

Pyropoiesis: Adorno, Non-Identity, and Redemption

Jack Marsh, Boston College

The only philosophy that can be responsibly practiced in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves in light of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption: all else is reconstruction, mere technique. Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indignant and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light.

—Theodor W. Adorno (2002, p. 247)

1. Introduction

Theodor Adorno was one of the founding figures of what has come to be known as the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory. Though his trenchant critiques of instrumental reason and mass culture are relatively well known, his more philosophical and utopian motifs have remained somewhat obscure to those external to the critical tradition. The reasons for this obscurity are many. Adorno obtained his philosophic competence, style, and impetus through his sustained interests in art, psychoanalysis, musicology, and German Idealism, all filtered through a heterodox Marxist social theory.¹ To those of us not utterly immersed in these currents, Adorno's ingenuity and subtlety, if not down right brilliance, can be hard to glimpse. His own, intentionally difficult, "atonal" style does not help in the matter.

The motifs in Adorno's philosophical and aesthetic writings adds to the ambivalence of his reception. In our so-called "post-modern" situation, one may happily devour invectives against reason and social organization in defense of non-identity and the discontinuous. Yet when one hears motifs such as "redemption," "reconciliation," or the "ab-solute," one is expected to man the flame-thrower of "meta-narrative" and blast away. The intent of this paper is to introduce Adorno's own pyroics and to sketch a gloss of his later and more obscure philosophy. As I proceed, it will become evident that Adorno uncannily anticipates the critique of modernity which irrupted in the 1970s. It will also become clear that a redemption of the utopian impulses which animated modernity's rise emerges from this critique. Indeed, the fire Adorno aims at instrumental

reason, commodity exchange, and mass culture also burns with emphatic witness: The horrors of human history, particularly those of the 20th century are not a fateful necessity. The memory of the victims of atrocities and the promise inherent in ephemeral moments of happiness tremble with utopian potential. As opposed to the more celebratory iconoclasts of contemporary (anti) philosophy, Adorno's meditations are not so much a *pyrotechnics*, as a *pyropoiesis*. The aesthetic fireworks his philosophy interprets all hinge on his emphatic attendance to non-identity.

2. The *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

Adorno's attendance to non-identity arose in his sustained critique of Western reason; what he, with Max Horkheimer, called the "dialectic of enlightenment." In order to escape irrational myth and cyclical fate, enlightenment began as a process of skeptical demythologization (cf. Jarvis, pp. 20-44). This process entailed a reduction of all meaning to constitutive and synthesizing rational activity. As such, thought becomes a "context of pure immanence," where "Nothing at all remains outside" (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1972, p. 16).² This reduction occasions a repetition which enlightenment first sought to overcome. In order to attain objectivity over irrational and subjectivist myth, enlightenment sought to ground objectivity in an *unchanging* transcendental subject or in purely formal quantitative structures. In either case, enlightenment, like myth, presents the real as just unalterable and fateful: Enlightenment becomes a necessarily cyclic, instrumental self-replication.

The cognitive moment is dialectically related to a socio-historic moment. In Marxist parlance, there is a reciprocal, mutually determining relation between base and superstructure.³ The process of enlightenment converts nature into merely manipulatable material. Here material objects become mere categorial representations. Thought subsumes and classifies objects for its own practical ends: "Nothing remains sacred, so that everything can be worked on, consumed, and exchanged. Nothing is to be beyond thought; nothing is to be beyond price" (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1972, p. 10). The insistence on the reduction of all meaning to rational immanence yields a liquidating of the specificity of the object that thought initially sought to obtain, and the subjectivity that it sought to liberate. The object is reduced to a manipulatable function, mastered by

the subject. The subject is deceptively promised immortality (as rational and transcendental) at the price of sacrificing the contingent present for a mythic future. In its domination of nature, the subject dominates the nature within itself, repressing and deferring qualitative experience in the quest for self-preservation and replication.

Adorno and Horkheimer were not calling for a return to pre-critical metaphysics. Nor did they espouse irrationalism over instrumental reason. They were seeking to diagnose the violence and terror unleashed in the 20th century in a society that purported to be “enlightened.” They isolate a tendency common to fascism, collectivism, and monopoly capitalism: the violent suppression of alterity. Auschwitz, Nagasaki, and the Gulags were not simply accidental events external to the “rational” system. Enlightenment “rationality” had become irrational *in toto*. Adorno and Horkheimer betray the inherent tendency of reason toward power and mastery, toward the rejection of all exteriority, any transcendence. Adorno’s own *Negative Dialectics* and *Aesthetic Theory* are a response to this diagnosis. They espouse a thinking and experience [*Erfahrung*] which hinges on the non-identical, which offers a critical alternative to the dialectic of enlightenment.

3. Non-Identity

To introduce the utopian element in Adorno’s thought it will be helpful to first compare him with Kant and Hegel. Kant’s claims that intuition without understanding is blind, and understanding without intuition is empty are critically reworked by Adorno with a Hegelian twist; Hegel’s claim that history proceeds as a dialectic of subject and object is critically reworked with a Kantian twist. In treating the sensory manifold as totally indeterminate and made to conform to the categories of the understanding, Kant extends and repeats the dialectic of enlightenment. Kant’s privilege of the ahistorical cognitive structures of transcendental subjectivity belies subjectivity’s own historical specificity and empirical contingency, while reducing knowledge to static, instrumental scientificity. Kantian subjectivity forgets the historical preformation of the objects it seeks to constitute, and, thus, the social experience sedimented within those objects. By insisting on unity, identity, and formal coherence, the understanding dominates the very material on which it depends; it obscures the non-identical detail, the material which resists

assimilation into its schemas. This epistemological domination is reflective of the real social domination extent in the bourgeois era. Adorno emphasizes that the ideal of truth is unrealizable in a context of class oppression and the social domination of nature.

Objective inquiry cannot help but produce contradictions in the wake of the real socio-historic antagonisms. These contradictions, then, produce moments of negative insight into the social totality which produces them.

Adorno's negative Hegelianism becomes manifest at this point. Breaking open the fallacy of ahistorical intentional meaning structures discloses the dialectical relationship between subject and object, individual and society, history and nature. Adorno, however, absolutely rejects Hegel's speculative identity.⁴ Opposing Hegel, Adorno, like Kant, holds that objects elude assimilation by identity. Adorno critically appropriates the Kantian "noumenal" in a very specific manner. For Adorno, Kant's *Ding an sich* testifies to the non-identity of the object. Rather than an inaccessible realm of metaphysical essences, the noumenal speaks, *ex negativo*, of the *possible* transcendence which irrupts in the reciprocal and co-determining relation between subject and object in history. Thus, identity does not subtend this dialectic as Hegel maintained: Subject and object are intertwined yet irreducible. Through a determinate negation of social and philosophical totalizing claims to identity, Adorno testifies to the non-identical: the victims of social domination and the material dominated by the concept. Determinate negation entails both *anamnesis* as well as a proleptic moment. If Hegel's negative served the imperial movement which subsumes all alterity in relation to its own ends, Adorno turns it on its head. According to Adorno, absolute negation no longer produces identity, but anticipatory memory in an ephemeral glimmer of non-identity. Crudely put, Adorno's negative is a kind of reservoir of redemptive memory. It recalls the victims of history as it critically traverses the present order. It operates in fidelity to a fleeting promise it repeats as its very movement. Rather than subsuming the particular, it preserves it as non-identical, as victim of identity. Negative dialectics bears witness to a type of world-historic refugee camp, a mobile hospital or haunted mortuary where, rather than preparing victims for a forgetful burial, they huddle in wait for the seemingly impossible possibility of redemption. How is this so? What is this proleptic moment of hope?

4. Art's Utopia and the Possibility of Metaphysical Experience

Art's Utopia, the counter-factual yet-to-come, is draped in black. It goes on being a recollection of the possible with a critical edge against the real: it is a kind of imaginary restitution for that catastrophe, which is world history; it is freedom which did not come to pass under the spell of necessity and which may well not come to pass ever at all... Aesthetic experience is the experience of something which spirit does not have yet either of the world or of itself. It is the experience of the possible, as promised by its impossibility. Art is the promise of happiness, a promise that is constantly broken (Adorno, 1977, pp. 134-6).⁵

For Adorno, aesthetic experience and negative dialectics collude to produce a proleptic glimmer of utopian possibility. The "truth-content" of works of art is possible in that modern art has become disinterested. As such, it is no longer subsumptive and identitarian, no longer serves instrumental ends (at least directly). The work of art *seems* to promise its own in-itself. It seems to promise that there is more. It hints that there may be an excess. The artwork presents the idea of reconciliation in that non-identical details, breaks, and ruptures appears along with formal and expressive aspects of the work. Modern art's autonomy, its purposive purposelessness, as well as its non-subsumptive mimetic manner of production, allows it to produce "an illusion of the non-illusory" (Wellmer, 1997, p. 112). The semblance of reconciliation is just that - semblance - in that the conditions for the realization of truth are not yet extent. Yet the very presentation of this illusion seems to testify to the memory and possibility of reconciliation. The apparitions of modern art are their critical index; they disclose and question real social and philosophical antagonisms in their apparitions of reconciliation. Adorno writes:

In art, denunciation and anticipation are syncopated. If apparition illuminates and touches, the image is the paradoxical effort to transfix this most evanescent instant. In art, something momentary transcends; objectivation makes the artwork into an instant. If, as images, artworks are the persistence of the transient, they are concentrated in appearance as something momentary. To experience art means to become conscious of its immanent process as an instant at a standstill... [a] "pregnant moment" (Adorno, 1977, p. 84).

This "instant at a standstill" is a point in which all of history seems contracted in the work; a moment in which it were as if history terminated in a moment of reconciliation. Yet this instant is only one aspect of its truth-content: "Artworks not only produce

imagines as something that endures. They become artworks just as much through the destruction of their own *imagerie*; for this reason, art is profoundly akin to explosion” (Adorno, 1977, p. 84). Authentic modern works as produced artifacts, and by the inner antagonisms they present, are simultaneously a transfigured instant—an illusion of reconciliation—and the destruction of illusion. As Adorno asserts:

The shocks inflicted by the most current works of art are the explosion of their appearance. In them appearance...dissolves in a catastrophe in which the essence of appearance is for the first time fully revealed... In the incineration of appearance, artworks break away from the glare of the empirical world and become the counterfigure of what lives there; art today is scarcely conceivable except as a form of reaction that anticipates the apocalypse. Closely observed, even tranquil works discharge not so much pent-up emotions of their makers as the works' own inwardly antagonistic forces. The result of these forces is bound up with the impossibility of bringing these forces to any equilibrium; their antinomies, like those of knowledge, are unsolvable in the unreconciled world. The instant in which these forces become image, the instant in which what is interior becomes exterior, the outer husk is exploded; their apparition, which makes them an image, at the same time destroys them as image. ...The artwork is mediated to real history by its monadological nucleus. History is the content of artworks (Adorno, 1977, pp. 84-5).

The horror and shock that modern art evokes is an ephemeral moment of truth. This apparition “incinerates” semblance as such, that is, it shows history as the history of semblance; a gigantic “not-yet” of realized truth and a reconciled world. This apparitic moment entails both the transfixed image of a transient, historical moment, and at the same time, the destruction of that moment as image. Art does nothing less than offer truth-content to philosophical interpretation as negative dialectics. This truth-content, taken with the operation of negative dialects, bears the same relation as Kantian intuition and concept. Adorno’s negative dialectical method, however, gives primacy to the object: the work of art. The work of art as material is conceptually mediated in a manner that respects its alterity. Here the concept gives voice to the work by interpreting it, and by naming the oppression it indicts, never subsuming or feigning to exhaust it. Adorno’s method seeks to allow concept and content, identity and alterity, to stand in a non-subsumptive relation. Aesthetic experience and negative dialectics model a utopian and redemptive manner of relation between identity and difference. In that this model occurs in a history of violence, the contact of art’s truth-content with real history is explosive:

Negative yet hopeful, critical yet promissory, transformative yet remembering. It is important to emphasize that “Art’s Utopia” is “draped in black.” The utopian moment does not offer a positive program for its own attainment. Indeed, Adorno holds that the truth-content of the artwork irrupts as type of “mirror-writing” of non-identity, of the “absolute.” Its content is a kind of cipher which invites second reflection. The non-identical, as absolute, can only irrupt as momentary glimmers of redemption and reconciliation. If anything it only hints at what utopia would entail by indicating the conditions it would require.

Art’s Utopia testifies to the possibility of metaphysical experience if conditions were sufficiently changed, and to the current and total absence of those conditions.

Adorno writes:

The smallest intramundane traits would be of relevance to the absolute, for the micrological view cracks the shells of what, measured by the subsuming cover concept, is helplessly isolated and explodes its identity, the delusion that it is but a specimen. There is solidarity with metaphysics at the time of its fall (1973, p. 408).

In the wake of the horrors of the 20th century, in the wake of the radical disenchantment constitutive of modernity, metaphysics is redeemable and non-identical at the precise moment that it is no longer thinkable: Its utopian content becomes a genuine possibility in the wake of the collapse of ostensive necessity. If transience is the only enduring feature of nature and spirit, critical prohibitions on the experience of transcendence are themselves transient. Adorno’s utopian *pyropoiesis* shatters the spell of the necessity of domination, of necessity and domination. If the image transfixes the persistence of transience, yet crashes against real history, then Weber’s steel cage can indeed crumble: The existing conditions can change; the hegemony of commodity-exchange and constitutive subjectivity can give way to qualitative transformation; violent social and philosophical antagonisms can give way to a state of peace, a situation where the other is experienced as other and its alterity is allowed to stand, and where spirit no longer dominates what it depends on and embraces the truth of its own conditionedness and finitude.⁶ Only if “that which is” can be changed is “that which is” not all there is (Adorno, 1973, p. 408)⁷

5. Conclusion

Adorno's critique of rationality is not forgetful: It remembers and thus redeems the victims of identity. Adorno's insistence on non-identity is neither irrational nor dogmatic: The potentiary absolute eludes all attempts at conceptual seizure and irrupts in critical engagement of the totality, exploding in every attempt to negate it. Adorno's testimony to reconciliation is not violent: reconciliation would entail a non-instrumental, non-subsumptive, peaceful relation between identity and alterity, where neither are oppressed by the other. Adorno's utopian possibility is not a program: Abstract utopian programs always employ the instrumental and identitarian dialectic of enlightenment. Adorno's *pyropoiesis* anticipates postmodernity yet interrogates those elements in postmodernity that forget, totalize, and valorize fragmentation at the expense of socio-political violence, and which remain dogmatic in their rejection of the possibility of metaphysical experience. The irruptions produced in qualitative experience both critique and promise. If we do not heed the critique, whether we fancy ourselves modern or "postmodern," the promise "may well not come to pass ever at all..." (Adorno, 1977, pp. 134-6; Wellmer, 1997, p. 112).

Notes

¹ See Jarvis, 1998, pp. 1-19.

² For this summary account, I'm indebted to Jarvis, 1998, 20-44.

³ This shows Adorno's ambivalence towards orthodox Marxism which has occasioned charges of idealism from the faithful. Adorno considers any insistence on the absolute determining character of relations of production to be no less dogmatic and dominating than the idealist claim of the primacy of thought. In Adorno's architecture, there are materialist and idealist moments which mutually infect each other. Adorno's thought ultimately sides with materialists concerns in that he claims that the experience of transcendence might be possible under different socio-historic conditions. In a world not dominated by commodity exchange and reification, the experience of transcendence may be possible.

⁴ The *Identity* of identity and difference.

⁵ This is Wellmer's modified translation in "Adorno, Modernity, and the Sublime," p. 112.

⁶ Due to length restrictions, I will leave aside Adorno's "shudder," his own peculiar version of apperception, the sublime experience which somehow also testifies to redemption and reconciliation.

⁷ Adorno, 1973, p. 398. This is Jarvis's translation, see Jarvis, p. 216.

Bibliography

Adorno, Theodor and Max Horkheimer (1972). *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. (John Cumming, Trans.). New York: Seabury Press.

Adorno, Theodore (1973). *Negative Dialectics*. (E.B. Ashton, Trans.). London: Continuum.

—(1977). *Aesthetic Theory*. (Robert Hullot-Kentor, trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

—(2002). *Minima Moralia*. (E.F.N. Jephcott, Trans.). London: Verso.

Jarvis, Simon (1998). *Adorno: A Critical Introduction*. London: Routledge.

Wellmer, Albrecht (1997). "Adorno, Modernity, and the Sublime," in *The Actuality of Adorno*. Max Pensky (Ed.). Albany: SUNY Press.