Politics and the Enigma of Art: The Meaning of Modernism for Adorno

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The premise of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* is clearly stated in its opening sentence: "It has become self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the whole, not even its right to exist."[1] To announce this premise at the beginning of a work devoted to the aesthetic and its theory is perplexing to say the least. Does aesthetic theory not require that there is, in fact, an art to which it can refer? If the existence of art cannot be taken for granted, is the whole project of aesthetic theory then inconceivable from the outset? The extent to which the fate of art is tied to the existence of aesthetic theory indicates that Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* is as much a work about art as it is a work about the survival of the aesthetic and the theoretical at a moment when art can no longer turn to these categories as the means of sustaining its significance. What is then in question is nothing less than aesthetic theory itself rather than a particular aesthetic theory.

The moment that occasions this questioning of aesthetic theory is the same moment that prompts Adorno's opening statement about art: the moment when art can no longer fulfill its promise. It is this moment that defines, for Adorno, what we now recognize as Modernism. Adorno writes:

[2] To set out on the sea of the unforeseen, to break down the doors of the impossible, is to foresee a future whose significance resides in its promise of the new. While this is also the promise of any manifesto, what makes the *Manifesto of Futurism* so striking an example of the genre is that it does not locate the significance of art in a particular practice, form of expression or act – unlike movements such as Imagism or Vorticism whose claims for art are published only a few years later. In this respect, Futurism does not describe a specific historical result for itself, a result that would immediately contradict its openness to the future since such a result would have to be already known in advance. Instead, Futurism emphasizes the increased experience of speed as the sign of a radical shift in what art is. In this respect, it is symptomatic of a shift away from the past as the defining source of what art is. Accordingly, the task of Futurism is to preserve this shift and all the actions described in its manifesto are directed towards this preservation of a future that cannot be comprehended by the past. Oriented toward the impossible knowledge of the unforeseen, Futurism can only promise that the continuing significance of art alone resides in the future. As the eighth article of the manifesto makes explicit, the past is no longer important wherever the significance of art is at issue.

It is not without a sense of irony that we can now look back on Futurism as a movement that had not only a limited future but a politically compromised future as the distance between it and fascist ideology diminished. But the significance of the adventure launched by movements such as Futurism lies less, for Adorno, in the fact of their historical failure than in the reason why they set out on this adventure in the first place. Indeed, Adorno's reference to these movements does not aim to confirm their place within the historical identification and succession of artistic periods – only their historical failure can do that. More is at stake for Adorno than a mere history of Modernism and the relation of its internal movements.

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radicalization of form that identifies Modernism), remains an extension of the promise that has been the foundation of art through much of its history, art's promise that there will be a future for art, in short, the promise that art, however naively, will always confirm what it is to be human.[6] Adorno traces this aspect of art in an account that reiterates terms used by Benjamin to characterize auratic art in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility."[7] First, art becomes an autonomous form, that is, it becomes art properly speaking, by freeing itself from its mythical and religious past. Adorno writes: "The autonomy [art] achieved, after having freed itself from cultic function and its images, was nourished by the idea of humanity" (*AT*, 9/1). More explicitly than Benjamin, Adorno emphasizes the role played by the idea of humanity in this freeing of art from its cultic past.[8] In Adorno's account, the autonomy of art derives its social function from this idea. As a result, the autonomy of art is regarded as embodying the autonomy of a society no longer subject to the interpretations of myth and religion. In other words, the rejection of the cultic function and its images not only inaugurates art as an autonomous form but also establishes the significance of this art as a representation of the social structure within which this rejection occurs. While this representative social function has been claimed many times on behalf of art, and while its modern significance may be traced to its origin within the Enlightenment, it is a claim that, Adorno insists, can no longer be made for art, at least not in such a positive way. This is so for Adorno because such a representation of autonomy owes its existence to an idea that has lost its force, the idea that society is human. What autonomy represents can no longer affirm its existence. Adorno is unequivocal on the effect of this loss: "As society became ever less a human one, this autonomy was disrupted" (*AT*, 9/1). The loss is, however, not simply the loss of an idea. If it were, it would only be necessary to await the arrival of another perhaps better idea. Rather, it is also the loss of the sense that the function of art is to reflect any such idea. Adorno's remarks on the autonomy of art after its cultic function makes this clear. Although the autonomy of art owes its significance to the idea of humanity invested in society, once the idea of humanity invested in society is no longer credible, its expression, which occurs in the form of the autonomy of art, can no longer be sustained. Accordingly, this understanding of the autonomy of art is disrupted and art enters the situation to which Modernism responds when it sets forth on the sea of the unforeseen. What is disrupted at this point, however, is not the autonomy of art but rather the significance that was attached to the autonomy through which art first asserted its secular existence. This is why, even after remarking that "the constituent elements which had accrued to art faded (*verblaßten*

enactment of the origin of secular art – that is, in its own setting apart from the history of art – Modernism takes away the very category that gave such an art its historical significance. It is in this way that art conforms to the law of its movement, its *Bewegungsgesetz*, the movement that embodies the law that governs art. That this release occurs as the effect of Modernism indicates that, for Adorno, Modernism is not just one more historical period in the development of art but the period in which art

for Adorno? Second, what is this movement and how does it release the insecurity of art?

Art is effectively blind for Adorno not only when it tries to assert or restore its social function but also when, as Modernism, it seeks to emancipate itself from its past. To embark on such an adventure, art must remain blind to the reasons why it has become what it is.

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existence of art. What is therefore at stake in art's uncertainty is nothing less than art itself. But, at the same time, one can also ask what is at stake in Adorno's

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aesthetic is already the possibility of the political and the social in Kant. As a result, the role of the aesthetic as the category that gives significance to art (and when all else fails, it is in the name oe4(tf1(th)-5em(4(els)-7(e)

why the “without” that founds the aesthetic as a theoretical undertaking remains its only justification. In this context, it can be asked whether Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* and its demand that art exist as the negation of negation is not the last possibl

of determination, in short, a determined denial of itself by itself. As a result, negation is never quite negative enough to relinquish its determining function. In this context, the negation of negation takes the form of a criticism whose task is to preserve throughout the history of art a negation that will always distinguish what art is from what it is not. This is why criticism is described by Adorno as the historical unfolding of artworks. But, as Adorno also says, this unfolding cannot be separated from the philosophical unfolding of truth content. But if form is understood as criticism, then form is also one of the dependent parties in this relation. How then is this relation, this interdependency assured? How does criticism maintain a relation to truth content? In other words, what accounts for this interdependency that permits a content, even a truth content, without affirming its determination? In effect, what accounts for an art that continues to exist even when that mode of existence manifests itself as uncertainty about its existence?

When Adorno describes this interdependency he also introduces the necessity that artworks be

enigma is constitutive of an art that would satisfy the demands of an historical materialistic aesthetic, that is, an aesthetic through which art is never the objectivized form of a politics, then, what is achieved by Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*

[6] There is no stronger a condemnation of the humanism that drives this idea than Adorno's remarks on poetry and Auschwitz. For an interpretation of the negativity Adorno expresses in these remarks as a turning away from the ethical imperative of Auschwitz, see Josh Cohen, *Interrupting Auschwitz* (London: Continuum, 2003).

[7] For an account of the relation of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* to Benjamin's work, in particular, to the latter's concept of constellation, see Sherry Nicholsen Weber, "*Aesthetic Theory*'s Mimesis of Walter Benjamin" in her *Exact Imagination, Late Work. On Adorno's Aesthetics*

reason, ultimately in the un