

Reflections on the Dialectics of Marginalization

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Abstract This work reflects upon the philosophical origins and literary consequences of Theodor Adorno's thesis "the whole is false" (*das Ganze ist das Unwahre*), as it greatly influenced the literary and philosophical practice of modernity. In investigating this problem the paper attempts to approach the vital question whether thinking from the standpoint of margins in terms of philosophy is possible and what is the nature of truth that such a philosophical project reveals.

Key words marginalization; dialectics; Adorno; negation; truth; *Ulysses*

1. "The Whole is Untrue" —Emergence and Alienation of the System

In almost every dimension, ontological, moral and existential, the world-system illustrated by Franz Kafka in *The Trial* appears to be an alienated sociological totality opposed and contradictory to the irreducible consciousness of an individual existence—Joseph K. Therefore the main experience that is conveyed in *The Trial* is the expression of the embarrassment that the individual consciousness suffers from non-conciliation with the system comprehended as the whole—that which is identical with itself. This incompatibility leads K. to recognize the system as false:

You don't need to accept everything as true, you only need to accept is as necessary".

"Depressing view" said K. "The lie made into the rule of the world. (Kafka 406)

These words almost immediately remind one of the more radical, negative, yet fundamental thesis of modern philosophy formulated by Theodor Adorno, *the whole is false*. However, the question here arises: How is individuality possible given the coercion of the system? If in the process of the dialectical movement the individual constitutes only a moment –merely one element of the total assemblage, society, how does it become possible that this element differentiates itself by gaining self-

awareness? Adorno claims that in the dialectical movement of the totality something always stays behind and in turn that fault implies the primal and axiomatic crack in the very origins of dialectics. In this instant of incoherence hope and truth may reside as it releases self-consciousness in constituting itself, thus arising in freedom from the totality. Nevertheless, in light of the above thesis an inappropriate question appears almost instantly: what is truth? Of course in the face of negation such a question should not even be thought. Out of curiosity however, pursuing further the trace of negation designated by Adorno, what is found is the critique of the realm of the spirit:

In those branches themselves, in the emphatic claim of their autarchy, dwells untruth. All culture after Auschwitz, including its urgent critique, is garbage. By restoring itself after what transpired in its landscape without resistance, it has turned entirely into that ideology which it potentially was, ever since it took it upon itself, in opposition to material existence, to breathe life into this latter with the light, which the separation of the Spirit from manual labor withheld from such. (Adorno 358-361)

As such, the untruth lives in the emphatic demand for autarchy of the dimension of Spirit—culture. The echo of this claim and its literary allusions reaches far back into the history of philosophy—to Hegel’s thesis that culture is in fact an alienated spirit:

This spirit is the absolute and universal inversion and estrangement of actuality and of thought; *pure culture*. (Hegel 62)

Let us then take a closer look at the origins of this thesis from Adorno’s stance: in Hegel’s historiosophy the spirit through the negation of negation—negation of the primal difference—absorbs the different—*nature*. Culture emerges as the expression of spirit’s mediation in nature and at this precise moment of expression culture becomes different, alienated from the identity of the spirit. Thus the author of *Negative Dialectics* is entitled to assert, that culture “perhorresces a stench, because it stinks” (Adorno 358-361), because, as he believes, culture bears the guilt of old Adam, that is the fault of absorbing the different—*nature*. Every conception bears the trace of this guilt, as Adorno emphasizes:

In truth all concepts, even philosophical ones, move towards what is non-conceptual, because they are for their part moments of the reality, which necessitated—primarily for the purpose of controlling nature—their formation. (23-24)

Moreover, Adorno maintains that this primal correspondence is based on an intrinsic violence associated with the dominance underlying the dialectic movement. Therefore the author of *Negative Dialectics* introduces in his philosophy the moment of grounding in the manifestation of the most individual and irreducible experience—the experience of pain.

The impoverishment of experience through dialectics, which infuriates mainstream opinion, proves itself however to be entirely appropriate to the abstract monotony of the administered world. What is painful about it is the pain of such, raised to a concept. (18-19)

In this manner pain for Adorno becomes almost a metaphysical principle as it previously was for Schopenhauer:

The need to give voice to suffering is the condition of all truth. For suffering is the objectivity which weighs on the subject; what it experiences as most subjective, its expression, is objectively mediated. (29)

For Schopenhauer as well the will in its blind pursuit of objectification and subjecting to it convicts itself to suffering in the view of the final contradiction: limiting the spatiality of objectification and the infinity of desire. Accordingly Adorno asserts that every notion in its innate dialectics terminates at such a contradiction as it evokes the different in its own identity, which is related to suffering. The metaphysical pain in *Negative Dialectics* becomes as it were a mystical experience which forces the philosophical order to pursue the impossible, i.e. to reflect the irreducibly different:

It is characterized as much by its relation to the nonconceptual—as in keeping with traditional epistemology, where every definition of concepts ultimately requires non-conceptual, deictic moments—as the contrary, that the abstract unity of the *onta* subsumed under it are to be separated from the ontological. To change this direction of conceptuality, to turn it towards the non-identical, is the hinge of negative dialectics. (23-24)

2. Thinking Through the Margins—Testimony and Literary Truth

The only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the

standpoint of redemption. (Adorno 247)

In the light of these reflections it can be concluded that individual being is likely to differ from the system, the social totality. However, is the absolute breakout possible or are we just lured into the trap of a paradox as expressed in *Ulysses* “Think you’re escaping and run into yourself. Longest way round is the shortest way home” (Joyce 360).

The greatest reflections of this *negative* trend in literature are the works of James Joyce. The famous stream-of-consciousness carries not only psychological meaning, but more importantly: it expresses the irreducibility of the single consciousness in the face of world thought as whole:

If Socrates leaves his house today he will find the sage seated on his doorstep. If Judas go forth tonight it is to Judas his steps will tend.’ Every life is many days, day after day. We walk through ourselves, meeting robbers, ghosts, giants, old men, young men, wives, widows, brothers-in-law. But always meeting ourselves. (204)

To penetrate deeper into the consciousness might lead one to the point of its disintegration. Therefore *Ulysses* balances at the verge of communication and reasoning whereas *Finnegan’s Wake* collapses further into the incomprehensible. Still *Ulysses* appears to depict the struggle of the abysmal irreducibility of consciousness with the non-transparent *world without end*:

Ineluctable modality of the visible: at least that if no more, thought through my eyes. Signatures of all things I am here to read, seaspawn and seawrack, the nearing tide, that rusty boot. Snotgreen, bluesilver, rust: coloured signs. Limits of the diaphane. But he adds: in bodies. Then he was aware of them bodies before of them coloured. How? By knocking his sconce against them, sure. Go easy. Bald he was and a millionaire, *maestro di color che sanno*. Limit of the diaphane in. Why in? Diaphane, adiaphane. If you can put your five fingers through it, it is a gate, if not a door. Shut your eyes and see.

Stephen closed his eyes to hear his boots crush crackling wrack and shells. You are walking through it howsoever. I am, a stride at a time. A very short space of time through very short times of space. Five, six: the *nacheinander*. Exactly: and that is the ineluctable modality of the audible. Open your eyes. No. Jesus! If I fell over a cliff that beetles o’er his base, fell through the *nebeneinander* ineluctably. I am getting on nicely in the dark. My ash sword

hangs at my side. Tap with it: they do. My two feet in his boots are at the end of his legs, *nebeneinander*. Sounds solid: made by the mallet of *Los Demiurgos*. Am I walking into eternity along Sandymount strand? Crush, crack, crick, crick. Wild sea money. Dominie Deasy kens them a’.

*Won't you come to Sandymount,
Madeline the mare?*

Rhythm begins, you see. I hear. A catalectic tetrameter of iambs marching. No, agallop: *deline the mare*.

Open your eyes now. I will. One moment. Has all vanished since? If I open and am for ever in the black adiaphane. *Basta!* I will see if I can see.

See now. There all the time without you: and ever shall be, world without end. (Joyce 37-38)

In order to elucidate this process it is essential to understand that to fulfill the task of reflecting the different—negativity as both a philosophical and a literary vision, or rather testimony of the real need to become as it were a kaleidoscope—reality transformed. Although this project of thinking aims at truth, eventually it falls into the inevitable, inner contradiction between primal impulse—the desire to express and its exteriorization into meaning. This is why Adorno ends up entangled in his own method. At this point it seems that it would only be prudent and consequential for him as a philosopher to take a resolute step into silence, like Wittgenstein did. However, then he would fail to express his truth. To follow the path of the endless need of expressing means failing to posit the philosophical imperative, as Hegel would argue:

(...) Spirit is this power only by looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it. This tarrying with the negative is the magical power that converts it into being. This power is identical with what we earlier called the Subject, which by giving determinateness an existence in its own element supersedes abstract immediacy, i.e. the immediacy which barely is, and thus is authentic substance: that being or immediacy whose mediation is not outside of it but which is this mediation itself. (Hegel 19)

However this “failure” implies that the works of Theodor Adorno attain more literary value. It means that to some extent *Negative Dialectics* is essentially a work of literature and therefore it is a testimony of its time—modernity. Adorno’s experience is in fact of a historical nature and thus his work gains the additional significance of historical truth which is expressed in philosophical terms. Yet, this language is used in a purely artistic manner as a medium to create some kind of metaphorical

archipelagos.

As such, the seemingly incoherent reflections of *Negative Dialectics* constitute a flow which originates in the very fault that Adorno perceives in dialectics as a characteristic core of philosophical inquiry and of thinking. Adorno's thinking appears to accrue around the dialectical moment wrested from the Hegelian totality. In such a project thinking is confined to reflecting upon difference and therefore the intellect still comprehends conceptual characteristics only in their abstraction - one-sidedness and finitude while difference itself becomes an abstract, empty contradiction in which everything has its negation but not an identity. Thus Adorno brings out a Hegelian negation which, detached from the whole, becomes the formal principle of *Negative Dialectics*. Consequently the author states his thesis subjecting it to the principle of contradiction. By means of philosophical language Adorno expresses his utterly sincere wrath—historical truth.

Negative Dialectics, like *Ulysses*, is a journey that opposes itself to its own goal and, I believe, it intends to present the demand of critical consciousness; it is a sign indicating utopia as the possibility of something different than what is faced in reality. Although this flow of thought consistently follows the trace of difference and negation the fact remains that this path does not lead anywhere. Thus *Negative Dialectics* is indeed both a manifesto and almost an image of the true nihilism that is, in Adorno's belief, "nihilism that implies the opposite of the identification with nothingness" (Adorno 369-374). Thus in the world of Adorno's philosophical demands we may either place literature in the dimension of philosophy or put *Negative Dialectics* in the realm of literary truth. However, the latter finds it possible only to observe a historical event, indicating it and by that referring to the possibility of something different—utopia. This kind of power lies only within the works of art.

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