

## Editor's Introduction: Adorno's Actuality

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What is the actuality of the work of Theodor W. Adorno for contemporary Continental philosophy? Posed in this way, such a question is both suggestive and unsatisfactory. "Actuality" is a meager translation for the German "*Aktualität*." This is the sort of linguistic nonaffinity that any serious reader of Adorno in English has long since learned to deal with, or has at least become resigned to. Even in its original, however, the term *Aktualität* contains within it the sort of dialectical ambiguity that is the hallmark of Adorno's own careful deployment of philosophical terminology. "Actuality" can mean both "relevance for the present and its concerns" or "up-to-date," "still in fashion."

Thus the term actuality encompasses dramatically different alternatives: on the one hand, it expresses the quintessence of the modern ephemeral, in which an eternalized present defines itself against its past by a gesture to the arbitrary rules of production and consumption that determine what is popular and what is forgettable. Even in this sense, Adorno's work is "actual," at least within the confines of professional philosophy in Western Europe and North America, as evidenced by the secondary literature on Adorno, which continues to grow nearly thirty years after his death. Clearly, there is something about Adorno still very much in philosophical fashion.

On the other hand, however, actuality denotes a kind of practical affinity between an element of an intellectual legacy and a self-reflective contemporary situation; an affinity that resists or ignores what is intellectually fashionable and instead wants to capture an aspect of a culture's authentic expression of what it needs. The actuality of Adorno's work for contemporary Continental philosophy in *this* sense entails the claim that the current situation of Continental

philosophy, analyzed appropriately, points toward the *necessity* of reading Adorno now, toward the *warranted* currency or the persistence, of Adorno's thought—the need to refashion, out of Adorno's work, the elements of a critical self-analysis of the contemporary state of philosophical discourse. In this sense, the essays collected in this volume all address Adorno's work not as a “legacy” to be selectively appropriated through the concerns of the present, not as “appreciations,”—as if Adorno's currency has somehow grown in value simply by its aging—but rather very much in the spirit in which Adorno described his own critical appropriation of Hegel: the question is what the present means in the face of Adorno.<sup>1</sup> And this critical face-to-face between the present and an aspect of its philosophical past means not just a question of the philosophical “legitimacy” of the present, but also—for Adorno centrally—the question of the present legitimacy of philosophy.

It is this sense of actuality that Adorno had in mind in his inaugural lecture of 1931, entitled simply “The Actuality of Philosophy.” At the beginning of his professional career Adorno had perceived the situation of contemporary philosophy to coalesce around two equally unsatisfactory options. On one side, the tradition of philosophical idealism had clearly failed to provide a general and unified theory of the real, of subjectivity, or of time; its totalizing conception of rationality had betrayed not just its own unsuitability to comprehend the mediated character of social reality, but its own ideological bias as well. Already, “totality” appears in Adorno's thought as a critical category, referring negatively to a futural possibility of just social and material conditions, and thereby opposing itself to the inherently dominative totalizing tendency of philosophical reason: “Only in traces and ruins,” Adorno claimed, “is [reason] prepared to hope that it will ever come across correct and just reality.”<sup>2</sup>

For Adorno in 1931, Heidegger ends the tradition of philosophical idealism by ruining the Husserlian project of a general account of the constitution of subjectivity in time—and also exhibits once again the fundamental untenability of such large-scale projects. After idealism, then, philosophy might also find itself bereft of a defining project, and hence ready to liquidate itself, to collapse into the separate disciplines that it had once aspired to organize and unify. The question of philosophy's actuality, then, was for the young Adorno first and foremost the question of whether philosophy's self-appointed task of providing a unified account of human reality—a “grand and total philosophy”—now appeared untenable in the new landscape of post-metaphysical theory; and whether, in light of this, philosophy now found its last task in its own self-liquidation:

By “actuality” is understood not [philosophy's] vague “maturity” or immaturity on the basis of nonbinding conceptions regarding the gen-

eral intellectual situation, but much more: whether, after the failure of these last great efforts, there exists an adequacy between the philosophic questions and the possibility of their being answered at all; whether the authentic results of the recent history of these problems is the essential unanswerability of the cardinal philosophic questions. [ . . . ] Every philosophy which today does not depend on the security of current intellectual and social conditions, but instead upon truth, sees itself facing the problem of a liquidation of philosophy.<sup>3</sup>

In 1931, the "security of current intellectual and social conditions" would be short-lived indeed. Yet Adorno still saw the liquidation of philosophy to be in essence a *philosophical* question, and the tone here—the truth over current intellectual fashion—refers naturally to the other broad current in contemporary philosophy, the logical positivism of the Vienna School and the origins of post-metaphysical analytical philosophy, a current for which, in Adorno's view, the "liquidation" of traditional philosophy had become a self-defining task.

And yet logical positivism's goal to disburden philosophy of its traditional self-understanding and vocabulary—and thereby to dissolve its "grand and total" projects into the special projects of disparate scientific disciplines—ran into properly philosophical problems that formed the counterweight of those encountered by Heidegger's post-idealism. Neither of its two cardinal assumptions, the unproblematically "given" of empirical observation, and the static, ahistorical subject, were philosophically tenable in light of the fundamentally dynamic and historically and socially mediated character of subject-object relations. And the question of the Other, of the "alien ego," received an explanation according to analogy to the self-transparent ego that proved just as unsatisfactory as it had in late phenomenology. Thus properly philosophical problems frustrated logical positivism's efforts to liquidate philosophy from within.

Adorno's assertion at this point is crucial, for he will argue that philosophy's actuality rests in its status as a process of continuous interpretation, whereas the sciences subsist on research. But this is no mere appeal to a well-established debate concerning the epistemological underpinnings of the *Geisteswissenschaften*; the "interpretation" that Adorno has in mind here differs dramatically from traditional hermeneutics. The latter proceeds on the presumption of the meaningful character of the social and historical totality; philosophical interpretation in Adorno's new sense specifically breaks with just this assumption, which for Adorno must always have the immediate political effect of justifying a riven, contradictory and desperately unjust social reality by attributing an overarching meaningful structure to it.

On the contrary, interpretation,—the only justifiable task left to post-idealist philosophy—was for the early Adorno the task of the revelation of

historical truth, and this was to be had by the philosophical construction of historical images from out of the material of an inherently unstable, contradictory, and self-fragmenting text of the social world. To the interpreting gaze the social world appears not just as text but as riddle, as visual puzzle or *Vexierbild*. The *recognition* of the puzzle-like character of a supposedly seamless social whole is the first dialectical talent required of philosophy. The *solution* to textual puzzles, however, must consist not in the evocation of some higher-level meta-social meaning beyond appearance, but rather the inherently practical interpretation whereby the puzzle-like character of the real flashes into images which point indirectly toward the dissolution of the puzzle-like character of the real. Interpretation is thus the construction of historical constellations out of the waste products of social reality, and the images that spring forth from it are nonarbitrary and historically precise images of redeemed social reality:

Authentic philosophical interpretation does not meet up with a fixed meaning which already lies behind the question, but lights it up suddenly and momentarily, and consumes it at the same time. Just as riddle-solving is constituted, in that the singular and dispersed elements of the question are brought into various groupings long enough for them to close together in a figure out of which the solution springs forth, while the question disappears—so philosophy has to bring its elements, which it receives from the sciences, into changing constellations, or, to say it with less astrological and scientifically more current expression, into changing trial combinations, until they fall into a figure which can be read as an answer, while at the same time the question disappears.<sup>4</sup>

This deeply Benjaminian conception of the redemptive power of constellations (or “dialectical images,” as Benjamin had it), would, as Susan Buck-Morss has demonstrated, endure throughout Adorno’s theoretical development, although not without significant changes.<sup>5</sup> And it is true in some important sense that the “constellation,” even if only a metaphor for a method, remains somehow Adorno’s most influential and enduring intellectual legacy, one that captures metaphorically a number of different aspects of Adorno’s thinking: the overarching sensibility that the collapse of idealism nevertheless leaves at least part of the underlying normative part of idealism’s motivation intact; the insight that the drive to unify the world through concepts is in a tense and in the end irresolvable conflict with the desire to redeem the particular, the nonidentical. The form of interpretation through “constellative thinking” that Adorno sees as philosophy’s only home for its actuality in 1931 expresses simultaneous and perhaps contradictory ambitions which go

on to structure Adorno's philosophical trajectory. The ambition to make good on Benjamin's project of a philosophy that can still think the marginalized particular without violence—a true materialist philosophy—and the ambition to redeem the utopian, reconciliatory dimension of idealist texts subsist uneasily alongside one another. The project of redeeming nature dominated by concentrating attention on the material margins of rational discourses has to accommodate itself to Adorno's characteristic project of rescuing the non-identical from the center of the concept. Moreover, Adorno was to the end Hegelian in his belief that such an enterprise—thinking the particular without simply submitting it sacrificially to the imperatives of universalization—was in the end a possibility that had rather rigorously logical and methodological parameters; it was in short still philosophy, and not poetry, that was especially charged with the production of truth.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, this range of ambitions places Adorno in a proximity with the later development of poststructuralist theory, and the question of the actuality of Adorno's philosophy—its relation to its own present possibility, or the possibility of a philosophical present in relation to it—is, more concretely, the question of the relation of Adorno's modernist philosophy to the philosophical spirit of the postmodern.

The constellation of “poststructuralist,” “postmodern” or “postmetaphysical” philosophy has changed from the one Adorno analyzed sixty years ago. On the one side, analytic philosophy has developed its own institutionalized traditions, and has in large measure exhausted its original intentions through a philosophy of language. On the other side, the influence of Heidegger's destruction of onto-theology, of linguistic analysis, of the French recoveries of Nietzsche and Freud, all led out of existentialism and into philosophical poststructuralism, which in many ways replicates the sorts of interpretive strategies that Adorno had in mind in the essay on the “Actuality of Philosophy,” and points beyond traditional philosophical discourse in similar ways as well.

Adorno and contemporary poststructuralist theory certainly bear some intuitively clear affinities: both are efforts to work out the philosophical import of the collapse of philosophical idealism. Both seek to interpret this collapse not in terms of a simple liquidation of philosophy but rather attempt to perform a self-liquidation of the contents and intents of idealist philosophy toward some radically new conception of philosophical practice. Both interpret a crisis of meaning and representation as an indisputable event, for the social reality of Western civilization no less than for the internal development of Western philosophy. Both respond to this crisis of meaning and representation by inaugurating radical projects of methodological and formal innovation. And both find their most characteristic voice in the critical dismantling or deconstruction of established texts of the tradition of Western modernity.

Rejecting the totalizing reason of traditional Continental philosophy, they both appeal to critiques of the dominative aspect of rationality as guides toward a radically new form of philosophical practice, one that will undermine the dominant paradigm of subject-centered philosophy of consciousness, of pristine sources of truth and representation, univocal metanarratives of historical progress or a transparent social world. In both, the liquidation of the philosophical heritage is still, however, a philosophical question.

More significant still, both Adorno's negative dialectic and deconstruction regard the interpretive task of philosophy to consist in the legibility of a fragmented social reality that appears as text. Both dedicate themselves to the gleaning of unintentional moments of interruption, resistance, deferral, or negation that are cryptically encoded within the material that dominant totalizing discourses marginalize or repress. In this sense both Adorno and poststructuralism still understand philosophy as containing the promise, however fragile, of preserving the possibility of thinking differently or thinking difference; Adorno's negative dialectics was in large measure intended as a conceptual practice dedicated to allowing the nonidentical to emerge free of the violence done to it through the application of concepts.<sup>7</sup> Both Adorno and deconstruction frequently draw themselves toward the "trash of history," as Benjamin once put it, in order to address a crisis of meaning and representation, but also as the response to an ethical intuition, according to which the repressed other—the nonidentical—can reappear within the ruins of a dominant discourse.<sup>8</sup> In this overarching sense, poststructuralist philosophy finds in Adorno an essential precursor in terms of its underlying and often murky ethical dimension—and a continuing irritant as well, since Adorno's frequent insistence on the corporeality of the other, on the heritage of physical suffering and deprivation that is the unavoidable horizon of virtually all of Adorno's ethical reflections, challenges the linguistification of human relations that is the hallmark of poststructuralism.<sup>9</sup>

The closest affinity between Adorno and poststructuralism can thus be described as their parallel efforts to recover an ethics of alterity by way of an imminent overcoming of the tradition of philosophical idealism. This affinity extends, in some cases, to the logical level.<sup>10</sup>

In this sense, Adorno and poststructuralist theory generally are united in the essentially ethical-political motivation behind their complex rejection of the model of Enlightenment rationality. For Jürgen Habermas, this point in common, in a rather unexpected way, also determines an aspect of Adorno's actuality—though perhaps in the sense of "fashion" more than "relevance for the present." For Habermas, Adorno's rejection of the tradition of Enlightenment is characterized by his inability to articulate a coherent foundation for the powerful ethical insights and intuitions that structure his work, and this failing also links Adorno with major trends in contemporary poststructuralist

theory, in particular Foucault. Habermas's decision to include Horkheimer and Adorno in his analysis of the irrationalist dimension of postmodern theory in the *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* was a landmark in the debate on the actuality of Adorno, and in more than one sense. Habermas's status as Adorno's heir and chief critic allowed him to focus on an aspect of Adorno's work that has always been strangely troubling: for Habermas there is something dreadfully wrong with the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Tracing the oppressive aspect of the achievements of conscious subjectivity all the way back to the early hominids could be persuasive only by virtue of a massively distorted and reductive view of the character and social deployment of reason.

By grouping Adorno's bleak prognoses together with the celebratory departure from traditional philosophical guarantees on truth and coherence typical of French postmodern theory, Habermas argued that both illustrate the *philosophically* unacceptable alternative of a *false* liquidation of the promise of rational modernity. For Habermas, the hypercomplex, claustrophobic, fretful atmosphere of Adorno's late work was the unavoidable consequence of a total rejection of the rational and normative grounds of criticism, and led to a form of performative self-contradiction just as pronounced as the exhilarating gestures of French theory. In both cases, for Habermas, a misguided appropriation of Nietzsche lies behind the doomed attempt to generate texts that criticize the irreducibly dominative character of reason while simultaneously eschewing all rational criteria according to which critique could reach any coherence concerning its own procedure.<sup>11</sup> In the *Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas also rejects Adorno's scattered references, mostly in the *Aesthetic Theory*, to mimesis as a form of cognition resistant to the violence of conceptual thought, objecting that, on Adorno's terms, mimesis can appear only as a "placeholder" for a primordial, domination-free form of rationality, only as the abstract and vacuous other of reason, hence an impulse both demanding, and immune from, any theoretical elaboration.<sup>12</sup>

Habermas thus grants Adorno a strange actuality by saying that he and the postmoderns are performing the same unwarranted liquidation of the philosophical tradition; he thus highlights a point of commonality—irrationalism—that in fact will prove to be very contentious, for it is clear that the question of reason and the deconstruction of philosophy is just as easily a point on which Adorno and poststructuralism differ *the most sharply*.

Habermas, Adorno's chief philosophical heir in the Frankfurt School seemed eager to range Adorno along with Derrida, Foucault, and Bataille. Ten years earlier, however, Jean-Francois Lyotard had already made a sharply different point: in his essay "Adorno como diobolo," Lyotard had described the insurmountable gap separating Adorno from the Nietzschean enthusiasm of postmodern theory.<sup>13</sup> Dialectics, which Habermas had regarded as decaying into the impotent wishes for a vacuous other of reason, is for Lyotard still

hopelessly imbricated in a master narrative of historical progress. In "Adorno como diobolo," Lyotard took Adorno to task for clinging to the logical structure of the dialectic beyond the point where social conditions and the self-liquidation of philosophy allowed the dialectic to be a plausible theoretical alternative. For Lyotard, Adorno is among the last representatives of a commitment to emphatic theorizing that a postmodern spirit would liquidate; Adorno is the quintessentially out-of-fashion, irrelevant modernist thinker, whose tragic mask subverts to its own self-parody. Turning to the *Philosophy of Modern Music*, Lyotard argued that Adorno was unable to keep separate the mournful modernist and the parodistic/pastiche voice of postmodernism; thus modernism a lá Adorno *generates* the sort of postmodern reinvestments that Lyotard wished to champion.

More recently, Fredric Jameson has argued at length that it is precisely Adorno's dialectic—what for Lyotard makes Adorno *permanently* nonactual—that constitutes Adorno's contemporary relevance for a postmodern age. Jameson's controversial attempt to redeem Adorno's negative dialectics as the truly Marxist theory of postmodernity as late capitalism is complex and cannot be summarized here. For Jameson, however, virtually all comparisons of Adorno and postmodern theory are at best misleading. Jameson insists instead on reading Adorno as a modernist, and seeing Adorno's modernism itself as the surest theoretical lens for picturing the postmodern situation.

There is, for Jameson, a sort of historical symmetry between the older Marxist objections to Adorno's abandonment of praxis—his "irrelevance"—and contemporary (Lyotardian) critiques of Adorno's marxism as out-of-date. If, for Jameson, Adorno is on the contrary "consistent with and appropriate for the current postmodern age,"<sup>14</sup> it is because of, and not despite, Adorno's status as a Marxist theoretician; one who is able to deploy startlingly orthodox Marxist concepts (totality, ideology, dialectical development, crisis) in order to grasp the essentially mendacious character of the "perpetual present" of postmodernity as the "cultural dominant" of late capitalism.

Much of Jameson's argument thus rests upon the insistence that Adorno's actuality consists in his *dissimilarity* from contemporary poststructuralism; it is his very out-of-date Marxism that allows him to rein a relevance for the contemporary situation that currently fashionable Continental philosophy simply does not have. In this sense, Adorno's every anachronism becomes a component of his relevance: his failure to make the linguistic turn, for example, like his clinging to concepts of totality, experience, and historical truth, preserve an aspect of thinking, and constitute a range of negative conceptual possibilities, which imply a critical perspective entirely distinct from that of poststructuralism: "However tortured the Archimedean problems of the negative dialectics as such," Jameson writes,



they are only analogous to and not at all identical with the even more elaborate Archimedean dilemmas of deconstruction; both need something outside the system in order to criticize it, but in Adorno's case this something would remain an idea, while in Derrida's thought it ought ideally to be a linguistic possibility: the similarity comes from the fact that in neither case can this urgent need be met, except by an elaborate formal subterfuge.<sup>15</sup>

For Jameson, then, it is precisely Adorno's unparalleled modernism that establishes his relevance for the present, his actuality. But this complicates the question of Adorno's timeliness, rather than resolving it, since it is above all the problematic of time and temporality, of diachrony and its disturbances, that constitutes the standpoint of modernism. Insofar as actuality is itself a concept that, both in Adorno's work, and for our own reception of it, essentially serves to *complicate* temporality, this incipient paradox—the sense that Adorno's antiquated modernism makes him up-to-date for the postmodern present—is worth considering more closely.

In one sense, Adorno's modernism consists for Jameson precisely of a characteristic sense of temporality, and throughout his analysis Jameson is drawn to Adorno's "attention to temporality as a mode of grasping history, the use of existential time protentions and retentions as an instrument for grasping the dynamics of an external collective history otherwise available only in the "facts" and "faites diverses." "<sup>16</sup> And indeed Adorno's work is structured throughout by a distinctive sensibility, inherited in part from Benjamin, in part from Hegel, for the unruly process in which objects, concepts, and persons, in capitalism, age. The "idea of natural history" that was so powerfully formative for Adorno's early work provides a consistent paradigm still evident in his last theoretical projects. Natural history evoked more than just the graphic spectacle of historical processes displayed as fields of dead, abandoned, and forgotten things. It also contained the strategic insight that, conceived as ruin, historical objects were not just dead but also liberated from a totalizing historical reason, and, as liberated, presented themselves to the attention of the critic as material for the construction of constellations. Resistance to the homogenizing imperatives of instrumental reason is to be sought in the temporal slippings, gaps, discontinuities, and paradoxical returns and reanimations of the material, resisting the modern imperative for temporal continuity and historical progress, as much as in the preservation of a supposedly pristine faculty of mimesis. Earlier, I referred to Adorno's first theoretical program, the "Actuality of Philosophy," to show that interpretation, the activity in which philosophy's actuality in a postphilosophical world was to be found, consisted in the construction of constellations from the flotsam of a society that cannot help but designate things—objects, bodies,

texts—as losers. Adorno did not always follow up on the promise to transform the impulses of idealism into a historiography of things: whatever we make of the familiar accusations of his “*Berührungsgangst*,” it is true that, unlike Benjamin, he was always more comfortable as an observer before the stage of the concept than he was wading into the thicket of the historical material. (The most significant exception to this fear of touch seems to me to be Adorno’s unsurpassed and uncanny ability to transpose the experience of musical hearing into figurative language.) But what Adorno did excel at was the recognition that the same temporality that hastened the demise of the object, the abstract time that capitalism formalized, accelerated, and commodified, also generated discontinuities. In this Adorno is related to, but distinct from, contemporary theory. From Foucault’s genealogy and counter-memory to Derrida’s “hauntology,” virtually all poststructuralist theory bears, in one way or another, traces of the affirmative temporal vocabularies of Nietzsche (“not yet,” “until now,” “eternal return”) or Heidegger (the invigorating recollection and rescue of what the tradition consigns to a fixed past). Adorno, on the other hand, discovers the seismic critical power contained in an entirely different, negative temporality: “too late,” “already over,” “almost gone,” “never came,” “still here.”

In the 1930s, Adorno defined actuality as the question of whether philosophy ought to liquidate itself in the face of the more urgent task of materialist cultural criticism. In the 1960s, Adorno famously begins the *Negative Dialectics* with the idea that philosophy can still be practiced at all—is still, in this mournful sense, actual—only insofar as the historical window of opportunity for its “realization” was missed; that only insofar as it missed its appointment with historical reality can philosophy “live on.”<sup>17</sup> This attitude is not, of course, a simple act of resignation. It is the willed residence in a form of temporal acuity in which every anachronism is also the site of a transgression. It mandates philosophy’s actuality as the fading resonance of its own “practical” failure; having broken its promise with the world, philosophy is now in a state of permanent debt to its past which it can discharge only through continuous self-criticism. It is also, as Eva Geulen points out in this volume, a temporality which already in itself raises the question of the postmodern *within* the trajectory of Adorno’s philosophy: “Since philosophy survived its own apocalypse,” Geulen points out, “it has become untimely—it comes, from now on, always too late, it will always be a philosophy *post festum*, a post-modern philosophy, as it were. However, only because philosophy paradoxically survived the experience of outliving itself, is there yet a faint chance of one day arriving in time. The ‘no longer,’ so to speak, holds open the possibility of the ‘not yet’; the negative telos sustains the positive.”

There is, however, another side to this sort of time-consciousness. Temporality for Adorno includes an objective component that encompasses a spectrum of strategic deployments (spatial history, constellation) but also a subjective, personal component, which is less obvious and hence often mistaken as an

eccentricity or an untheorizable affect. Discussing Adorno's characteristic sensitivity to temporality, Jameson refers, correctly, to the "coordination between a personal and idiosyncratic sense of missed occasions and unseasonable survivals and a now more than merely nonsynchronous historical paradigm, in which the 'stages' of social and productive development pile up, fall out, keep us waiting, or turn out to have happened already and to have been forgotten."<sup>18</sup>

This "personal and idiosyncratic" feeling for the losses and survivals of time in capitalism is Adorno's sadness. Throughout his work, Adorno constructs a functional affinity between a sensitivity to the unfolding of the fate of objects under capitalism, on the one hand, and, on the other, a deep sadness that serves as the counterpart of this fate, an affect that forms an inseparable part of the subject's critical vision. In this sense, what might have initially appeared as a caricature of Adorno's relation to the postmodern—Adorno's mask of tragedy, his "damaged life" or "a priori pain," as Sloterdijk calls it—now appears, in fact, to represent something crucial. For Adorno was not insensitive to Benjamin's earlier claim, from the *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, that subjective emotions ought not to be considered as arbitrary productions of individuals, but "respond like a motorial reaction to a concretely structured world." In the world of unreason that Adorno confronted, critique consisted in thoroughgoing negativity, extending from the negative deployment of concepts "straight down" to the construction of a negative persona. In this sense, the a priori pain that Sloterdijk finds so objectionable in Adorno is in fact inseparable from Adorno's critical legacy.

What poststructuralism celebrates as play, critical theory mourns as failure. The crisis of meaning and representation that opens into the exhilarating space of play and contingency for poststructuralism is, for Adorno, yet another sign that meaning is not a fixed quantum but decays in the measure that its effects are rationalized. The constellation, the centerpiece of Adorno's historiography, was to have been *nonarbitrary*; its point was the representation of historical truth from within the shattered material of used-up textualities, and not the spectacle of the free play of liberated textual elements. The constellation—the dialectic—is a construction out of losses, a lading list of all that it is too late to save; critical subjectivity is one generated from loss, and learning from it.

*Disappointment* seems to me to capture the distinctive Adornian comportment at the crossroads of subject and object, since it refers both to the time of the object (the appointment with the nonidentical is always missed, just as philosophy is still arriving too late), as well as the subjective disposition (to feel disappointed) whose vaguely childish wisdom contains something of the mature power that Adorno was able to bring to bear in his better critical work. This work is powered, throughout, by a disappointment so massive that it remains itself virtually undetectable according to all the familiar theoretical devices, by all the instruments that conceptual thought has

hitherto contrived and, like some astronomical singularity, like some impossibly great mass, makes itself felt only by its invisible distortion of each and every formulation that circles ceaselessly around it, unable either to escape its gravity or illuminate it. This testifies to how powerfully, if covertly, Adorno's negative thinking is allied to the utterly "positive" wish for happiness; in this sense, Adorno's distorting effect is similar to that of Proust. If Proust mastered the peculiar productive power of disappointment for the work of memory in literature, then Adorno surely has to count as the most disappointed philosopher we have yet seen. And like Proust, Adorno's disappointment was able occasionally to irradiate his field of critical objects with a care that seems, from this perspective, startlingly different from that of poststructuralism. The project of thinking the singular nonviolently *is* the ethical kernel of what used to be metaphysics. The wreckage of metaphysics, however, does not open up the prospect for the celebration of the nonidentical, the singular, as pure alterity. Ending the *Negative Dialectics* with reflection on the possibility of a metaphysics after Auschwitz, Adorno concludes that,

[a]ccording to its own concept, metaphysics cannot be a deductive context of judgments about things in being, and neither can it be conceived after the model of an absolute otherness terribly defying thought. It would be possible only as a legible constellation of things in being. From these it would get the material without which it would not be; it would not transfigure the existence of its elements, however, but would bring them into a configuration in which the elements unite to form a script. To that end, metaphysics must know how to wish.<sup>19</sup>

For all the forcefulness with which this last methodological plea reenacts the programmatic ambition of a project of philosophical interpretation from the essay on the "Actuality of Philosophy," what was claimed earlier as a concrete intellectual and political project, is now expressible only in the conditional, and is made contingent upon hope. Hope, in fact, is the subjective element alone that could render this script of dead and dying historical-cultural artifacts legible. It is the impulse that insists upon an advocacy for things because they are small, or thrown away, or tend to get lost; it is the closest one can approach to an axiom of the methodical "micrology," the historiographical account of tiny things that Adorno holds out as the only "place where metaphysics can find a haven from totality."<sup>20</sup> There is certainly an "ethics of alterity" in Adorno's work. It is an ethics that often seems to situate itself between Benjamin's ethical talent (a love of things, of the abandoned souvenir, the shopworn, the gimcrack, slightly sad, dingy, shabby stuff, all of which is now excused from representation and commodification, and can with patience be made to say terrifying and true things about modernity) and that of Derrida (with his ability to find the fissures and gaps

in otherwise seamless texts that render the text stuttering and haunted by the voices of those who are silenced; whom the text silences even if it did not know it.) As I mentioned at the outset, Adorno did not consistently focus on either of these poles of matter or text. This makes his early project of the construction of the constellation in a sense unfulfillable; for *that*, he would have had to do what he did not, in the end, see himself capable of doing: liquidating philosophy in the name of the material world, in the name of a truly materialist historiography unleavened with conceptual labor, or conversely, liquidating philosophy into an originless and ungrounded work of textual analysis, music or literary criticism. Adorno's distinctive talent lay neither in the things nor the text, notwithstanding the brilliant work he did with both. His ethics derived from an even stranger crucible: from within the motion of conceptual thinking itself. It is entirely characteristic of Adorno, and very significant for his ethics of alterity, that, if such an ethics exists, it is to be "bodied forth" from the very *last* place that one would have looked for it: within the very maw of the work of the dominating concept. In this sense, Adorno's "disappointment" consists in the ability to read philosophical texts with an eye toward the gaps and inconsistencies within the totalizing work of the concept; gaps which indicate the negative spaces where the nonidentical, in whose service philosophy ought to have been from the beginning, can find a safe place for expression. This is the kind of self-criticism of postmetaphysical philosophy that remains actual after the last philosophical ambitions have been disappointed.

Hope becomes indistinguishable from disappointment in Adorno's late theory, and I would suggest that it is this very disappointment, complete with its distorting effects, that constitutes Adorno's actuality for contemporary philosophy. In this sense too, the present state of philosophy finds in Adorno a continuous contestation of its own legitimacy; Adorno's disappointment is more than a memory or a guilty conscience of how one philosophical path out of metaphysics ended in a critical cul de sac.<sup>21</sup> The "relevance" of Adorno's disappointment for the current ethical reappropriations of poststructuralist theory consists in the *inability* of poststructuralist theory to liquidate philosophical ethics in light of the massive disappointment emanating from Adorno's conceptual work; it consists in the debt that poststructuralist theory owes to the philosophical terminology—subject and object, reflection, identity, concept, totality, particular, reason—that it thought to have banished from the philosophical present.

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Adorno's work provides a strong corrective to the unreflective rejection of Enlightenment reason. Even at his darkest, Adorno remained convinced that the same reason that dominates as *Zweckrationalität*, as pure calculation,

also remains permanently linked with any possibility for an emancipatory and utopian, a different reason. In the quest for a new, nondominating form of cognition, a total break with rationality in all its forms is not possible. Although Adorno remained convinced that a "theory" of the reconciliatory dimensions of reason could not be responsibly written in an irrational society, he also never abandoned the hope for a loosening of the appropriative motion of rationality, just as he never abandoned the basic conviction that, in its inability to acknowledge true human needs, capitalism is irrational. Reason remains the play of the concept, which encompasses both the aspect of domination and of reconciliation. Irrationalism, for this reason, is merely an abstract possibility for Adorno, whose position toward reason in all its guises remains far more complex than Habermas's despairing claims of irrationalism would suggest. A different reason, embodied, careful, or solicitous of an Other, could only be a reason that sustained itself against, yet still in relation to the unifying work of the concept, just as the negative dialectics of postidealist philosophy continues to uncover traces of a nonsacrificial or reconciled thinking only through its immersions in the core texts of philosophical idealism. In her contribution to this volume, Ute Guzzoni reflects on the possibilities for an "other" reason between the negative dialectics of Adorno and some of the basic themes of postmodern thought. Through readings of critiques of rationality in Adorno, Lyotard, and Sloterdijk, Guzzoni sketches out the possibility of an Adornian "Different Reason" which, beyond domination, acquires "the character of a kind of companionship with the happening of 'nature,' which owns its own coming into the world as itself a natural event."

There are the seeds of a new, naturalist and unantagonistic variety of rational thought in Adorno, even if they are always developed by gesturing toward the negative spaces that such a form of thought would have occupied in a fantasized, reasonable social order. So too Adorno's difficult and often frankly contradictory impulses toward an account of subjectivity do not point to a "disappearance," or an "overcoming" of the subject as much they do to the dismantling of a cumbersome and outdated metanarrative of the centered and autonomous ego. Adorno complains often enough that mass culture dismantles the possibilities for authentic selfhood far more effectively than philosophy ever could. Again, the absence of a grounded subject in Adorno's work responds negatively to the social facts: in a rationalized world, the only permissible discourse of authentic subjectivity indicates the possibilities for a self free of violence, or a subject beyond the subject-object dialectic—but only by depicting an integrity that appears only in the process of its own dismantling. Adorno's dialectical overcoming of subjectivity have less to do with the expulsion of a dominant discourse than with the critical exposure of the price that individuals must pay in a rationalized world. Philosophy stands in the debt of a vision of a non-sacrificial, porous, and fulfilled self;

one which philosophy consistently betrays in its attempts to dedicate concepts of "subjectivity" to it. What emerges in Adorno is not the erasure of subjectivity but rather the search for the moments of possible transgression within the concept itself.

As Rainer Naegele has put it, Adorno thus "does not cancel the subject; he reclaims it through a postulate of transgressions."<sup>22</sup> In his contribution to this anthology, Hauke Brunkhorst takes up this idea in the context of Adorno's aesthetics, demonstrating how deeply Adorno's aesthetic conception of modernism is imbricated with his notion of the transgressive possibilities of modernist art. Linking Adorno's accounts of the aesthetic and the critical experience, Brunkhorst argues that both—against theory—offer powerful transgressive possibilities for a rethinking of the concept of the subject.

The complaint is frequently made that Adorno fails to make the linguistic turn: in the Habermasian sense, this means that he remains stuck in the out-of-date paradigm of consciousness and fails to understand the dynamic sense in which *intersubjective communication* bears a rationality of its own. In the poststructuralist sense, this means that Adorno's unwavering fixation on the category of thought and the work of the concept makes him unable to recognize that, despite his impressively large body of writing on the subject of philosophical style and form, textuality bears a lability and creativity that is far more elusive and interesting than Adorno's paradigmatic commitments allowed him to see. In "The Discourse of Philosophy and the Problem of Language," Peter Hohendahl seeks to correct the simplifying view that Adorno neglects a philosophy of language in favor of a philosophy of the concept. On the contrary, Adorno set out to fashion a distinctive philosophical language for the peculiar historical position of a philosophy whose actuality and critical task consist in its very lateness: philosophical language must be language and anti-language at once. Like postmodern theory, Adorno saw a rethinking of the problem of language as a key element in the deconstruction of philosophical idealism. In total opposition to deconstruction, however, Adorno argues for the *historically* nonarbitrary aspect of the linguistic sign. For him, the word is the meeting point between language and material history. Combined with Adorno's diagnosis of the decay of philosophical language, this insight grounds his search for an alternative linguistic model: a "configurative" language that would move beyond the linguistic models of positivist explanation or Heideggerian disclosure of truth, and adequately reflect the convergence between aesthetic and philosophical linguistic modes.

One of the strongest supports to any argument that Adorno is out of date is the relative lack of success in appropriating Adorno's work for the growth of contemporary cultural studies; a failure normally ascribed to Adorno's condemnation of rationalized culture as a *totaler Verblendungs-zusammenhang* apparently devoid of redeeming features, and the resulting

elitist insistence on an essential distinction between avant garde art and the manipulations of the culture industry. Postmodern theory, on the other hand, has been credited with a pivotal role in effacing just this distinction, and thereby opening up to critical thought an entire spectrum of cultural activities that had previously been dismissed. Miriam Hansen's essay, "Mass Culture as Hieroglyph: Adorno, Derrida, Kracauer," problematizes this distinction. By moving the focus to varying accounts of *writing*, Hansen brings out the dialectics of the hieroglyph that structure Adorno's sense of the legibility of cultural phenomena. The hieroglyphic character of mass culture, that mass culture is structured like a hieroglyphic text, can be taken in two radically different senses: as the masked return of the ur-old function of secret written signs, cultural hieroglyphs can be read as allegories of domination. Yet, as *legible*, these same hieroglyphs open themselves up to a *critical* as well as a duplicitous kind of reading. Contrasting Adorno's account of the legibility of mass culture with that of Derrida and Sigfried Kracauer, Hansen works toward an understanding of the mimetic aspect of hieroglyphic writing, and suggests that, notwithstanding its many limitations, Adorno's account of the cultural hieroglyph provides a powerful corrective to Derridean accounts of cultural texts.

Few aspects of Adorno's work resonate more powerfully in the "modernity versus postmodernity" debate than his aesthetic theory, and, accordingly, it has received more critical attention than any other aspect for those interested in Adorno's relation to the postmodern. It seems trivially true to say that there is no easy sense to map Adorno's aesthetic theory against any simplified binary modern versus postmodern; the theory is far too complex, far too fragmented in its articulation and its ambitions, to allow such a description. Adorno employs thoroughly postmodern means to develop a theory in defense of aesthetic modernism, a constellation of aesthetic positions already out of date by the time Adorno wrote his *Aesthetic Theory*. With all its problems, then, Adorno's late aesthetic theory emerges as the key site for working out the question of modernism and postmodernism.

The contributions by Albrecht Wellmer and Wilhelm Wurzer address the implications of Adorno's aesthetic theory for the question of modernity and postmodernity. Taking up Adorno's relation to the key elements of Kantian aesthetics, both essays call for a radical transformation of the reading of modernity in the *Aesthetic Theory*—and there the similarity ends.

For more than a decade, the third-generation Critical Theorist Albrecht Wellmer has worked to establish a space for theoretical *rapprochement* between Adorno and Habermas, the first and second generations of the Frankfurt School. In the essays collected in *The Persistence of Modernity*, Wellmer develops the argument that Adorno's theories of mimesis and of the critical-utopian dimensions preserved in avant garde art can be shown



to share a common ground with the forms of intersubjective interaction developed in Habermas's *Theory of Communicative Action*.<sup>23</sup> To summarize a complex argument, Wellmer believes that the critical aspect of Adorno's aesthetic theory is deeply compromised by Adorno's fixation on the inherently metaphysical, even theological categories of reconciliation and negative utopia; that Adorno allows the ethical force of his notion of aesthetic mimesis to deplete itself in the vision of a relationship with a redeemed nature. With the crucial shift in perspectives from a production to a reception-based aesthetics, Wellmer argues, the irredeemably metaphysical dimensions of Adorno's account of the emancipatory dimension of avant garde artworks can be shown to supplement and expand, rather than undialectically contradict, Habermas's account of the dynamic and open processes of self-constitution and self-transgression that are essential features of communicatively structured intersubjective interaction.

In his contribution to this volume, Wellmer continues and radicalizes this project. He shows how even the most rigorously metaphysical categories of Adorno's aesthetics, such as the sublime, can be separated from Adorno's metaphysics of reconciliation and read through a discourse-theoretical paradigm. Beginning with a discussion of Adorno's complex appropriation of the Kantian idea of the aesthetic sublime, Wellmer demonstrates how Adorno's development of this concept decisively breaks with the Kantian noumenal, developing instead a "noumenality" based on the aesthetic movement between the unrepresentable Absolute and the abyssal as radical absence of meaning. Wellmer argues that this dialectic need not be articulated according to the Adornian model of alienated and redeemed nature; that is, according to the paradigm of reconciliation. The sublime, he argues, can be recovered from Adorno's late aesthetics as a powerful reconstruction of the aesthetic dimension of the overwhelming and liberating force of the world of linguistic meaning in the context of intersubjective life. As a part of his broader project to demonstrate "the persistence of modernity," Wellmer's intervention here demonstrates how a creative reappropriation of Adorno's late theory—a "stereoscopic" reading of Adorno against Adorno—can decisively overcome the metaphysical residues that make Adorno's work other than actual, and can point the way toward a critical social aesthetics that bears decisive advantages over any available poststructuralist aesthetic theories.

Wilhelm Wurzer's essay, "Kantian Snapshot of Adorno: Modernity Standing Still," will also take up the complex relations to Kant in the *Aesthetic Theory*, but with radically different aims. Rather than recovering the tools for the persistence of modernity in Adorno, or reading the *Aesthetic Theory* as yet another theoretical resistance to the displacements of traditional metaphysical concepts through postmodern thought, Wurzer instead finds the traces of a desistance of modernity in Adorno's aesthetics.

Agreeing with Wellmer on Adorno's crucial transformation of the Kantian relation between natural beauty and the aesthetic sublime, Wurzer will not follow Wellmer in the implications of this transformation. Desistance gestures toward the work of the *Aesthetic Theory* beyond the categories of traditional aesthetics; desistance which "marks a standing away from, a standing down of, a ceasing to proceed in the manner of, a letting go of, even, finally, a fictioning of a certain textual metaphysics of nature" thus constitutes the motion of Adorno's text. Introducing the concept of the inhuman, Wurzer illustrates how a "desistance of the inhuman" is the sublime moment of Adorno's account of the beautiful-in-nature; a desistance of subjectivity or a letting-go of subjectivity which points toward a postmodern appropriation of the *Aesthetic Theory* radically different from that of Wellmer.

An impossible subjectivity once again evokes the possibility of an Adornian ethics; the topic of the last two essays of this anthology. J. M. Bernstein's "Fragment, Fascination, Damaged Life: The Truth about Hedda Gabler" begins, like Wurzer, with an analysis of the play of fascination, reflective judgment, embodiment, and a post-Kantian conception of the aesthetic sublime, this time played out in the work of Maurice Blanchot. Bernstein argues that the opening onto exteriority, the sublime *within* the sphere of experience which violates the possibility of that same experience, is in Blanchot ultimately both the possibility of the ethical relation and also ineffable; the fascination of bodily suffering which can only mark the site of an impossible empathy. By contrast, Adorno's tangled efforts to delineate an openness to the nonidentical are inherently relational and empirical, materially engaged: the nonidentical indicates what is effaced and excluded in this world, not by some aporias at the heart of language.

Bernstein enacts this contrast through an extended reading of the fragment from the *Minima Moralia*, "The Truth about Hedda Gabler," Adorno's interpretation of Ibsen's character. In a subtle and powerful exegesis, Bernstein shows how an Adornian ethics—one that is politically committed, material, sensitive to the other *in* the other's concrete situation—emerges from, and subsists in, the fragmentary form. The fragment allows Bernstein to pose the question of the ethics of sublimity in Blanchot and Adorno at a higher level, or, better, at a lower one: against postmodern ethical orientations, Bernstein's reading of the "Hedda Gabler" fragment allows him to argue, against poststructuralism, that it is to this empirical world, with its victims, losses, and chances for transformation, and not to any aporias at the heart of language, that ethics must ultimately concern itself.

Closing the anthology, Eva Geulen's "Theodor Adorno on Tradition" undertakes to read another short text, Adorno's "On Tradition," as a way of describing how Adorno's ethical motivations inhabit the intellectual landscape of the modern/postmodern. After an illuminating discussion of the

manner in which the postmodernity debate has played itself out in Germany, Geulen turns to Adorno's text, showing how the motion of the text itself demonstrates Adorno's dialectics of tradition. Focussing particular attention on Adorno's readings of the ethical import of the bodily gesture—the handkiss, the handshake, the farewell—Geulen moves to a discussion of the gesture of farewell, taking leave or *Abschied*, which at once crystallizes some distinctive aspect of Adorno's ethical sensibility, and allows us to see Adorno's position in the modernity/postmodernity question with a new clarity: "If the postmodern is the continuing 'Abschied' from the modern tradition," Geulen writes, "then its relation to that tradition cannot be one of overcoming or preserving, liquidating or reinterpreting. All of these depend upon a stable distinction between old and new, and that is the first thing that 'Abschied'—and tradition—take leave of."

## NOTES

1. See Theodor W. Adorno, "Aspects of Hegel's Philosophy," in *Hegel: Three Studies* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 1.

2. Theodor W. Adorno, "The Actuality of Philosophy," *Telos* 31, Spring 1977, 120.

3. See n. 2 above, p. 124.

4. See n. 2 above, p. 127.

5. Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics. Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute*. (New York: The Free Press, 1977), 102–104.

6. For a detailed discussion of this question, see Peter Uwe Hohendahl's contribution to this volume.

7. See Rainer Naegele, "The Scene of the Other: Theodor W. Adorno's Negative Dialectic in the Context of Poststructuralism," in Jonathan Arac, editor, *Postmodernism and Politics. Theory and History of Literature*, vol. 28 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), 106.

8. Adorno expressed this intuition most clearly in *Minima Moralia*: "If Benjamin said that history had hitherto been written from the standpoint of the victor, and needed to be written from that of the vanquished, we might add that knowledge must indeed present the fatally rectilinear succession of victory and defeat, but should also address itself to those things which were not embraced by this dynamic, which fell by the wayside—what might be called the waste products and blind spots that have escaped the dialectic. . . . Theory must needs deal with cross-grained, opaque, unassimilated material, which as such admittedly has from the start an anachronistic

quality, but is not wholly obsolete since it has outwitted the historical dynamic." *Minima Moralia*, 151.

9. An excellent discussion of this opposition is J. M. Bernstein, "Whistling in the Dark: Affirmation and Despair in Postmodernism," in Francis Barker, Peter Hulme and Margaret Iverson, eds., *Postmodernism and the Re-reading of Modernity* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1992).

10. Peter Dews, for example, has pointed to the analogous revelations of the logic of the "supplement" that structure both the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and Derrida's early work; in both cases, a deconstruction of the narrative of subjective self-creation and self-maintenance, inspired by critical appropriations of Nietzsche and Freud, gestures toward the moment of domination and self-delusion indwelling in subjectivity itself. See Peter Dews, "Adorno, Post-Structuralism, and the Critique of Identity," in Andrew Benjamin, ed., *The Problems of Modernity. Adorno and Benjamin* (London: Routledge, 1989), 1.

11. See Habermas, "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Horkheimer and Adorno," in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), especially 126–130.

12. See Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume I: Reason and the Rationalization of Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1981), 380–383.

13. Translated as "Adorno as the Devil," in *Telos* 19 (1974), 127–137.

14. Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, The Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 1990), 229.

15. See n. 14 above, 235.

16. See n. 14 above, 243.

17. T. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 1973), 3.

18. See n. 14 above, 243.

19. See n. 17 above, 399–408.

20. See n. 17 above, 407.

21. Jameson refers to this sense of Adorno, half-ironically, when he writes that "[t]his, then, is indeed some first service that [Adorno's writings] might do for us: to restore the sense of something grim and impending within the polluted sunshine of the shopping mall—some older classical European-style sense of doom and crisis, which even the Common Market countries have cast off in their own chrysalid transmogrification, but which the USA can now use better than they can, being an older and a now ramshackle society by contrast . . ." Jameson, 248.

22. Rainer Naegele, "The Scene of the Other: Theodor W. Adorno's Negative Dialectic in the Context of Poststructuralism," in Jonathan Arac, ed., *Postmodernism*

*and Politics*. Theory and History of Literature vol 28 (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1986), 102.

23. See Albrecht Wellmer, *The Persistence of Modernity. Essays on Aesthetics, Ethics, and Postmodernity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).