

E. NEGATIVE DIALECTICS OF FREEDOM : ADORNO

Introduction

My contention is that a contradictory politics of truth pervades the modern ethos of freedom. This contradictory politics emerges as the historically developed opposition of two major strands of thinking on the question of freedom - what I have termed the opposition of a conceptual *ratio* and an existential *poiesis*. In effect the conceptual *ratio* reveals an over-determined articulation of freedom, such that the claim to freedom reveals itself more properly as a sign of unfreedom. Differently and yet similarly, the effect of existential *poiesis* on the practice of freedom is a radical indeterminacy, such that freedom is indistinguishable from unfreedom. This indicates that both strands of thinking are enmeshed in aporetic claims from which they are unable to extricate themselves. Having brought out these ambiguities in the foregoing discussions, what remains is to articulate the manner in which both strands form a negative dialectics of freedom. Only thus will the potential for freedom remain open in face of the reifying implications of existential immanence and the ideology of an already actualised condition of freedom.

What is at stake in articulating the negative dialectics of conceptual *ratio* and existential *poiesis* is not, however, some over-arching unity which magically dissolves their differences. Rather this task involves the transfiguration of each as a specific form of negative dialectics through which their respective blind spots no longer disable the idea of freedom but actively enable it. In the first instance, against the background of the conceptual *ratio* of subject and object, I consider Adorno's critical re-articulation of those relations through mimetic expression and conceptual parataxis. Here culturally inscribed somatic affects, the materialism defended by existential *poiesis* is given voice within the *ratio*'s conceptual reflections. In the second instance, against the background of an existential *poiesis* of eternal recurrence and life affirmation, I consider Adorno's critical re-articulation of those relations through a secular metaphysics and the sublime in modern autonomous art. Here the conceptually determinate inscription of freedom, the metaphysics defended by the conceptual *ratio* takes on a critical function within the

aesthetic truth of existential *poiesis*. In short, with modern art's evocation of the sublime, the capacity for metaphysical experience curtailed by existential *poiesis* is aesthetically redeemed; and likewise within speculative reason, the aesthetic experience of sensuous particularity cut short by the conceptual *ratio* is rescued. The negative dialectics of existential *poiesis* and conceptual *ratio*, given expression through both these perspectives, constitutes Adorno's speculative politics of freedom. Adorno articulates this utopian politics of freedom through what he refers to as the negative unity of speculative philosophy and art.

Conceptual *ratio*, sensuous particularity and speculative philosophy

Dialectical experience, according to Hegel, concerns the mutual mediation of thought and being. In effect thought mediates being in so far as being becomes an object of thought. In other words, as an object or expression of thought, being becomes thought. Despite being qualitatively other than thought, the nonidentical object of thought remains wholly determined by thought. Hence the mediation of thought by being consists in nothing more than a self-reflective relation of thought to itself. Hegel thereby dissolves the qualitative difference of thought and being in the absolute truth of a self-reflective reason. Having initially upheld the qualitative difference of thought and being in the opening chapter of *The Phenomenology of Mind*,¹ Hegel quickly disguises the sensuous quality of being in a conceptual mask for the sake of an indubitable claim to absolute knowledge. In so doing, Adorno argues -

Hegel fails to do justice to his own insight. The insight says that even though the nonidentical is identical - as self-transmitted - it is nonetheless nonidentical: it is otherness to all its identifications. Hegel does not carry the dialectics of nonidentity to the end.²

What was qualitatively other than thought now has the singular and exclusive status of thought. The dialectical mediation of thought and being does not so much preserve their qualitative nonidentity but reduces being to thought. Knowledge of the nonidentical object thereby reveals nothing more than thought's self-confirming concept of itself as thought. As Adorno indicates -

This is precisely what reduces the dialectics of nonidentity and identity to a mere semblance: identity wins over nonidentity.³

¹ G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind* [1807] tr. J.B. Baillie, New York and London, Harper Torchbooks, 1967.

² T.W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* [1966] tr. E.B. Ashton, New York, Continuum, 1990, p.120.

³ *Ibid.*, p.173.

The determining mediation of thought by its nonidentical object is altogether annulled. With the uncontested primacy thus accorded the conceiving subject, Hegel hypostatizes the function of conceptual mediation as the only possible relation of subject and object, of thought and being. It is just this determining universality of Reason, its one-sided positivity, to which Hegel's formulas concerning 'the identity of identity and difference' and 'the negation of negation' make claim. This conceptual synthesis of subject and object is, however, the tautological circularity of a thought that never leaves its transcendental point of origin. Hegel's concept of becoming is more properly the still point of what already is, an ontological metaphysics of the eternal recurrence of reason.

What thus wins out in the inmost core of [Hegel's] dialectics is the anti-dialectical principle : that traditional logic which, *more arithmetico*, takes minus times minus for a plus. ...[yet] a negation of particularities ... remains negative. Its only positive side would be criticism, definite negation; it would not be a circumventing result with a happy grasp on affirmation.⁴

Not only does the determinate negation of sensuous being by conceptual thought remain negative or critical in character, Adorno argues, but that being is itself the determinate negation of thought's self-confirming presumption to have wholly accounted for it. What is at stake then, for Adorno's negative dialectics, is how thought may think the determinate negation of itself by the nonidentical object to which it refers, without reducing the latter to an aspect of its own self-reflected identity. This raises a seemingly unresolvable dilemma, since it is only by way of conceptual thought that the determining force of this nonidentical other may find philosophical expression. The attempt to redeem the object's determining mediation of thought, without falling back into idealism, constitutes the crux of Adorno's negative dialectics.

In order to dismantle what Adorno calls the conceptual spell, the traditional fetish of rational identity and synthetic positivity, it will be necessary to show, by way of that very conceptual form, how conceptual thinking is mediated by the nonidentical object to which it refers. It will be necessary, that is, to reverse the conceptual reduction of the nonidentical object within the concept's claim to rationally necessary, objective, universal knowledge. The possibility of such immanent critique, with respect to Hegel's idealism, shows up in the qualities he attributes to the universal world Spirit. For this absolute Subject is said to adopt those same empirical characteristics of individuality and immediate being-in-itself whose untruth it had already soundly denounced. Indeed the

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.158-159. {Adorno's italics}

spontaneity attributed to the empirical subject, and which is suppressed by the determining absoluteness of the world Spirit, now reappears as the qualitative ground of Spirit's own self-determining character. Moreover, with Hegel's claim to Spirit's historical embodiment in the contemporary monarch of Prussia, Spirit takes on the contingent character of the individual monarch's will; a contingency which has otherwise been suffocated in Hegel's defence of rational necessity. Not only does the conceptually constituting subject universalise the particular, but what is universal is also particularised in its own supposed immediacy and spontaneity. In this way Hegel's concept of the world Spirit reveals its undisclosed determination by a nonidentical, empirical subject; an individuality otherwise repressed in Spirit's absolute universality. While it may be argued, against this view, that all particularity is not simply negated but at once conserved within the universality of Spirit, through the Hegelian dialectic of sublation, the persistent reversibility of universal and particular subverts such a claim. This means, Adorno argues, that -

The inherent reversibility of the identity thesis counteracts the principle of its spirit. If entity can be totally derived from that spirit, the spirit is doomed to resemble the mere entity it means to contradict; otherwise spirit and entity would not go together.⁵

There is further evidence of such reversibility with Hegel's qualification of the world Spirit acting within us precisely as a 'second nature'.⁶ Having shown the accidental, contingent form of 'first nature' as an inessential moment in the self-determining history of Spirit, Hegel later reinstates this 'natural' inessentiality as indeed the essential character of Spirit's historical development.

What this reversibility demonstrates, Adorno argues, is the Hegelian Spirit's incapacity to reflect sufficiently on its own determination by that nonidentical entity or context which it otherwise claims to govern. From an historical perspective, the self-determining character of the Hegelian Absolute is but the spiritualised reflection of what it is not, namely the determining force of bourgeois social relations. In other words, the supposed dialectical identity of history and Hegel's universal Spirit is better understood as the philosophical mirror of a society governed by the universal principle of commodity exchange - namely, abstract equivalence.

[I]n so far as the unity of consciousness is modeled after objectivity - that is to say, in so far as it is measured by the possibility of constituting objects - it is the conceptual reflex

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.142.

⁶ G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right* [1821] tr. T.M. Knox, Oxford, O.U.P., 1969, p.20.

of the total, seamless juncture of the productive acts in society which the objectivity of goods, their 'object character', requires if it is to come about at all.⁷

Having styled itself after the bourgeois drive to master nature in the name of the species' continued self-preservation, the Hegelian World Spirit at once reveals itself as an abstract legal claim to the legitimacy of bourgeois social relations. In light of the species' ongoing subjection to natural and historical forces beyond its control, however, the Hegelian identity of history and Spirit is further exposed as an ideological cover for what continues to produce affective agony and material suffering. Hegel has clearly failed to adequately consider these negatively determining, nonidentical implications for the self-affirming, 'rational' identity of Spirit and history.

In the midst of history, Hegel sides with its immutable element, with the ever-same identity of the process whose totality is said to bring salvation. Quite unmetaphorically, he can be charged with mythologizing history.⁸

Hence, despite itself, Spirit's determinate negation of social conflict sets up what is more adequately understood as an ideological restoration of history's already naturalised and unmitigated chaos.

The purpose of reversing the conceptual or subjective reduction, of unveiling the immanent mediation of Hegel's concept of Spirit by that which Spirit claims to master, is not, however, to raise the nonidentical object to an all determining status traditionally assumed by the concept. Such a subjectively unmediated materialism, evident in the orthodox Marxism of Engels and Lenin, simply reproduces that empty conceptual posturing it was designed to overcome. In defending what he nevertheless calls the 'preponderance' of the object, the indissolubility of sensuous materiality in thought, Adorno is not asserting that such nonidentical being remains unmediated by a conceiving subject. On the contrary, this conceptual mediation is unavoidably present, he argues, in all claims to objective knowledge. The subject's inability to wholly subsume the object of knowledge within its conceptual categories, however, is just that which indicates something beyond the subject's phenomenological grasp; something radically other, which, despite the subject's mediating role, remains nonidentical with this subject.

[T]he concept of immediacy, points to that which cannot be removed by its own concept. Mediation makes no claim whatever to exhaust all things; it postulates, rather, that what it transmits is not thereby exhausted.⁹

⁷ T.W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* op. cit., p.179.

Hume had also defended the object's material preponderance in his critique of the Cartesian *cogito*. What Hume's empiricism failed to appreciate, however, is that any discursive presentation of empirical experience occurs by way of conceptual categories that are qualitatively different from that experience. In other words, empirical experience does not carry with it a direct revelation of truth. Here the subject misunderstands its role as that of a passive reflector. This same misunderstanding, albeit in the form of a social Darwinism, and as just now indicated, is also evident in orthodox Marxism. It is again apparent in Positivist epistemology. For the experiential object of cognition, generally referred to by epistemological studies as the fact of bodily sensations, is recast, through methodological rules, into conceptual form as though there were no qualitative difference between them. The difficulty with Positivism's epistemological method is this -

Sensation, the crux of epistemology, needs epistemology to reinterpret it into a fact of consciousness, in contradiction to its own full character - which after all, is to serve as authority for its cognition.¹⁰

So while Adorno is in some sense sympathetic to empiricism's various attempts to give priority to sensuous matter over conceptual form, his point is that what is physically or materially other than thought is at once unavoidably mediated by its conceptual presentation. In order to avoid idealism's ultimately conceptual constitution of sensuous being what is necessary, in Adorno's view, is not so much an even greater passivity on the part of the observing subject, but a more searching inquiry by thought concerning its own sensuously and historically mediated constitution.

What is in question here is the very notion of conceptual rationality. The traditionally accepted form of rationality since Plato, despite Plato cautioning against this in certain passages of the *Phaedrus*,¹¹ has been one based on the model of mathematics. Here an object is measured exclusively in terms of pre-defined units of conceptual meaning. In this way the claim to rational objectivity is made altogether dependent on the primacy attributed conceptual thought and its logical demands. With this propensity for conceptual definition as its point of departure, the conceiving subject has itself been reduced to a repository of logical categories through which an object is made to measure. While Hegel recognises the qualitative moment underlying conceptual quantification, the

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.357.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.172.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.193.

¹¹ Plato, *Phaedrus* tr. B. Jowett in *Great Books of the Western World* 54 vols., ed. R.M. Hutchins, Chicago, Encyclopaedia Britannica., 1952, vol. 7, pp.115-141.

dialectic he propounds, despite his claims to the contrary Adorno argues, reveals an ultimate dependence on formal arithmetic principles. For the identity of identity and difference is no more than the arithmetic algorithm which yields a positive result from the multiplication of two negatives. However, as Adorno points out, the very capacity for conceptual synthesis is rendered inoperable if such synthesis does not already exclude from its particular moments that which it will then inconsistently attribute to its result. In abstracting thus from the qualitative nonidentity of the subject/object relation, Hegel does violence not only to the particularity of subject and object respectively, but thereby undermines Spirit's claim to absolute truth and reason. The lack of self-reflection on its own conclusive finality demonstrates the method's qualitative unreason. The truth of philosophical reflection is here maligned with its mythical devotion to the dominant culture of scientific reason.

Paradoxically enough, the affinity which Adorno's negative dialectics displays with materialist philosophy, in so far as it seeks to undo the supremacy of the constituting concept, nevertheless reiterates the Idealist *credo*. Adorno states -

A basic philosophy ... necessarily carries with it the primacy of the concept; whatever withholds itself from the concept is departing from the form of allegedly basic philosophizing.¹²

Adorno's critique of idealism now appears flawed by the priority accorded the concept, by the contradiction in its otherwise materialist intention. As indicated earlier, however, Adorno distinguishes between the unavoidable conceptual character of philosophical expression and idealism's consequent assumption that conceptual mediation is altogether sufficient and conclusive with regard to the disclosure of objective truth. In the above-cited passage, Adorno simply articulates the inbuilt limit of all philosophy from within which he deconstructs its traditional governance of sensuous and social objects. Hence truth is no longer considered dependent solely on acts of conceptual self-reference. Conceptual meaning is conveyed more appropriately, Adorno argues, through its nonidentical relation to an affectively felt world outside it. Without the preponderance of the object, the subjective form of conceptual meaning would become altogether vacuous. While philosophy necessarily carries with it the primacy of the concept, this does not diminish the determining nonidentity of an affective reality at work within conceptual relations.

Mediation of the object means that it must not be statically,

¹² T.W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* op. cit., p. 136.

dogmatically hypostatized but can be known only as it entwines with subjectivity; mediation of the subject means that without the moment of objectivity it would be totally nil.¹³

Adorno's point is that neither conceptual thought nor its nonidentical object may be construed as an 'absolute first'. Both act as the determining nonidentical and so negative principle of the other. Neither does this mutually negative relation, here abstractly presented in thought, thereby become some ultimate rational or ontological principle of being, in which case, as with Hegel, it would be transformed into a transcendental act of conceptual self-identity. In passing over the affective mediation of thought, conceptual claims become all the more susceptible to ideological distortion. Only through critical self-reflection upon its own meaning, Adorno maintains, will the concept escape the tautological vacuum of its apparent being-for-itself.

Insight into the constitutive character of the nonconceptual in the concept would end the compulsive identification which the concept brings unless halted by such reflection. Reflection upon its own meaning is the way out of the concept's seeming being-in-itself as a unit of meaning.¹⁴

Such insight implies the possibility of presenting a subject's experience of being in an altogether new configuration beyond the magic circle of a purely rational or conceptual self-identity. The undistorted experience of the object is revealed, Adorno argues, only in the subject's ability to discriminate between the conceptual ordering of an object and that object as it exists outside this formal representation.

This discriminating experience is made up of two distinct but inseparable moments. Adorno refers to the first aspect of this experience as a subject's spontaneous affinity with an object to which it mimetically responds.¹⁵ Within discursive practice this mimetic response is given voice in an utterance shaped by the sensuous qualities of the object itself. In other words, mimetic assimilation to an object is not simply imitative; it does not involve a reflective re-presentation or mirror image of those objects with which an affinity is formed. For these objects are at once transfigured in the very medium which gives them expression. A translation, for example, while imitating the original, at once

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.186.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.12.

¹⁵ There are many excellent discussions of Adorno's notion of mimesis. Three of these are 1) Michael Cahn's 'Subversive Mimesis: T.W. Adorno and the Impasse of Critique' in *Mimesis in Contemporary Theory* vol.1 ed. M. Spariosu, Philadelphia and Amsterdam, Benjamins, 1984; 2) Shierry Nicholzen's *Exact Imagination, Late Work On Adorno's Aesthetics* Cambridge Massachusetts and London England, M.I.T., 1997; and 3) Martin Jay's 'Mimesis and Mimetology: Adorno and Lacoue-Labarthe' in *The Semblance of Subjectivity* eds. T. Huhn and L. Zuidervaart, Cambridge Massachusetts and London England, M.I.T., 1997.

transforms that text into something other; just as a musical score is transformed into sound, and differently with each performance. In other words, the mimetic subject, while responding to an object through spontaneous expression, does not reduce that object to a simple being-for-consciousness. While implicating the hope of identity, mimetic transfiguration does not subvert the nonidentical relation between expression and what occasions it. In effect, mimetic response is nothing short of a qualitative leap beyond and yet within the principle of identity; a leap, which in relinquishing the mock supremacy of the conceiving subject, at once revives the expressive spontaneity of that subject from within the coercive enclosure of its former conceptual presuppositions. Mimetic spontaneity, understood in this way, effectively ‘use[s] the strength of the subject to break through the fallacy of constitutive subjectivity’.¹⁶ Nevertheless Adorno warns against hypostatizing the subjective leap itself.

[T]he modes of subjective reaction which the object needs require ceaseless objective correction in their turn. This occurs in self-reflection, in the ferment of mental experience.¹⁷

In other words, within discursive practice, the spontaneous act of mimetically naming an object through linguistic utterance is objectively mediated by conceptual reflection upon this experience.

The conceptual mediation of mimetic response, which forms the second aspect of a subject’s discriminating sensibility, transfigures mimetic expression into an objective, albeit fragmented unity. For this unity is no longer transfixed in the traditional, hierarchical procedure of formal deduction, dialectic or otherwise, which results in the claim to a purely rational system of absolute Knowledge. The subject no longer mediates or constitutes the objective world from within what it believes to be its own conceptual absoluteness. When conceptual thought in traditional philosophy coercively synthesises the object within its own categorial precision, it performs an act of self-substitution, and so abstracts from the nonidentical object determining its formulation. What clearly demonstrates this nonidentity is the subject’s need to bring into focus other related concepts in an attempt to bridge the gap.

The determinable flaw in every concept makes it necessary to cite others; this is the font of the only constellations which inherited some of the hope of the name.¹⁸

¹⁶ T.W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* op. cit., p.xx.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.47.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.53.

The impossibility of achieving a final identity of concept and object, despite the claim to such identity postulated through the very act of naming, results in what Adorno calls a fragmented or discontinuous constellation of concepts. The organising principle of this constellation is no longer a general cover concept from which all others are necessarily deduced, but rather the rhetorical emphasis through which these concepts acquire their specific positional relations. Adorno also refers to this rhetorical subversion of logical unity as the technique of parataxis - 'artificial disturbances that evade the logical hierarchy of a subordinating syntax'.¹⁹ These rhetorical, paratactical relations are themselves mediated by the mimetic response to the object in question. Deplored by the scientific tradition, rhetoric is now revalued by Adorno as that very element through which the identity of subject and object is most nearly achieved.

In what thus constitutes a decisive break from the conceptual positivity of Hegelian dialectics, Adorno states -

Dialectics - literally: language as the organon of thought - would mean to attempt a critical rescue of the rhetorical element, a mutual approximation of thing and expression, to the point where the difference fades. Dialectics appropriates for the power of thought what historically seemed to be a flaw in thinking : its link with language, which nothing can wholly break.²⁰

Language had previously been considered nothing more than an instrument of thought, a system of cognitive signs, whereby an object is known solely according to conceptual definition. This traditional claim to conceptual truth is indicative of the subject's delusion concerning its rational mastery of the objective world. For here the transfiguring mimetic quality of language is suppressed in the subject's rigid adherence to pre-given, conceptual schematics of rational truth. Language implicates not only a conceptual *ratio* through which communication may occur, but also a mimetic response through which communication is affectively motivated.²¹

As an expression of the thing itself, language is not fully reducible to communication with others. Nor, however ... is it simply independent of communication. Otherwise it would elude all critique, even in its relationship to the matter at hand, and would reduce that relationship to an arbitrary presumption. Language as expression of the thing itself and language as communication are inter-woven. The ability to name the matter at hand is developed

¹⁹ T.W. Adorno, 'Parataxis: On Hölderlin's Late Poetry' [1964] in *Notes to Literature vol.2* tr. S.W. Nichol森, New York, Columbia University Press, 1992.

²⁰ T.W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* op. cit., p.56.

²¹ Simon Jarvis notes this double character of language in his *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* Oxford, Polity Press, 1998, p177.

under the compulsion to communicate it, and that element of coercion is preserved in it; conversely, it could not communicate anything that it did not have as its own intention, undistracted by other considerations. This dialectic plays itself out within the medium of language itself.²²

Here the autonomy of mimetic expression is dialectically constrained by the necessity to communicate through concepts that are socially and historically accessible. With Adorno's defence of mimesis and the paratactic, rhetorical organisation of concepts, a long overdue respect is now accorded the mediating force of the nonidentical object in conceptual thought.

In acknowledging the mimetic mediation of thought by its nonidentical object, and so too the rhetorical assemblage of conceptual constellations, the Hegelian dialectic of essence and appearance undergoes a radical re-appraisal. With Hegel, Spirit's self-reflective universal reason is understood as the mediating essence of all that empirically appears in the natural-historical world. With Adorno, however, essence is the mediating force of social history embedded in what otherwise appear as empirically immediate facts of consciousness.

Essence can no longer be hypostatized as the pure, spiritual being-in-itself. Rather, essence passes into that which lies concealed beneath the facade of immediacy, of the supposed facts, and which makes the facts what they are. It comes to be the law of doom thus far obeyed by history, a law the more irresistible the more it will hide beneath the facts, only to be comfortably denied by them.²³

Adorno's inversion of the Hegelian relations of essence and appearance, where social history becomes the essential determination of an object's conceptual appearance in consciousness, nevertheless depends on that object's submission to conceptual mediation in order that its social value may be made known. In other words, the history of the object, the essence of its conceptual appearance, is nevertheless transmitted, paradoxically enough, by that object's meaningful transfigurations in the history and tradition of knowledge.

The history locked in the object can only be delivered by a knowledge mindful of the historic positional value of the object in its relation to other objects - by the actualisation and concentration of something which is already known and is

²² T.W. Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies* [1963] tr. S.W. Nicholson, Cambridge Massachusetts and London England, M.I.T., 1993, p105. Jay Bernstein uses this dialectic of language as the cornerstone of his critique of Habermas' idea of communicative action. See his *Recovering Ethical Life. Jürgen Habermas and the future of Critical Theory* London and New York, Routledge, 1995, p.7.

²³ T.W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* op. cit., p.167.

transformed by that knowledge.²⁴

Despite what now resurfaces as a conceptually mediated social history, and an apparent return to conceptual thought as the determining essence of an object's becoming, Adorno's explication of mimetic response and the paratactic organisation of conceptual constellations are enough to quell such suspicions. For the presentation of historical knowledge, when mindful of its conceptual limitations, will be only too aware that its determining essence at once pervades that presentation and yet remains nonidentical with it. Indeed Adorno maintains that the essence of subjective consciousness may be felt only negatively over and against its conceptual identifications. This, Adorno argues, is somewhat akin to Husserl's notion of 'essence perception', albeit now stripped of its idealist suppositions. In other words, the essence of consciousness remains the determining force of socio-historic relations.

The perception of radical nonidentity within thought's otherwise determining absoluteness is possible, Adorno argues, only for a subject conscious of its dependence on an alienating socio-historic context. However, when individual freedom remains the ideological bulwark of a social process compelling all but universal submission to its economic and political machinations, alienation is for the most part wholly denied. Becoming conscious of this social condition demands a critical response to those philosophies that express an actual reconciliation of individual and society. Already critical of Hegel's assertion concerning the historical reconciliation of what is rational and actual, Marx indicated their persistent nonidentity in the social context of capitalist commodity production. Certainly Marx considered the historical process leading to capitalism as one of natural growth, yet unlike Hegel the dialectical laws that govern this natural history are not hypostatized as an ontological apology for the actual suppression of individuality and social freedom. Indeed with the historical actualisation of social freedom those laws would disappear. While Adorno, similarly to the later Marx, offers no definite historical image of freedom and social reconciliation, he does offer an indefinite utopian perspective on what that freedom might mean.²⁵

The reconciled condition would not be the philosophical imperialism of annexing the alien. Instead, its happiness would

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

²⁵ However unsatisfactory this may seem to those needing a blueprint for the actualisation of freedom, the social catastrophes arising from the early Marx's idea of proletarian freedom and from Nietzsche's *Übermensch* are indication enough of the dangers inherent in any pre-determined politics of freedom. Broadly speaking, negative dialectics involves a social critique of actual theoretical and practical blocks to freedom without holding to any socially progressive outcome as the necessary result of such critique.

lie in the fact that the alien, in the proximity it is granted, remains what is distant and different, beyond the heterogeneous and beyond that which is one's own.²⁶

Hence while the telos of negative dialectics is certainly the actualisation of freedom, Adorno's idea of freedom has no more specific content than that of a metaphysical yearning for social solidarity.

That this yearning or hope is not just an abstract utopianism, 'the pious hope for a better world', is evident in so far as it functions as a self-reflective critique of the absolute finality emerging through his own conceptual *ratio*.²⁷ For Adorno is acutely aware that negative dialectics, on account of the inherent universalising function of conceptual thought, assumes that same absolute positivity which it otherwise seeks to undo. This constitutes the unavoidable aporetic character of speculative philosophy. Indeed the mutually determinate negation of thought and its object remains conceptually bound to produce that same ontological identity which Hegel falsely posited as absolute truth. To avoid hypostatising the negative dialectical relations of thought and object, it is necessary to turn that relation against itself.

The critique of every self-absolutizing particular is a critique of the shadow which absoluteness casts upon the critique; it is a critique of the fact that critique itself, contrary to its own tendency, must remain within the medium of the concept. It destroys the claim of identity by testing and knowing it; therefore it can reach no further than that claim. The claim is a magic circle that stamps critique with the appearance of absolute knowledge. It is up to the self-reflection of critique to extinguish that claim, to extinguish it in the very negation that will not become a positing.²⁸

The metaphysical implications of an indeterminate hope for freedom break the effect of conceptual absoluteness and gives back to experience the possibility of escape from the totally confining conditions of conceptual immanence. Only through constant reflection upon critique itself, Adorno argues, will the hope of freedom be sustained.

Existential *poiesis*, metaphysics and autonomous art

Existential *poiesis* concerns an agonistic, self-affirming mode of behaviour, which Nietzsche articulates as radical nihilism. Critical of the passive, life-denying nihilism of Christian culture where suffering and misfortune are infused with personal guilt and a

²⁶ T.W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* op.cit., p.191.

²⁷ S. Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* op. cit., p.207.

²⁸ T.W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* op. cit., p.406.

misguided belief in life after death, radical nihilism transfigures the ever-recurring agonies of worldly experience as productive conditions for self-affirmation here and now. Acknowledging the eternal recurrence of suffering and despair, confronting the world's profound negativity, and yet positively affirming the joy and beauty of life, Nietzsche argues, involves an act of superhuman courage. The will to continually re-value life's present and future perspectives in this way, to give life the sense of an ongoing work of personal, artistic genius, he argues, is a sign of the *Übermensch*. Nietzsche's fictional character, Zarathustra, attempts to carry through this anti-metaphysical, self-disciplinary program of becoming *Übermensch*. Zarathustra nevertheless comes to parody the solitary, inwardly reflexive exemplarity he demands of himself as a teacher of virtue. In effect it is not yet possible to become *Übermensch*. At this point Nietzsche's notion of the *Übermensch* assumes a distinctly metaphysical, utopian quality, despite his frequent anti-metaphysical invective. Nietzsche's ethics of the *Übermensch* aporetically reveals, as Adorno puts it, a 'metaphysics of the artist'.²⁹

This aporia of a secular metaphysics of transcendence situated within an outright denial of metaphysics is again evident in the existential *poiesis* of Heidegger and Foucault. Heidegger's 'fundamental ontology' seeks to uncover the unthought origins, concealed since Plato, of what he considers the traditional metaphysics of will, where a universally immanent, yet nonetheless transcendent Being is said to imbue the world with rational, instrumental purpose. In contrast, Heidegger's anti-metaphysical ontology makes claim to a more fundamental Being, through which poetic meaning is given to *Dasein*'s ever-recurring fate, namely its path to death. *Dasein*'s authentic attendance to the immanent horizon of death again indicates, however, a quasi-transcendental, no less metaphysical notion of Being, albeit one now constituted as the ontological difference between being and not-being. Similarly to both Nietzsche and Heidegger, Foucault rejects the transcendental, anthropomorphised metaphysics of Kant and Hegel. In so doing he constructs an historical ontology of power/knowledge relations, whose metaphysical implications are supposedly dissolved in a totalising claim to absolute cultural immanence. Vehemently opposed to any utopian metaphysics of freedom, Foucault, on the one hand, insists that our specifically modern mode of resistance is an effect of the historical and cultural relations of power producing us. In this context of an all-embracing cultural immanence, we cannot step beyond the socio-cultural limits of self-production.

²⁹ T.W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature* 2 vols., tr. S.W. Nichol森, New York, Columbia University Press, 1991, vol.1, p.107.

On the other hand, however, power/knowledge relations also produce us as selves with an historically transgressive claim to go beyond our presently constructed self-identities, indeed beyond the modern limits of cultural immanence. From this perspective, Foucault's historical ontology of power reveals a critical metaphysics of freedom with utopian overtones. Paradoxically, the possibility of transgression reveals a speculative view to freedom in Foucault's otherwise anti-metaphysical historical ontology of cultural immanence.

In rejecting metaphysics, however, the existential leap beyond immanence unavoidably falls back within the already culturally inscribed limits of power. In this way existential *poiesis* repeats the error of the conceptual *ratio*. The all-exhaustive rationality of immanence, whether in the form of universal reason or an historical ontology of eternal recurrence, condemns us to a life in which we just carry on, to a life without possibility. The poetic leap of agonistic affirmation within what already is, is more properly an ironic mask concealing what Adorno describes as 'the withering of experience' in our functional enactment of those multiple social roles prescribed for us through the determining immanence of reason and culture.³⁰ This modern loss of experience is effectively a loss of self through loss of other, where the non-identical experience of self and other evaporates in the indeterminate difference between possibility and impossibility, between freedom and unfreedom. This loss becomes manifest in the unthinkable affliction of personal despair. The extreme horrors of this loss of experience are exemplified, Adorno contends, in the Auschwitz gassings, where death is the only hope for a life reduced to the recurrent agony of despair.

After Auschwitz, our feelings resist any claim of the positivity of existence as sanctimonious, as wronging the victims; they balk at squeezing any kind of sense, however bleached, out of the victim's fate. And these feelings do have an objective side after events that make a mockery of the construction of immanence as endowed with a meaning radiated by an affirmatively posited transcendence.³¹

In contrast to any affirmative postulation of transcendence, Adorno's utopian metaphysics of freedom is determinately produced through an immanent critique of modern social relations. Indeed the objective, historical ground of Adorno's critical metaphysics of freedom arises precisely through an affectively felt abhorrence at the practice of ethnic cleansing. Adorno's critical reflections on the ongoing failure of

³⁰ T.W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia* [1951] tr. E. Jephcott, London and New York, Verso, 1993, p.55.

³¹ T.W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* op. cit., p.361.

enlightened reason and 'post-metaphysical' culture to avert the modern politics of genocide produces an affectively mediated, materialist metaphysics that challenges both the anti-metaphysical ontologies of power/knowledge and the affectively unmediated metaphysics of reason.

Happiness, the only part of metaphysical experience that is more than impotent longing, gives us the inside of objects as something removed from the objects. Yet the [person] who enjoys this kind of experience naïvely, as though putting [h/er] hands on what the experience suggests, is acceding to the terms of the empirical world - terms [s/he] wants to transcend, though they alone give [h/er] the chance of transcending. ... A metaphysics proclaimed without recourse to subjective experience, without the immediate presence of the subject, is helpless before the autonomous subject's refusal to have imposed upon it what it cannot understand. And yet, whatever is directly evident to the subject suffers of fallibility and relativity.³²

Adorno likens his notion of critical metaphysical experience to a promise of happiness beyond the debilitating effects of scientific and cultural immanence, to after-images of something once felt in childhood. Where this utopian experience of metaphysical non-identity is revoked as chimerical, whether through the pragmatist ban on metaphysics generally, or through claims to radical cultural immanence, despair is made rational.

Adorno's secular metaphysics draws on what he calls the rescuing urge and block to metaphysics in Kant's *Critiques of Pure and Practical Reason*. In the former Kant defends a self-sufficient, cognitive rationality, whose immanent transcendental limits invalidate the possibility of metaphysical experience. In his later critique of moral reason, however, Kant salvages the metaphysical postulates of God, immortality, and freedom on the grounds that, without them, the intelligibility of moral experience would remain impossible. Kant refers more generally to this mutual exclusion of pure and practical reason as that between sensible and intelligible domains of possible experience. This division reverberates throughout Kant's philosophy, evident particularly in his distinctions between empirical and transcendental consciousness, happiness and virtue, particular and universal, the understanding and reason. Their radical separation, occasioned through the social division of intellectual from manual labour, Adorno argues, is the source of Kant's block to metaphysics.

The separation of the sensual and intellectual realms, the nerve of the argument in favor of the block, is a social product; by the *chorismos*, sensuality is designated as a victim of the intellect

³² *Ibid.*, p.374. {translation modified between brackets}

because, all arrangements to the contrary notwithstanding, the state of the world fails to content sensuality.³³

In effect this social division of labour has been theoretically institutionalised as the prerogative of an instrumental pragmatics not only on cognitive claims to truth but also on moral truth. Metaphysical postulates aside, Kant's moral reason, organised principally through a universalising, categorical imperative heralds the monopoly that this instrumental rationality came to exercise over the question of moral truth. This pragmatically generated block to metaphysics ideologically sustains our historical incarceration within the instrumental rationality of self-preservation by naturalising the socio-historic division of labour. The historical dialectic of instrumental reason's immanently determining presence within cognitive and moral experience, Adorno argues, is such that -

The authority of the Kantian concept of truth turned terroristic with the ban on thinking the absolute. Irresistibly, it drifts toward a ban on all thinking. What the Kantian block projects on truth is the self-maiming of reason, the mutilation reason inflicted upon itself as a rite of initiation into its own scientific character.³⁴

As Adorno further indicates, however, Kant nevertheless tacitly acknowledges the nihilistic implications of an instrumental conceptual *ratio* that has exclusive rights over cognitive and moral experience. Indeed it is precisely in order to counter such implications, Adorno argues, that Kant rescues the metaphysical ideas of God, immortality and freedom. For these speculative, metaphysical ideas transcend the universal immanence of instrumental reason within contemporary socio-cultural relations through their critical promise of a better world, of social solidarity and happiness. Adorno here defends the non-identical, utopian implications of Kant's metaphysics as a critical site of moral intelligibility.

Adorno's defence of Kantian metaphysics nevertheless involves the dissolution of the mutual exclusion of sensible and intelligible domains of experience. When bound by this mutual separation their respective relations to metaphysical experience become disfigured. On the one hand there arise dogmatic claims concerning the necessary existence of God, immortality and freedom; and on the other, these metaphysical ideas are debunked because of their purely imaginary status. This sets up a contradiction within the domain of intelligibility itself. For metaphysical ideas, while categorically banned from having 'an object of possible visibility', must nevertheless refer to or visualise a

³³ *Ibid.*, p.389. {Adorno's italics}

material reality in order to remain intelligible.³⁵ As Bernstein comments, the intelligible world is thereby 'poised in an apparently impossible space between the real and the merely imaginary'.³⁶ However, as Kant's notion of the thing-in-itself demonstrates, what is barred from the sensible domain of finite empirical experience effectively mediates that domain as 'the self-negation of the finite mind'.³⁷

To be a mind at all, it must know that what it touches upon does not exhaust it, that the finiteness that is its like does not exhaust it. The mind thinks what would be beyond it. Such metaphysical experience is the inspiration of Kantian philosophy, once that philosophy is drawn out of the armor of its method. The question whether metaphysics is still possible at all must reflect the negation of the finite which finiteness requires. Its enigma animates the word 'intelligible'.³⁸

Once the self-identical absoluteness of the finite mind is dismantled, what Kantian metaphysics reveals is not so much the necessity of a transcendent being, but rather the negatively mediated possibility of transcendence. Indeed the necessity of postulating intelligibility, Adorno argues, does not entail the necessity of some transcendent existence. Nor is the imaginary aspect of this possibility sufficient to reduce it to an 'airy nothing'. In other words, as Adorno puts it, '[t]he concept of the intelligible realm would be the concept of something which is not, and yet it is not a pure nonbeing'.³⁹ This means, in effect, that the intelligible paradoxically *appears* in the sensible as the self-negation of the sensible. The intelligible sphere now translates as a semblance of transcendence, mediated by and yet non-identical to the sensible. Moreover, this illusory semblance of transcendence is necessary to the extent that we remain critical of the social immanence of an instrumental rationality and an historical ontology of self-affirming power relations.

Differently from that semblance of transcendence defended by traditional metaphysics and religion, Adorno's concept of necessary semblance does not depend on the absolute separation of cognitive understanding and moral reason or a dualism of body and spirit. Rather the illusory character of semblance emerges within a definitively materialist mediation of these sensible and intelligible domains of human experience. As

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.388.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.390.

³⁶ J.M. Bernstein, 'Why Rescue Semblance? Metaphysical Experience and the Possibility of Ethics' in *The Semblance of Subjectivity*. (eds.) T. Huhn and L. Zuidervaart, Cambridge Mass. and London England, MIT, 1997, p.193.

³⁷ T.W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* op. cit., p.392.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.393.

the self-negation of the finite sensible mind, otherwise caught in the cultural immanence of a self-preserving pragmatics and an eternal recurrence of despair, this necessary semblance of transcendence now finds its most potent expression, Adorno argues, in modern autonomous art. Art and aesthetics become the experiential and reflective context of moral intelligibility.

Art is semblance at its highest peaks; but its semblance, the irresistible part of it, is given to it by what is not semblance. What art, notably the art decried as nihilistic, says in refraining from judgments is that everything is not just nothing. If it were, whatever is would be pale, colorless, indifferent. No light falls on [people] and things without reflecting transcendence. Indelible from the resistance to the fungible world of [exchange] is the resistance of the eye that does not want the colors of the world to fade. Semblance is a promise of nonsemblance.⁴⁰

Rescuing the utopian semblance of happiness and social solidarity from the ontological immanence of recurrent relations of power at once involves the rescue of noumenal non-identity, of sensuous particularity from the suffocating grasp of a transcendently immanent conceptual *ratio*. In effect, the semblance of transcendence in modern autonomous art constitutes a metaphysical critique of transcendently and ontologically inscribed forms of social immanence.

Existential *poiesis* itself claims to rescue sensuous particularity through its aesthetic configuration of life as art. Yet the semblance of transcendence to which this rescue gives rise, apparent in the agonistic will of Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, remains ensnared in the sheer immanence of culturally inscribed power relations; an immanence reinforced, moreover, by an overt denial of metaphysical possibility. Emblematic of this denial is Zarathustra's parody of his utopian quest for an exemplary life of solitude. Here the semblance of life as art does not hold out the possibility of transcendence, a going beyond the fateful recurrence of power and domination, but merely the adopting of appropriate masks or *personae* in the strategic negotiation of power relations. Existential *poiesis* thereby erodes the critical metaphysics of utopian transcendence evident, Adorno maintains, in modern autonomous art. The intelligibility of transcendence as social critique is disfigured in the existential affirmation of life as art or art as life. This indeterminate fusion of self and other -

is, for Adorno, prohibited rather than encouraged by the artwork. The artwork witnesses not the achievement of subjective freedom, but the continuation of its failure to ever fully arrive. Hence, the

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.404–405. {translation modified between brackets}

objectivity of the artwork is the literal embodiment of the distance between where we are and freedom. The artwork stands not just as a testament but also as a reminder of our unfreedom.⁴¹

Only with the actualisation of freedom could life become an ongoing work of art and so relinquish the need for a critical metaphysics of transcendence. Where life remains historically tied to the economics of commodity exchange, however, and thus to a pragmatic politics of self-preservation, it remains unable to develop conditions for universal happiness and social solidarity. Only through the semblance of transcendence affectively experienced in the autonomous art object does the speculative, utopian claim to social freedom first become manifest.

Adorno otherwise refers to this utopian semblance of transcendence in modern autonomous art as an experience of the sublime. This experience, he argues, is the truth content of modernist art; a truth content which emerges through art's negation of its own aesthetic form, and yet a form, or aesthetic semblance of beauty, to which artworks are nevertheless necessarily bound.

Works in which the aesthetic form, under pressure of the truth content, transcends itself occupy the position that was once held by the concept of the sublime.⁴²

That position, elaborated by Kant, confines reflective judgements of the sublime to the indeterminate form or incomprehensible greatness of nature. Aesthetic judgements of beauty, on the other hand, concern cognitively determinate forms of nature. Both forms of judgement, according to Kant, involve a reflective, disinterested pleasure; however, the sublime, contrary to the positive pleasure of the aesthetic, carries a satisfaction 'which rather deserves to be called negative pleasure'.⁴³ Indeed judgements of the sublime reveal a self-negating deference in face of nature's overwhelming magnitude; a self-negation which at once occasions a pleasing reflection on our sovereign capacity for transcendence in the supersensible, intelligible sphere of moral reason. Here Kant implicates a determinate mediation of nature and moral reason. In contrast, the lack of mediation between aesthetic judgement and moral reason becomes evident when Kant states that the beautiful in art stands merely as 'the symbol of the morally good'.⁴⁴ Modernist art turns against this exclusion of art from any determinate relation to moral reason precisely through the negation of beauty and aesthetic form. Art does not so much express a direct

⁴¹ T. Huhn, 'Kant, Adorno, and the Social Opacity of the Aesthetic' in *The Semblance of Subjectivity*: (eds.) T. Huhn and L. Zuidervaart, Cambridge Mass. and London England, MIT, 1997, p.249.

⁴² T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* [1970] tr. R. Hullot-Kentor, London, Athlone Press, 1999, p.196.

⁴³ I. Kant, *Critique of Judgement* [1793] tr. J.H. Bernard, New York, Hafner Press, 1951, p.83.

moral judgement, however, since this would annul its very being as art. Rather the mediation of moral reason and modernist art occurs as a process of grieving over its sacrifice of what cannot be integrated into art's aesthetic form.

In serene beauty [art's] recalcitrant other would be completely pacified, and such aesthetic reconciliation is fatal for the extra-aesthetic. That is the melancholy of art. It achieves an unreal reconciliation at the price of real reconciliation. All that art can do is grieve for the sacrifice it makes, which, in its powerlessness, art itself is.⁴⁵

In so doing, Adorno argues, modernist artworks develop an affinity with the sublime. 'The sublime, which Kant reserved exclusively for nature, later became the historical constituent of art itself'.⁴⁶ This means that 'the opposition between art and nature, beauty and the sublime, becomes an internal constituent of artworks themselves'.⁴⁷

Whereas the Kantian sublime indicates a moral transcendence occurring within the reflective subject, with the sublime's historical transposition into art there arises a distinctly materialist reversal of emphasis. The radical disjunction of an extra-aesthetic, moral reason from the otherwise integrative form of aesthetic beauty appears in art as cruelty; not necessarily as direct images of cruelty, but as a discordant ugliness that emphatically disrupts the serene, pacifying spell of beauty. By virtue of what Adorno calls the 'determinate irreconcilability'⁴⁸ between art's aesthetic form and the mimetic expression of ugliness, the truth content of modernist art emerges as a morally critical, sublime transcendence of the disfiguring effects occasioned by the integrative, subsumptive power of modern instrumental reason. Differently from the Kantian sublime, where the subject holds onto a morally transcendent relation to nature, the modernist sublime gives rise to a possible, albeit utopian reconciliation with nature.

Adorno's account hugs the shoreline of the Kantian sublime while transforming it: what was the sacrifice of the imagination for the sake of reason becomes the sacrifice of the material equivalent of the unifying work of the transcendental imagination, i.e. aesthetic beauty, for the sake of the truth (reason) that would redeem it.⁴⁹

At this point what perhaps needs to be stressed, however, is that this sublime reconciliation with nature, or what more precisely refers to our social reconciliation with

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.198.

⁴⁵ T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* op. cit., p.52. {translation modified between brackets}

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.196.

⁴⁷ J.M. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* [1992] Oxford, Polity Press, 1997, p.236.

⁴⁸ T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* op. cit., p.168.

⁴⁹ J.M. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art* op. cit., p.239.

each other, does not actually appear in art. Paradoxically, it appears only through its absence as an experience brought on by the compositional tension between aesthetic form and its immanent, mimetic negation. This negative unity of the sublime is a grieving over the loss of beauty while at once longing for its return in a still utopian freedom.

Without surrendering art to the more immediate instrumental aims of 'progressive' politics as Brecht, Benjamin, and Sartre advocate, Adorno argues that the emancipatory effect of art on social relations takes place only indirectly by disturbing the complacency of reified consciousness. Autonomous art confronts consciousness with its own socially introjected self-domination. The works of Kafka and Beckett, for example, give expression to the social destitution wrought by the over-riding immanence of instrumental reason without engaging in direct political critique and without resort to any consoling image of beauty.

Kafka's prose and Beckett's plays ... have an effect by comparison with which officially committed works looks like pantomime. Kafka and Beckett arouse the fear which existentialism merely talks about. ... The inescapability of their work compels the change of attitude which committed works merely demand.⁵⁰

Beckett's mimetic transfiguration of modern life reveals not only a debilitated relation to nature, but also an incapacity to see beyond the present historical stasis. The characters in Beckett's *Endgame*, Clov and Hamm, are found vegetating in a garbage dump barely able to take cognisance of the world's 'corpsed' condition.

CLOV: (He gets up on ladder, turns the telescope on the without.)
Lets see. (He looks, moving the telescope.) Zero ... (he looks)
... zero ... (he looks) ... and zero.
HAMM: Nothing stirs. All is-
CLOV: Zer-
HAMM: (violently) Wait till you're spoken to. (Normal voice.) All is
... all is ... all is what? (Violently.) All is what?
CLOV: What all is? In a word. Is that what you want to know? Just a
moment. (He turns the telescope on the without, looks, lowers
the telescope, turns toward Hamm.) Corpsed.⁵¹

Everything is dead. History lies in ruins. The repetitions that occur throughout the play are testimony to a history become defunct. All that remains of history is its own decline. Not only history but nature too has been irretrievably demolished. In a world where all is produced on the basis of economic self-preservation, 'there's no more nature'.⁵² Nature

⁵⁰ T.W. Adorno, 'Commitment' [1962] tr. F. McDonagh in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader* eds. A. Arato and E. Gebhardt, New York, Continuum, 1993, pp.314-315.

⁵¹ S. Beckett, *Endgame* [1958] London and Boston, Faber and Faber, 1979, p.29-30.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p.16.

has been decimated in the face of industrial expansion to the point where nothing will grow.

HAMM: Did your seeds come up?

CLOV: No.

HAMM: Did you scratch round them to see if they had sprouted?

CLOV: They haven't sprouted.

HAMM: Perhaps it's still too early.

CLOV: If they were going to sprout they would have sprouted.

(Violently.) They'll never sprout!⁵³

The loss of nature and historical consciousness results in an experience of the world that is severely numbed.

In Brecht's plays, however, we are presented with an objective simulation of the world, 'social documentaries', according to Adorno, 'that are to function as down payments on empirical research yet to be done'.⁵⁴ Moreover the social realism to which Brecht objectively aspires is evident, Adorno asserts, through the studied lack of subjective expression in the language of his characters. Nevertheless, Brecht's imitative critique of social reality remains naive, governed as it is by a pre-formulated image of social beatitude. Beckett, on the other hand, neither produces an objective account of social reality nor postulates thereby a positive account of historical meaning. There is in effect no positive foundation, either subjective or objective, from which the contemporary social and ecological catastrophe may be given expression.

If art tried directly to register an objection to the gapless web, it would become completely entangled; thus, as occurs in such exemplary fashion in Beckett's *Endgame*, art must either eliminate from itself the nature with which it is concerned, or attack it. The only *parti pris* left to it, that of death, is at once critical and metaphysical.⁵⁵

Indeed Beckett's technique involves the negation of social content such that it becomes a determinate principle of form. Through this determinate principle of form, which necessarily strives for an aesthetic integration of content, Beckett's art, like all art however, participates in myth and domination. Yet it is for just this reason, Adorno argues, that autonomous art 'incorporate[s] its own decline; as the critique of the spirit of domination it is the spirit that is able to turn against itself'.⁵⁶ Autonomous art turns on itself in the determinate irreconcilability of its aesthetic form with the apparent

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.17.

⁵⁴ T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* op. cit., p.32.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p.133. {Adorno's italics}

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.320.

meaninglessness of its content. What is meaningless or absurd in Beckett's plays does not arise through an abstract negation of meaning, however, but more precisely through 'the photographic negative of a reality referred to meaning'.⁵⁷ According to Adorno, this indicates that -

The immanent contradiction of the absurd, the nonsense in which reason terminates, opens up the emphatic possibility of something true that cannot even be conceived of any more. It undermines the absolute claim of the status quo, that which simply is the way it is.⁵⁸

In other words, the sublime possibility of going beyond the modern debilitation of sensuous and historical experience does not emerge from the anachronistic sublation of social content within the pre-ordained *ratio* of classical beauty, but through the critical negation of this aesthetic semblance. Beckett eludes the mythical magic of aesthetic immanence by 'blot[ting] out every trace of reconciliation in memory', and this, as Adorno argues, 'for the sake of reconciliation'.⁵⁹ It is this that holds promise; but a promise which, paradoxically, is no promise at all.

Wellmer's Habermasian inspired objection to the 'strong metaphysical residue' in Adorno's concept of the sublime and its promise of reconciliation depends on what he considers Adorno's philosophical short circuit between 'the emancipation of the modern subject and the loss of objectively binding systems of meaning and of world interpretation'.⁶⁰ Accordingly, Wellmer attempts to remodel Adorno's understanding of the determinate irreconcilability of aesthetic semblance and the truth content of art into 'a post-utopian philosophy of communicative reason'.⁶¹ In so doing, however, Wellmer not only misconstrues Adorno's metaphysics as a form of negative theology,⁶² but also devalues the experience of sublime transcendence as an experience of aesthetic delight 'beyond all meaning'.⁶³ In response to Wellmer's first objection, Bernstein argues -

Negative theology turns on discriminating the finite and the infinite through a negative comprehension of the finite; and does so for the sake of summoning the mystery of God in a manner that would not reinscribe Him in other 'finite' categories.

⁵⁷ T.W. Adorno, 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*' in *Notes to Literature* vol.1, tr. S.W. Nicholson, New York, Columbia University Press, 1991, p.253.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.273.

⁵⁹ T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* op. cit., p.234.

⁶⁰ A. Wellmer, 'Adorno, Modernity, and the Sublime' in *The Actuality of Adorno* ed. M. Pensky, Albany, SUNY, 1997, pp.117-118.

⁶¹ A. Wellmer, *The Persistence of Modernity : Essays on Aesthetics, Ethics and Postmodernism* tr. D. Midgley, Oxford, Polity Press, 1991, p.viii.

⁶² A. Wellmer, 'Truth, Semblance, Reconciliation: Adorno's Aesthetic Redemption of Modernity' in *Telos* 62, 1984-85, p.94.

⁶³ A. Wellmer, 'Adorno, Modernity, and the Sublime' in *op. cit.*, p.131.

... The similarity between Adorno and negative theology stops at the point where what is termed the 'absolute' can be gathered only as a result of negations; for Adorno these negations are determinate and not abstract. Because these negations are determinate the result is finite.⁶⁴

Adorno's utopian metaphysics emerges precisely as the determinate negation of contemporary social relations and their regulation by the economic principle of commodity exchange. In response to the second objection, it is argued that Wellmer's devaluation of the sublime constitutes a failure to appreciate the specificity of modern art as that which critically, and thereby autonomously negates its own aesthetic conditions of production. As Bernstein so astutely puts it -

Wellmer's refusal of modernism's self-reflective character, his refusal to acknowledge the nature of the risk of meaning enacted by modernist works, has its proximate cause in his assumption of the validity ... of the Weber-Habermas thesis that the categorial separation of truth into knowledge, moral rightness and aesthetic validity represents *the* cognitive achievement of modernity.⁶⁵

The truth content of modern art is here bound to the ethics of intersubjective communication, to art's reception, rather than as that which art itself communicates as the sublime possibility of universal freedom through its critical negation of what is.⁶⁶ Moreover, bound by an affirmative aesthetics of representation both Habermas and Wellmer insist on an image of social reconciliation directly apparent in the artwork. Such imaging, however, has the ring of instrumental violence where art serves nothing but the pragmatic goals of sectional power interests. As with Brecht, Benjamin, and Sartre, autonomous art is here devalued in a means-oriented rationality, where the sublime metaphysics or utopia of universal freedom remains suppressed. In Adorno's words -

[autonomous] art denounces the particular essence of a *ratio* that pursues means rather than ends. Art reminds us of the latter and of an objectivity freed from the categorial structure. This is the source of art's rationality, its character as knowledge.⁶⁷

Furthermore Adorno expressly articulates the rationality of this knowledge in terms of liberated communicative relations.

The *We* encapsulated in the objectivation of works is not radically other than the external *We*, however frequently it is the residue of a real *We* that is past. That is why collective appeal is not simply

⁶⁴ J. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art* op. cit., pp.256-257.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.246-247. {Bernstein's italics}

⁶⁶ For an excellent discussion of the difference between Adorno's and Wellmer's notions of truth content in art see Simon Jarvis' *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* Cambridge, Polity Press, 1998, pp.110-114.

⁶⁷ T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, op. cit., p.330.

the original sin of artworks; rather, something in their law of form implies it.⁶⁸

According to Wellmer, Adorno here misreads aesthetic synthesis as a model of trans-subjective moral community. Despite the collective 'we' implicit in aesthetic form, Wellmer continues, the artwork speaks only with a singular voice and 'cannot possibly prefigure the open rules of dialogue with many voices'.⁶⁹ However, as Bernstein rightly indicates, according to Adorno, autonomous art does not offer a definite image of communicative reconciliation but rather 'an image of the *form* of praxis appropriate to a reconciled society'.⁷⁰ This form of practice, indicated previously, is the determinate irreconcilability of mimetic expression and an aesthetic semblance of reconciliation. Only through this form of practice can the sublime, utopian possibility of social solidarity, of universal freedom, become apparent.

With its explicit block to metaphysics, existential *poiesis* remains either critical of the sublime or makes no mention of it. Nietzsche's fictitious character, Zarathustra, chastises those concerned with the sublime and their preoccupation with what he calls the ugly and the heroic. He urges their return to laughter and beauty.

Today I saw a sublime man, a solemn man, a penitent of the spirit: oh, how my soul laughed at his ugliness! ... he has not yet learned of laughter and beauty. ... Truly his longing should be silenced and immersed not in satiety but in beauty!⁷¹

Nietzsche's positivistic correlation of the beautiful with agonistic self-affirmation is such that the intelligibility of transcendence is dependent solely on aesthetic taste. Transcendence does not so much involve an aesthetically mediated experience of sublime otherness, but rather an aesthetically mediated affirmation of life as it is now. In this way the semblance of transcendence occasioned by the beautiful is altogether ironic. Nietzsche's self-transcending *Übermensch*, we remember, is an ironic heroisation, a beautiful parody, of the enlightened, instrumental subject and its metaphysical assumptions. The emphasis given to an aesthetic of beauty is equally evident with Heidegger and Foucault. In the final paragraph of his first appendix to 'The origin of the work of art', Heidegger speaks of the disclosure of truth as an aesthetic revelation of

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.238. {Adorno's italics}

⁶⁹ A. Wellmer, 'Reason, Utopia, and the Dialectic of Enlightenment' in *Habermas and Modernity* ed. R. Bernstein, Cambridge Massachusetts, 1985, p.49.

⁷⁰ J. Bernstein, 'Art Against Enlightenment : Adorno's Critique of Habermas' in *The Problems of Modernity* ed. A. Benjamin, London and New York, Routledge, 1989, p.64. {Bernstein's italics}

⁷¹ F. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* [1892] tr. R.J. Hollingdale, Penguin, 1969, pp.139-141.

beauty.⁷² Heideggerian Being, that indeterminate void of absolute difference, is an aesthetically mediated affirmation of death's existential immanence in life. With this ontologically construed aesthetics of death and *Dasein*, Heidegger remains altogether silent, it would appear, on the secular metaphysical question of the sublime and its socially critical implications. With Foucault the affirmation of beauty and its intimate relation to truth again re-surfaces. In response to a question concerning the art of living or truth-telling (*parrhésia*) practised by the ancient Greeks, Foucault states -

It was a question of knowing how to govern one's own life in order to give it the most beautiful possible form ... That is *what* I tried to reconstitute: the formation and development of a practice of self whose aim was to constitute oneself as the worker of the beauty of one's own life.⁷³

This art of beautiful self-invention is then given contemporary value when Foucault defends what he considers Baudelaire's specifically modern ethics of *dandysme* in his article 'What is Enlightenment?'.⁷⁴ Foucault presents Baudelaire's *dandy* as an ironic heroisation of the *flâneur*, that man who seeks nothing but 'the fugitive pleasure of circumstance',⁷⁵ and who thereby remains bound, it would seem, by a Kantian sublime, albeit now in an urban landscape.

Despite this denial of the sublime in favour of beauty, the quasi-utopian, metaphysical quality of transgression aporetically apparent in existential *poiesis* at once implies a possible defence of the sublime.⁷⁶ The indeterminacy characteristic of existential *poiesis*, which has been discussed already at length in terms of the indeterminacy between freedom and unfreedom, is no less apparent in the distinction between beauty and the sublime. Yet unlike beauty, the sublime does not sustain a self-relating agonism of universal exemplarity, but indicates a determinate, sensuously mediated experience of utopian non-identity with the universal horror emerging through modern social relations. Within the historical ontology of eternal recurrence, however, the sublime experience of radical non-identity quickly evaporates in the critically indeterminate parody or ironic heroisation of what is. For parody, while critical of what

⁷² M. Heidegger, 'The origin of the work of art' in *Poetry, Language, Thought* tr. A. Hofstadter, London, Harper and Row, 1971.

⁷³ M. Foucault, 'The Concern for Truth' in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977-84* ed. L. Kritzman, New York and London, Routledge, 1990, p.259. {Foucault's italics}

⁷⁴ M. Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment?' tr. C. Porter in *The Foucault Reader* ed. P. Rabinow, Penguin, 1991, pp.41-42.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p.40.

is, fails to generate any hope that the world may become other than it is; that is, other than an ontologically sanctioned multiplicity of agonistic relations of power and domination. The indeterminacy of parody as a critical, transgressive tool indicates the abstract quality of its claim to sublime difference. In this way, existential *poiesis* reflects what Bernstein refers to as the degenerative dialectic of modernism.

The incessant repetition of the new makes it old; the very sharpness of the dichotomy between identity and non-identity tendentially makes the appearance of the non-identical itself an image of the triumph of identity. ... The path of modern art is from a determinate to an abstract negation of the categorial structures of modernity. But abstract negation contains nothing to inhibit its turning into its opposite; which to a large extent is the fate that has befallen modernist art: it has become the token of what it originally refused.⁷⁷

It is just this fate which existential *poiesis* carries through in its aesthetic parody of modern life as enlightened heroisation. Despite effecting cultural reform with respect to feminist politics, existential *poiesis* has otherwise remained -

in tune with both capital's self-transgression of all natural boundaries, all presence, and with capital's unnatural naturalism, its formal reduction of particularity to fungibility for the sake of further capital expansion, further self-transgression.⁷⁸

Here Bernstein's critique of post-modernism and deconstruction applies equally to what I have termed existential *poiesis*. By way of substitution -

[Existential *poiesis*] repeats the Janus-faced ambiguity of capital, emancipatory and dominating at the same time. Hence the confusions surrounding [existential *poiesis*] concerning its political orientation.⁷⁹

With existential *poiesis* the mask of the sublime tendentially obscures what is otherwise an all too real integration of regional differences and agonistic aesthetics within the universally immanent relations of global capital.

Art and speculative philosophy

The modernist sublime arises through the determinate fracture of mimetic expression and aesthetic beauty. With the aesthetic form of beauty all artworks promise transcendence, yet modern autonomous art now holds that promise through its very denial

⁷⁶ See for example Philip Barker's *Michel Foucault: an introduction* Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1998, pp.121-127, where reading Foucault against the grain Barker defends the sublime in Foucault's philosophy.

⁷⁷ J. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art* op. cit., pp.262-263.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p.267.

- through the determinate irreconcilability of aesthetic unity and mimetic expression. This historical fracturing, where there is a reversal of traditional subject/object relations, transposes the enigmatic riddle of the sublime into modern art. The sublime truth content of modernist art does not directly appear in art. For this reason the truth content of modern autonomous art is altogether enigmatic.

Artworks speak like elves in fairy tales: 'If you want the absolute, you shall have it, but you will not recognize it when you see it.'⁸⁰

Moreover, the truth content of modernist art cuts short the integrative power of aesthetic form and its otherwise self-explanatory meaning. Accordingly, with respect to modernist works, Adorno makes the point that -

Whatever perfection they may lay claim to, artworks are lopped off; that what they mean is not their essence is evident in the fact that their meaning appears as if it were blocked.⁸¹

Without this dislocation of aesthetic form and truth content, artworks potentially revert to their archaic, mythical function as religious, cultic objects with magical powers. In so far as modern artworks remain autonomous, however, their truth content emerges as an 'emphatic absence of meaning'.⁸² While artworks may themselves attempt to make sense of this enigmatic fracturing, they cannot make judgements concerning such meaning or lack thereof. Hence the enigmatic character of modern artworks calls for a speculative, philosophical interpretation of their truth content.

The truth content of artworks is the objective solution of the enigma posed by each and every one. By demanding its solution, the enigma points to its truth content. It can only be achieved by philosophical reflection. This alone is the justification of aesthetics.⁸³

Without themselves demanding or standing in need of philosophical interpretation, artworks become indistinguishable from kitsch.

An interpretation of the truth content of modern artworks differs markedly, however, from an interpretation of artistic intention. With the latter, where the mystery of technical production and figuration is tautologically expounded by way of an artist's subjective intentions, artworks are reduced to a simple message. An aesthetic interpretation of an artwork's truth content, on the other hand, illuminates the negatively

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* {translation modified between brackets}

⁸⁰ T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* op. cit., p.126.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*, p.127.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp.127-128.

determinate mediation of what is technically achieved in an artwork and that work's objective, expressive spirit. In other words, truth content does not simply mirror an artwork's figurative appearance, nor is it unrelated to that technical achievement, but emerges as the historically determinate antithesis of technical form and expression. As noted earlier, the technically produced aesthetic form of a modern artwork mediates and is itself critically mediated by mimetic expression, by the transfiguring sublimation of an artist's affective response to the world.

By re-enacting the spell of reality, by sublimating it as an image, art at the same time liberates itself from it; sublimation and freedom mutually accord. The spell with which art through its unity encompasses the *membra disjecta* of reality is borrowed from reality and transforms art into the negative appearance of utopia.⁸⁴

This 'negative appearance of utopia' is negative to the extent that it does not directly appear in art at all. This semblance of sublime transcendence, which constitutes modern autonomous art, stands critically opposed to traditional aesthetic semblance and those social and political relations from which it is mimetically drawn. Unable to explain the presence of this negative, enigmatic truth content within their critically fractured aesthetic form, modernist artworks demand philosophical mediation. Indeed the intelligibility of modernist art, Adorno argues, depends on the historical truth sedimented in modern philosophical concepts.

Philosophy and art converge in their truth content: The progressive self-unfolding truth of the artwork is none other than the truth of the philosophical concept.⁸⁵

The condition for this convergence is that both philosophy and art unavoidably carry the social collective and its history as mediating moments within their otherwise particular media of expression. Philosophy and art thereby constitute different sides of the same socio-cultural riddle.

Without speculative philosophy art would lose its critical intelligibility; and without art philosophy would lose the historical traces of sensuous particularity, of mimetic expression through which speculative critique is objectively mediated. As Bernstein quite succinctly puts it -

Philosophy can know and say what art cannot say; but the veracity of philosophy's saying is dependent on the truth content of art; philosophy's second reflection follows the historical

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p.130. {Adorno's italics}

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

path sedimented in works.⁸⁶

Bernstein views the speculative semblance of the sublime through which philosophy and art overlap as Adorno's attempt to reformulate more adequately the Kantian relation between intuition and concept. This relation no longer involves the distorting sublation of sensuous non-identity in the transcendental unity of Kant's synthetic *a priori* judgement. Rather it involves a speculative judgement, which while discursively betraying sensuous non-identity at once redeems it in so far as this judgement is 'neither legislated, posited, nor a reductive statement of fact'.⁸⁷ What thus in turn redeems philosophy's conceptual *ratio* is the recognition of its inability to fully account for sensuous particularity. Speculative philosophy's relation to autonomous art is the sign of this recognition.

⁸⁶ J. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art* op. cit., p.259.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p.260.

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