

## Historical Dialectics and the Autonomy of Art in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*

As Peter Hohendahl has noted, the posthumous publication of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* in 1970 disappointed many who expected that it would provide a materialist aesthetic which would cultivate praxis.<sup>1</sup> The Left, who dismissed the work, maintained that, though anti-capitalist, the text advocated an anachronistic cultural elitism.<sup>2</sup> After Hohendahl (re)constructs the historical context in which Adorno's text was so negatively received, he suggests that the time has come (1981; 1991) to reassess the *Aesthetic Theory*. Interestingly, while implying that the apparent flexibility of German society in the 1970s produced an inadequate analysis of Adorno's final work, Hohendahl's reappraisal still embraces the cornerstone of that analysis: like Peter Bürger, he posits the autonomy of art as the central thesis of the *Aesthetic Theory* and then places the work squarely in the historical tradition of German idealism.

The brash rejection of the *Aesthetic Theory* does call for a reassessment, but that reassessment ought not neglect questioning the role the autonomy of art has in the work's overall project. At stake is whether the initial reception cited by Hohendahl centered on a problem of secondary importance to the more subtle and comprehensive analysis occurring in Adorno's text. The dismissal of the *Aesthetic Theory* on the grounds that it advocates an autonomy of art preconceived the meaning of aesthetic autonomy rather than deriving it from the text, i.e., from Adorno's usage. Consequently, the dismissal sidestepped a confrontation with the work's greater concerns: an analysis that explores how historical dialectics are erratic and lack uniformity and stability.<sup>3</sup> As the following arguments will demonstrate, the autonomy of art in the *Aesthetic Theory* is not—as Bürger maintains—merely an historical category describing the detachment of art from practical life. It results from an historic dialectic whose mechanics, Adorno argues, are faltering and unable to enact supersession (*Aufhebung*). In the *Aesthetic Theory*, art is autonomous because of the unique formulation of dialectics posited by Adorno: art manifests itself in dialectical tensions with its own historical moment—in this respect art and life are indelibly intertwined—but these tensions remain unresolved. Although art receives its identity from its

negative critical relation with society, it does not have the ability to sublimate the social dimensions that it negates. As society inevitably changes, an art work's non-identity becomes increasingly encapsulated—and therein lies the autonomy. For Adorno, the autonomy of art refers to the unresolved dialectical tensions of a work that respond to socio-historical conditions that have subsequently changed. Autonomy denotes the aesthetic tension's lack of resolution, a resolution that only supersession at a specific historical moment could have brought.

When Bürger argues that the autonomy of art is a category that describes art's detachment from practical contexts, he isolates only one aspect of (and thereby impairs) the dynamic at play in Adorno's discussions (Bürger 46). For Adorno, the autonomy of art is double-edged, and although he appears to hold to a philosophy of *l'art pour l'art*, Adorno has a radical theoretical adherence to the relation between art and society. On the one hand, he affirms that socio-historical change makes the separation of art and practical life unavoidable. But on the other, the separation does not denote the irrelevance of art to life. The relevance, however, can only be stated in negative terms. Adorno uses the autonomy of art to sustain art's negative value, i.e., to sustain the integrity of the unresolved negative tensions (the non-identity) a work has with a specific historic moment.

Aesthetic autonomy occurs with the inevitable movement of history, and Adorno uses autonomy to defend art against the reification that results from elevating a work's aesthetic non-identity to a status of validity beyond its historic moment. On its most immediate level, the *Aesthetic Theory* uses the autonomy of art as the foundation for an emphatic plea *not* to turn previous aesthetic *non-identity* into subsequent *positive values*. The plea is the natural heir to Adorno's reservations about supersession. Without supersession, the movement from negation to positive value falters, and a work's non-identity remains intact, i.e., autonomous. The point is this: for Adorno, historicizing a work does not solely relegate its negative (aesthetic) value to the past; historicization revitalizes a work's non-identity in the sense that historicization enacts its own brand of negation.

A criticism that historicizes art in order to counteract reification initiates a negation ancillary to the negation implicit in an art work's original non-identity. Like the art it discusses, the criticism has a negative function: the negation of reification. A criticism that underscores a work's unresolved tensions results in an unresolved tension of its own. Like the art it discusses, the criticism generates an unresolvable tension in the positive value it derives from maintaining what it heralds as essentially negative, art's non-identity. Thus, Adorno revitalizes art in an act of mimicry—a mimicry which his idiosyncratic conception of the autonomy of art to a great extent facilitates. Yet in terms of importance, the autonomy of art is subordinate to the (negating) mimicry that marks the whole of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*; both are only possible as by-products of the revision of dialectics that precede them. In the *Aesthetic Theory*, the autonomy of art has

to be understood in the context of this revision. This is not to say that the mimicry in Adorno's criticism is without its problems—they will be explored in this work—but it seems to me that an adequate reassessment of Adorno's final work has to look at the dynamic Adorno constructs between his revision of dialectics and his mimicry of art.

The early reception of the *Aesthetic Theory* mistook Adorno's defense of the autonomy of art as an exchange of praxis for an aesthetics of retreat—in fact, the defense of the autonomy of art serves as the premier example for de-reified critical activity. In answer to the calls for an aesthetic that cultivates political praxis, Adorno offered an aesthetic that, by using the autonomy of art as its primary example, challenged the ossified presumptions underlying praxis and that argued “art's critical strength is bought at the price of praxial powerlessness.”<sup>4</sup> Not only did Adorno's aesthetic preclude art as a tool for social change, it argued that art exposed the delusory presuppositions of *engagement*.<sup>5</sup> As Lyotard observed in 1974 in his article “Adorno as the Devil”: “What can an affirmative politics be, which does not look for support in a representative (a party) of the negative, etc.? That is the question left, abandoned by Adorno.”<sup>6</sup> The specific rigor that the *Aesthetic Theory* applies to the concept of art—to proving that as a concept, art itself lacks continuity—is the central strategy of its larger enterprise: that of fostering critical attitudes resilient to reification. More importantly, the critique of aesthetics, the argument that the concept of art lacked continuity, offered a subtle critique of presumed continuity in the goals guiding political activism, certainly during the sixties and seventies if not in general.

The sub-text on history that structures the autonomy of art in the *Aesthetic Theory* employs an historical-materialist dialectic in which neither universals nor particulars are precluded from change.<sup>7</sup> Rather than appealing to immutable, transcendent aesthetic criteria (e.g., Kantian), Adorno posits an autonomy of art bound to society by its non-identity with a specific socio-historical moment.<sup>8</sup> The elements of this dialectic can be seen in the following statement which, interestingly enough, also indicates that Adorno's defense of art's autonomy is not positivist, as Hohendahl suggests Adorno's early reception implies. For Adorno, the autonomy of art makes assumptions about the structure of dialectics, not an assertion that art is independent from practical life or society. He writes:

Works of art are after-images of the empirically living, inasmuch as they offer to the latter what outside is denied them, and thus liberate from their objective-external experience which shapes them.<sup>9</sup>

The key terms here are “after-images” (*Nachbilder*) and “the empirically living” (*das empirisch Lebendige*), the former not being a mere replica of the latter, but rather a dynamic counter-image to what the “empirically living” denies. Of equal importance to this counter-image is the peculiar formulation, “*das empirisch*

*Lebendige*," what Adorno also calls "*die empirische Realität*" or simply "*die Empirie*." From the section's sub-heading, "On the Relation Between Art and Society," we can gather that these obscure references to living, to experience, and to the senses make broad allusions to society while trying not to succumb to its reified categories. In other words, Adorno echoes the art works he describes: he employs these peculiar terms to circumvent the denials inherent in the dominant discursive patterns of society. Like art, Adorno's terms "should assist the non-identical, which the coerced identity in reality represses."<sup>10</sup>

Whether the circumvention succeeds is debatable. Adorno's elocutions possess an amazing flexibility which is offset by an equally amazing vagueness. (One need only consider that they accommodate aesthetic discussions as diverse as adultery in *Madame Bovary* and absurdity in Beckett.) But the negative import of the terms "*das Nichtidentische*" and "*Nachbild*" allows Adorno to undercut the fixed criteria normally associated with the autonomy of art—that is, once he supplements the terms with assertions about the ephemeral nature of every work of art. He argues *not* that each work has its place in history but that important works of art "age, go cold and die."<sup>11</sup> Each individual work dies as the conditions of empirical reality change. Rather than contributing to the evolution of a concept, a work's characteristic counter-image or non-identity survives only as long as do the historical conditions from which it emerged. "What was once true in a work of art . . . [was] dismantled in the course of history."<sup>12</sup> This death necessitates a new form of aesthetic criticism, but more importantly, death precludes "*Aufhebung*."

Instead of a movement of negation that resolves itself into subsequent moments (as in Hegel), historical passage is, for Adorno, the steady accumulation of unresolved tensions, repressed beneath the appearance of resolution. By questioning "*Aufhebung*," Adorno can argue that the dialectical tensions between an art work and its origins remain intact and unresolved, buried beneath the passage of time. The autonomy of art is premised upon this lack of resolution, upon temporal movement without a reconciliatory absorption into a greater whole, i.e., upon the persistence of tension between an art work and "*die empirische Realität*" from which it emerges. What Adorno's aesthetics seek, then, is to bring these unresolved tensions back into focus and thereby subvert the appearance of their resolution, the appearance which contributes to their reification.

In the absence of transcendent and inalterable aesthetic criteria, this refocus is, for each work of art, a new project following new criteria—and in the absence of sublation, this refocus is especially in need of persistent revision because the unfolding continuity implied by "*Aufhebung*" obscures and even reifies the tensions upon which the autonomy of art is premised.<sup>13</sup> The disparity and lack of resolution in historical movements, which Adorno posits, allow art to occupy a watershed position within historical passage. Yet the former is inextricably bound

to the latter: "Directly as artefacts, however, as products of social work, they [art works] also communicate with the empirical experience that they reject and out of which they draw their content."<sup>14</sup> Art is always in response to the social empirical reality, and the social empirical reality always provides the substance or "origins" from which art emerges. The restructuring of historical dialectics that procures the autonomy of art also binds it: the socio-historical context, "the empirically living," structures art and its autonomy.

The structural relation between the socio-historical and the autonomy of art is most evident in the foundational dynamic Adorno argues exists between the two. The dynamic is itself dialectical. What remains constant in Adorno's aesthetic is that, though neither universal nor particular is exempt from the consequences of historical passage, art always emerges from a negative dialectical or non-identical relation to its corresponding "Empirie." But inasmuch as the instability of historic sublation procures the autonomy of art, the negative dialectical movement of art out of its socio-historic context is subject to a corresponding instability. Adorno's contention about the instability of sublation in the socio-historical process, the very instability that allows for the autonomy of art, brings the stability of aesthetic negation into question as well.

While art may in fact owe its existence to a negative dialectical relation with its socio-historical context, art reflects this context foremost in its own inability to prompt sublation with the "origins" or context to which it is bound in antithetical (negative) dialectical opposition; i.e., in its own inability to enact a comprehensive and nonetheless de-reified transformation of the social whole (whether politically oriented or otherwise).<sup>15</sup> The instability of aesthetic negation, its inability to sublimate—in the material social environment—the "origins" it negates, procures the autonomy of these same "origins" while confirming art's own. Both the autonomy of art's origins of art itself are contingent upon the instability of sublation. The continued autonomy of an art work's origins, despite their aesthetic negation, is the logical consequence of the law (*Bewegungsgesetz*) creating the autonomy of art itself.<sup>16</sup> What results is not a bifurcation of art and society into separate, autonomous realms, but a bilateral staggering of tensions straining against one another.

While the initial reception of Adorno's study in aesthetics latched on to the prominent position he gives to the autonomy of art, Adorno's questioning of sublation itself, not art's autonomy, is the central focus of the *Aesthetic Theory*. But this clarification would not have been enough to re-ingratiate Adorno with the Left, from whom, in his last years, he was estranged. Using aesthetics as the catalyst for a rigorous inquiry into "*Aufhebung*" did little to meet the Left's demands. While the Left sought an aesthetics for activists, Adorno developed Leftist cultural thought. In this respect, Hohendahl is correct in his assessment: the *Aesthetic Theory* is consistent with Adorno's general resistance to the dogmatic privileging that an emphasis on praxis gives to action (*Reappraisals* 80). If,

for Adorno, art and philosophical thought were not the last bastions of critical opposition to society, he at least prescribed them as a seemingly interminable prerequisite to *engagement*.

Hohendahl is cautious not to dismiss the initial reception of Adorno's final work, as the work itself was dismissed. Nor do I want to dismiss this reception. Although my coming remarks argue that to interpret the autonomy of art as the central thesis of the *Aesthetic Theory* is to mistake effect for thesis, the prevalence of this interpretation cannot be explained solely on the basis of the political climate of the 1970s. It is the result of Adorno's rhetorical stance, his articulating his theory from the perspective of art itself, i.e., of his adopting the voice of the aesthetic position he purports to describe.

By positing the autonomy of art as the *Aesthetic Theory's* central thesis, Hohendahl and the initial reception of Adorno's last work missed a crucial link in the chain of Adorno's reasoning: an argued discontinuity in the concept of art is part of Adorno's project to revise historical dialectics. Once Adorno pinpoints this discontinuity, he can challenge traditional dialectics because, as a system, they provide an insufficient account of art. As his revision unfolds, the autonomy of art comes to signify how art functions in the absence of conceptual continuity. But if the excessive attention Adorno devotes to the autonomy of art while restructuring historical dialectics did not in itself explain why the student and academic Left thought his central thesis was art's autonomy, then Adorno's rhetorical stance gave them what seems to be understandable cause.

In the sections that follow, I argue that Adorno creates the illusion that one can reside (indefinitely) in the autonomy figured by works of art. He does this by rhetorically adopting the voice of art looking in retrospect on what he describes as its negated origins. This rhetorical strategy is arguably an attempt by Adorno to distance himself from the reified social structures negated by art. But in his efforts to avoid succumbing to reification, Adorno side-steps the crucial question of origins itself. He side-steps the socio-historical particularity upon which aesthetic autonomy is based. It seems to me that this strategy displays a preference which obscures a most problematic and unwritten chapter in Adorno's last work. Rhetorically, the *Aesthetic Theory* occupies the same position that Adorno repeatedly asserts must find new and dis-continuous forms in a non-identical relation to specific socio-historical origins.

#### Articulating the Already Autonomous

Early in the *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno clarifies that the autonomy attributed to art is sustained only in movement, and that this movement, in contrast to immutable criteria, depends not upon what art is, but on art's differentiating itself from what it is not. In other words, art defines itself through a process of negation or a continuous non-identity. Adorno writes:

It is through its dynamic laws, not through some invariable principle, that art can be understood. It is defined by its relation to what is different from art. This other makes it possible for us to arrive at a substantive understanding of the specifically artistic in art. It is this approach to art that alone meets the criteria of a materialist and dialectical aesthetic, which evolves by segregating itself from its own matrix (Adorno *AT* 4).

In this general statement, Adorno provides the structure, indeed the *modus operandi*, underlying his subsequent claim that art works are “counter-images” to the “empirically living.” In these and similar passages in “On the Relation Between Art and Society,” Adorno constructs a definition of the autonomy of art based on an ever-changing socio-historical context. Art obtains autonomy in opposition—this is the cornerstone of negation—while its socio-historical context, the object of its opposition, structures (*bestimmt*) both the nature of that opposition and the character of art’s autonomy.

When socio-historical context provides the substance “out of which . . . [art draws its] content,” and out of which art determines itself in negating recoil, each work of art constitutes a definitive instance of autonomy (Adorno *AT* 6–7). Aesthetic autonomy is indelibly defined by the non-identical tensions it possesses with its historical context. Aesthetic negation, the emergence of the artistic out of its Other, is neither a more accurate articulation nor a progressive unfolding of autonomy. Individual instances of autonomy have only the movement of non-identity in common. Each instance is connected to other instances not in any reciprocal confirmation of having taken different paths to the same destination, nor in having assisted one another in a greater realization of potential autonomy, but in a dynamic, mutually-negating interaction that challenges the universal position of autonomy as a concept. The interaction of heterogeneous autonomies occupied by or articulated through different works of art dispels the reified illusion of autonomy as a realm unto itself. The autonomy of art pivots on the negation of autonomy as a reified ideal. Each work of art is singularly exemplary, its non-identity not being an example of a greater universal, but a singular instance of itself. For Adorno, any conception of the autonomy of art, other than the position a given work occupies in negative relation to its Other, regresses into reification and a repressive positivism.

This last point—which, it seems to me, does much to vindicate Adorno from his critics—is not immediately apparent in Adorno’s writing. On the contrary, Adorno gives the appearance of adherence to a fixed conception of autonomy because he attempts to avoid reification by speaking from the general position or perspective of art that is already autonomous, i.e., from the perspective that has already negated its socio-historical context. For example, in the claim that the artistic (*das Kunsthafte*) specifies itself out of its Other (*das*

*Andere*), the movement of aesthetic negation is an event spoken of in retrospect, when the socio-historical is already positioned as an object of hindsight, signified here by the term "the Other." By speaking from the position of art, Adorno eliminates the necessity for exploring the vast complexities underlying the socio-historical, choosing instead to dismiss them as the single collectivity, "the Other." As previously stated, this strategy of adopting the voice of art as a means of avoiding a reified concept of autonomy gave his initial readers the impression that Adorno had traded the goals of political activism for the consolations of aesthetic pleasure.

Yet for Adorno, aesthetic negation could never meet the demands of activists: aesthetic negation is not the direct articulation of criticism nor is it the positing of formulated goals or hypothetical alternatives—all of which sustain prevailing, delimiting discourse by appealing to tolerated and defusing avenues of dissent. Negation would be neutralized if subordinated to protest or if constricted to preconceived reified concepts of autonomy. Aesthetic negation, according to Adorno's argument, occurs when art resists the temptation to oppose the portrayed "unredeemed" state with formulated or implicit ideals. He specifies this in his *Aesthetic Theory*:

By cathecting the repressed, art internalizes the repressing principle, i.e., the unredeemed condition of the world (*Unheil*), instead of merely airing futile protests against it. Art identifies and expresses that condition, thus anticipating its overcoming. It is this and not the photographic rendition of the unredeemed state or a false sense of beatitude, that defines the position of authentic modern art towards a gloomy objectivity (Adorno AT 27-28).

Adorno's distinction between an anticipatory, cathected internalization of the repressing principle (*Lust am Verdrängten*) and mere protests against the principle arguably responds to the demand for an aesthetic that instigates political activism. While politically *engaged* art like Brecht's—which often serves as a point of contrast for Adorno—attempts to adjust the social whole by protesting society's aberration from preconceived guidelines or values, such art fails to recognize that these same values are intrinsically structured by the dominant discourses which they ostensibly oppose.<sup>17</sup> In the place of such limited aesthetic approaches, Adorno suggests the need for art works which incorporate the preconceived notions of autonomy into themselves and thereby expose how the dominant social discourses permeate current ideals. He posits an aesthetic whose autonomy resides in its negative dialectic or non-identity with prevalent conceptions of autonomy.

The futility of protest, its "false sense of beatitude," lies in the mistaken presumption that one can detach him/herself enough from the mediations of



repression so as to offer an alternative that does not subscribe to the same repressive forces. Instead of offering protests that attempt to redirect within the status quo, art seeks to deadlock repression and thereby violate its limits. The deadlock generates a crisis in meaning, whereas protest only simulates crisis while still perpetuating prevalent constricting delusions. The crisis occurs through an exposure of stultification and reification in perception, thus exposing the ways accepted interpretations of reality dictate experience. Art is anticipatory in that it upsets or obstructs habitual, unexamined principles of conduct. Adorno argues that "Willfulness and spontaneity—this is the vital element of art," a "willfulness" that facilitates "spontaneity" by negating repression (Adorno *AT* 167). Art demands a willfulness, a courage, which allows new meaning. This meaning is a departure from reification into spontaneity and the unknown.

Art's incorporation of the repressive principle into itself objectifies the dynamic of negation. When an art work objectifies repression, it becomes the progenitor of aesthetic reflection, and its non-identical movement subverts the repression. According to Adorno, objectification alters the social environment of those who come in contact with the work. More than a mere reflection of the social milieu, an art work that objectifies its origins alters the socio-historical context, offering in its "counter-image" to "the empirically living" what the "empirically living" denies (Adorno *AT* 4). The non-identical generates tension between itself and its origins that endures beneath the appearance of resolution. The work becomes a limited part of the social environment, but nonetheless an object to which an individual potentially can respond. Adorno argues:

Aesthetic expression is objectification of the non-objective. Put more precisely, through its objectification expression becomes a second non-objective substance, one that speaks out of the artefact rather than out of the subject.<sup>18</sup>

The aesthetic voice emerging from the artifact anticipates a new-found autonomy in the contemplation it facilitates. Anticipation would seem the correct term here because aesthetic expression is only potentially autonomous. Negation is not cancellation, i.e., final. It denotes a dynamic impasse in a continuing struggle for dominance. Here we are speaking of two distinct autonomies: one ephemeral and terminal, and the other resulting from historical passage. The former resides in what an art work potentially offers to an individual in the counter-image it provides to a specific socio-historical context. The latter is the autonomy addressed earlier in this paper, the autonomy that results from the unresolved tensions an art work has with a specific historic moment.

### The Question of Origins

The autonomy of art depends upon such an elaborate conception of historical dialectics that Adorno's writing from the perspective of the non-identical is arguably a subtle method for talking about the autonomy of art without becoming entangled in the complexities leading to it. But the method also has the tendency to presume that the origins with which an art work is non-identical are non-problematic. Thus Adorno dismisses the question of origins in an early section of the *Aesthetic Theory* entitled "*Gegen Ursprungsfrage*" ("Against Questions of Origin"). The dismissal might not be so problematic were it not for two points. First of all, art owes its non-identical existence to the origins which Adorno dismisses. Immediately after dismissing the question of origins, Adorno specifies that aesthetic negation and the subsequent autonomy of art are meaningless without the origins from which they emerge: "Works of art became what they are by negating their origins" (Adorno AT 4). Secondly, Adorno keeps the question open at the margins of his discussions by pushing it into an appendix.<sup>19</sup>

When he finally does return to the question of origins, the reasons for his discomfort quickly become evident: the excursus is a documented explication of his earlier rejection (Adorno AT 447–455). The rejection of origins as a topic worthy of consideration is based upon its association with debates concerning the origin of art itself. For Adorno, the origin of art is irrelevant to the origins an art work negates, and he dismisses the question of art's origin because the question presupposes a continuity in art which, according to Adorno, is at odds with art itself. This is ostensibly why in the excursus, he begins with the claim that the endeavor to understand the essence of art by looking to its origins is "necessarily disappointing" (447).

While the distinction between the origin of art and the origins an art work negates is important to the subordination of universals to the influence of historical dialectics, Adorno also overplays the distinction. The excursus rigorously dismantles and obstructs a view of art as a continuous and unfolding concept, but does so at the expense of an adequate explanation of what constitutes the origins an art work negates. Like his structurally binding "autonomy" to socio-historical specifics, his rejection of the "*Ursprungsfrage*" emphasizes historical distinction or particularity over historical evolution or continuity. Adorno's views on the autonomy of art and on the origins negated by art bear the additional similarity that, in both instances, the socio-historical occupies the position of the unarticulated. But the point is that regardless of whether Adorno rejects the term "origin(s)" in its common usage, he still employs a structural conception of it whose explanation he neglects.

Although the excursus refuses to provide an adequate explanation of what is meant by the "origins" an art work negates, the methodology of the excursus

lends itself to an inferential construction of the underlying structures governing Adorno's use of the term. Adorno's use of "origins" rests at the center of a dynamic tension between a radical historicization and an equally radical questioning of what comprises historicity. Like the art works whose negative basis they form, the origins to which art works owe their existence are historical (Adorno *AT* 447). But while historicity joins an art work to its origins, one must also understand what constitutes the substance of history to understand origins. Unfortunately, it is not enough to say that the material and the social are the substance of the historical.

The vagueness of the term "origins" hedges between a catch-all phrase and a critical expression that calls into question the material and the social to which it refers. It alludes not only to socio-historical context but also questions the fixity and stability of such a concept. By saying that art negates its origins rather than its socio-historical context, and by adopting the position of art looking in retrospect on the Other it has left behind, Adorno concedes that art responds to social reality, but leaves open the question as to what constitutes that reality.

The scope of the origins to which art responds extends beyond the specifically "material" life men and women lead. As Peter Hohendahl has noted:

[Adorno] . . . used Hegel's model of history to understand the evolution of literature as representative for the development of social and political history. . . . While he insists on the dialectic of art and society (the art work is also a social fact), he does not, unlike Lukács, conceive of it in terms of reflection (Hohendahl *Reappraisals* 82).

Adorno's opposition to the arguments that art is a reflection of social reality stem from his assumption that consciousness is not merely a reflection of the material. The lives men and women lead respond to a social milieu comprised of ideas as well as materiality. Rather than thought mirroring the material-social environment, art actively contributes to it. The origins negated by an art work denote a socio-historical context that includes art and philosophy—not as reflection but as substance. As Hohendahl notes: "Ultimately, art and society belong to the same stream of history" (Hohendahl *Reappraisals* 82). "Origins" denotes them both.

Once art and philosophy become part of the socio-historical context that a work of art negates, it is not difficult to understand why Adorno is so opposed to studies tracing art back to its prehistoric origins. Such studies presuppose a separate qualitative continuity in art that Adorno claims each work must negate in order to be art at all: "It must turn against that which determines its own concept and thereby becomes uncertain within its deepest fibers."<sup>20</sup> His combining the intellectual with the material in a single milieu subordinates abstractions and concepts—which try to stand "above" or "outside"—to the qualitative substance,

i.e., the origins that a work must negate to become art. The consequences of this subordination occur at numerous levels. First of all, it radically alters the notion of "an unfolding concept," by leaving each work of art disjointed and severed from the next. At the same time that Adorno places art amidst specific socio-historical parameters, he expands the width of these parameters by replacing reflection theory with a conception of the socio-historical as an admixture of the intellectual and the material.<sup>21</sup> Combined, these two maneuvers suggest a revision of dialectics that distinguishes Adorno from Hegel. They make up a dynamic that pulls at its own seams: once the historical becomes an admixture of intellectual and material, the elements of history, which include the disjointed concept of art, lose their qualitative continuity.

Adorno's emphatic rejection of a qualitative continuity in the concept of art has implications for the movements of history in general. A discontinuity in concepts implies a corresponding discontinuity in history—especially within the Hegelian model where concepts are traditionally the movers of history itself. Even if the concept of art were a special case—which here it is not, despite other privileges Adorno gives to art—its being an exception among concepts would have ramifications that demand a conceptual restructuring of history. The qualitative discontinuity of the concept of art suggests that, rather than evolving, concepts expire once outside of their socio-historical context. They have a bounded, contextual vitality. This is the essence of their autonomy. Like an individual work of art, concepts in general sustain a dialectical tension which thrives within their socio-historical context, but which reifies once beyond this context.

While reification in place of a dialectical synthesis brings into question the conception of history as a unified process, it has specific consequences for aesthetics as well. Socio-historical change de-stabilizes the referents of the terms and ideals with which previous works of art formulated their non-identity. Historical passage slips these terms into the origins with which later works are qualitatively at odds. Once de-stabilized, previous aesthetic ideals or discourse lend themselves to appropriation and ultimately to the opposite of their earlier non-identical opposition, viz., repression and reification.<sup>22</sup>

With the contextual, qualitative specificity of the concept of art, an additional element vies for position within the dynamic tension of its negated origins: Adorno's radical historicization is not only offset by a rigorous questioning of what comprises history but by a questioning of supersession as well. Art's non-identical origins are a socio-historical context in which the content of the social and the historical are brought into question, and in which reification prevails beneath the appearance of supersession.

The "origins" of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* presuppose a model of history in which even the basic oppositions of Hegelian dialectics are brought into question, a model in distinct contrast to Hohendahl's Hegelian reading of Adorno

and to the reading of Eugene Lunn, who defends a similar position. Lunn notes Adorno's frequent juxtaposition of "seeming opposites . . . so as to mediate them by developing each of the apparent antinomies out of the other in mutual critique." This strategy is, according to Lunn, "a dialectic procedure which . . . [Adorno] owed to Hegel."<sup>23</sup> With origins, however, the mediation quickly extends beyond the mutual critique of antinomies. Adorno's dialectical model escalates instead into a constellation of mediations that radically challenges binary oppositions: at one level, there is the socio-historical that brings its own substance into question, and at the same time this socio-historical is in dynamic tension with a rigorous inquiry into the presumptions underlying supersession (the continuity thought to gauge temporal passage). While one can single out specific elements—as, for example, the apparent antinomy that the continuity of a concept becomes a litmus test for its reification—the question of socio-historical substance is no less a mediating factor to a concept (*ein Begriff*, in the Hegelian sense) than is the question of its continuity. The complex mediation within "origins," indeed, mediation in general, occurs at a level where the antinomies are never quite clear because opposites are themselves never stable enough to polarize and ossify into the Hegelian categories of thesis and antithesis. For Adorno, aesthetic non-identity and the particularity it embodies is seen, as Peter Dews has noted, "as standing in a pattern of relations to other particular, a historically sedimented 'constellation' which defines its identity."<sup>24</sup>

The diverse and dynamic mediation occurring beneath Adorno's own use of the term "origins" helps to pinpoint the referent in the sentence with which he opens "*Gegen Ursprungsfrage*": "Art has its concept in the historically changing constellation of moments."<sup>25</sup> The weight of this sentence rests on the definite article, on the specificity that it connotes. The constellation to which he refers is the "origins" that he says an art work must negate. But the concept of art is not that which is changing or evolving, at least not evolving beyond the constellation itself, within which it continues to unfold because its dialectical tensions remain unresolved. It is the constellation of moments that changes and the constellation from which art receives its concept, each new constellation necessitating a new non-identical concept of art and of autonomy. The dialectic evolution continues within the constellation itself, but the concept has no continuity outside of the contextual origins structuring it.

While Adorno's polemic against the so-called origin of art does emphasize a discontinuity that is presupposed in the autonomous, non-identical movement of aesthetic negation, and while the description of origins as a constellation or dynamic of tensions does much to highlight the presumptions functioning beneath Adorno's own application of the term "origins," these characterizations still describe the consequences of aesthetic negation and not really origins *per se*. The characterizations are part of Adorno's rhetorical stance. They still come from the perspective of art looking in retrospect on the

origins or the Other it has negated. Aesthetic negation uncovers the discontinuity of concepts—i.e., the breakdown in sublation—and it illuminates the unresolved, thriving dialectical tensions obscured beneath the appearance of supersession.

To say that art has its concept in the historically changing constellation of moments is to describe origins in their negated relation to an art work, to describe origins after the appearance of continuity and stability has given way to an aesthetic force capable of reinscribing the constellation which appearance obscures. But it makes sense, at least according to the dictates of Adorno's argument, that the origins as Adorno presents them must already be in their negated state: if the origins were already obviously discontinuous and unresolved, an artwork could not find the stable basis—however illusory that basis proves to be—against which to build its non-identical relation without positing continuity so as later to dispel it.

The origins negated by art remain unarticulated in Adorno's theories, more so than the non-identity of art itself. One might think that this is as it should be, given that the *Aesthetic Theory* is after all a work on aesthetics, and given that the theory itself emphasizes the socio-historical specificity of origins, a specificity articulation might dilute. Yet for all its non-identity, art presupposes a corresponding specificity as well, the structure and not merely the details of which Adorno neglects by addressing the consequences of negation instead of clarifying his own use of the term "origins." As a result, both the non-identity of art and its negated origins remain cryptic and formulaic. Crucial structural aspects of the dynamics between art and society persist in the form of mostly unexplored terms—e.g., "non-identity," "what it is not," "the Other" and above all "origins"—although their exploration would foster a clarity rather than dilution. In part, this lacuna results from and is even obscured by Adorno's having selected the concept of art to illustrate the discontinuity of concepts in general, the discontinuity that aesthetic negation exposes. This unexplored territory results, in part, from Adorno's mesmerizing account of the consequences of negation—an account that is in itself suspect because, by articulating the consequences of negation rather than the structural conditions leading to it, the account comes dangerously close to the formulation of immutable criteria which artifacts must meet in order to be art. At the very least, the account of the consequences of negation cultivates registers with which a critic/reader can search for that which appears to correspond to preconceived results. It borders on begging the question. While these last possibilities are at odds with more dominant tendencies in Adorno's text, their emergence in the theory's central dynamic raises questions that cannot be ignored. For the present, suffice it to say that, though the terms may remain unexplored, their function is to provide the means with which to discuss the aesthetic exposure of the heterogeneity which society obscures.

## Heterogeneity and the Crisis in Dialectics

Rainer Nägele argues that “if Hegel’s dialectic is the attempt to master the heterogeneous in philosophical concepts, negative dialectics is the attempt to reinscribe the heterogeneous as heterogeneous also in thought.”<sup>26</sup> In Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*, art’s non-identity is this reinscription. This means that the non-identity of art, because it re-inscribes heterogeneity, presupposes the homogeneity, i.e., a continuity in concepts, which negation dispels. More than a mere reversal of Hegel, reinscribing the heterogeneous articulates a crisis in the basic mechanics of Hegelian dialectics. Without continuity in concepts, sublation comes to a standstill—in this respect there is a brilliance in Adorno’s having focused on the discontinuity or disunity of the concept of art.<sup>27</sup> Art’s own heterogeneity gives it the conceptual basis from which to question and negate the appearance of continuity in concepts; its heterogeneity is its non-identity with its origins; and it is at the *avant-garde* of the heterogeneity it uncovers.

Adorno’s rejection of theories on “the origin of art” and this rejection’s connection with his reworking of historical dialectics are but two aspects within a larger critical constellation. While the discontinuity of art suggests that sublation forces or creates the illusion of unity “where none in fact exist[s],” Adorno’s rejection of continuity also initiates a reworking of the idea of reification—which here signifies the glossing over or repression of heterogeneities beneath the appearance of unity.<sup>28</sup> The appearance of a resolution (*Aufhebung*) that leads from one historical constellation into another robs art of the dialectical vitality it has within its specific socio-historical context.

In contrast to the continuity of origins implied by supersession, Adorno posits layers of constellations whose essential tensions have not resolved, but are buried beneath a reified rhetorically-imposed supersession which accompanies temporal passage. This same lack of resolution is, for example, what allows Adorno to make the claim with which he opens *Negative Dialectics*: “Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed” (Adorno *ND* 3). Philosophy is not a floating potential waiting for realization—its moment has passed. It is rather the premier example of unresolved tension surviving within its specific moment or constellation and providing a point of focus from which to scrutinize fabricated resolution. In the unity and stability presupposed by the origins art negates, Adorno finds a false and reified history—just as the question of the origin of art is a false question based upon a reified concept of art. While origins presuppose historical continuity, negation reinscribes historical heterogeneity. Art’s negation of its origins is two-fold: it uncovers unresolved dialectical tensions that the apparent unity within origins obscures; and its non-identity with these origins generates a dialectical tension that also knows no resolution.

In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno argues that unity was fraudulently posited at the expense of plurality, and that whatever the initial source of this fraudulence

might have been, the end result was that as "unity" gained in prominence, it also gained the power to repress those resisting it (Adorno *ND* 315). He argues:

The universal by which every individual is determined at all, as one of his particular kind, that universal is borrowed from what is extraneous and therefore as heteronomous to the individual as anything once said to have been ordained for him by demons (315).

Adorno's resort to the image of demons in his description is not gratuitous. The image forms a negative contrast to the Hegelian Spirit, specifically a contrast to the continuity so central to the movements of Hegelian dialectics: a contrast between the singularity of an all-superseding and unifying Spirit and the diverse plurality of demons reinscribing heterogeneity. The image of demons admonishes against concepts of unity because these concepts erase the history they purport to trace. Art negates these posited origins with the reinscription of particularity, the cornerstone of heterogeneity. The contrast in imagery extends even into the structural morphology of Adorno's descriptions: while origins project retrospectively an evolution through sublation, art recalls "an objectivity removed [enthoben] from categorical frameworks."<sup>29</sup> The contrast between the subsuming supersession of Spirit and the heterogeneous reinscriptions of demons resides in the distinction between an "auf-" and "ent-" "(ge)hobene Objektivität." The polarities of demons and Spirit, the "Enthobene" and the "Aufgehobene," are the opposing elements in art's non-identity with its origins. The reinscription of heterogeneity is the recovery of the "Enthobene" vis-à-vis the overwhelming appearance of the "Aufgehobene."

Yet despite the forcefulness of this contrast, it still remains within descriptions of consequences at the expense of an explanation of the structural conditions leading to it. By articulating the discussion from the perspective of art looking in retrospect on the origins or the Other it has negated, Adorno posits his (art's) oppositions rather than allowing art to formulate them on its own. In this case, the necessary opposite is Hegel whose dialectics foster the appearances with which art is non-identical, but which persist in each instance of art's non-identity to them. Inasmuch as art persists in the lack of resolution of its dialectical tensions, so too do the counter-elements of these tensions. Though Adorno attempts to circumvent Hegel by arguing that art recalls a reality before the Hegelian system, "eine dem kategorialen Gefüge enthobene Objektivität," his having built aesthetic negation in opposition to Hegel reflects Adorno's own irresolute and unresolved tension with his origins.