

Language, truth, and semblance

Historically, accounts of art as being capable of expressing truth or truth-claims have taken a number of forms. Some, like that of Schopenhauer's aesthetics, have been Platonist, arguing that, when successful, certain types of art-works imitate or perhaps even invoke, express, or manifest timeless essence or ideality. Others, like Lukács's realism, have asserted that art reflects, imitates, and interprets social action and reality. In yet other accounts, such as those of Hegel's aesthetics or Heidegger's anti-aestheticist philosophy of art, the art-work is said to disclose to a community a particular set of socially and culturally constitutive meanings (for Hegel, *Geist*; for Heidegger, *Welt*). In contemporary anglophone aesthetics, there are numerous debates about realism and, more specifically, art's ability to represent or depict reality.¹ In a variety of views, art is said to be cognitively inferior compared to other modes of representation, in particular discursive ones. A number of aestheticians in the tradition from Hume have found the notion of artistic truth to be unpromising and wanted to account for the distinctness of art by reference to non-cognitive forms of engagement, typically those based on emotional response.

Adorno's view is hard to pin down. While unquestionably a truth-theorist, he does not agree with, or even come close to, any of the major positions at hand. On a somewhat cursory reading, he seems sympathetic to what can be called Platonist views – views that consider art to be capable of expressing a privileged, “higher” form of truth, one that is inaccessible to discursively structured expression.² He does not, however,

¹ For an overview, see Richard Eldridge, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), Chapter 2.

² The reader is asked to disregard the complexities involved in using the adjective “Platonist.” In Book x of *The Republic*, Socrates famously gets Glaucon to accept that art is ontologically inferior because of its restriction of imitated subject matter to the sensible (as opposed to the intelligible) realm. By attributing a Platonist view to Adorno, however, I simply have in mind the association of truth with transcendence. The claim, as we shall see, takes the form of holding that art is able to express ontologically more adequate or “real” truths than those expressed by regular vehicles of representation, in particular sentences or propositions.

accept any of the metaphysics that normally accompanies Platonist accounts, including the belief that reality is hierarchically structured or that works of art are best viewed as aiming to articulate transcendent idealities or essences. In fact, Adorno vehemently opposes such views, claiming that they distort our sense of the value of art and how it may offer meaningful forms of experience and engagement. Another challenge to interpreters of Adorno's account of artistic truth is that the transcendence invoked by the successful work of art is supposed to be extremely hard to grasp. Although his critical remarks about hermeneutics seem close to caricature (hermeneutics is identified with a naïve search for "message"), it is abundantly clear that, in his view, standard procedures of interpretation are not likely to yield any adequate understanding of the truth-claims at stake in any given work of art. Whatever truth there is, it should be dealt with as a riddle, resisting comprehension. "Ultimately, artworks are enigmatic in terms not of their composition but of their truth-content. The indefatigably recurring question that every work incites in whoever traverses it – the 'What is it all about?' – becomes 'Is it true?' – the question of the absolute, to which every artwork responds by wrestling itself free from the discursive form of answer."³ In the following I explore Adorno's conception of truth-content (*Wahrheitsgehalt*). The contrast between identity and non-identity plays a crucial role in his account of the distinction between discursive and non-discursive judging; thus I begin with this issue. I suggest that much of what Adorno says about the alleged identitarian violence of standard, predicative judging is based on a problematic notion of the fixity of concepts, and that the discursive/non-discursive contrast should be reconsidered. The creation of what Adorno thinks of as false identity is not the result of predication as such; rather, it emerges when procedure, principle, and method fail to engage the true nature of the particular. In the next section I offer reasons to think that the transcendence (and hence non-mediated reality) Adorno thinks music is expressing is ultimately ineffable. The tension between the commitment to transcendence and the commitment to mediation generates a very peculiar vision of musical truth. The moment of truth, I argue, arises negatively as (at best) a non-conceptual intimation of the absolute.

The final section is devoted to the notion that the meaning of works of art, as Hans-Georg Gadamer claims, is dependent on interpretation. While Adorno is hostile to hermeneutics, claiming that advanced works of art are recalcitrant to standard forms of interpretation, I argue for a

³ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 185.

certain rapprochement between Adorno and Gadamer. In particular, I suggest that Adorno cannot coherently reject such notions as the hermeneutic circle, the conceptual structuring of aesthetic experience, and the historicity of symbolic production.

4.1 Predication, identification, and truth

Adorno makes a number of inter-related claims about artistic truth-content. At one level artistic truth-content is contrasted with discursive truth and identified with some form of non-discursive presentation. At another level, Adorno tries to integrate the notion of truth-content into a complex, dialectical account of negation: drawing on Hegel's argument in the *Science of Logic*, truth-content results from the negation of semblance (*Schein*). At a third level, however, truth-content is epistemically determined as resistant to interpretation, indeed so resistant as to preclude comprehension. Finally, the conception of truth-content is made out to depend on a complex conception of form, and ultimately on a dialectics of form and content.

In the following I concentrate on the first claim – the one about artistic versus discursive truth. For experienced readers of Adorno it will not come as a surprise that he seeks to locate artistic truth-content at a non-discursive level. After all, a major claim of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is that the purported crisis of modernity is at least partially the result of forms of conceptual codification that prevent the acknowledgment of sensuous particularity. “Identity” is a key term in this regard. While an object of incessant reflection and critique, it figures in everything from his account of subjectivity and the commodity-form to his theory of the predominance of social totality over the individual, his critique of western metaphysics, including German idealism, and his interpretation of the subject-object relationship, as well as his reflections on language, rationality, and predication.⁴ By contrast, the notion of *non-identity* serves as the negation of identity, generating a range of views concerning freedom, liberation, social change, happiness, and fulfillment.

“Identity” is a polysemantic term. At the *de re* level identity is a relational property – the property of X's identity with Y – and one must distinguish between numerical identity – an entity's identity with itself – and qualitative identity – an entity's identity with a numerically different entity falling under the same concept or description. At the *de dicto* level,

⁴ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 148: “Identity is the primal form of ideology.”

while equally a relational property, one speaks of identity holding between concepts, or between concepts having the same content or extension. Again, one must distinguish between numerical and qualitative identity – a concept's identity with itself versus a concept's identity with some other concept. Moreover, one often speaks of identity as that which individuates someone or something – whatever it is that essentially differentiates an entity from other entities. Persons, for example, are often viewed in terms of their identity.

In *Negative Dialectics*, however, Adorno defines identity in terms of predication.⁵ In standard Fregean logic, concepts have an extension, comprising all the objects that purportedly fall under them. When concepts are used as predicates to assert something, they are said to “identify” or “classify” the object referred to by the subject under the higher-order content provided by the concept. Since thinking takes place via the making of judgments (rather than just possessing some sort of pre-judgmental content of the type exemplified, say, by Descartes's “ideas”), to think is to *identify*. “X is green” asserts the existence of some particular state of affairs or fact. Thus, the judgment has a truth-value. However, it also, Adorno argues, functions to synthesize X, the particular, with its universal attribution, provided by the concept “green,” creating an identity between the two.

When referring to this synthesis, Adorno somewhat strangely does not seem to have in mind the subject (name, definite description, or concept) of the predication but, rather, the entity or state of affairs referred to by that subject. However “false,” a judgment creates an identity, he claims, between an entity or state of affairs and a concept. It thereby, he writes, does “violence to the object of its synthesis.”⁶ That idea, however, seems to involve an elementary use/mention fallacy. Surely, it does not make sense to say that “*water* is identical with ‘H₂O’ or ‘water.’” An entity cannot be identical with some predicate term, designating a concept or class.

Should we then interpret Adorno differently? Is his point rather that predication – and the identity brought about by predication – somehow *associates* the particular with the conceptual content, such that the particular gets determined and viewed in terms of that content? Indeed, on this interpretation it becomes easier to approach Adorno's complaints about identification. Identification then becomes an act whereby a

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 85: “Irrationality is the scar which the irremovable nonidentity of subject and object leaves on cognition – whose mere form of predicative judgment postulates identity.”

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

particular – presumably a sensuous particular, presentable in intuition – is “subsumed under” some higher-order, universal content in relation to which it actually is “different” or “other,” possessing, as Adorno puts it, other definitions.⁷ In some fairly intuitive sense it is possible to understand this worry: the tree, considered as a sensuous particular, always seems “richer,” more complex, unpredictable, inexhaustible, and so on, than the conceptual content designated by the term “tree” would seem able to track. The way in which language may seem incapable of responding adequately to the purported richness of experience (the fineness of grain) – is that what Adorno is considering?

In a passage in the *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein seems to respond to something like this issue by asking the reader to describe the aroma of coffee:

Why can't it be done? Do we lack the words? And *for what* are words lacking? – But how do we get the idea that such a description must after all be possible? Have you ever felt the lack of such a description? Have you tried to describe the aroma and not succeeded?

And, Wittgenstein continues:

((I should like to say: “These notes say something glorious, but I do not know what.” These notes are a powerful gesture, but I cannot put anything side by side with it that will serve as an explanation. A grave nod. James: “Our vocabulary is inadequate.” Then why don't we introduce a new one? What would have to be the case for us to be able to?))⁸

Wittgenstein's point, I take it, is that while the gesture towards non-identity seems deep, it is not clear in a case such as this what it would mean to ask for a different vocabulary (as though vocabularies are at our disposal to accept or reject), or even to say what it is that our concepts (the ones at our disposal at least) do not cover. In one fairly straightforward sense the object (the aroma) seems ineffable: we just cannot hope to provide successful descriptions of everything we experience. Yet why should the fact that words at times fail to capture the uniqueness of a particular reveal some sort of deep ontological gap between language and reality, and not just limits to what particular individuals in particular situations care or

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 149: “[Cognition of non-identity] seeks to say what something is, while identitarian thinking says what something falls under, what it exemplifies or represents, and what, accordingly, it is not itself. The more relentlessly our identitarian thinking besets its object, the farther will it take us from the identity of the object.”

⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Blackwell, 1958), §610. The double brackets are Wittgenstein's own.

manage to describe? A good poet, employing a striking metaphor, might come up with a perfectly satisfactory description of the aroma of coffee.⁹

A universal, *if we find one that is suitable*, successfully picks out a particular: a house is correctly characterized as “a house.” We can describe its details, the particulars of which the house is composed, but then we will need concepts. A door is correctly characterized as “a door.” The little patch beneath the first-floor window on the south wall is correctly characterized as “the little patch beneath the first-floor window on the south wall.” These are truisms. Yet Adorno seems to worry not only that we often fail to find the right concepts, but that *as such* universals falsify experience by failing adequately to pick out the particular. It is language itself that is “under the spell of identity.”

As already indicated, the root of this particular form of skeptical conundrum may seem to consist in Adorno’s failure to distinguish properly between predication and identification. Predications affirm or assent something of the subject of a proposition, thereby attributing properties to its referent. A judgment of the kind “X is green” attributes greenness to X. X, it is asserted, has the property of being green. This is not, however, the same as *identifying* X with the property of being green. The ball is green, yet that does not mean that we somehow *identify* the ball with greenness, whatever that means. It can be assumed that any rational speaker who utters the sentence “The ball is green” knows that greenness will only be one of its properties, and that greenness is not an essential property of the ball. In no way would such a speaker think that the assertion – “The ball is green” – identifies the particular with one of its (in this case contingent) properties. Whatever the ball is, it is not a heap of *greenness*.

That said, there is a certain historical precedence for thinking about predication in terms of identification. In Kant, for instance, judgments are supposed to create synthetic unity between various representations. A judgment is an act whereby consciousness is able to take up various representations and see them united such as to form a synthesis.¹⁰ Since

⁹ Adorno makes a similar point in *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 204: “Language mediates the particular through universality and in the constellation of the universal, but it does justice to its own universals only when they are not used rigidly in accord with the semblance of their autonomy but are rather concentrated to the extreme on what is specifically to be expressed.”

¹⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), B93: “Since no representation pertains to the object immediately except by intuition alone, a concept is thus never immediately related to an object, but is always related to some other representation of it (whether that be an intuition or itself already a concept). Judgment is therefore the mediate cognition of an object, hence the representation of a representation of it. In every judgment there is a concept that holds of many, and that among this

judgments are said to be objectively rule-governed (governed by a priori rules of synthesis), they are formally constitutive of a normative unity that is valid not only subjectively (or arbitrarily) but in the sense that I can rightly take myself as experiencing the unity objectively, that is, via judgments displaying objective truth-conditions. In his influential account, Hölderlin turns to the Kantian account of judgment as creating a discursively constituted unity, arguing that the very act of judging leaves us to experience the world via universal concepts that ultimately efface a more original but ineffable unity or identity.¹¹ While the original unity remains an obscure presupposition of the very act of judging, it recedes from sight in and through the judging. In his early writings, Nietzsche, a more obvious source of inspiration for Adorno's epistemology and philosophy of language, claims that in a world exclusively composed of sensuous particularity, concepts create false unities and continuities. On the early Nietzsche's nominalist account, concepts mainly serve to streamline experience, making it more "manageable" and ultimately calculable.¹²

Predication cuts both ways. It permits us to determine an object conceptually. The ball presented to me in intuition is no longer just a ball but a *green* ball, making rigorous individuation possible: I can distinguish it from the yellow and blue balls. By means of the predication, I obtain a conceptually mediated sense of what *this* particular ball is like – it thereby particularizes the ball for me. The more true descriptions I add, the more I will know about this particular ball, and the more unique it will appear. However, predication can only affect such particularization by employing concepts that are applicable in an indefinite number of other and potentially different circumstances. The ball is green, but so are my house and the maple leaf I looked at yesterday. Although these radically disparate

many also comprehends a given representation, which is then related immediately to the object ... All judgments are accordingly functions of unity among our representations, since instead of an immediate representation a higher one, which comprehends this and other representations under itself, is used for the cognition of the object, and many possible cognitions are thereby drawn together in one."

¹¹ Dieter Henrich, *Der Grund im Bewußtsein: Untersuchungen zu Hölderlins Denken (1794–1795)* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1992).

¹² I am here thinking in particular of Nietzsche's reflections in the unpublished *Philosophenbuch*. In the most famous section thereof, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense," Nietzsche points to the (post-Copernican) fact of our decentered and marginal position in the universe (located in the "out of the way corner of that universe which is dispersed into numberless twinkling solar systems") in order to cast doubt on the belief that our intellect and our language can ever be in touch with reality. Our existence is simply so contingent that the best we can hope for is to produce useful illusions, capable of providing some sort of order that will increase the chances of survival. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870s*, trans. D. Breazale (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1979), pp. 79–91.

objects do not display the same shade of green (available to me in intuition), my predications nonetheless focus on an abstract universal uniting them: on the basis of what I say, they are all to be viewed as green. Indeed, they are all green.

I could interpret this to mean that I have succeeded in classifying these entities by subsuming them under a higher-order universal that itself has a fixed content. I could say that greenness has an ideal or eidetic content that is independent of all empirically existing green objects. That would be a Platonic view, or at least the basis for formulating a realist view of concepts. Although he offers a social account of the genesis of such concepts, it may at times seem as though Adorno does hold such a view. In particular, when he associates predication with subsumption and classification, he seems to imply that experiencing an object as green is not only to judge that the object is green but, rather, to subsume the particular under a fixed, trans-temporal, and higher-order universal covering every green object. On such a view, I truly risk – especially when classification according to an easily available and simple criterion is my goal – reducing the manifold of green objects to just one, fixed determination.

Yet is a Platonist view of concepts really plausible? In the wake of Wittgenstein's critique of conceptual Platonism, it seems that the odds are stacked against any view involving the idea that predication presupposes a grasp of Platonic essences. An essence of this kind is neither necessary nor sufficient for determining the correct application of a concept and determine meaning. It is not necessary because correct application does not require the presence of an essence before the mind; it is not sufficient because the essence itself, which is general, cannot specify how correct application takes place in particular cases.¹³ According to Wittgenstein, a more adequate account must focus not on the idea that "acting according to a rule" is to interpret the rule but, instead, on action within the framework of an established practice – a practice in which there is training and supervision, hence also right and wrong.¹⁴

Wittgenstein's view of language may seem radically different from that of Adorno. Rather than taking the logical form of predication, and thus predicative judgment, as the basic semantic unity, Wittgenstein emphasizes the "countless kinds" of equally acceptable types of moves possible in language.¹⁵ Unlike Adorno, moreover, Wittgenstein views language as an

¹³ For a particularly lucid reconstruction of these two points in Wittgenstein, see Colin McGinn, *Wittgenstein on Meaning* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

¹⁴ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §§ 198–201.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, §23.

activity, embedded in forms of life. Finally, whereas Adorno seems to believe that concepts can have meaning independently of their use in judgments, Wittgenstein holds that concepts only have meaning in utterances, and that utterances only have meaning in a language, where language is the collective possession of a form of life. Indeed, as Habermas points out, Adorno has not conducted “the linguistic turn.”¹⁶ Too much of his work remains indebted to the idealist tradition in which language plays a subsidiary role compared to that of consciousness.

However, in some of his lecture courses Adorno occasionally offers a different account of language, one not centered on an objectivist appeal to essence and mere “classification.” In *Philosophische Terminologie*, for example, he suggests that language must be viewed as an intersubjective practice, embedded historically in linguistic communities with shared horizons and background beliefs.¹⁷ Like Wittgenstein, he emphasizes how agents do things with language, committing themselves in light of communally instituted rules of sense-making.

How, then, if something like this alternative reading of Adorno’s philosophy of language can be defended, are we supposed to interpret his critique of “classificatory” or “subsumptive” thinking? The most promising line, it seems, would be to focus on what Adorno, at least since the writing of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, views as an inherent tendency towards reification. Although no a priori “logics” dictates that such a tendency should emerge, modern agents are prone to use concepts in overly subsumptive ways, focusing on universality and generality while downplaying, and in some cases bracketing, the conceptualized particular. They do this not because the nature of language forces them to do so, but, rather, because social and economic pressures are such that quantification, orientation towards exchange value, commodification, calculation, and so forth, are being privileged (both epistemically and in cruder social and everyday terms) over attention to the particular (at least for its own sake).¹⁸ The argument comes across as complex and includes reference to the Marxist

¹⁶ Habermas explains in detail what he means by this claim in *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 1, pp. 366–99.

¹⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophische Terminologie*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1973), Vol. 1, pp. 84–6. See also Theodor W. Adorno, *Vorlesung zur Einleitung in die Erkenntnistheorie* (Frankfurt: Junius, 1972), p. 266: “Ich möchte noch darüber hinausgehen, indem ich Ihnen sage, daß ja allein durch die Sprache ... immer schon das gesellschaftliche Moment gegenüber dem Einzelsubjekt vorgedacht ist, mitgesetzt ist und daß demgegenüber, gegenüber dieser Konkretion eines Einzelsubjekts, das vermöge der Sprache stets bereits schon Anteil hat an der Intersubjektivität, also an der Gesellschaft die Versicherung, die einzige Rechtsquelle der Erkenntnis sei der Rekurs auf die Monade eine bloße Beteuerung, eine ganz willkürliche Behauptung ist.”

¹⁸ See Adorno, *Philosophische Terminologie*, pp. 108ff. Here Adorno distances himself from any attempt to criticize logical thinking as such, claiming that his main aim is to attack identitarian thinking

theorem of commodity fetishism and Weber's account of formal-instrumental reason, as well as Lukács's investigation of reification.¹⁹ For now my point is simply that discursive language, rather than inevitably *forcing* agents to prioritize "identity" over the "non-identical," *lends* itself to reification and identification. Because of its unique role and importance in human life, and because of its ability to be used for purposes of conceptual codification, language is *the* major vehicle of "identity thinking." Yet only contingently, and as the result of deep-seated social pressures and commitments, does language play this dubious role. Rather than some inherent logic of language itself, it is *how* we use language that causes distortion.

4.2 Non-discursive truth

In the brief but important 1956 essay "Music and Language: A Fragment," Adorno asks whether – and, if so, how – works of art may be said to issue in judgments. The essay is particularly instructive insofar as it focuses on music, which together with architecture has traditionally been understood as the least representational of all the arts. Of course, with modernism's challenging of all forms of representation, the very basis for viewing music as inherently non-representational *in contrast* to the other arts no longer makes sense the way it did to idealist aestheticians like Hegel and Schelling, who defined music as the temporally organized expression of emotion, more or less devoid of any cognitive dimension. However, regardless of modernism's general suspicion of representation, it is evident that music does not use conceptual language, and even when, as in "program music" (the "1812" Overture, Beethoven's "Eroica" Symphony, Siegfried's Funeral March, and so on), it aims, say, to celebrate or memorialize particular events, it neither describes nor characterizes.

Adorno makes a number of key claims in this essay.²⁰ He starts by suggesting that music "resembles" a language, providing quasi-judgments or assertions of some kind.²¹ "Music resembles language in the sense that it

"running amok." See also Christoph Demmerling, *Sprache und Verdinglichung: Wittgenstein, Adorno und das Projekt einer kritischen Theorie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1994). According to Demmerling, Adorno can be viewed as a linguistically oriented social philosopher, aiming to criticize socially constituted reifications of language.

¹⁹ In *ibid.*, pp. 26–43, Demmerling traces this argument as it develops in these thinkers.

²⁰ For a discussion of "music and the concept" in Adorno, see Simon Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), pp. 126–9.

²¹ For a more contemporary discussion of the claim that music has communicative strengths similar to language, see Kathleen Higgins, *The Music between Us: Is Music a Universal Language?* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

is a temporal sequence of articulated sounds which are more than just sounds. They say something, often something human. The better the music, the more forcefully they say it. The succession of sounds is like logic: it can be right or wrong.”²² Music is non-propositional: it does not make claims ushering in discursive judgments, capable of communicating meanings via conceptual attribution. How, then, if music only judges “non-discursively,” can Adorno suggest that music carries truth-value? A key concept in this regard is that of “intention” (*Intention*), which Adorno borrows from Walter Benjamin’s *Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, a source from which a number of elements of his theory of aesthetic truth are drawn. Adorno repeatedly states that aesthetic truth is without intention. “Music aspires to be a language without intention.”²³ Since Adorno leaves the term “intention” unexplained, we need to turn for a moment to the original context from which it is drawn.

In Benjamin’s work, the question of intention is closely connected to the question whether the achievement of truth requires a form of unmediated awareness of the object. In the “Prologue” to the *Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin seeks to disassociate truth from Cartesian method and, indeed, any conception according to which truth is viewed as the successful possession of the object according to pre-given epistemic stipulations or rules. For Benjamin, such possession includes not only a Cartesian ordering in terms of the evident presence of clear and distinct ideas, but also the operations of transcendental consciousness in thinkers such as Kant and Husserl.²⁴ In Kant, a judgment can only be objective insofar as the judging agent is freely able to take herself as epistemically responsible for the judgment by placing it in the “space of reasons”

²² Theodor W. Adorno, *Quasi una fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London and New York: Verso, 1992), p. 1. The quote is not unambiguous. There seems to be an equivocation in it as between “being right or wrong” in the sense of “being true or false” and “being right or wrong” in the sense of something like “being adequate to the compositional task at hand, or simply sounding right.” In the following I read him in the first sense – as saying that music can be cognitively true or false.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

²⁴ Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), p. 93: “The goal of knowledge is the *possession* of objects and not their emancipation. Knowledge, in this sense identical with the Nietzschean ‘will to power,’ will stop at nothing to reach this end, and its preferred technique, from the Cartesian cogito to the transcendental ego of Kant and Husserl, has been the imperious assertion of the primacy of the knowing subject over the object to be known; a practice which falls victim to the logical fallacy of assuming what is eminently mediated – consciousness – is authentic immediacy. The desire to avoid this fallacy accounts for the persistent and unyielding anti-subjectivism of Benjamin’s philosophical standpoint, which is evident in his castigation of all attempts to turn the being of ideas into an object of ‘intuition’ (*Anschauung*), either in the Kantian sense or according to the Husserlian program of an ‘intuition of essence’ (*Wesensschauung*).”

(Sellars) and committing herself to being able to justify the judgment with reference to universally shared rules (categories) for judgment-formation. Moreover, conceptual capacities are operative not only in judgments but already in the actualizations of receptivity; thus, a priori conceptualization is at work both at the level of the understanding and at the level of intuition, where it serves to create unity. Viewing himself as largely continuing the Kantian program of showing that a successful account of objective experience requires a theory of transcendental consciousness, Husserl considers transcendent or objective content as given within the immanence of consciousness itself, according to a priori rules of synthesis that determine the constitution of the object. By virtue of a synthesis of different conscious states, the flowing lived experience of subjective appearances of objects is united such that an identical object stands before consciousness. Following Brentano, Husserl further argues that consciousness is essentially intentional: by means of various noetic acts (perceiving, remembering, judging, doubting, anticipating, and so forth), consciousness directs itself towards the “noema,” or the object of cognition, and the empirical object is given in and through the noetic-noematic engagement we have with it. A perceived object, for example, is only directly presented through its *Abschattungen*; thus Husserl contrasts what is really given – *reell* – in an act from that which is transcendent, which includes the unseen sides as well as the various contexts within which the object is presented, and all of this within a temporal flow that holds together both protentions and retentions in a dynamic yet unitary now.

Adorno is inspired by Benjamin’s attempt to “rescue” truth from such forms of synthesis and mediation. For Benjamin, non-intentional truth is supposed to redeem the particular by permitting it to identify itself as what it is independently of all human strategies or procedures for identification. “Name” (*Name*) is both Benjamin’s and Adorno’s quasi-theological term for the non-reified particular – the particular that has not become transformed into a token or instance of conceptual generality – and hence truth is the particular experienced as itself only. Truth, moreover, is temporal – the experience of particulars as plural, each one existing uniquely, in the transient being of their irreducible *haecceitas*. At one point Adorno approvingly characterizes Benjamin’s theory of knowledge as a “metaphysical rescue of nominalism.”²⁵ While Benjamin’s term “name” invokes a long-standing tradition of Jewish mysticism, Adorno associates “the name” with *nomen* in “nominalism,” thereby placing his reflection

²⁵ Adorno, “Introduction to Benjamin’s *Schriften*,” in *Notes to Literature*, Vol. II, pp. 220–32 (p. 222).

on this issue more squarely within philosophy rather than theology. In classical accounts of nominalism, such as in Locke or Hume, while universals are illusory yet pragmatically necessary products of induction, imagination, and habit-formation, only particulars exist. While views of this kind tend to see the particular as ineffable, what seems to preoccupy Adorno most is the problem of identification: in the absence of intention (or conceptually mediated representation in the form of discursive judgments), how can the particular be expressed (or “named”)? Indeed, what would “non-discursive, non-intentional judging” be? Can there be such a thing, or does judging necessarily introduce an order (of synthesis, say, or normatively structured subsumption or conceptualization) of appearing being compared to which the notion of unmediated objecthood will remain abstract and epistemically insignificant?

The problem Adorno is faced with is familiar to students of Hegel’s treatment of the configuration of “sense certainty” in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In this opening section of the dialectic, Hegel investigates whether knowledge and truth can coherently be viewed as “immediate.” Interestingly, the configuration in question takes such knowledge (which it is claimed must be wholly receptive, not altering anything in the object as it presents itself) to be

the *richest* kind of knowledge, indeed a knowledge of infinite wealth for which no bounds can be found, either when we *reach out* into space and time in which it is dispersed, or when we take a bit of this wealth, and by division *enter into* it. Moreover, sense-certainty appears to be the *truest* knowledge; for it has not as yet omitted anything from the object, but has the object before it in its perfect entirety.²⁶

Hegel’s dialectical argument is well known. In its barest outline it leads to the twofold realization that (a) such apparently rich content, since it lacks any determination, is in fact infinitely poor, and (b) as soon as the attempt is made to articulate or comprehend the “pure being” of the singular “This,” one will have to use language and thus introduce mediation by way of conceptual universality. Even the bare indexical pointing to the “This” requires spatiotemporal determination, generating a “Now” and a “Here,” which then respectively will have to be cashed out in terms of predicates (“night,” say, or “tree”), making description (“Now is night,” “Here is a tree”) possible. If consciousness restricts itself exclusively to using deictic expressions, it may be able to receive momentary sense impressions. What

²⁶ G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 58.

it will not be able to do is take itself as having established a referring relation to the object. For this to be possible, the Hegelian account makes reference to concepts, judgments, and ultimately self-consciousness.

This is not the place to reconstruct this whole, complex argument.²⁷ Suffice it to say, though, that Kant and Hegel agree that while there may be forms of intentional awareness that function as mere episodes of conscious life but are non-cognitive (in the sense of lacking cognitive value, lacking objectivity), human subjects are capable of judging that thus-and-so is the case, thereby taking up a manifold and uniting it as a truth-functionally responsive, cognitive unit for which the knowing subject can take epistemic responsibility. Rather than merely undergoing an experience, in judging the subject actively takes itself to have an experience by judging accordingly, thus placing the experience within the space of reasons and normativity. Truth, moreover, is normative; if a representation is true, then every rational being *ought* to accept it. The same is true of justifications. They purport to be valid for all rational speakers. By contrast, experiential episodes simply occur at the level of causally interacting events under laws, and as such they do not have a normative structure. For Kant and Hegel, judgments are rationally generated actions, requiring spontaneity. When a judgment is made, the experiential episode is conceptually determined not because nature dictates the predication, but because the subject freely decides to take itself as being committed to the judgment. That is when a cognitive, intentional awareness becomes possible.

If something like this argument is correct, then notions such as “non-intentional truth” and “non-discursive judging,” suggesting that truth could arise from some kind of immediate encounter with the object and that judging could take place without the self-reflexive, rational action it is to determine conceptually a particular *as something*, seem deeply problematic, if not incoherent. Yet is this Adorno’s view? Is he really committed to the view that the mind is bifurcated into the conceptual powers – generating the illusion of generality in a world of particulars – and the intuitional or purely perceptual powers – being on their own able to open the subject to the world *and*, in lieu of conceptual capacities, establish a position from which it is possible legitimately to apply the predicate truth to its direct (and privileged) encounters with sensuous particularity? There is plenty of evidence that this was Benjamin’s view. “[Truth] is an intentionless state of being. The proper approach to it is not therefore one of intention and knowledge, but rather a total immersion and absorption

²⁷ For a clear account, see Pippin, *Hegel’s Idealism*, pp. 116–25.

in it. Truth is the death of intention.”²⁸ There is, as already mentioned, also some evidence that Adorno occasionally entertained a view of this kind. For example, in some passages at the end of *Minima moralia*, he seems to contrast the space of epistemically knowable appearance, understood in idealist terms, with a metaphysically realist appeal to a transcendent reality, approachable ultimately in messianic terms.²⁹ However, a number of other passages point in the direction of greater continuity between the conceptual and the intuitional order – a continuity that Adorno, for social reasons (to do with his account of the fate of reason in modernity), sees as being threatened. In *Negative Dialectics*, for example, he distances himself from appeals to the immediate or the given: “There is no peeping out. What would lie in the beyond makes its appearance only in the materials and categories within.”³⁰ At the same time, however, the aim of dialectics, for Adorno, is to conduct a form of self-reflection whereby reason is supposed to turn against itself: “Dialectics is the self-consciousness of the objective context of delusion: it does not mean to have escaped from that context. Its objective goal is to break out of the context from within.”³¹ What would count as experience outside of that context? This is not clear and, within the framework of Adorno’s theory, not properly explicated.

There is an important reason why Adorno never explains how this is supposed to be possible. In the absence of that context of delusion, however ideological, there could be no objective judging or experience. Something else, some other economy of taking up and experientially processing content, would have to take its place. The fact is that Adorno simultaneously seeks to entertain two radically diverging philosophical visions. One is the Kant/Hegel vision of experiential content as being necessarily conceptual, or conceptually laden. On the basis of Adorno’s interpretation of normal human judging and sense-making, issuing from the compulsion to create identity, reduce heterogeneity to conceptually mediated forms of unity, and the like, a project emerges of trying to criticize those forms of identification that are detrimental to a genuinely unobstructed view of, and response to, the particular. We have seen that such a critique, in order to make sense, cannot simply appeal to predication but must take a socially oriented form, disclosing socially constituted mechanisms responsible for creating reification. While questionable for Adorno, the Kant/Hegel

²⁸ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. J. Osborne (London: New Left Books, 1977), p. 36.

²⁹ Although they are few and far between, there are, in Adorno, overt and affirmative references to “the messianic.” See for example Adorno, *Minima moralia*, aphorism 153.

³⁰ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 140. ³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 406.

vision is essentially an idealist one: there is an account of consciousness, of predication, of conceptual capacities entailing that no experience could count as objective unless it conforms to the rational requirements arising from this model.

If held to this view, Adorno would escape the charge of irrationalism. He would not think that a deeper, different, and “more real” reality can be apprehended once we open ourselves to a purportedly immediate encounter with things (as they are) independently of any predicative judging. Reality can be known insofar as determinations take place; thus, in the absence of judgment, while perceptual acts may occur, there can be no objectivity – no truth-apt representation. Along these lines, Adorno would be a true Kantian, for whom truth is a predicate of judgment, and for whom the very making of judgment presupposes spontaneity, the capacity to think on the basis of considerations arising exclusively from within the normatively regulated “space of reasons.”

However, as mentioned, Adorno is not fully satisfied with the Kant/Hegel vision, which he views as one of confinement and limitation. Following Benjamin, he also entertains a metaphysically realist vision of unrestricted transcendence.³² For the reasons I have already rehearsed, that realist vision is incompatible with the idealist one. The Kantian/Hegelian idealist vision is essentially epistemic: it points to the conditions of objective knowledge (while – and this is Adorno’s challenging twist – arguing that the conditions that make knowledge possible are at the same time ideological, in need of critique). Benjamin’s realist vision is essentially metaphysical, postulating the possibility of an absolute view of the world, beyond the limiting confines of human knowledge, according to which – and here Adorno can only guess; he has no right to make knowledge *claims* – the world is composed of transient and unique particulars.

Adorno offers few clues in this regard. The closest one gets is perhaps his qualified defense, in the *Negative Dialectics*, of Kant’s notion of the thing in itself against Hegel’s absolute idealism.³³ As will be discussed more extensively in Chapter 6, Adorno essentially praises Kant’s attempt to “rescue” the intelligible sphere, thereby allegedly demonstrating that “identity thinking” (for Adorno the Hegelian construal of the inseparability of understanding and intuition, and the equally Hegelian notion that conceptual capacities reach all the way out to the intuitions

³² For an exploration of this motif in Adorno, see Nichol森, “*Aesthetic Theory’s* Mimesis of Walter Benjamin.”

³³ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 384–93.

and determine those) is epistemically limiting or confining. Of course, in order to think of this view as limiting or confining, Adorno will have to side with the traditional view of Kant's transcendental idealism as asserting, at least implicitly, an ontological doctrine, equating appearances with mere illusion and the thing in itself with objective reality. Resisting Hegel's effort to bridge the gap between the order of appearances and the order of things in themselves, figures such as Schopenhauer and the late Schelling sought to combine an epistemological view of the ideal constitution of objecthood with a realist metaphysics of transcendent objecthood. They did this in part as a reaction against what they saw as the excessive commitment to reason in Hegel's speculative system of dialectical logic. According to Schopenhauer, the human subject can know only its own representations (*Vorstellungen*), which in contrast to the thing in itself are illusory. What *really* exists is the will (*Wille*) – a completely irrational, non-teleological, endless drive or impulse, radically opposed to Hegel's vision of reality as subject to a rational development, articulable in philosophical terms. Likewise, Schelling late in his career distinguishes between *negative philosophy*, or dialectics – allowing humans to disclose and self-reflectively respond to appearing reality (exploring the *whatness*, or essence of things) – and a *positive philosophy* of “the abyss” (*Ab-Grund* or *Un-Grund*) – circling around the *thatness* of ineffable, transcendent being, existing “*before* all thought.”³⁴

In attempting to explain how metaphysical insight is possible, both Schopenhauer and Schelling appeal to privileged episodes of non-discursive knowing. In Schopenhauer such non-discursive knowing is primarily to be encountered in the aesthetic realm, while in Schelling one finds various shots at the mystical, the intuition of the absolute, or what he sometimes calls a “metaphysical empiricism.”³⁵ At the end of his late Berlin lectures on the grounding of positive philosophy, Schelling (anticipating Benjamin) associates this pure existence, beyond conceptual determination, with the possession of a *name*: “For, of itself, the One is unknown, it has no concept through which it could be designated, but rather only a *name* – therefore, the importance placed on the name – in name *He* is *himself*, the singular being who has no equal.”³⁶

³⁴ F. W. J. Schelling, *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy: The Berlin Lectures*, trans. Bruce Matthews (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), p. 204.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 171–91. Schopenhauer's account of non-discursive knowing appears in Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 2 vols., trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover Publications, 1969), Vol. 1, pp. 178–9.

³⁶ Schelling, *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, p. 212.

While no doubt deeply familiar with their works, the extent to which Adorno was directly influenced by Schopenhauer and Schelling is not clear. What is clear, though, is that in the post-Kantian tradition there exists a long-standing and influential precedent for what is structurally the kind of view that we find in Adorno. All the components of a view that combines a skeptical account of idealism with a utopian vision of transcendent reality are present in Schopenhauer and Schelling, carried forward and reinterpreted by various post-Hegelian thinkers (including Marx and Kierkegaard), rather idiosyncratically appropriated by Benjamin, and made the basis for Adorno's thinking.³⁷ As in Schopenhauer and Schelling, it is precisely art and aesthetic intuition that hold open the promise of transcendence. And as in Schopenhauer and Schelling, transcendent reality resists human comprehension, representation, and truth: there is at this point a limit at which nothing more can be said or expressed. At this limit the self-preserving subject, with its powers of free and active judging, is challenged and possibly at the brink of some form of collapse, made manifest in the bodily responses that Adorno tends to evoke: weeping, shudder, and so on. Yet no direct experience of the absolute is involved. Rather, the work of art presents the absolute as *Schein*: "Intentional language wants to mediate the absolute, and the absolute escapes language for every specific intention, leaves each one behind because each is limited. Music finds the absolute immediately, but at the moment of discovery it becomes obscured, just as too powerful a light dazzles the eyes, preventing them from seeing things that are perfectly visible."³⁸ In the essay on music and language from *Quasi una fantasia*, he characterizes the non-intentional language of music as *incapable* of saying what it intends to say. All it can do, he ventures, is *aspire* to say it: "Its [the language of music's] Idea is the divine Name which has been given shape. It is demythologized prayer, rid of efficacious magic. It is the human attempt, doomed as ever, to name the Name, not to communicate meanings."³⁹ In *Aesthetic Theory*, much in the same vein, he maintains that only philosophy (conceptually structured language) can interpret what art aims to say but cannot say: "whereas art is only able to say it by not saying it" (*während es doch nur von Kunst gesagt*

³⁷ Georg Simmel is an important yet neglected mediating figure in this regard. See for example Georg Simmel, *The View of Life: Four Metaphysical Essays with Journal Aphorisms*, trans. John A. Y. Andrews and Donald N. Levine (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2010). For the late Schelling's influence on the post-Hegelian, materialist tradition, see Manfred Frank, *Der unendliche Mangel an Sein: Schellings Hegelkritik und die Anfänge der Marxschen Dialektik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1975).

³⁸ Adorno, *Quasi una fantasia*, p. 4. ³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

werden kann, indem sie es nicht sagt).⁴⁰ While philosophy can put forward judgments, it is limited by its conceptual approach. Aesthetic intuition, on the other hand, aims at absolute truth but can never reach and hold on to it.

In the essay on music and language Adorno further argues that while music is not making conceptual judgments, it does present its sensuous stimuli in an ordered, “logical” fashion, creating a structured or meaningful whole, as well as successions of such enclosed, structured wholes, that can be thought of as presenting an analogy to ordinary judgment. Rather than the purportedly pure expression of transitory and ultimately “adventitious” meanings, music exists in an ever unresolved tension between form and content, with both being transformed into a dynamic, self-negating unity; and form is “the thought process by which content is defined.”⁴¹ It is no doubt hard to articulate this complex thought without undue abstraction or triviality. However, what Adorno certainly is claiming is that serious music presents us with something of supreme importance and profound meaning. The beginning, he writes, of the recapitulation in the first movement of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony seems to assert that “‘This is how it is,’ the decisive, even the magisterial confirmation of something that has not been explicitly stated. In the supreme moments of great music,” he continues, “this intention becomes eloquently unambiguous by virtue of the sheer power of its context.”⁴²

Musical synthesis – its quasi-judgments, which Adorno thinks is brought about via aesthetic form – differs from standard, conceptual judging in certain key respects. One is that it is “nonviolent”: “It is the nonviolent synthesis of the diffuse that nevertheless preserves it as what it is in its divergences and contradictions, and for this reason form is actually an unfolding of truth.”⁴³ A synthesis is an act of holding elements together such as to create a unity. One may therefore wonder how any act that preserves the elements in their divergences and contradictions can be called a synthesis. We already know that Adorno does not have in mind the Kantian definition of synthesis. Yet neither does he seem to suggest that art’s synthesis somehow (along Hegelian lines) cancels difference by dialectically overcoming it. Rather, what Adorno is articulating, and fits in with his commitment to the complex notion of reconciliation, is a form

⁴⁰ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 72. The German is from Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. VII (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970), p. 113.

⁴¹ Adorno, *Quasi una fantasia*, p. 6. ⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁴³ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 143.

of unity that registers difference without cancelling it. Exactly what such a unity amounts to is not easy to determine. One clue, though (and this is another manner in which non-conceptual synthesis is peculiar), is that, in a work of art, the unity is precarious. It continually, Adorno writes, “suspends itself as such; essential to it is that it interrupts itself through its other just as the essence of its coherence is that it does not cohere.”⁴⁴ Even for Adorno, whose negative dialectics often requires the appeal to such apparently intractable paradoxes, the notion of a coherence whose essence it is not to cohere may sound forbiddingly excessive. Yet what he seems to have in mind is that significant art is capable of letting the particular – configured as content – reverberate in the work without “subsuming” or otherwise controlling or dominating it. The particular is subjected to aesthetic form without being transformed by it. Since it resists form, however, its mode of appearing will be dissonant, expressive, as Adorno thinks advanced modernist works of art are, largely of pain.

As mentioned, Adorno views the work of art as fundamentally illusory (*scheinhaft*). Thus, any attempt to consider art in relation to a concept of truth will have to be faced with the considerable difficulty that art, in Adorno’s view, appears unable to present objective truth. But if art is illusory, why talk about truth in the first place? Doesn’t this entail that art is a source of deception of some kind? Adorno’s view, though, is that sophisticated works of art undermine their own *Schein-Charakter*. When aesthetic synthesis, in its sensitivity and openness to difference, admits the disparate and heterogeneous, it destroys the unity and harmony characterizing aesthetic semblance. Thus, for Adorno, aesthetic truth is made possible by a form of negation of semblance brought about by the internal logic of the work itself. Since that negation can never arrive at a stable resolution (involving an immediate, wholly non-intentional encounter with the sensuous particular), it can only *aspire* to truth.

Adorno has a number of ways by which to approach this experience. He compares it to the witnessing of fireworks – “illuminating and touching” – that instantaneously light up the night sky and then disappear. The “instant of expression” can be thought of as an apparition, “a heavenly vision,” impossible to pin down and define yet uniquely pregnant with meaning.⁴⁵ In many of Adorno’s metaphors and characterizations, he precisely stresses the fleeting nature of this encounter. At their most expressive, works of art are, as I discussed in Chapter 2, more sublime than beautiful. Ultimately, however, thanks to the moment of spiritualization whereby the instant of

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* ⁴⁵ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 80.

expression is taken up and mediated by the work, the apparition attains to an image-like character, capable of expressing, while in an enigmatic way, a truth of universal or objective significance. While natural beauty, lacking the moment of spiritualization, does not allow for such a transformation, artistic beauty freezes, as it were, the suddenness and vitality of pure transcendence into an abiding “pregnant moment,” the moment of objectivity. This is not to say that such images are “real” in some straightforward sense – indeed, dependent on the activity of the imagination, their reality, Adorno claims, is “their historical content”⁴⁶ – and, although they endure, they are not in any way conceptual or conceptually available (at least in any direct sense). Unsurprisingly, moreover, Adorno does not think that the transformation into the *imago* leaves the apparition unscathed. Art, in this way, both makes expression objective *and* occludes the immediate experience of the content. However, the full cognitive significance of a work of art is only available via the Kantian conjunction of intuition and concept. Since Adorno believes that both intuitive awareness and conceptual uptake are needed – and at the same time that we have no way of showing that conceptual understanding justifiably (or, as Adorno would have it, non-ideologically) permeates the operations of receptivity – we need to ask what it means to offer conceptual understanding of a work of art.

4.3 Truth, interpretation, critique

According to Adorno, arriving at the truth-content of works of art calls for active interpretation and discursively structured judgment. The task of the critic is conceptually to articulate the work’s truth-content. However, the disjunction between aesthetic and critical truth – between the truth-content momentarily displayed in the work of art and the truth-content discursively expressed in philosophically oriented criticism – is aporetic: in current social circumstances, it cannot be bridged. “Interpretive reason,” as Albrecht Wellmer calls it, cannot aspire to preserve aesthetic truth-content unchanged.⁴⁷ In its sensuous mode of presentation, aesthetic truth-content is supposed to present itself in the form of transitory riddles; and what they state is resistant to analysis and conceptualization. Thus, the task of interpretive reason is, first, to make the aesthetic experience amenable to reflection, and, second, to use language to approximate or encircle aesthetic truth-content. While the first

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 85. ⁴⁷ Albrecht Wellmer, *The Persistence of Modernity*, p. 6.

aim is fairly straightforward, involving the constitution of a reflective second-order level that will, as it were, make the truth being expressed in the work of art become aware of itself (just as the holding of beliefs, and hence also the attribution of belief, requires the self-reflective knowledge *that* the belief is being held), the second is difficult and unending, the work of making the “impossible” transition from non-discursive to discursive truth.

Adorno is skeptical of approaches to advanced art that, rather than respecting the specificity and uniqueness of its mode of presentation, seeks to walk away with some sort of *message* (“what p *really* means is X”). As opposed to such views, Adorno highlights what he calls the “enigmatic quality” of works of art, their character of being “hieroglyphs for which the code has been lost,” as well as their refusal to speak “intelligibly.”⁴⁸ Adorno’s argument, however, is also targeting a related (though more complex) view, namely intentionalism, according to which the supposed message is identical with the artist’s intention. On a view of this kind, which Adorno detects in Dilthey’s hermeneutics, the work of art is essentially a vehicle for conveying or making manifest a set of meanings (intentions) that the artist consciously has sought to communicate via the making and distribution of the aesthetic product.⁴⁹

However, a closer reading of Dilthey reveals that, according to him, the intentional act is always mediated by the historical circumstances of artistic production; thus, a work of art contains no simple message, if by that one means a content issuing directly from the artist’s mind to be arrived at independently of a consideration of the context in which the work was conceived and made. Indeed, according to Dilthey the only access we may have to what the artist can have intended is via the context: the intention, therefore, is only available insofar as it is made manifest in the forms and materials of the artist’s historical and cultural environment.⁵⁰ It follows that Dilthey is resisting the identification of intended meaning with some

⁴⁸ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 124.

⁴⁹ That Adorno has Dilthey and his famous doctrine of *Verstehen* in mind, and that he attributes to this thinker some version of intentionalism, is fairly clear from a number of passages, including the following from *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 121: “Understanding [*Verstehen*] is itself a problematic category in the face of art’s enigmaticalness. Whoever seeks to understand artworks exclusively through the immanence of consciousness within them by this very measure fails to understand them and as such understanding grows, so does the feeling of its insufficiency caught blindly in the spell of art, to which art’s own truth content is opposed.”

⁵⁰ Wilhelm Dilthey, *Selected Works, Vol. I: Introduction to the Human Sciences*, ed. and trans. Rudolf Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 83: “Man as a fact prior to history and society is a fiction of genetic explanation; the human being which a sound analytic science takes as its object is the individual as a component of society.” For what remains

sort of token content in the artist's mind. Rather, the intended meaning will tend to be compatible with, or a function of, a variety of possible interpretations that themselves depend on the descriptions and accounts the interpreter is ready to offer of the context.

In the history of hermeneutics, there are views that, while differing from Dilthey's historical contextualism, seem closer to the kind of intentionalism that Adorno associates with hermeneutics. Schleiermacher's account of divinatory criticism is one such theory, yet even for him the empathetic projection required by the interpreter must always be mediated by a consideration of how language shapes thought, and indeed of the forms of symbolic representation available to the speaker at the time of making the relevant utterance.⁵¹ Adorno is surely wrong in attributing to hermeneutics in general a model according to which the act of interpretation consists in grasping the author's unmediated token thought-content.

But what about intention in general? Does Adorno dismiss the role of intention entirely? The answer, it seems, is complex. He certainly rejects the identification of aesthetic meaning (or "content," *Gehalt*) with aesthetic intention, arguing that every advanced work of art generates an excess (*Überschuss*) of meaning that the artist could never have controlled or rationally intended.⁵² A good illustration of this point emerges from Adorno's personal encounter with Beckett. To Beckett's dismay, Adorno is supposed to have insisted that the name "Hamm" in *Endgame* must be alluding to the character Hamlet in Shakespeare's play. When Beckett denied that the character Hamm has anything to do with Hamlet, Adorno responded that *no author can control all the meanings of a work of art*.⁵³

Two things should be noted about this claim. One is that from the fact that no artist can control *all* the relevant or possible meanings of a work of art, it does not follow that no meanings can be controlled or intended. While Beckett may not have intended the connection to Hamlet, he will have intended Hamm to be Clov's master (even though the master/slave

the best introduction to Dilthey's account of *Leben* and the social constraints on meaning, see Jos de Mul, *The Tragedy of Finitude: Dilthey's Hermeneutics of Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

⁵¹ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism*, trans. Andrew Bowie (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 92: "The *divinatory* method is the one in which one, so to speak, transforms oneself into the other person and tries to understand the individual directly."

⁵² Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 151: "The meaning of Goethe's *Iphigenie* is humanity. If this idea were merely intended abstractly by the poetic subject, if it were in Hegel's words simply a 'maxim' – as indeed it is in Schiller – it would be irrelevant to the work."

⁵³ Stefan Müller-Doohm, *Adorno: Eine Biographie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003), p. 543.

relation between them occasionally turns out to be reversible), a point no adequate interpretation can afford to ignore. Another point is that while an artist may not have had every meaningful feature of a work of art in mind at the time of creating the work, it is, as Stanley Cavell points out, always possible to ask in retrospect whether the artist is able to acknowledge given features of the work as her own.⁵⁴ The question then is not about what went on in the mind of the artist during the execution of the work but, rather, the extent to which the artist is able and ready to take responsibility for it; and while in some cases such acknowledgment may take the form of rediscovering feelings and ideas that originally went into producing it, in others it may simply consist in seeing whether the artist can presently identify with the feature. If it speaks to how the artist has come to think of the work (or what she will realize must have been required in order to create it), then what we are identifying is an intention. Even when the artist is incapable of taking responsibility for elements of her work, the critic must proceed *as if* someone takes responsibility for them, i.e., underwrites and stands behind them; otherwise they will seem entirely arbitrary.

Adorno never really considers these points. When asked whose voice it is we hear (and here I obviously speak in a rather loose, metaphorical manner, including voices not only of the literary and musical but the plastic and painterly arts as well) in a work of art, his response is that it is the voice of history itself, in particular that of suffering as mediated by the individual artist and expressed in the work.⁵⁵ Thus, to experience a truly great work of art is to expose oneself not primarily to an individual's successfully communicated intention but to the unsatisfied needs – and, more generally, the sedimented experience – of a historical configuration at large, or what Adorno at the end of his 1958/9 lecture course on aesthetics calls “world feeling” (*Weltgefühl*).⁵⁶ (The affinity with Schopenhauer is at this point particularly manifest. Like Adorno, Schopenhauer views the

⁵⁴ Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, pp. 225–37. Cavell brings these considerations to the fore in order to defend a view of modernist art-making as requiring unrestricted responsibility for the work itself. Since, presumably, the condition of modern art-making is that we are forced to realize that we no longer know in some emphatic and historically sanctioned way what art is, or whether, say, *this* particular sequence of organized noise counts as music, the artist must carry the burden of authorizing her every step and decision, making them feel as *meant* by her.

⁵⁵ In *Ästhetik (1958/59)*, p. 256, Adorno associates aesthetic truth with an epoch's “unconscious and, as it were, blind writing of history” (*die bewußtlose und gleichsam blinde Geschichtsschreibung, die eine jede Epoche in sich vollzieht*).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 323: “Ich bin mir der Kontamination mit finsternen Begriffen wie dem des sogenannten ‘Weltgefühls’ bewußt, wenn ich riskiere, Ihnen zu sagen, daß der Inbegriff von Reaktionen auf Kunstwerke, wie er überhaupt vielleicht als einigermaßen angemessen betrachtet werden dürfte,

creator of a work as a mere instrument, as it were, of a force or movement that is prior to and enabling the empirical individual.⁵⁷ Adorno also agrees, at least structurally, with Heidegger, for whom the artist is not in any way a communicator, making intentions manifest in materially present symbolic form, but someone who discloses a space of truth.⁵⁸ A crucial dimension of Adorno's notion of truth-content (*Wahrheitsgehalt*) is precisely that art is supposed to expose its audience to socially and historically mediated experiences that, rather than being arbitrary in the sense of representing particular perspectives on reality (the perspective, say, of the bourgeoisie during the reign of the restoration in Gustave Flaubert's *L'éducation sentimentale*, or of the early-twentieth-century German working class in Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*), arrives at something like a sense of the *essence* of what it means to exist as a human being in a specific historical setting.

In the same lecture course, he further claims that "what speaks through the work" (*aus dem Kunstwerk spricht*) is "social spirit" (*Geist der Gesellschaft*).⁵⁹ As I discussed in Chapter 1, Adorno at this point seems to invoke something like Hegel's notion of (objective) spirit, incorporating commitments, needs, and values shared by a historically constituted community and made manifest in key events and symbolic structures with which its authoritative members identify. While spirit achieves a level of generality that can be symbolically unified and expressed, it is not some form of impersonal essence, shorn of connection with communally situated agents' lives, aspirations, and sufferings. Thus, the emphasis on individual intention, Adorno argues, wrongly presupposes that the mind of the individual artist (which he views as "contingent" compared with the *Geist der Gesellschaft*) can be isolated or abstracted from her historical existence and circumstances, making the intention falsely seem like a property over which she exercises full and unrestricted control. From Adorno's Marxist point of view, an act of abstraction of this kind is fundamentally bourgeois, involving

der eines Gefühls von der Welt wäre, das das Kunstwerk herstellt, und zwar des Wesens der Welt in ihrer konkreten Verfassung und nicht etwa in abstracto."

⁵⁷ Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Vol. 1, p. 186: "For genius to appear in an individual, it is as if a measure of the power of knowledge must have fallen to his lot far exceeding that required for the service of an individual will; and this superfluity of knowledge having become free, now becomes the subject purified of will, the clear mirror of the inner nature of the world."

⁵⁸ Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Off the Beaten Track*, pp. 1–56 (pp. 35–6): "In the light of the delineation of the essence of the work we have reached, according to which the happening of truth is at work in the work, we can characterize creation as the allowing of something to come forth in what has been brought forth. The work's becoming a work is a mode of the becoming and happening of truth."

⁵⁹ Adorno, *Ästhetik (1958/59)*, p. 338.

a misguided commitment to the unrestricted autonomy of belief-formation. Works of art are valuable and meaningful on account not of artistic intention but, rather, of their aesthetic properties and capacity to convey truth-content.

One might think that the rejection of intentionalism with its implicit “bourgeois individualism” would make it impossible for Adorno to entertain a notion of artistic genius. However, Adorno disconnects the notion of genius from any association with the quality or nature of the artist’s intention, defining it in terms of the ability to be totally “under the sway of the work.” Great artists, he maintains, tend to be responsive to that which is foreign to the ego (*das Ichfremde*) and the domain of rational control. Echoing classical accounts of inspiration, the genius relinquishes such control, being solicited by the tasks presented by the material and the developing work itself. The genius, then, is best thought of as being subject to the demands of the work, able to follow through and actualize its inherent logic.⁶⁰

The interpreter should not seek to identify aesthetic intention correctly. A hermeneutics geared towards the tracking of intentions will not generate true understanding. Yet if the hermeneutics of aesthetic intention is the only version of hermeneutics Adorno allows for, is he not being too restrictive? Is his justified resistance to subjectivism in aesthetics leading him to infer that hermeneutics is irrelevant to the understanding of aesthetic truth-claims? The question is especially pertinent when considering more contemporary developments of hermeneutics, in particular the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, for whom interpretation is a direct engagement with truth-claims originating in the work of art itself.⁶¹

Gadamer makes several interconnected claims that are relevant for the consideration of Adorno’s position. One is that interpretation is not optional. In every engagement with meaningful material, the interpreter,

⁶⁰ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 170: “Spontaneity manifests itself primarily in the conception of the work, through the design evident in it. But conception too is no ultimate category: It often transforms the self-realization of the artworks. It is virtually the seal of objectivation that under the pressure of its immanent logic the conception is displaced. This self-alien element that works contrary to the purported artistic volition is familiar, sometimes terrifyingly so, to artists as to critics; Nietzsche broached this issue at the end of *Beyond Good and Evil*. The element of self-alienness that occurs under the constraint of the material is indeed the seal of what was meant by ‘genius.’”

⁶¹ Unfortunately and somewhat strangely, especially in view of his life-long and very keen interest in Heidegger, Adorno does not seem to have engaged with the work of Gadamer. Within the framework of the Frankfurt School, it was Adorno’s assistant, Habermas, who first started to debate publicly with Gadamer, challenging key tenets of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer’s seminal 1960 contribution to hermeneutics. One might note that in the work of Habermas, Dilthey was the first figure in the hermeneutic tradition to be the object of extensive discussion. In the 1968 *Knowledge and Human Interests*, Habermas viewed Dilthey not only as the central figure of that tradition, but as the thinker par excellence of the *verstehende Wissenschaften*.

seeking understanding, will have to rely on an existing horizon of prejudices (*Vor-Urteile*) informed by knowledge, values, expectations, epistemic interests, and historical context; and interpretation takes place via the dialectic of the hermeneutic circle, the emerging coherence of the perceived work as a whole. Adorno never really considers these aspects of interpretation. It is true that the early Adorno assigned a central role to “interpretation” (*Deutung*).⁶² However, a close reading reveals that what he once meant by “interpretation” has little or nothing to do with hermeneutics qua science of interpretation. Indeed, “interpretation” in the early work is essentially keyed to his attempt to inherit Benjamin’s notion of allegorical truth-content, requiring for its unfolding the redemptive interpretation of particular material content.

Can Adorno afford to ignore the insights of hermeneutics? Isn’t Gadamer right that works of art – indeed all meaningful, symbolic expressions – must be approached as objects of interpretation, and that understanding is always profoundly contextual, functioning to situate the work within ever widening circles of proposals and validations? Although Adorno resists such (in part phenomenological) language, there may in fact be resources in *Aesthetic Theory* for considering issues such as the historicity of interpretation, the historicity of the work itself, as well as the apparent need for interpretation, involving conceptually structured and piecemeal articulation of the truth-claims emerging in and through the work itself. While Adorno is profoundly skeptical of the idea, central to Gadamer’s work, that any particular element of the work is meaningful only as a function of its relation to the whole of which it is a part (on Adorno’s view this threatens to make the particular subservient to our conception of the whole, thus violating the principle of the integrity of the particular so central to his overall view of aesthetic rationality), he accepts that the particular (or individual) is forced – thanks to the form, the consistency that runs through a successful work – to speak “through the whole.”⁶³ In Gadamer’s organicist view, emphasizing totality, this is unavoidable. In Adorno’s anti-organicist view, however, emphasizing the discontinuities of any purported wholeness, the dependence of the part on the whole constitutes a necessary injustice, the “melancholy of form.”⁶⁴

Since the part is in some sense dependent on the whole, it seems evident that Adorno will have to allow for some version of the hermeneutic circle. He would, however, reject Gadamer’s practice of seeking coherence

⁶² Theodor W. Adorno, “The Actuality of Philosophy,” *Telos* 31 (1977): 120–32.

⁶³ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 144. ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

among all the parts of the work of art, instead highlighting the resistance of the particular to the whole. Adorno believes that works of art are to be treated on a par with organisms in which every organ serves and helps to articulate the whole. However, since he also believes that a proper approach to an accomplished work of art requires a recognition of the tension between part and whole, it follows that interpretation will be aimed not at producing coherence but at redeeming the particular as it reveals itself in those tensions within the structural organization of the work as a whole that are central to generating aesthetic negativity. The implications of this view for interpretive practice and aesthetic experience are of great consequence and constitute the central difference between Gadamer and Adorno.

An illustration of how this difference plays out is their highly revealing and different approaches to the modernist poetry of Paul Celan.⁶⁵ Whereas Gadamer – surely recognizing the resistance of this poetry to interpretation – approaches Celan’s poems as semantically closed unities, demanding a patient but not impossible piecing of each word, each phrase, into some projected conception of unified, total meaning, expected to emerge at the end of the exercise of interpretation, Adorno highlights the poems’ fragmented, disjointed structure, evading the logical hierarchy of a subordinating syntax.⁶⁶ For Adorno, no proper approach to Celan can afford to ignore the constitutive *unintelligibility* of his poetry: “The task of aesthetics is not to comprehend artworks as hermeneutical objects; in the contemporary situation, it is their incomprehensibility that needs to be comprehended.”⁶⁷

Gadamer, however, makes another key claim – or set of key claims – that Adorno seems to accept. This is that aesthetic experience is only complete in the medium of conceptual expression. Again, however, there is disagreement over some crucial details. Adorno thinks of conceptual expression as the philosophical accounting of the work, the explication of the work’s meaning in discursive language. Yet although “interpretation, commentary and critique,” as Adorno calls it, “serve the truth content

⁶⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan: Who Am I and Who Are You?*, trans. Richard Heinemann and Bruce Krajewski (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997). Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, pp. 321–2.

⁶⁶ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 322: “[Paul Celan’s] poetry is permeated by the shame of art in the face of suffering that escapes both experience and sublimation. Celan’s poems want to speak of the most extreme horror through silence. Their truth content itself becomes negative. They imitate a language beneath the helpless language of human beings, indeed beneath all organic language: It is that of the dead speaking of stones and stars.”

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 118. The claim about the incomprehensibility of the particular (represented by the art-work) follows from the dominance of the general and the conceptual.

of works,”⁶⁸ and “art requires philosophy, which interprets it in order to say what it is unable to say,”⁶⁹ philosophy can never do more than intimate what the work says. Art needs philosophy, but its form of expression can never be reduced to, or translated into, the language of conceptual expression. The difference between Adorno and Gadamer at this point hinges on deep disagreements about the nature and ontology of language. Whereas Adorno, as we have seen, is profoundly ambivalent about discursive presentation, being prepared to criticize all forms of supposedly false identification, Gadamer, in the third part of *Truth and Method*, argues that our experience of the world, insofar as it can be understood, is without remainder linguistically mediated and structured.⁷⁰ Artworks, then, including music and painting, can be said to *speak*, thereby lending themselves to epistemically satisfying procedures of interpretation (although Gadamer, because of his thesis of the perspectival nature of interpretation, does not believe in the possibility of a *final* interpretation of a work of art).

Moreover, both Gadamer and Adorno share a commitment to the historicity both of interpreter and of work of art, agreeing that while works of art are historical entities, produced in historically specific circumstances and for historically specific audiences, their truth-claims are able to transcend those circumstances and be taken up and acknowledged by interpreters. However, they profoundly disagree about how this transmission does and should take place, and what role tradition should play in informing adequate approaches to the work, as well as how contemporary historical circumstances influence interpretation. As Habermas later made clear in his debate with Gadamer, the Frankfurt School position (of which Adorno of course was a key representative) is extremely reluctant to accept the tradition at face value. According to Gadamer, by contrast, the truth or truth-claim of a work of art obtains concreteness and actuality via the mediation of “effective history” (*Wirkungsgeschichte*), the historical transmission and actualization of the work in serious and competent successive acts of interpretation. Rather than simply a historically distant object that, in order to be appropriated, calls for some sort of leap from one’s own historical position to that of the work, the work of art exists for us

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 194. ⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁷⁰ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Sheed and Ward, 1989), p. 450: “Verbal experience of the world is ‘absolute.’ It transcends all the relative ways being is posited because it embraces all being-in-itself, in whatever relationships (relativities) it appears. Our verbal experience of the world is prior to everything that is recognized and addressed as existing. *That language and world are related in a fundamental way does not mean, then, that world becomes the object of language.* Rather, the object of knowledge and statements is always already enclosed within the world horizon of language.”

by virtue of having been exerted into a living tradition through which it has been handed over. Adorno's objection, if we were to construct such a response, would be that Gadamer provides no compelling reason to think that historical transmission of this kind preserves or generates truth. On the contrary, interpretive traditions, it seems, are prone to encourage dogmatism and should be approached with the standard repertoire of Marxist tools for conducting ideology critique. In particular, Adorno would reject Gadamer's account of asymmetrical epistemic authority. In *Truth and Method* and elsewhere, Gadamer argues that great or "eminent" works of art carry a claim to truth whose integrity is immune to serious critique; thus, rather than being disposed to adopt a critical attitude, the interpreter needs to approach the work with an attitude of reverence and acceptance of the truth being disclosed and presented.⁷¹ While Adorno invokes passivity, the ability to be radically receptive to the aesthetic features of the work, he does not think that this rules out the possibility of reflection and critique. The accomplished critic, rather than, as in Gadamer, being a receptacle of the work's autonomous "truth-event," must be able to negotiate the inevitable tension between receptivity and critical activity.

The considerations I have brought to bear on Adorno's dismissal of hermeneutics do, I hope, show that it can at best be viewed as only partly justified, and that some central tenets of Dilthey's and, in particular, Gadamer's hermeneutics – the hermeneutic circle, the linguistically structured nature of complete aesthetic experience, and the historicity of all symbolic production – are either consistent with Adorno's position and could be accepted, or actually cohere with it. Stated more broadly, however, the differences are palpable, many hinging on deep disagreements regarding questions of modernity and what it means to experience works of art and be informed by them. A deeply conservative thinker, Gadamer views great canonical works as sources of unquestionable authority in matters to do with ethics and how to lead a good life. They tell us what it means to be human, how creatures such as ourselves should conduct their lives.⁷² Available to us as tireless students of the tradition are deep insights

⁷¹ Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 1, p. 134: "To be sure, Gadamer gives the interpretive model of *Verstehen* a peculiarly *one-sided twist*. If in the performative attitude of virtual participants in conversation we start with the idea that an author's utterance has the presumption of rationality, we not only admit the possibility that the interpretandum may be exemplary *for us*, that we may learn something from it; we *also* take into account the possibility that the author could learn *from us*. Gadamer remains bound to the experience of the philologist who deals with classical texts: 'The classic is that which stands up in the face of historical criticism.' The knowledge embodied in the text is, Gadamer believes, fundamentally superior to the interpreter's."

⁷² Hans-Georg Gadamer, "On the Contribution of Poetry to the Search for Truth," in *The Relevance of the Beautiful* and *Other Essays*, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge

that, while potentially at odds with the lives of modern, purportedly rootless, cosmopolitans, are continuous with the identities and commitments that ultimately (and in a deep sense) have come to shape who we are; thus studying the tradition is to arrive at a progressively more adequate self-understanding. While agreeing that art can be a purveyor of greater self-understanding, Adorno, by contrast, views art as disruptive of traditional certainties, a source of alienation from all that which he deems to be false, and therefore more in line with anti-conventional, modernist sensibilities than with the retroactively oriented and historically mediated model of self-reflection that one finds in Gadamer.⁷³ The significance of such disruption and self-alienation is made particularly manifest in Adorno's reading of Beckett, which is the topic of the next chapter.

University Press, 1986), pp. 105–15 (pp. 114–15): “Language always furnishes the fundamental articulations that guide our understanding of the world. It belongs to the nature of familiarity with the world that whenever we exchange words with one another, we share the world.” “The word of the poet does not simply continue this process of *Einhausung*, or making ourselves at home. Instead it stands over against this process like a mirror held up to it. But what appears in the mirror is not the world, nor this or that thing in the world, but rather this nearness or familiarity itself in which we stand for a while. This standing and this nearness find permanence in the language of literature and, most perfectly, in the poem. This is not a romantic theory, but a straightforward description of the fact that language gives all of us our access to a world in which certain special forms of human experience arise: the religious tidings that proclaim salvation, the legal judgment that tells what is right and what is wrong in our society, the poetic word that by being there bears witness to our own being.”

⁷³ Adorno, *Ästhetik* (1958/59), p. 127: “Die Aufgabe der Kunst ist es wirklich, das Vertraute zu verfremden und auf diese Weise in eine Perspektive zu rücken, die die Perspektive des Wesens und nicht mehr die bloßen Erscheinung ist.”