Art as Writing

A central difficulty of Theodor W. Adorno’s views on literature, quite beyond the breadth and depth of his writing in this area, is that the literary work of art is a social object whose aesthetic content cannot be reduced to its possible adherence to any particular convention, tradition, or genre. This opens onto an ontological problem to the extent that art “itself” has, for Adorno, no fixed essence or potentiality that it should somehow come to actualize in specific works or even specific media (Adorno 1977, 2003). No ontology of art is available to us and a fortiori no ontology of literature. Rather, what makes an artwork art—including works of a literary character—depends, in part, upon the possibility of relativizing or even dispensing with apparently ontological or essential identifying marks. Thus, while it is impossible to provide a definition of art in the traditional sense, there remains the possibility of understanding the openness of art to its lack of fixed essence. In other words, art is most “itself” when it ventures onto the terrain of what it has not yet expressed—where the content of this “not yet” is left open, while yet remaining historically situated. The “definition” of art is therefore volatile: “art is in each case outlined by what art once was, but is legitimated only by what art became in its openness to what it wants to, and perhaps can, become” (Adorno 1997: 3).

More particularly, successful artworks, on Adorno’s view, express a kind of surplus, a “more” (Mehr) that lies not so in their purported “message” (nothing of the sort is necessary, in any event), but in the way in which the work transforms art as it currently exists through hitherto unrecognized possibilities of expression (Adorno 1997: 78). To cite a common example, the exploration of dissonance in the Second Viennese School was the actualization of previously unacknowledged aesthetic possibilities, of something that art had not yet become—something that could not have been foreseen as belonging to art’s so-called essence prior to its actualization (Adorno 1977: 294). Art establishes itself in the very process of liberating itself from established practices, from what had become aesthetic second nature. However, for reasons that will gradually become clearer, what remarkable works achieve is not merely a relative freedom from staid forms and conventions, as though the aim were merely to broaden the category of what counts as art. Rather, great works depend upon a more specific kind of expression, a kind of “writing” that conveys substantive social content.

Adorno frequently refers to the unforeseeable historical development of art in terms of what finds itself “written” into artworks. Their “writing,” on his use of this term (Schrift, usually), is the manifestation of their “more.” Thus, he will say that “all artworks are writings, not just those that come about as such; indeed, they are like hieroglyphics for which the
code has been lost—a loss that contributes to their substantive content [Gehalt]. Artworks are language only as writing” (Adorno 1997: 124). In this way, successful works are said to be “eloquent” in the production of their “more”: “Their transcendence is their eloquence, their writing, but without meaning or, more precisely, with broken or veiled meaning. . . . Art fails its concept when it does not achieve this transcendence; it loses the quality of being art [wird entkunstet]” (Adorno 1997: 78).

Thus while Adorno refuses to say what art is in and of itself, he nevertheless describes what it does: it expresses a surplus or a “more” through a writerly organization of moments that applies to both literary and nonliterary works. But again, this expressive surplus, while “written” and “language-like,” is precisely not the communication of some judgment or propositional content embedded into the work by the artist (Adorno 1997: 124). The language of artworks, Adorno says, is “unintentional”: “The truth of the new, as the truth of what is not already used up, is situated in something unintentional [im Intentionslosen]” (Adorno 1997: 26). How does this eloquent though unintentional hieroglyphic writing play itself out concretely? And how is it realized in literary works?

**Benjamin and the Baroque**

Many of the issues just outlined originate in Adorno’s reception of the writings of Walter Benjamin. As is well known, this reception, though sometimes critical in tenor, was nevertheless essential to Adorno’s intellectual development and his works bear its traces indelibly. In this vein, an important model for Adorno’s view of art and literature is to be found in Benjamin’s *Origin of the German Mourning Play* (1928), which focuses on the seventeenth-century dramatic works of Gryphius, Lohenstein, Opitz, and others.

On a general level, Benjamin, like Adorno after him, stresses the pointlessness of defining artistic production by way of induction or identifying marks, which can easily obscure what is peculiar to a given work or series of works. The point of criticism or of the philosophy of art is not to construct a unifying concept under which very different works can be classified, often rather awkwardly—e.g., “tragedy” (Benjamin 1998: 38–44). Nor is the point to compare works to some standard, according to which so-called minor works may be found wanting, whether the standard appealed to is, e.g., Aristotle’s theory of tragedy or the genius of authors such as Shakespeare and Calderón (Benjamin 1998: 48–50). Rather, for Benjamin, even comparatively deficient works—as in the case of German Baroque drama—can nevertheless become important insofar as they succeed, often unconsciously, in expressing the animating “idea” of historical phenomena that are otherwise recalcitrant to our attempts to understand them (Benjamin 1998: 34). The German mourning play is expressive in this specific sense. It says more than can be said at the level of dramatic content or authorial purpose. As such, the truth it contains is “unintentional,” i.e., it does not take the form of “an opinion developed on the empirical level; rather it is the power [Gewalt] that first stamps the essence of the empirical” (Benjamin 1998: 36).

Thus, something is written, as it were, into these works that is neither commensurable with their authors’ intentions nor directly expressible in the familiar opinions or forms of experience proper to that period. For Benjamin, this something resides within the melancholy of the seventeenth-century Lutheran worldview and its obsession with the transience of life, as these take shape in the literature of the period and, especially, as reflecting a deep belief in the impotence of human activity in the face of fate. This belief might be summarized, albeit somewhat reductively, as the ineffectuality of good works in the face of the final judgment of God. However, what was not immediately evident to the inhabitants of this world was the social construction of this belief. The possibility of such knowledge is at best replaced by patient faith, for example, which may assuage but does not overcome discouragement and
suffering; it papers over the futility of a life that might have been different. As Luther writes, commenting on Romans 8: 18–30:

if we hope for that which we see not and neither have nor hold, then we wait with patience for it, for hope that is deferred discourages the soul. Likewise the Holy Spirit also helps, by causing us to pray with deep groanings, our infirmity..., our impotence, and inability. For we know not... what, insofar as the object of our prayer is concerned, we should pray for as we ought, insofar as the attitude and manner of our prayer are concerned; but the Holy Spirit asks for us, makes intercession for us, with groanings that cannot be uttered, that no man can express in words and none except God can feel.

(Luther 1961: 256–257)

Faith promises to dissolve impotent hope into patient waiting; but since impotence and suffering persist, the latter serves merely to mask the former, which finds other ways of expressing itself. Such theological views thereby inevitably distort and seek to suppress the suffering that they nevertheless also express, turning the problem of earthly suffering into our subjection to an inscrutable divine plan.

What is unintentionally written into these plays, therefore, and what they thereby express allegorically, as Benjamin puts it, is precisely the unquestioned, natural character of this “subjection to fate,” i.e., the apparently ineluctable submission to what appears to be the structure of divine creation itself (Benjamin 1998: 138). Benjamin frames the issue as follows:

Whereas the Middle Ages present the fragility of world events and the transience of the creature as stations on the road to salvation, the German mourning play withdraws into the hopelessness of the earthly condition. Such redemption as it knows resides in this dark destiny itself rather than in the fulfilment of a divine plan of salvation.

(Benjamin 1998: 81)

It is the debilitating and disempowering notion that things cannot be otherwise that organizes these works; but this organization also suggests an unconscious resistance, an inkling that the denial of objective happiness or, in short, suffering as fate is an object worthy of melancholic presentation.

However, crucially, it matters little whether knowledge of the social construction of this hopelessness was given as such in experience or not (i.e., in the form of what Benjamin calls the “empirical”). In fact, generally speaking, conscious awareness of this situation and any thought of overcoming the apparent futility of life was instead short-circuited by faith and simple moral principles. And yet, at the same time, what could not be dissolved into faith and morality instead made its way into literary form as an unconscious protest against “existence as a rubbish heap of partial, inauthentic actions” (Benjamin 1998: 139). Life, whatever its defects, cannot be reducible to its apparent futility. In this way, the mourning plays are to be read as the expression of a surplus of meaning over the more familiar, readily communicable beliefs that circulate within the confines of the seventeenth-century Lutheran worldview. The belief that things cannot be otherwise as accompanied by faith and the obscure possibility of redemption is precisely the thought—however repressed and distorted—that they nevertheless ought to be otherwise.

Adorno takes this reading to provide a model of sorts for artistic and literary interpretation, first and foremost in his reference to the unintentional surplus of artworks, i.e., the indirect presentation of an “idea” that does not correspond to the surface of experience.
There can thereby coexist two levels of “content” in works of art, one in which the ordinary content (Inhalt) of a work—e.g., “plot” or “color”—is not idealistically assimilable to some allegedly universal concept—e.g., “tragedy” or “painting”—but instead points toward a “more,” i.e., a more substantive content (Gehalt), of the kind that Benjamin finds to be obliquely presented in the tradition of the mourning play: “in poetics, Benjamin’s study of the German Baroque [rejects] the confusion of subjective intentions with substantive aesthetic content [Gehalt] and, ultimately, the alliance of aesthetics and idealist philosophy [which gives priority to universal concepts]” (Adorno 1997: 145–146).

Adorno’s writings on literature bring these notions into play in a variety of ways. In the present context, which is necessarily quite limited in scope, three different examples will be considered: Huxley, Hölderlin, and Beckett. These examples hang together insofar as Huxley shows us the unintentional social content of defective works, Hölderlin the way in which historical works can bequeath a surplus of meaning to contemporary actuality, and Beckett the redemptive possibility of looking hopelessness in its gray, catarctal eye.

**Huxley and the Fate of Progress**

Just as Benjamin took seriously the relegated form of the mourning play in order to tease out of it the unconscious idea animating the Lutheran world, Adorno too thinks that “even defects may become eloquent” (Adorno 1997: 211). Indeed, he says explicitly that “the truth content of many artistic movements does not necessarily culminate in great artworks, as Benjamin demonstrated in his study of German Baroque drama” (Adorno 1997: 25). Generally speaking, of course, Adorno tends to write about artists and authors whose works’ greatness is openly recognized, e.g., Goethe, Heine, Proust, and Kafka. However, as we have seen, their importance cannot lie in their participation in some aesthetic canon. Conversely, even minor works can eloquently albeit unintentionally express a truth content that exceeds their manifest content.

The essay “Aldous Huxley and Utopia” was first published in 1951 and then taken up in the Prisms collection, whose first edition appeared in 1955. However, the essay has its origins in a private seminar on need (Bedürfnis) held in Los Angeles in 1942, for which Adorno wrote his “Theses on Need” (Adorno 2017; see too Horkheimer 1985a, 1985b, 1996). The overall point of the seminar was to analyze the meaning and possibility—or rather, impossibility—of real social progress under capitalism. Adorno’s published essay on Huxley contains modified passages from his contribution to the seminar.

The trouble with Brave New World (1932), on Adorno’s view, lies not so much with Huxley’s sense of the increasing impotence of the individual in contemporary society. Nor does Huxley give in to a “childish faith” in social progress through technological prowess (Adorno 1981: 99). Regarding the individual, Adorno essentially agrees that “spontaneous experience, long corroded, [has been] stripped of its power” through increasing conformity and uniformity, which Huxley portrays in the form of biological, chemical, and social conditioning (Adorno 1981: 98–100). As for technology, Adorno frequently acknowledges that its bourgeois incarnation puts us on a path to destruction: “Insecticide pointed toward the death camps from the outset” (Adorno 1991c: 270). Furthermore, he acknowledges that the attempt at the domination of nature by human beings could well end in the domination—i.e., the annihilation—of human beings by nature, in catastrophic events such as nuclear war and irreversible climate change (though Adorno only speaks of the former). As he puts it, any talk of “progress from the slingshot to the megaton bomb” would have to be punctuated by “satanic laughter” (Adorno 1998: 153).

Rather, the problem lies with Huxley’s vision of the future, in which these contemporary tendencies lead inexorably to an imagined extirpation of human dignity and culture.
For Adorno, Huxley fails to recognize the profound ambiguity of progress and the social mechanisms that generate it. In large measure, this is due to Huxley's essentially reactionary attachment to bourgeois culture and an attendant devotion to individuality, and this in spite of his skepticism as regards other tenets of bourgeois existence, especially the belief in the inevitability of progress through technological advancement. However, for Huxley, these turn out to be two sides of the same coin: the intrinsic worth of bourgeois culture and individuality has no need for technology or the so-called progress it promises—and whose controlling tendencies may in fact degrade, if not destroy, the possibility of individual flourishing and cultural development. As Brecht succinctly puts it: “the more iceboxes, the less [H]uxley” (cited in Horkheimer 1985a: 561).

Against Huxley’s defensive skepticism, Adorno underscores another side of technology. Thus, while it is patently absurd to speak of “progress” from the slingshot to the megaton bomb, “it is only in the age of the bomb that a condition can be envisaged in which violence might vanish altogether” (Adorno 1998: 153). This is a version of one of Adorno’s most recurrent claims concerning progress and technology—namely, that the possibility of eliminating need is quite real albeit socially suppressed: “Material needs, which long seemed to mock progress, have potentially [potentiell] been eliminated; given the present state of the technical forces of production, no one on earth need suffer deprivation anymore” (Adorno 1998: 144). The paradox, of course, is that if needs “have been eliminated,” it is only in potentia or at the level of social possibility, while deprivation remains the reality because of socially perpetuated injustices. In the essay on Brave New World, the ambiguity of this insight is directed against Huxley, essentially because, while he well understands the dark side of progress, he remains blind to its utopian promise, i.e., the elimination of socially unnecessary suffering.

This blindness takes a number of forms, according to Adorno, all connected by at least two highly questionable postulates: that there exists a natural opposition between the individual and society, and that technology follows a historical teleology that pits progress against human beings. In both cases, Huxley doubts the potential for a real, universal, socially mediated happiness that does not trample on individual human dignity and cultural values. In the book, the point is made early on and brutally: “that is the secret of happiness and virtue—liking what you’ve got to do. All conditioning aims at that: making people like their unescapable social destiny” (Huxley 2004: 26). This, then, is a future in which the happiness of the individual is ruined by being entirely dissolved into a totalitarian whole and its reified, incontestable mechanisms of social conditioning. True, the criticisms leveled by Huxley against pseudo-happiness retain a trace of utopian content, insofar as they remind us—correctly—that happiness and conditioned social conformity are at odds with each other. Yet while such criticisms may thereby seem promisingly “subversive,” they in fact hide a reluctance to embrace universal happiness as a real social possibility (Adorno 1981: 103–111).

Thus, for Adorno, the negative portrayal of objective, i.e., social, happiness is as ideological as the critique of pseudo-happiness is socially relevant (Adorno 1981: 110–111). Part of the problem is that Huxley thinks that the satisfaction of material needs dispenses with the struggles and suffering that give humanity its pluck and fiber. Against this view, Adorno critically remarks that Huxley turns “the cult of suffering [into] an absurd end in itself” (Adorno 1981: 107). Or to frame the issue even more explicitly, Huxley perversely insists on the necessity of suffering for life to have meaning precisely when the elimination of socially unnecessary suffering had become technically possible. But Huxley remains ignorant of this tension in his self-assured defense of a humanity of suffering individuals, represented by John, “the Savage,” who speaks in favor of Shakespeare and a humane but self-centered individuality focused on personal sentiment and the acceptance of suffering: “I don’t want comfort,” he says, “I want God, I want poetry I want real danger, I want freedom, I want
goodness. I want sin. … I’m claiming the right to be unhappy” (Huxley 2004: 215). Suffering is the index of his freedom.

The question, of course, is whether Huxley can lay claim to such an opposition: the natural, suffering individual (who, though flawed, is at least a genuine individual) versus reified social forms that dissolve the individual into a false state of socially mediated happiness. Through this opposition, Huxley takes a stand against the society that seeks to alleviate suffering, claiming that such a society would have to be based upon a totalitarian suppression of individuality. Adorno, for his part, is quick to denounce this abstract opposition as the real source of reification in Brave New World: “Huxley construes humanity and reification as rigid opposites …. [He] cannot understand the humane promise of civilization because he forgets that humanity includes reification as well as its opposite” (Adorno 1981: 106). In other words, the problem is not that individual consciousness has lost something essential in becoming reified through social mediation (“conditioning”), but that we should defend an abstract and questionable ideal of humanity (e.g., the noble “Savage”) against social mediation in general, whereas such mediations might yet make humanity’s—and not just the individual’s—happiness possible. Huxley’s “conditioning” is not the only possible outcome of the dialectic of individual and society, nor the natural end of technological progress.

As such, the universal satisfaction of material needs that the novel portrays in no way “moves inexorably into insanity, into mechanical bestiality” (Adorno 1981: 111). On the contrary, it is here that Huxley inadvertently reveals his blind adherence to the “idea” that animates his bourgeois perspective: the objective, almost metaphysical, impossibility of a happiness both “subjectively consummate” and universal (Adorno 1981: 111–112). Adorno does not shy away from drawing the parallel to Benjamin’s analysis of the mourning play, with a nod to Weber: Huxley suffers from “the ominous ‘It shall not be otherwise’ that is the result of the basic Protestant amalgamation of introspection and repression” (Adorno 1981: 117). As such, the alternative to the future described by Huxley amounts to the proposition that humankind ought not to extricate itself from the calamity. … No room is left for a concept of humankind that would resist absorption into the collective coercion of the system and reduction to the status of contingent individuals.

(Adorno 1981: 113–114)

Huxley’s view not only depends upon the convergence of unnecessary suffering and the denial of the social possibility of its overcoming for the better but also depends upon a dystopian variant of a mainstay of bourgeois philosophies of history: the linearity of progress unfolding in time. Thus, even though Huxley refuses the bourgeois myth of progress through technology, he does so in order to show us that technology leads inevitably to pseudo-happiness in linear fashion, i.e., without the possibility of bifurcation. For him, as for the bourgeois philosophy of history but with dystopian intent, history moves in an unbroken, straight line. But this requires a distortion of the present: Huxley “drives observations of the present state of civilization out of its own teleology so as to make its monstrous nature immediately evident” (Adorno 1981: 99).

What Huxley cannot imagine is that he remains trapped, once again like the melancholic inhabitants of the Lutheran world, within the postulates of his historical existence. The possibility of questioning them, let alone transforming them, is precisely ruled out by them:

The monolithic trend and the linear concept of progress, as handled in the novel, derive from the restricted form in which the forces of production developed in “prehistory.” The inevitable character of [Huxley’s] negative utopia arises from projecting
the limitations of the relations of production—the profit-oriented, glorified apparatus of production—back onto the human and technological forces of production, as though the former were an intrinsic property of the latter.

(Adorno 1981: 114)

Adorno here invokes Marx’s talk of capitalism as part of the prehistory of emancipation, which comes into its own only when we succeed in exploding the myth of “natural” class divisions and the relations of production they entail, under which the forces of production remain fettered, along with the possibility of eliminating socially unnecessary suffering (Marx 1987: 263–264). But it is just this myth, which also produces the vision of the individual as powerless in the face of social destiny, to which Huxley tacitly subscribes in his view of progress as catastrophic fate. Adorno therefore concludes,

It is not for its contemplative aspect as such, which it shares with all philosophy and representation, that the novel is to be criticized, but for its failure to contemplate a praxis that could explode the heinous continuum [of prehistory].

(Adorno 1981: 117)

**Hölderlin, Polemics, and Parataxis**

Adorno’s reading of *Brave New World* shows how unintentional but significant social content can filter through the narrative line of a literary text, in spite of, but also because of, its defects. The case of Adorno’s reading of Hölderlin is somewhat different and more complex. Here, Adorno is not dealing with a minor work, but with one of Germany’s most important poets, whose legacy, he thinks, should be wrested from the influence of conservative philosophy, grandiose philosophy, and German nationalism (recalling, among other facts, that the Hölderlin Society had been founded by Joseph Goebbels in 1943). In particular, he thinks that Hölderlin’s poetry should be given its due as a poetic liberation from, rather than a generation of, mythical lost origins and forgotten destinies—of the German people in particular, but also of philosophy more generally. In this regard, he is above all interested in freeing Hölderlin from the orbit of Heidegger’s readings.

“Parataxis: On Hölderlin’s Late Poetry” was originally presented as a lecture at the 1963 annual meeting of the Hölderlin Society. It appeared in print a year later before being taken up in 1965 in the third volume of *Adorno’s Notes to Literature*. It was not published in the proceedings of the meeting, as would normally have been the case. Indeed, the initial lecture was the subject of much controversy, with one or more of Heidegger’s supporters causing some kind of commotion in the lecture hall and possibly storming out. Adorno himself did not attend a formal discussion of his talk that had been planned to take place the next day, during which his reading was contested. (For a summary of the event, see Betzen 1963–1964; Savage 2008: 97–99.) Heidegger himself, who had spoken at the 1959 meeting, heard about Adorno’s lecture at some point but did not comment on it publicly. Subsequently, Adorno went on to publish an extended critique of Heidegger’s thought in *Jargon of Authenticity* and *Negative Dialectics*, published in 1964 and 1966, respectively (Adorno 1973a, 1973b). Heidegger, for his part, did not care to learn the details of Adorno’s critique (Wisser 1977: 283–284). Instead, he put himself above the fray. However, in 1968 he canceled his Hölderlin Society membership, claiming that “the present age [was] no longer able to hear Hölderlin’s voice” (Pfister 1977: 194–95), which for him had always been associated with “the future of the historical being of the German people” (Heidegger 2000: 48; see too 2014: 201–202). In this context, then, it would seem clear that Adorno’s reading of Hölderlin is not merely about his poetry, but about its political and philosophical reception. Hölderlin,
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in this sense, is a site of contestation and part of Adorno’s attempt to deal with what he labeled “Heideggerism” (Adorno 2002: 424).

Adorno begins “Parataxis” with an emphasis on the “unintentional” layer of Hölderlin’s poetry. As we have seen, this means that interpretation cannot limit itself to what appears at the level of poetic form in relation to content (Inhalt) in the normal sense of the term, where “content” refers to the author’s intentions, historical references, and so on. There is a surplus in Hölderlin’s poetry that philological reconstruction, while invaluable, cannot fully grasp without recourse to philosophy—and specifically to a philosophy that understands this surplus as an animating “idea” that the poet may only glimpse, as it were, but for which poetic language is a conduit. This gives certain poems a

strangeness [that] stems from something objective, from the disappearance of substantive material content [Sachgehalt] from expression, from the eloquence of something that has no language. What has been poetically composed could not exist without this content falling silent, any more than it could without what it falls silent about.

(Adorno 1992: 112)

In this way, a “configuration of moments” comes to signify “more than the structure intends” (Adorno 1992: 113). Adorno adduces the example of “The Nook at Hardt,” which depicts the natural environs in which Ulrich, Duke of Württemberg, hid while fleeing those he had maltreated. What Adorno emphasizes in the poem, and what traditional philology cannot master on its own, on his view, is the notion of a nature that has more to say than what appears in the use to which it is put by human designs—a nature that is “quite able to speak for itself” (nicht gar unmündig), as Hölderlin puts it. This claim partially appears in the content of the poem, especially in the image of a place that is more than the use to which it was put (an übrigem Orte), suggesting a sense of nature as “residue” or “remnant,” as it were, and as the bearer of a “great destiny” (groß Schiksaal) that is not reducible to that of Ulrich (see Hölderlin 1994: 390–391). Thus, beyond the historical references discernable in the work lies the more general idea that language itself—and the language of the poem in the first instance—might serve such remnants in a way that exceeds intentional content. The question, then, is what it might mean for language to unintentionally serve nature, or nature as remnant.

It is here that the disagreement with Heidegger reveals its importance, for Heidegger too claims that we have overlooked or forgotten a certain surplus within being itself (Sein)—a surplus that was never mastered in the history of philosophy, with its one-sided emphasis on beings or its search for a supreme being. As he puts it in his Elucidations of Hölderlin’s Poetry (1944, third edition 1963), the language of the poet serves precisely to encourage a return to the lost origins of everyday language, carrying the reader beyond the level of banal content toward a hidden remnant of primordial φύσις that he calls the “clearing” (Lichtung) of being (Heidegger 2000: 60, 78–79, 107). More concretely, Heidegger also suggests that the destiny of the German people remains conserved in Hölderlin’s poetry, which becomes a trace of the origin that must one day be recovered: “poetic activity, … in the secure destiny of Germany’s future history, festively shows the ground of its origin” (Heidegger 2000: 171).

As such, Adorno sees Heidegger as illegitimately enlisting Hölderlin in an attempt to recover a notion of being that is entirely archaic and mythological. He therefore strenuously refuses what he calls a “cult of origins,” counter-citing Hölderlin’s “The Journey”: “But I am bound for the Caucasus!” He adds,

As though Hölderlin’s poetry had anticipated the use to which German ideology [i.e., Heidegger] would later put it, the late changes made to “Bread and Wine” put
Adorno’s point is not simply to oppose Heidegger on such questions of interpretation, but to actualize Hölderlin in such a way that we correctly inherit the “more” that his poetry generates in writerly form. Consequently, Adorno argues that Hölderlin presents us with something undissolved within history—namely, the promise of a future that is different and better than what we now know. True, this may seem close to Heidegger’s aim (with his talk of Hölderlin as the poet of future Germans), but there is one telling difference: Adorno is asking us to build a utopian future from out of the ruins of the present—in the sense of a discontinuous, genuinely progressive future of the kind that Huxley was incapable of imagining—yet without succumbing to the myth of an archaic origin or first principle, according to which all else must be organized. In this respect, what Adorno says of Heine holds true of Hölderlin as well: “there is no longer any homeland other than a world in which no one would be cast out any more, the world of a humanity emancipated in reality” (Adorno 1991a: 85). Adorno sees this better future as discontinuous with “prehistory,” as already mentioned, not as a return to its roots, which are those of ancestral injustices. By contrast, Heidegger, in spite of a purportedly anti-metaphysical stance, still subordinates human existence to a necessary re-grounding of our understanding of being. This is what he calls the “other beginning” starting in the 1930s, an almost cosmological beginning deeper than any discovered hitherto, from which human existence—and the German people in particular—might finally draw its most essential power.

The concept of parataxis developed in Adorno’s essay is meant to name the way in which poetic form articulates a refusal of such an “other beginning.” What it invokes in Hölderlin’s poetry are precisely the elements that refuse to be synthesized or ordered “hypotactically,” that is, in a relation of dependence upon some other principle or element. (Hypotaxis is the subordination of one linguistic or poetic element to another, while parataxis is the absence of such subordination.) Adorno refers, for example, to the caesura in “Bread and Wine,” which places antiquity into tension with Christianity or, alternatively, to the irresolvable tension between the two stanzas of “Half of Life” (Adorno 1992: 132–133; Hölderlin 1994: 262–273, 392–393). What such nonhierarchical structures show, according to Adorno, is not a synthetic unity of elements organized around a founding principle, but a broken unity, “a unity [that] indicates that it knows itself to be inconclusive” (Adorno 1992: 136). Or to put it another way, what Hölderlin’s paratactical form promises—unconsciously, as it were—is a form of reconciliation in which the Many is not subordinated to the One. In Adorno’s reading of “Conciliator, you that no longer believed in…” (later “Celebration of Peace”), this comes to the fore explicitly, in the claim that

insofar as the only-begotten son of the god of the theologians ought not to be made into an absolute principle—but instead “there would be others beside you” [neben dir noch andere sein]—, mythic authority over myths, the idealist rule of the One over the Many, is abandoned. Reconciliation is that of the One with the Many. That is peace.


Parataxis is the expression of this substantive content (Gehalt) seeping into literary form, in contradistinction to the mere propositional content or specific imagery deployed in a given poem (which are on the level of Inhalt). Parataxis in Hölderlin is the formal, poetic
expression of that which history, with its ancestral injustices and obsession with domination, has not yet realized. It names a tension between now and a better future that is unsolvable through any attempt to return to an original source of greatness.

**Beckett and the Catastrophe**

What the critique of Huxley and the anti-Heideggerian reading of Hölderlin have in common is their “physiognomic” character: “Artworks are enigmatic in that they are the physiognomy of an objective spirit that is never transparent to itself in the moment in which it appears” (Adorno 1997: 128). In this way, “what these works say is not what their words say” (Adorno 1997: 184). In the case of Huxley, the surplus resides in the gap that Adorno underscores between Huxley’s quite legitimate worry about so-called progress coinciding with disaster and his utterly uncritical acceptance of the axioms of a society that perpetuates unnecessary suffering. In the case of Hölderlin, the physiognomic aspect takes on even greater historical breadth: Hölderlin’s poetry not only provides us with resources that enable us to counter certain currents of its political and philosophical reception but also sketches a view of “nature” as remnant that exceeds the human ends and uses to which it is subordinated, including, ultimately, the metaphysical quest for a lost original nature. On Adorno’s view, then, nature is not a material first principle, but simply a name for that which can surge up within experience as nonidentical with our beliefs, i.e., that which invalidates them and obliges us to reconfigure them. As such, nature is the “other” of spirit, but only as that which drives spirit—i.e., the network of human beliefs, customs, and institutions—to evolve; and so nature is neither merely its material counterpart nor its mythic wellspring. Nature, in Adorno’s sense, could just as well be the auto graveyard that indicts industrial society as the melancholy that betrays the Baroque world’s inability to diagnose the social construction of the futility of life.

Expressing this “natural” surplus is the work of language, whether as art or as philosophy—or even as the wordless facial contortion of socially unnecessary suffering, to which art and philosophy can sometimes do justice. Language is thereby more than the mere communicative circulation of existing concepts, beliefs, and worldviews. As Adorno puts it in an essay on lyric poetry,

> For the substantive content [Gehalt] of a poem is not merely an expression of individual impulses and experiences. Those become artistic only when they come to participate in something universal by virtue of the specificity they acquire in being given aesthetic form, … by making manifest something not distorted, not grasped, not yet subsumed. … This is why the lyric reveals itself to be most deeply grounded in society when it does not repeat what society already knows, when it communicates nothing [familiar], when, instead, the subject whose expression is successful reaches an accord with language itself, with that which language would like to reach from out of itself.  

(Adorno 1991b: 38, 43)

It is at this level that the work of art expresses its truth content.

Adorno’s reading of Beckett takes up these issues from yet another angle. “Trying to Understand Endgame,” begun in 1960, was first published in 1961 in the second volume of *Notes to Literature*. Adorno had seen a performance of Beckett’s *Endgame* in Vienna in 1958, after which he arranged a meeting with Beckett that took place later that same year (Müller-Dohm 2005: 356–357). “Trying to Understand Endgame” is dedicated to the memory of this first meeting (Adorno 1991c: 241). The posthumously published *Aesthetic
Theory, which was to have borne another dedication to Beckett, also contains a number of passages relating to him (Adorno 1997: 366). Additionally, there are many entries in Adorno’s personal notebooks relating to Beckett’s works (published in Tiedemann 1994), as well as a transcript of a televised discussion in which Adorno speaks at length about Beckett (Adorno et al. 1994), and occasional references are to be found in Adorno’s collected works. In short, Adorno’s engagement with Beckett’s work was intense and sustained throughout the final decade of his life.

In terms of Adorno’s approach and to frame the question in relation to what we have already seen, one could say the following: if the substantive content of the literary work of art is to be found in the “nature” or “idea” that it enacts, then Beckett’s Endgame is an allegory of the exhaustion of nature as it is translated into the etiolation of human experience. As Adorno puts it,

The situation in the play … is none other than that in which “there’s no more nature.” The phase of complete reification of the world, where nothing remains that has not been made by human beings—the permanent catastrophe—is indistinguishable from an additional catastrophic event caused by human beings, in which nature has been wiped out and after which nothing grows any more.

(Adorno 1991c: 245; Beckett 1992: 8)

The point here is not merely to raise the question of the destructive capacity of human beings, and certainly not if nature were to be understood by the spectator or reader as the passive material counterpart of human activity. Nature is rather that which has migrated into human experience as destroyed, such that the catastrophe that Beckett depicts is not merely the devastation of outer, material nature, but the ruin of inner experience as well. As such, the content of destroyed nature is coextensive with the subjectivity that can no longer think this ruination. They are of a piece. This is the central thrust of Adorno’s reading of Beckett.

For this reason, Adorno strenuously resists existentialist interpretations that put the emphasis on the human individual as stranded or somehow challenged to survive in a godless, meaningless universe (compare Magee and Barrett 1978: 74). Such readings retain a notion of substantial human individuality standing against a devastated nature or an absurd reality, when it is precisely such fantasies of individuality that Beckett’s works mock—often by portraying the literal disintegration of human subjectivity and corporeality. As such,

the catastrophes that inspire Endgame have shattered the individual whose substantiality and absoluteness was the common thread in Kierkegaard, Jaspers, and Sartre’s versions of existentialism. … The individual is revealed to be a historical category, both the outcome of the capitalist process of estrangement and a defiant protest against it, yet also something transient.

(Adorno 1991c: 249)

However, lest we think that this protest is something actively chosen and empowering, he adds that “Beckett’s characters behave in precisely the primitive, behavioristic manner appropriate to the state of affairs after the catastrophe, after it has mutilated them so that they cannot react any differently—flies twitching after the fly swatter has half-squashed them” (Adorno 1991c: 251). Such twitching is the only protest still possible, and yet it is a protest. In what does it consist, then, qua protest, if there are no longer vital and autonomous subjects, but only half-dead, already decaying bodies and worn-out, enervated tropes and habits? The answer lies in understanding that the process of decay is another expression of nature as remnant, the sign of something to be remembered and to which we should do justice.
One might refer here to the terrifyingly concise main character in Beckett’s “The End,” a decrepit homeless man on the verge of dying who finds himself at one point to be the subject of a socialist’s textbook discourse on the evils of charity (Beckett 1995: 94–95). But the thunderous promise of emancipation has no more effect on the old man’s situation than the charity for which he begs. His reply consists not in a political rejoinder, but in retreating to a shed where he lies dying:

The sea, the sky, the mountains and the islands closed in and crushed me in a mighty systole, then scattered to the uttermost confines of space. The memory came faint and cold of the story I might have told, a story in the likeness of my life, I mean without the courage to end or the strength to go on.

(Beckett 1995: 99)

What history has served up to the individual is not liberation, but a retracting, failing subjectivity merged into its return to nature, unable to tell the story that would do justice to what it has undergone. Homelessness and poverty, stripped of all effective social meaning, are indistinguishable from bodily decay. Such is the apparently natural consequence of a historical process that is already well advanced in late capitalist society. Indeed, the “perfectibility” of the catastrophe is all that we seem to have left (Beckett 1990). And yet there remains the memory, however impotent, of a story that might have and indeed ought to have been tellable. As Adorno puts it, Beckett’s writing “signals the retreat from a world of which nothing remains except its caput mortuum,” i.e., its apparently useless residue, the seemingly worthless social by-product of people literally decaying into caricatures of themselves (Adorno 1997: 31). However, such by-products are also the trace of what was not taken up, of what might yet be said or done. This is nature as remnant, the possibility (currently blocked) of reconstructing and freeing ourselves from what has happened to us.

The trouble is that we seem not to possess the means to tell the story, to diagnose this situation adequately: “History is put out of play because it has dried up consciousness’s power to conceive it, the power to remember” (Adorno 1991c: 247). The core of Beckett’s works is thereby not that we subsist without meaning in an absurd world, but that decrepit subjectivity has not got the strength to see bodily decay and meaninglessness for what they are: residues, remnants of “nature” that reveal the socially unnecessary suffering that is forced upon us. True, Beckett succeeds in telling a version of the story that needs to be told, though only in the mode of aesthetic semblance. This is his great merit, according to Adorno:

The historical inevitability of this absurdity makes it seem ontological: that is the context of delusion proper to history itself. Beckett’s drama demolishes it. The immanent contradiction of the absurd, the nonsense in which reason terminates, opens up the emphatic possibility of something true that cannot even be conceived of anymore. It undermines the absolute claim of that which simply is the way it is.

(Adorno 1991c: 273)

Thus, the catastrophe described by Beckett is not the death of nature as such. The real catastrophe is rather that the social processes by which something like autonomous, critical subjectivity has come to deteriorate have been obscured to such a point that we have forgotten that there is absolutely nothing natural or necessary about them. The catastrophe is that we have naturalized, and are consequently unable to contest, the catastrophe. Beckett’s works put this loss of language on display, the inability to tell the story of a life in which “nature”—here signifying that apparent naturality of damaging social processes—crushes meaning out of existence by its “mighty systole.” As Adorno puts it in Aesthetic Theory,
Art emigrates to a standpoint that is no longer a standpoint at all because there are no longer standpoints from which the catastrophe could be named or formed, a word that seems ridiculous in this context. Endgame is neither a play about the atom bomb nor is it without content; the determinate negation of its content [Inhalt] becomes its formal principle and the negation of content altogether.

(Adorno 1997: 250)

The destruction of manifest content (Inhalt) is the play’s substantive content (Gehalt).

Benjamin, from whom Adorno inherits much in his use of the concept of catastrophe, had already noted in the late 1930s: “That things should just ‘carry on’ as they are is the catastrophe” (Benjamin 1999: N9a,1). Adorno sees this thought reflected in Beckett: “Prehistory lives on; the phantasm of eternity is precisely its curse” (Adorno 1991c: 273).

More Writing

For Adorno, Beckett provides what he takes to be one of the only effective contemporary condemnations of the history of decaying experience. This takes place in literature, i.e., in the aesthetic realm, because everyday social subjectivity cannot manage it. It is precisely this inability that Beckett’s works register and, for Adorno, above all Endgame. More generally, the presentation of such substantive content on the basis of a destruction of manifest content (outer nature, bodies, actions, beliefs, etc.) is part of what separates literature and other artistic forms from the mere communication of recognizable intentions, allowing us to say, if only obliquely, what the integrated taboos of late capitalist society prevent us from saying. Adorno’s readings of other literary figures evince the same traits:

As conceptual and predicative, language stands opposed to subjective expression; by virtue of its generality, it reduces what is to be expressed to something always already given and known. The poets rise up in opposition to this. They incessantly strive to incorporate the subject and its expression into language, to the point of its demise.

(Adorno 1992: 136)

Like Hofmannsthal’s Lord Chandos, who can no longer speak in the language of familiar commerce with people and things, literature seeks to speak

a language none of whose words is [previously] known to [it], a language in which mute things occasionally speak to [it] and wherein [it] may one day, be it in the grave, have to justify [itself] before an unknown judge.

(Hofmannsthal 1952: 141)

Such a language invokes justice and the possibility of redemption, yet without giving in to either a cult of origins or “sacrosanct transcendence” (Adorno 1973b: 17). In taking up this language, literature and art more generally provide us with a “sundial telling the time of philosophy and of history” (Adorno 1991b: 46, 1991c: 269).

References


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Further Reading


