opposed and conceptually exclusionary phenomena: the elevated promise of redemption conveyed through terrifying images of a nature free of domination is held in unresolved tension with the fear of separation from the safety of civilization below. And if the source of real reconciliation is this felt shudder before the indefinable beauty of nature, as it is for Adorno, then lyric poetry, which evokes this indeterminate nature, however ambiguously must count in the process of social emancipation.[23]

The very persistence of ineradicable contradictions in his concept of reconciliation makes it ambiguous with his concept of negation. Admittedly, the pessimistic reading has a textual basis for selectively

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 41 and 191.
21. Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, *op. cit.*, pp. 38, 41 and 44.
22. David Pan, "Adorno's Aesthetics of Myth," in *Telos* 115 (Spring 1999), pp. 16-18.
23. AT, pp. 108-110. On the centrality of the sublime beauty in nature in *Aesthetic Theory*, see Albrecht Wellmer, "Adorno, Modernity, and the Sublime," in *The Actuality of Adorno*, *op. cit.*

stressing the negative elements. The optimistic reading is also right in thinking that Adorno's thought is profoundly Hegelian. But it is mistaken in thinking that he simply rehabilitates a Hegelian-style project of reconciliation in a world, in which devolving social conditions rule out the very conditions of its possibility. It is still an open question, in either reading, as to how a few autonomous individuals manage to resist the dominant ideology and its thought forms. Adorno's social psychology is at its most pessimistic when he perceives in poets, as well as in cultural and social critics, not just the problem of a falsifying language, but some deep internal obstacle to waging resistance. By internalizing what was once an external authority, in the form of self-control, poets encounter in their own interests, impulses, and desires something related to the need for self-preservation, which forces them indirectly to collude with authorities and to reproduce blindly the prevalent social categories. Adorno's sociopsychological profile of the passive, manipulable individual presents the following problem: how does poetic language escape the distorting force of conceptual thought, if poets have to use much the same words as everyone else? If the dominant social structure perverts all culture, language, and thought, including even the logical laws governing discursive thought itself, if engaged poets have to draw on the same stock of ideas, concepts, and ready-made aspects of language, which are marked by the very distortions and untruths from which they seek to distance themselves, where in all of this is there room for authentic resistance?[24]

Clearly, Adorno's aesthetics cannot be as desolate as his critics claim it is, since his very idea of ideological "distortion" implies reference to some source of potential resistance or standpoint from which there is no such distortion, and from which it may be possible for individuals to experience authentic needs and interests.[25] If he were denouncing all artistic critique as tainted by crass materialism, commercial motives, and instrumental rationality, then there would be no point in valuing legitimate resistance and protest over cynical resignation and blind complicity. He thinks that if one could conceive of a state in which socially oppressive conditions had not yet robbed one of real interests, then it would be possible to recognize that one's real interests are different from

24. Lyr, p. 43; "Cultural Criticism and Society," in *The Adorno Reader*, *op. cit.*, pp. 197-8; *Minima Moralia*, tr. by E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Thetford Press, 1974), p. 247.
25. See David Couzens Hoy, "Power, Repression, Progress: Foucault, Lukes, and the Frankfurt School," in *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, ed. by David Couzens Hoy (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 125.

ideologically-distorted ones, and to identify with them. Adorno's social psychology allows for an instinctual nature which, at its core, remains resistant to distorting social influences, consisting of latent interests that one would not even be able to identify, because of the pressure to conform personal interests to more socially-acceptable ones.[26] From the "immanent" standpoint of this essential nature and with the help of retrieval through psychoanalysis, a few, isolated individuals can reappropriate language, so that it once again becomes a vehicle for authentically expressing latent needs and interests.[27]

If modern art is to provide a serious and effective catalyst for protest and resistance, as Adorno thinks it must, then it must point to some vantage point distinguishable from the hated social order, to the potential for a utopia in which thought and language once again can become a vehicle for expressing authentic needs and experiences. Literary expression in his social theory serves as the premiere vehicle for bringing to light this immanent standpoint, from which it is possible to imagine what one's interests would be like free of ideological distortion. The role of art is not to resign itself cynically to the badness of the world, or to protest futilely against a social condition, which it is unable to change. Art that opposes society only negatively is guilty of complicity, by leaving everything as it is.[28] Lived experience of art allows one to sense in spontaneous, unconscious literary elements the existence of a fictional point of reference of how the world *would* look to members of a utopia, if only it were changed. Yet, since his social analysis rejects the notion that there is such a transcendent standpoint of resistance, autonomous and independent of society and its norms, from which cultural criticism may be waged,[29] it is still an open question whether the dissonant, fragmentary, unassimilable form in which negative modern art expresses the truth, effectively denounces the established social order, or is indistinguishable from the ugliness and repulsiveness against which it protests.

26. See Jessica Benjamin, "The End of Internalization: Adorno's Social Psychology," in *Telos* 32 (Summer 1977), p. 43; and Axel Honneth, *Critique of Power, Reflective Stages in a Critical Theory*, tr. by Kenneth Baynes (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), p. 86; and Couzens Hoy, "Power, Repression, Progress, *op. cit.*

27. Lyr, p. 45. Cf. Jochen Schulte-Sasse's forward to *Theory of the Avante-Garde*, Peter Burger, *Theory and History of Literature*, Vol. 4 (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1984), p. xxvii.

28. AT, p. 194.

29. "Cultural Criticism and Society," in *The Adorno Reader, op. cit.*, pp. 197-8 and 207-8; and Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1967).

The Demand for Authenticity

Adorno's first demand of poetry, then, is designed to get around the problem of socially exploitative influences introducing themselves into the darkest corners of consciousness at the very points where he wants to ground resistance. He demands that art oppose authentically a truthful, utopian counterpart to false, rationally-organized society. Since human alienation is a state in which the use of conceptual knowledge dominates and repressively controls nature, including internal nature, he counters this with an alternative poetic language, governed by alternative laws of logic, which abandons this need for self-control. To oppose the impulse to relate coercively and instrumentally to language and to self, Adorno urges poets to abandon the aim of self-preservation and to yield spontaneously to an impulse of self-surrender. This is a state in which the poet attempts to free himself from those false aspects of his socially-determined self by "forgetting himself, by cultivating a condition of selflessness or impersonality, by making of himself a vessel for the ideal of pure language."[30] Adorno thereby redirects focus away from the all-too-individual psychology of the poet, a perspective that relates to nature from the viewpoint of conquest and control, toward the ideal of a pure language. The terms he uses to describe this unconscious moment of submersion in pure language, such as "self-loss" and "spontaneity," indicate a self distanced from commercial motives and material objects, from coercive impulses and instincts to dominate nature and other people. What remains is a primitive, instinctual integrity at the core, which allows one to make of speech a truthful instrument of the authentic, impersonal perspective.

30. Lyr, p. 52; AT, p. 97. Poem's true social content does not consist in the poet consciously and intentionally resisting social pressures by giving the poem an explicitly didactic or social content (Lyr, p. 43, AT, pp. 344-5). No genuinely free agent wants to experience the didactic content of a poem as preaching a moral imperative or injunction. It is contradictory to try to lead independent readers to the correct attitude, which will release them from their condition of servitude, by applying overt pressure or coercion. Thus, Adorno excludes Ben Jonson, whose poems have an explicit social or political content. Cf. Annabel Patterson, "Lyric and Society in Jonson's *Underwood*," in *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 151. The most perfect social use of lyric, Adorno claims, is precisely in not being directly moralizing, didactic, or propagating moral ideas. He condemns Plato's near wholesale rejection of poetry as owing to a *parti-pris* to vindicate the importance of only a very narrow type of art that would function as propaganda to promote his ideal state. The way to avoid the risk of the artist intentionally giving the work a falsely committed political content, Adorno thinks, is to locate negative content in the artwork's structure and formal qualities, regardless of any conscious ideas or intentions the author may have about its explicit sociopolitical content.

The Demand for Impersonality

Adorno, for whom unresolved suffering is related to authentic critique,[31] likens the attitude necessary for artistic resistance to that of the criminal's, whose alienation from the established order gives him an independent perspective from which to criticize it. But the attitude that allows the criminal to avoid mindless identification with the hated social order is clearly untenable. The suffering artistic subject, who similarly declines to participate in culture, nevertheless longs for a condition in which his love for that social order is no longer disfigured. He cannot remain in a private monologue with himself, but must reintegrate his voice back into the chorus of human speech. Adorno's Marxist emphasis on forces of production lead him to say that the poet, as social critic, must participate in culture. Not even the private lyric can turn away from society, because it is artistic labor and, as such, is social labor, and subject to productive forces as is any social commodity or product.

Adorno balances his demand for authenticity, given in terms of an exaggerated subjectivity at the expense of society, with a second demand that gives poetry an objective, social dimension. It is meant to convert what traditionally have been regarded as vices peculiar to the lyric — morbid introspection, asocial, abnormal introvertedness — into what gives the lyric a critical, social content. The poet who merely asserts the importance of an exaggerated individuality against the threat of an impersonal society, by severing all connections to that hated social reality, does not neutralize the threat by withdrawing into an interior realm of fine feelings. This disengagement with reality is a move Adorno associates most notably with Marcuse's valorization of the cultural products of the bourgeois epoch.[32] Marcuse discerned in the harmonious utopia depicted in works of German Classicism a sharp contrast with conflicted social relations — a contrast

31. Adorno, "Culture Criticism and Society," p. 209; AT, p. 34. Pan traces this element of suffering back to Nietzsche's notion that pain and suffering born of contradiction are at the heart of primordial forces of nature (AT, p. 335).

32. Marcuse, "Affirmative Character of Culture," in *Negations* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), pp. 95 and 102; and *The Aesthetic Dimension* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), pp. 7-8. Marcuse associates German Classicism with a revolt against the prosaic, unspiritual nature of the times, and an attempt to realize, in the realm of creative spirit, those values missing from everyday reality. Reconciliation means giving the appearance of resolving violent human conflicts by lifting them onto a higher plane, that of spirit. The harmony of the "beautiful soul," exemplified in Goethe's works, reconciled antagonistic elements of actual existence in an ideal, interior realm — a realm detached from everyday existence. See Albert Salomon, *In Praise of Enlightenment*, Ch. V: "The Place of the Poet in a World of Revolution: Goethe (1832) and Goethe (1849)" (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1962).

which indirectly served as a reflection of, an index to, and an indictment of antagonistic relations in the social order.

Adorno's attempt to provide a concept of reconciliation proceeds negatively, by rejecting Marcuse's approach as "excessively abstract,"[33] because it defines negative content through simple opposition to that which it protests. By this reasoning, Adorno argues *ad absurdum* that all affirmative works, even those which reconcile conflicts in a spurious harmony, can be defended as critical by virtue of their contrast with reality. The specific achievement of the modern lyric over the German classical epic and narrative is that its negative-utopian dimensions do not derive from an abstract contrast between a unified work and a divided world, from a retreat from destructive social forces to an ideal sphere of fine feelings.[34] To appreciate Adorno's second demand, it is necessary to move beyond the false alternatives that emerge from the attempt to fix a transcendent perspective on social reality: a false choice between uncritically accepting disharmonious reality or retreating to an atemporal world of harmonious ideals. Far from abstractly negating social reality, Adorno's second demand insists that lyric engage intensely with collective experience and the communicative aspects of language.

First Person Plural

Every time I say "I," paradoxically I express an absolutely singular voice opposed to the collective. Yet, the meaning of "I" has a universal aspect which identifies me with all others who say "I." Adorno is committed to positive dialectics in Hegel to the extent that he holds to Hegel's dictum that, "the moment of the will, which allows me to say 'I,' is the moment of universality, in which I identify myself with what is common to all beings, who also call themselves 'I.'"[35] Adorno's negative dialectic is in tension with Hegel's positive dialectic to the extent that he does not reconcile the terms "I" and the collective "we" through a synthesis or unity in thought, which overcomes the contradiction at a higher level. The force of the copula in the first person plural expression, the "I" that is a "We," cannot be the "is" of identity — certainly, not in these times, when such an identification runs the risk of assimilation and complicity with repressive collectivism. The copula has an alternative function in Adorno's negative dialectic,[36] i.e., to relate the particular to the general in

33. AT, p. 228.
34. Lyr, p. 49.
35. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right* §5, *Encyclopaedia* (EG) §381 Remark.
36. *Negative Dialectics*, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

a convergence in which the poet's act of self-negation shifts the stance away from a display of exaggerated individuality — expressed through the lyrical "I" resisting antithetical social forces — toward a state of immersion in the communicative, universal aspects of language.

Suspension of Logic

Paradoxically, it is the task of art to show that this dual set of demands being placed on it, authenticity and impersonality, are incompatible. Adorno casts poets in the dual role as prophetic visionaries, whose project is to speak a universal language and to reintegrate their voices into a happy, loving humanity, *and* as isolated, condemnatory social critic, who must actively affirm their utmost individuality in unhappy opposition to society and its falsifying language forms. The two demands are inconsistent, if by "self-loss" they encourage a total collapse of self into an absolute, objective authority. His two approaches cannot be combined, if he means that the correct relation of the self to larger, impersonal forces is one of submissive, self-denigrating, instrumental service to a higher, impersonal voice of authority, as represented by falsifying language forms and blind collective action. The whole point of Adorno demanding authenticity was to insist on the possession and expression of an authentic individual voice, revealing its unique interiority through language. For only then was it supposed to be possible for individuals to resist identification with a social condition that they find exploitative of their unique needs and authentic experiences.

Underlying Adorno's concept of reconciliation is this deliberate adoption of two mutually exclusive alternatives. The persistent conflict between his two primary demands, between exaggerated self-assertion and loss of self, is what prevents authentic art from giving a false reconciliation. Critical poetry avoids reconciliation of the false, illusory kind that reality denies, by unconsciously embodying an analogue of this social contradiction as it exists in reality: in the form of an unreconcilable contradiction between an exaggeratedly individual subject, resisting the threat of dispossession of voice, and a self-abnegating subject abandoning the urge for self-preservation, bent on self-extinction. The incommensurability of the poet's voice to impersonal forces in the poem is what truthfully reflects and is an index to antagonistic relations to an impersonal society and its common language forms. If the poem reproduces social contradictions in aesthetic form, allowing them to be experienced without regurgitating or endorsing them, this provides a therapeutically dissonant

experience of social contradictions in literary form, which becomes one of reconciliation, rather than contradiction and violence, because it does not just reproduce contradictions in an identical form indistinguishable from their ugly appearance in society. Yet, the presence of ineradicable contradictions gives the poem an undecipherable content, which keeps it from directly communicating its content.

In this sense, Adorno thinks poetry and cultural criticism in general are contradictory and at odds with themselves, and, in this sense, "untrue." He relishes the paradox that art must be at odds with itself, and strive to go beyond its own confines, in order to be properly critical, while remaining art: "If it lets go of its autonomy, it sells out to the established order; whereas, if it tries to stay strictly within the limits of its autonomous confines, it becomes equally co-optable, living an effectiveless life in its appointed niche."[37] The failure or poem's "untruth" of the poem disrupts the guilty literary practice of writing lyrical poetry in this age in which affirmative ideals and security are no longer possible. Since modern society is so pervasively evil that it is unable to criticize itself, art must have built into it a mechanism for disrupting itself, through which it tacitly induces immanent internal criticism, by calling attention to its contradictory nature. A healthy self-criticism is a prerequisite for the possibility of inducing further criticism of the social order. And the fact that lyric truthfully reflects the contradictions in the culture it criticizes makes it "in all its untruth, as true as culture is untrue."

To appreciate Adorno's concept of genuine reconciliation is to understand this peculiar sense in which the conflict between his two primary demands cannot be reconciled, if the standard for resolving contradictions is a dialectical procedure that reconciles two opposed terms, by either rejecting the one that is generating the contradiction, or overcoming opposition at a higher level through a synthesis into a third mediating term. He rejects a strictly Hegelian notion of reconciliation based on the mediation of opposite concepts, because he thinks it implicitly validates certain conventional, logical laws governing discursive thought. His critique of conceptual language goes beyond the surface sense of words and sentences to a deeper understanding of their complex grammatical interrelations to other sentences, and the logical relations underlying these sentences. Since he thinks the perverting dominant ideology pervades every corner of thought, even the fundamental logical laws governing conceptual thought

37. "Cultural Criticism and Society," *op. cit.*, p. 199. AT, p. 337.

itself, he rejects certain principles of Aristotelian logic, such as the law of non-contradiction, the law of the excluded middle, and principles of syllogistic reasoning, as repressive and coercive, constraining and controlling what can be thought and experienced.[38] To allow the idea of reconciliation to be limited by this repressive logic would be to capitulate to the very rational principles of organized society that he thinks the dominant social powers are using to control thought.

Adorno's way of dialectically establishing reconciliation is to accentuate ineradicable contradictions, rather than harmonious syntheses. Reconciliation lies in the very possibility of finding a nonconceptual, aesthetic mode of truth, freed from a repressive identity logic, which, by virtue of identifying and appropriating the contradictions, disunities, and discontinuities of an unredeemed world, thereby approximates a genuine reconciliation. While he does not deny the validity of traditional logic, his notion of reconciliation involves a logic of contradiction and a radical consciousness of non-identity, which requires suspension of this repressive logic.

The imagery of lyric poetry is beautiful and harmonious on the surface, but it falls apart underneath, because it is based on this deviant logic. The alternative logic of art serves as a protest against society, by distancing one from traditional logical principles, syllogistic reasoning, methodological rigor, and systematic proofs, which oppressively organize and coercively limit what can be thought and felt. Art has its own logic, which lies beyond the reach of rational understanding, in which the two poles of the opposition, individual and society, get "aesthetically reconciled" through formal literary elements in a kind of reconciliation that traditional logic and real life deny. In this sense, Adorno thinks that the poet's submission to the impersonal aspects of language does *not* entail the loss of identity: "The moment of self-forgetting in which the subject submerges in language is *not* a sacrifice of himself to being. It is *not* a moment of compulsion or force, not even of force against the speaking subject, but rather a moment of *reconciliation*."[39] This deviant logic in art brings about an "aesthetic reconciliation," which is not the bad, imaginary, illusory kind that can be understood rationally and communicated discursively, but rather the kind of impossible reconciliation that requires a suspension of the discursive, logical principles that serve as tools of instrumental rationality.

Adorno aptly describes the alternative logic underlying his notion of

38. AT, pp. 197-200. These reflections were inspired by conversations about poetry and logic with Allen Grossman at Johns Hopkins University.

39. Lyr, p. 44.

reconciliation using impossibly ambiguous formulations, such as "unconciliatory reconciliation," "an ambivalence between speech and silence," "a transformation of exaggerated individuality to self-annihilation."[40] The obscurity of his expressions underscore his demand that the laws of discursive logic must be held in a "suspended state," to truthfully reflect the fact that what is being enacted in the poem's materials is a sensuous analogue of the unreconcilable tension in the poet's relation to society. The non-conceptual elements in a poem, which resist incorporation by a traditional logic, appear in the structural and syntactic texture of lyric, which sometimes can verge on a breakdown of sense or degenerate into pure sound. This logic is reflected in the use of unconventional grammatical and linguistic constructions, especially in the illogical use of the pronoun "I" to evoke the collective "we." If one takes identity logic seriously, then the "I" cannot literally be a "we," because it is expressed through the agency of a single "I." To understand the first person plural use of the pronoun "I," it is necessary to suspend the law of identity, a = a (i.e., something must be identical to itself and not another thing; a thing is what it is and not another thing). Still very much in the grip of Hegel's logic, Adorno captures the essentially social content of the "I," by subsuming its use under a logic of non-identity, as an instantiation of his identity-in-difference thesis.

A concrete illustration of this alternative logic can be found in Goethe's "Wanderer's Nightsong" — a poem Adorno thinks possesses an unqualified authenticity:

> Over all the hill-tops
> Is quiet now,
> In all the tree-tops
> You hear
> Hardly a breath;
> The birds are asleep in the trees:
> Wait; soon like these.
> You too shall rest.

The final line captures the moment before falling into a deep sleep, which will put an end to all of life's back-breaking weariness and disfiguring

40. See Shierry Weber Nicholsen's detailed analysis of Adorno's use of impenetrable expressions, associations and equivocations, not based on logical, discursive argumentation, but intended to provoke further reflection. *Exact Imagination, Late Work: On Adorno's Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), pp. 113-24.

suffering. On the surface, the consolatory line does not speak of things alienating and disturbing; but the final line, "You too shall rest," is ambiguous between sleep and death. The poem does not deny or violate any cherished laws of logic, but rather thematizes a suspension of the law of the excluded middle, by striving to articulate an uneasy peace, poised precariously between sleep and death, not fully expressible using the ordinary concept "rest" in its straightforward, signifying function. The poem avoids a false reconciliation, by promising an ambiguously happy sleep, which could not be purchased without the dream disintegrating in death. This ineffable contradiction reflects the speaker's contradictory and ever-shifting relation to impersonal social conditions, in which an impossible psychic tension is produced by conflicting urges: to resist in death a social condition that evokes such suffering, yet to identify with it longingly, because it evokes such love. Both unhappiness with the social order, and longing for a potential in which ones love of it no longer is disfigured, find expression in this idea of an impossible suspension between life and death, self-affirmation and self-annihilation, identification and resistance, complicitous silence and shattered speech.

The authentic quality of poetry Adorno admires holds this indecipherable, inscrutable quality of language in conjunction with its signifying, communicative function in an intolerable suspension, an illogical conjunction, a dialectical tension. This permanent contradiction is at the heart of all successful art, in which the speaking subject strives to resist a prison environment that evokes such suffering, yet tries to reintegrate with others in an open-air prison, because it evokes such love, and strives to gain an authentic foothold beyond the prison walls, by using acceptable forms of communication: without violence, without taking a shortcut through crime.