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Author(s): Michael Rothberg

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*After Adorno: Culture in the Wake of Catastrophe**

Michael Rothberg

I. Introduction: The Politics of Commemoration

In January 1995 a controversy erupted in connection with the fiftieth anniversary commemoration of the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp. Upset that the Polish government seemed to be slighting the specifically Jewish elements of the Nazi extermination at Auschwitz, Jewish leaders and spokespeople, including Elie Wiesel, threatened to boycott the ceremonies. In the end, many Jewish groups attended, but they also organized an alternative ceremony that took place while Polish President Lech Walesa was opening the official Government commemoration with a speech that made no specific mention of Jewish victims.¹ This controversy constitutes one more episode in a half-century history of struggle over the meaning and memory of Auschwitz (and the Nazi genocide for which it has come to stand). From debates over the number of victims who died there, to the barely veiled anti-Semitism of Holocaust deniers who claim that no genocide took place, to the conflicts over the national, religious, or moral “ownership” of the site, Auschwitz has been contested ground since the first Soviet soldiers arrived at the end of January 1945. The recent international focus on the so-called liberation has revived the memory wars, which can serve as tools of education, but such a focus also limits an understanding of Auschwitz by

* I am grateful to Andreas Huyssen and Anson Rabinbach for their comments. Thanks also to Stuart Liebman, for all of his help, to Nancy K. Miller, as ever, to Russ Castonovo, Beth Drenning, Jeffrey Escoffier, Gerhard Joseph, and Neil Levi for reading earlier versions of this essay, and to Yasemin Yildiz, for showing me the power of Adorno’s thinking.

1. This controversy was reported in the *New York Times* 27 Jan. 1995: A3.

framing the narration of the events by the point of view of the victors. When the Soviets entered the camp, they found 7,000 prisoners — all who remained of the almost one and a half million (90% of whom were Jewish) who had passed through the Auschwitz complex. Many of those survivors died *after* liberation. Several days before the Soviets arrived, the Nazis had taken the majority of the surviving 65,000 prisoners on a death march in a perverse effort to maintain control and hide the evidence of atrocity as the war slipped away. Placing these events under the sign of liberation says less about the events of the Holocaust than it does about the desire of contemporary cultures to master an elusive past whose echoes still resonate in the present.

While recent events highlight the ethnic and national politics of memory and identity, Auschwitz has also long been a locus for intellectual debate about what German-Jewish philosopher Theodor Adorno called in 1959, “coming to terms with the past” [*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*]. Adorno is very much responsible for the centrality that Auschwitz has had in academic and popular discourses. His proposition that “[t]o write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” amounts — along with Walter Benjamin’s related insight that “[t]here is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” — to the most famous and probably most frequently cited statement about modern culture in the twentieth century. Adorno’s phrase (not even a full sentence in the original German) has been quoted, and just as often misquoted,²

2. For misquotations, see note 4. Among the many citations, see, for example, in philosophy: Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend*, trans. George Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988); Detlev Claussen, “Nach Auschwitz,” *Zivilisationsbruch: Denken nach Auschwitz*, ed. Dan Diner (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1988). In theology, see Richard Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966); Johann Baptist Metz, “Suffering Unto God,” *Critical Inquiry* 20.4 (1994): 611–22; Emil Fackenheim, *To Mend the World: Foundations of Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought* (New York: Schocken, 1982). In aesthetics, see Lambert Zuidervaar, *Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory: The Redemption of Illusion* (Cambridge: MIT, 1991); Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990). In literary and cultural criticism, see Lawrence Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1975); Irving Howe, “Writing and the Holocaust,” *Writing and the Holocaust*, ed. Berel Lang (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1988); George Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature, and the Inhuman* (New York: Atheneum, 1967); Eric Santner, *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory, and Film in Postwar Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990). See also Maurice Blanchot’s reflections in *Après Coup* (Paris: Minuit, 1983). Lastly, Charlotte Delbo’s memoirs, entitled *Auschwitz et Après*, were recently translated. See Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, trans. Rosette Lamont (New Haven: Yale UP, 1995).

by writers working in a variety of contexts and disciplines, including philosophy, theology, aesthetics, and literary criticism.³ Besides the conscious rewritings of Adorno's thought which extend it to fields never mentioned by Adorno and the unconscious distortions of his words — "No poetry after Auschwitz," "After Auschwitz, it is no longer possible to write poems"⁴ — the phrase has also circulated with even greater ease in the reduced, ever-malleable form: "after Auschwitz." As a two-word sound bite, "after Auschwitz" has become the intellectual equivalent of the political poster slogan "Never Again!"

Without a doubt, Adorno would be horrified to see his own words on the Nazi genocide turned into an academic truism; he would probably also be unsurprised, finding in the commodification of Holocaust discourse one more proof of the power of the late capitalist totality to reproduce itself and to colonize even the seemingly most resistant areas of social life. Yet, Adorno's self-citations and his use of the sound-bite version "nach Auschwitz" — which, translated into the English "after Auschwitz," has an ironically poetic effect — have facilitated the frequency

3. As testimony to the continued interest in Adorno and Auschwitz in the German context, two volumes have recently appeared. Manuel Köppen's edited volume *Kunst und Literatur nach Auschwitz* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 1993) is an interdisciplinary set of interventions growing out of a recent conference. Reclam has just issued an important source book entitled *Lyrik nach Auschwitz?* ed. Petra Kiedaisch, (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1995) that collects excerpts from Adorno's work in which the status of Auschwitz is in question and responses by poets and critics to his dictum. The editor's introduction is the only essay that I know other than the present one and the one by Claussen cited above which draws attention to the variety of Adorno's articulations and to the frequent partial or mis-citations of Adorno's critics. However, while Kiedaisch and Claussen are at pains to emphasize the continuity of Adorno's thought, I argue here for discontinuities in his articulations of Auschwitz. In this sense I am closer to Sigrid Weigel, who, while not providing a systematic reading of Adorno's *oeuvre*, does emphasize the differences between the writings of the 1940s and those of the 1960s. See Weigel, "'Kein philosophisches Staunen' — 'Schreiben im Staunen': Zum Verhältnis von Philosophie und Literatur nach 1945: Benjamin, Adorno, Bachmann." *Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift* 70.1 (1996): 120-37.

4. The first phrase (or paraphrase) is from Steiner, *Language and Silence* 53; hereafter referred to parenthetically within the text as *LS*. The second case is slightly stranger. Shoshana Felman subtly, but significantly, misquotes Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* — "it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems" — thus detracting from the tentativeness of Adorno's sentence, and adding the question of "possibility," which, as we will see, is a complex one. Nevertheless, on the back cover of *Testimony*, the quotation is the standard, correct one from Adorno's original statement, nowhere cited by Felman or Steiner. (There, however, Adorno is referred to as an "Austrian musicologist"!) See Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 33. Cf. Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973) 362.

with which the concept has circulated.⁵ In this case, it is the repetitions, and not the original, which have attracted the most attention. The most frequent allusions to the “after Auschwitz” proposition which actually cite Adorno refer to works in which Adorno was commenting on his earlier statement. Given this pattern, as well as the infamous difficulty of Adorno’s thought, it is not surprising that most commentary on this theme has de- and re-contextualized the words, often taking them far from Adorno’s intended meaning.

The interdisciplinary nature of Adorno’s writing has, somewhat ironically, left a fragmentary intellectual legacy, reaching diverse groups of readers, both hostile and friendly, in isolated institutional locations. Few of Adorno’s commentators who have picked up on his Auschwitz hypothesis have been interested in his system of thinking as a whole; rather, they have been concerned with the implications of the proposition for the study of some aspect of culture in the light of the Nazi genocide. Inversely, those who *have* been concerned with Adorno’s philosophical system have tended *not* to assign a central position to Auschwitz, relating it, at most, to the larger issues of his sociological theory, his relation to other members of the Frankfurt School, his unorthodox Marxism, or his particular version of dialectics. This split in critical approaches makes a more bifocal reading of the significance of the Holocaust in Adorno’s thought all the more attractive, if no less daunting.

After briefly tracking the way Adorno’s proposition has entered the writings of two very different critics (George Steiner and Eric Santner), I will offer a close reading of Adorno’s Auschwitz texts and of related works. One purpose of such an exercise is to bring to view the production of an important cultural category, one which has migrated from the heights of philosophy into the currents of popular intellectual culture. More crucially, I want to demonstrate, through an analysis based on Bakhtin’s category of the chronotope, how critical and philosophical approaches to the Shoah, even ones which declare its uniqueness, always project a theory of history. According to Bakhtin, the chronotope captures the simultaneity of spatial and temporal articulations in cultural practices: in the production of chronotopes, “[t]ime, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot, and

5. Gary Weissman pointed out to me the possible poetic seductiveness of the near assonance in “after Auschwitz.”

history.”⁶ As Hayden White remarks, the “socially structured domain” of the chronotope “defines the horizon of possible events, actions, agents, agencies, social roles, and so forth of all imaginative fictions — and all real stories too.”⁷ While Adorno himself does not use the term “chronotope,” his account of culture “after Auschwitz” both constructs a complex philosophical chronotope and serves as a stunning example of the kind of analysis envisioned by Bakhtin.

After Auschwitz, Adorno implies, philosophical categories must themselves become chronotopes — time-places that serve as imperfect embodiments of historical events and tendencies. Adorno’s meditations on Auschwitz ultimately transform his own thinking from within and lead him to reformulate the philosophy of history that had buttressed his writings of the 1940s. One of the later Adorno’s most important insights is that the Holocaust forces a confrontation between thought and the event from which neither philosophy nor history can emerge unscathed. In place of the negative teleology of modernity found in Adorno’s earlier works, *Negative Dialectics* represents modern history as a traumatic shock, a shock which leads to a critical reformulation of enlightenment. But Adorno’s focus on Auschwitz is not just turned toward the past; rather, it creates a constellation between the past and a series of postwar developments in Germany and to a lesser extent in the United States and the Soviet Union. These developments include the persistence of the very modes of thinking and social organization that made the Holocaust possible. The becoming-historical of thought in Adorno thus corresponds to an ethical and political imperative to prevent the recurrence of “Auschwitz,” an imperative which entails a critical program of public pedagogy and an ongoing engagement with modernity and democracy.⁸

II. Rewriting Adorno

Among the rewritings of Adorno, two strategies of interpretation have emerged, one which reads him *à la lettre* and one which takes his

6. M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist (Austin: U of Texas P, 1981) 84.

7. Hayden White, “Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth,” *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution,”* ed. Saul Friedländer (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992) 341n.

8. For an extended discussion of Adorno’s interventions in democratic pedagogical practice and theory, see Peter Uwe Hohendahl, “Education After the Holocaust,” *Prismatic Thought: Theodor W. Adorno* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1995) 45-72.

words as a jumping off point for even grander claims. Both strategies have produced conflicting evaluations of those interpretations, although the great majority of the literalist critics have rejected Adorno's claim. After all, the production of poetry continues apace with no immediately obvious barbaric side effects. Adorno has found more sympathetic readers in those who choose to stretch his insights beyond the restricted realm of poetry, as he himself ultimately did. Many, of course, have read Adorno in both ways, combining a particular attention to poetry or language with considerations of other areas of culture which readily come to mind as vulnerable to the catastrophe of genocide. I have chosen to discuss two particular adaptations here, not because they are necessarily typical of either tendency, but because, even in misreading Adorno, they produce significant variants of his Auschwitz chronotope.

Careful attention to the literal realm of Adorno's proposal (that is, poetry) does not necessarily result in an Adornian analysis, as the case of George Steiner demonstrates. Adorno's claim has produced sustained reflection by Steiner on the status of poetry and language after Auschwitz. Steiner, who is probably responsible for the initial impact of the phrase on an English-speaking audience, is one of the few who have taken seriously the effect of Nazi brutality on the writing of poetry. In 1959, and without mentioning Adorno, he diagnosed the German language as not yet free of the contamination produced by years of service to the Third Reich. Steiner impugns not just the human agents of Nazism, but their instruments as well: "the German language was not innocent of the horrors of Nazism. . . . Nazism found in the language precisely what it needed to give voice to its savagery." What it needed, Steiner implies, was precisely the opposite of the language's rich poetic tradition: Hitler "sensed in German another music than that of Goethe, Heine, and Mann; a rasping cadence, half nebulous jargon, half obscenity" (LS 99). Even fifteen years after the fall of the Reich, Germany's reconstruction was, as the essay's title maintains, a "Hollow Miracle," because the nation's "language is no longer lived," but propagates "a profound deadness of spirit" (LS 96).

Despite some reconsiderations about the status of contemporary German literature, Steiner reprinted the already controversial essay in his 1967 collection, *Language and Silence*. Although possessing an extremely wide range of reference, this work on "language, literature, and the inhuman" is premised on the Adornian proposition and seems to

reflect a reading especially of Adorno's *Notes To Literature*, which contains his second, better known pronouncement on Auschwitz. In the preface, Steiner declares, "We come after. We know now that a man can read Goethe or Rilke in the evening, that he can play Bach and Schubert, and go to his day's work at Auschwitz in the morning" (*LS* ix). This paradoxical relation of poetry and culture to barbarism stimulates some of the book's fine insights into the spatial and temporal frameworks in which genocide takes place and in which we who come after approach it. In an essay aptly titled, "Postscript," Steiner defines his project as an attempt "to discover the relations between those done to death and those alive then, and the relations of both to us; to locate, as exactly as record and imagination are able, the measure of unknowing, indifference, complicity, commission which relates the contemporary or survivor to the slain" (*LS* 157). Steiner draws (imprecisely) on Adorno's chronotope in a macabre illustration of such a relationship between past and present: "'No poetry after Auschwitz,' said Adorno, and Sylvia Plath enacted the underlying meaning of his statement in a manner both histrionic and profoundly sincere" (*LS* 53).

As these formulations indicate, Steiner considers language not just a transparent, instrumental medium — although "The Hollow Miracle" demonstrates how it can be *instrumentalized* — but part of the historical metabolism of the social. Yet Steiner's view of history is profoundly different from Adorno's. Steiner's conception of "after" imports an ideology foreign to Adorno, for, unlike Adorno, Steiner presupposes the existence of what he calls "humane literacy": "We come *after*, and that is the nerve of our condition. After the unprecedented ruin of humane values and hopes by the political bestiality of our age" (*LS* 4). Such a story of decline is far from Adorno's dialectical evaluation of the legacy of the Enlightenment, as I will argue in the next section. Instead of marking the intimate connection between bourgeois culture and modern terror — explicit in Benjamin and in Adorno's appropriation of him — Steiner laments the latter's emergence at the expense of the former: "The possibility that the political inhumanity of the twentieth century and certain elements of the technological, mass society which has followed on the erosion of European bourgeois values have done injury to language is the underlying theme of this book" (*LS* 49). Such an idealist understanding of historical change, which places values before material and political determinants, inverts Adorno's thinking. Since at least *Dialectic of*

Enlightenment's reading of *The Odyssey*, Adorno has demonstrated the brutality inherent in the tendential hegemony of "bourgeois values." The message of "after Auschwitz" is not one of nostalgia for a glorious culture where language approximated light or music, but of the necessity of a new relationship to the future.⁹

If Steiner's account stands or falls on its conception of what comes *before* Auschwitz (which one could contrast, for example, to Adorno's discussion of lyric poetry), other approaches have attempted to move Adorno into a new era after Auschwitz. In a fascinating study of post-war German film and culture, Eric Santner provides a strong and expansive misreading of the poetry proposition. Santner frames his study, which deals primarily with the mourning and working through of the recent German past, by proposing to investigate the symmetries and asymmetries of the "postwar," "post-Holocaust," and "postmodern" periods. He critically aligns himself with postmodern theory, arguing that it "represent[s] a kind of translation into more global terms of Adorno's famous dictum that there could be no poetry after Auschwitz. After Auschwitz — after this trauma to European modernity — critical theory becomes in large part an ongoing elaboration of a seemingly endless series of 'no longer possibles.'" Santner considers aesthetic, political, cognitive, and social practices as part of that iterative chain of what has become impossible: "an inability to tolerate difference, heterogeneity, nonmastery."¹⁰ He thus understands the phrase "after Auschwitz" as signifying a fundamental transformation in culture which *displaces* the conditions of, and leading up to, Auschwitz.

Santner follows Alice Jardine in giving an affirmative reading of the "no longer possibles." Jardine writes, "I have preferred to speak of our epoch as one of impossibility, and to call for an *ethics* of impossibility:

9. See Steiner, *Language and Silence* 41-46. With *In Bluebeard's Castle* (New York: Atheneum, 1971), Steiner appears to be making a somewhat different, perhaps more Adornian, argument. Here he wants to read the inhuman events of the twentieth century, now referred to as the "Thirty Year's War" of 1915-1945, as anticipated by the "*ennui*" of nineteenth-century culture. However, even in negating the pastoral view of the last century and the more general nostalgia for past "Golden Ages," his writing still preserves the sentiment of decline. Implicit in such phrases as "undermining European stability," "the dissolution of civilized norms," and "the breakdown of the European order" (22, 25, 29) is the same investment in the greatness of European culture found in *Language and Silence*, even at the same time that that culture's impotence before barbarism is exposed. To get out of this bind, Steiner constructs a "religious" theory of culture, which is particularly un-Adornian in its anachronistic idealism.

10. Santner 8-9.

im-possi-bility, the antithesis of *posse/potis/pàtis*, the antithesis of that which relies on power, potency, possessors, despots, husbands, masters.”¹¹ Santner’s (and Jardine’s) vision of the post-Holocaust future appears as a kind of mirror of Steiner’s nostalgic humanism. If the post-modernists emphasize difference as opposed to some mythical common culture, they nevertheless both posit a positive vision of an alternative that has existed or does exist. In this they are equally far from Adorno, who despite the ambiguous formulations of his texts, allows no direct formulation of culture after Auschwitz and proposes no such absolute break in modernity (whether or not it has in fact taken place).

While Santner distances himself from some postmodern tendencies to erase historical specificity, his appropriation of Adorno leaves it unclear whether the “no longer possibles” which he and Jardine enumerate are sketches of an ethical imperative or the actually existing condition of our epoch. Santner’s translation of Adorno’s “poetry after Auschwitz” dictum into the postmodern ethical demand “to tolerate difference, heterogeneity, nonmastery” elides the materialist and radically negative dimensions of Adorno’s thought and replaces them with a liberal pluralist discourse. Adorno’s comments are not so much a call for opposition to power, as are Jardine’s, but a questioning of the possibility of such resistance. In bringing these two very different discourses together, Santner risks reversing the significance of Adorno’s thought without remarking on it. At the least, such a translation would need to specify the relation between ideological/theoretical formulations of difference and the material conditions in which they take place. If this problem remains unresolved in Santner’s text, Santner nevertheless poses the important question of how to “[undo] a certain repetition compulsion of modern European history” that “found its ultimate staging in Auschwitz.”¹² In turning to Adorno’s *oeuvre* the question becomes: in what ways does Adorno’s philosophical restaging of Auschwitz entail (or not entail) a break with the condition of modernity which constitutes the matrix of the Nazi genocide?

III. Adorno on Auschwitz

Adorno’s philosophizing takes place in a complicated tension with the modernist chronotope of progress — the belief in a constant movement forward through a homogenous space/time that continuously

11. Cited in Santner 165n. See Alice Jardine, “Copyright 2000,” *Copyright* 1 (Fall 1987): 6.

12. Santner 9.

breaks with the past.¹³ From his *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, co-written with Max Horkheimer in 1944 but not published until 1947, to his *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno simultaneously reveals the lacunae in the progressive vision of history and holds out for more enlightenment, as opposed to an impossible return to the pre-modern.¹⁴ Viewing Adorno's work through the very particular lens of Auschwitz cannot give the complete picture of his, in any case, incredibly diverse work. But, given the status of the Holocaust within debates about modernity, the view opened up by a close, contextual reading of the pertinent texts is not insignificant. Adorno's Auschwitz chronotope is, in fact, a constellation of concepts which reconfigures itself over the course of two decades. It combines elements of aesthetics ("To write poetry"), temporality ("after"), and place ("Auschwitz") with a morally or politically evaluative predicate ("is barbaric"). My reading of Adorno will mobilize all of those categories in an attempt to reconstruct and examine his successive conceptual constellations. Despite the simplistic symmetry implied by the copula ("is"), neither the phrase as a whole nor its individual particles is transparent, and they all demand interpretation.

A brief consideration of the status of "Auschwitz" serves to unsettle whatever literalist suspicions underlie one's reading of the phrase. As architectural historian Robert-Jan van Pelt has demonstrated, Auschwitz was initially to be the site of a National Socialist "design for utopia": "Himmler insisted that all Poles and Jews would be removed from the area, and that Auschwitz itself would become a 'paradigm of the settlement in the East.'" Only over the course of time, and relatively late in the camp's existence, did Auschwitz become the "dystopia" which we know it as today — although certainly, I would argue, this second

13. The spatio-temporal articulation of modernity as consisting of a constant break between the "space of experience" and the "horizon of expectation" can be found in Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (Cambridge: MIT, 1985).

14. In "Cultural Criticism and Society," Adorno writes: "The cultural critic is barred from the insight that the reification of life results not from too much enlightenment but from too little." See Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge: MIT, 1981) 24. Hereafter referred to parenthetically as *P* in the text. Considering Adorno's ideas in the light of debates over modernity and postmodernity, Albrecht Wellmer argues for a notion of postmodernity as a "second" or "postmetaphysical modernity": "a modernity without the dream of ultimate reconciliations, but [which] would still preserve the rational, subversive, and experimental spirit of modern democracy, modern art, modern science and modern individualism." See Albrecht Wellmer, *The Persistence of Modernity: Essays on Aesthetics, Ethics, and Postmodernism* (Cambridge: MIT, 1991) viii.

moment was already contained in the “utopian” vision of the first.¹⁵ As a Germanization by the occupying power of the Polish town of Oswiecim, the name Auschwitz already reveals colonial violence. But it is almost immediately clear that Auschwitz, a place name, is intended to refer not so much to a place as to an event or events. How else could something come after it? We know today that the event to which it refers is the slaughter by Nazi Germany of an estimated 1.6 million people (of whom 90 percent were Jewish) during the course of four years (1940–1944). The extermination which created Auschwitz’s infamy was, for the most part, carried out at Auschwitz II, known as Birkenau, itself the sight of a razed Polish village, Brzezinka.¹⁶ At the time that Adorno wrote, however, an accurate account of events at Auschwitz was not yet available, nor was Auschwitz even the camp best known to the European and American publics, which were more familiar with the camps liberated by Britain and the United States, such as Belsen, Dachau, and Buchenwald. In disseminating such a formula, it seems unlikely, then, that Adorno meant to refer only to the effects of the events at Auschwitz, since that particular camp was part of a much larger system created and run by the Nazis. Auschwitz takes on both metonymic and synecdochic significance in Adorno’s phrase: the place-name refers both to events proximate to it and to a totality of events of which it is one part.¹⁷

Pierre Nora’s work on “sites of memory” and James Young’s crucial consideration of Holocaust memorials as such sites in *The Texture of Memory* remind us that memory is not indigenous to a (rhetorical or literal) place, but must be created through the ongoing intervention of human agents.¹⁸ In the case of Auschwitz, the process of memorialization had already begun by the time of Adorno’s first mention of it:

15. Robert-Jan Van Pelt, “A Site in Search of a Mission,” *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, eds. Yisrael Gutman and Michael Berenbaum (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994) 94, 106.

16. James Young, *The Texture of Memory* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1993) 128.

17. While we in the United States have, since the 1960s, conventionally called that totality of events the Holocaust, it is unlikely that Adorno, at least in his earliest writings, had the same object in mind when he referred to Auschwitz. More likely, he was referring to the totality of Nazi barbarism, and not necessarily its specifically Jewish component. It is important to keep in mind that the general significance of Auschwitz changed along with Adorno’s conceptualization of it — although Adorno’s prophetic reference to what would become the best know of the camps also makes clear how influential his thought was in this very history.

18. Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*,” *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 7–25.

“[i]n 1947, the Polish parliament declared that the [remains] of the camp would be ‘forever preserved as a memorial to the martyrdom of the Polish nation and other peoples’.” This incipient nationalization of memory contrasted with another tendency, that of the International Committee of Auschwitz, founded in 1952, to put a socialist spin on the memory preserved there.¹⁹ Unlike the efforts of the Polish and Soviet states, the International Committee, other groups of survivors, or variously interested parties, Adorno does not seek to alter the physical topography of Auschwitz. Nevertheless, through his mobilization of the proper name Auschwitz, he has intervened in Holocaust memory work and has powerfully contributed to the negotiated significance of Auschwitz as a literal and rhetorical site of remembrance.

Much of Adorno’s writing during his exile from Nazi Germany in the 1940s concerns the links between modernity, fascism, capitalism, and culture. This is true for the grand theorizing of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as for the fragmentary, more personal insights of *Minima Moralia* (written 1944-47; published 1951).²⁰ These works set the stage for the Auschwitz comments, which appear first in the essay “Cultural Criticism and Society” (written 1949; published 1951). This essay does not primarily concern the effects of World War II or the implications of genocide. Adorno dedicates the majority of the essay to a kind of sublation of cultural criticism. In good Hegelian Marxist fashion, he first demonstrates the implication of such criticism in “sinister, integrated society” (P 34) and in the culture which “shares the guilt of society” (P 26); he then argues that cultural criticism can be surpassed by the dialectical critic:

To accept culture as a whole is to deprive it of the ferment which is its very truth — negation. The joyous appropriation of culture harmonizes with a climate of military music and paintings of battle-scenes. What distinguishes dialectical from cultural criticism is that it heightens cultural criticism until the notion of culture is itself negated, fulfilled, and surmounted in one. (P 28)

The dialectical method, for Adorno, entails a double movement back and forth between “the knowledge of society as a totality” and “the specific content of the object” (P 33). Cultural criticism, on the other hand, either reduces the object to a simplified notion of the social or exalts culture as

19. Young 130.

20. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (New York: Verso, 1974).

a source of humane values. Against these tendencies, Adorno respectively castigates vulgar class analysis and insists that, “only insofar as it withdraws from Man, can culture be faithful to man” (*P* 20, 23).

If Adorno’s stated goal as dialectical critic is “to shed light on an object in itself hermetic by casting a glance at society [and] to present society with the bill which the object does not redeem” (*P* 33), what can we make of the intrusion of Auschwitz in the essay’s final paragraph? This last passage exemplifies Adorno’s characteristic absolutism and puts the Auschwitz phrase in a context not usually considered by cultural critiques of Adorno:

The more total society becomes, the greater the reification of the mind and the more paradoxical its effort to escape reification on its own. Even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter. Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today. Absolute reification, which presupposed intellectual progress as one of its elements, is now preparing to absorb the mind entirely. Critical intelligence cannot be equal to this challenge as long as it confines itself to self-satisfied contemplation. (*P* 34)

As the movement of this passage (and the essay from which it is taken) demonstrates, Auschwitz does not stand alone, but is part of a historical process. Adorno assigns Auschwitz a critical position in this history, but less as an autonomous entity than as a *moment*: Auschwitz is “the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism.” This does not necessarily entail a position on the uniqueness of the event, but it does demonstrate what is missing from critics of Adorno who ignore the place of genocide in “society as a totality.”

The complicated and ambiguous structure of Adorno’s German (as well as the tendency to decontextualize the Auschwitz phrase — a tendency facilitated by its English translation into a separate sentence) reveals the source of the mistaken interpretation that Adorno is declaring Auschwitz the source of poetry’s impossibility. The context reveals that the agent of the impossibility is “absolute reification,” the process which “absorb[s] the mind entirely.” In this essay at least, Adorno places Auschwitz within his larger critique of capitalist modernity and the Enlightenment, which stand behind the movement of reification. Adorno assigns Auschwitz a particular position as the apotheosis of barbarism,

but the significance of barbarism emerges from its place in what he sees as its Enlightenment dialectic with culture. The specificity of Nazi barbarism does not rupture, but continues, the strange blend of instrumentally rational means and irrational ends that the Frankfurt School understands as the primary legacy of modernity.

The barbarism or irrationality of poetry after Auschwitz is that, against its implicit intentions, it cannot produce knowledge of its own impossible social status. This impossibility is neither technical nor even moral, for Adorno clearly does not see barbarism as the result of individual abilities, actions, or attitudes; it results instead from an objective and objectifying social process which tends toward the liquidation of the individual. As a form of ostensibly free individual expression, the writing of poetry would contribute to that “semblance of freedom [which] makes reflection upon one’s own unfreedom incomparably more difficult” (*P* 21). That semblance is false since the tendential expansion of capitalist society integrates the individual as well as relatively autonomous spheres such as culture, and unifies them according to the identificatory logic of exchange. In Adorno’s reading even Marxist theory must change to keep up with the logic of capital since the latter “no longer tolerates even those relatively independent, distinct moments to which the theory of causal dependence of superstructure on base once referred. In the open-air prison which the world is becoming, it is no longer so important to know what depends on what, such is the extent to which everything is one” (*P* 34). The dark vision of this passage is self-evident, but it also leaves open possibilities for a less absolutist position. The emphasis on “becoming” is a crucial qualifier to Adorno’s totalizing critique, implying that domination has not yet eliminated all possible resistance. Secondly, the change in relation between base and superstructure signals an increased role for cultural politics since the cultural realm appears no longer derivative of economics. Yet, however other critics or a later Adorno might exploit these openings, in “Cultural Criticism” no such optimism is to be found.

In this essay, experience and expectation collapse into each other, as the mind is absorbed, creating a surface on which domination plays itself out with deadeningly repetitive blows. Time is reduced to a series of stages whose difference is one of degree but not kind. Meanwhile space suffers a similar iterative demise as the concentration camp replicates itself in the places of public life: the world becomes an “open-air prison.”

If the citizens of the world do not recognize Auschwitz as the reflection of their lives, that is only, according to Adorno, because terror functions more abstractly outside of the camps through the logic of identity that laid the groundwork for genocide and which has not disappeared. The triumph of exchange value, another name for identity in Adorno's work, prepared the way for mass murder by rendering human life indifferent and therefore expendable. The two words of the phrase "after Auschwitz" are thus equivocal: they mark the limits of an era, but one which was already on its way and which remains today; and they locate a crisis, but only in order to extend its effects well beyond its original space of experience.

The form that Adorno's reflections take here seems as much a product of Adorno's long exile in the United States during the 1930s and 1940s as it does of the situation in Europe. Adorno's experience of what he called "late capitalism" in the United States did not initially leave him with much belief in the existence of alternatives to the logic of fascism.²¹ To the contrary, Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* — with its adjacent chapters on the culture industry and anti-Semitism — suggests a parallel between American-style monopoly capitalism and Hitlerian National Socialism. Passages in the "Culture Industry" chapter make those similarities explicit:

"No one must go hungry or thirsty; if anyone does, he's for the concentration camp!" This joke from Hitler's Germany might shine forth as a maxim from above all the portals of the culture industry. . . . Under liberalism the poor were thought to be lazy; now they are automatically objects of suspicion. Anybody who is not provided for outside should be in a concentration camp, or at any rate in the hell of the most degrading work and the slums.²²

Whatever its truth-value (and who can deny its grain of truth in an era of homeless "shelters" and welfare "reform"), Adorno's argument

21. For some of Adorno's reflections on his U.S. exile, see Adorno, "On the Question: 'What is German?'" *New German Critique* 36 (Fall 1985): 121-31; and Adorno, "Scientific Experiences of a European Scholar in America," *The Intellectual Migration: Europe and America, 1930-1960*, eds. Donald Fleming and Bernard Bailyn (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1969) 338-70. The latter account, in particular, represents a more positive take on his experiences in America than the wartime and immediate postwar writings do. In *Prismatic Thought*, Hohendahl argues convincingly that this "pro-American reorientation" was "motivated by the confrontation with postwar Germany" (43).

22. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1972) 149-50.

demonstrates the spatio-temporal situatedness of the production of chronotopes (the latter are always produced from within other chronotopes). First, Adorno's writing bears obvious traces of his American location, as his later writings will intervene in a more strictly German context. Secondly, I think it is arguable that such a "comic" comparison could only take place at a moment *before* the camps had been sacralized as sites of ultimate and unspeakable terror — before Auschwitz was "Auschwitz." This is not to say that there was not already consciousness of the camps which Adorno cites in creating this phrase, for indeed there were already memoirs, films, and other accounts. But it is to suggest that the temporal break which we retroactively infer in the phrase "after Auschwitz" had not yet taken place in the 1940s' public consciousness. The response to, and the form of, some of the texts of the late 1940s (including Adorno's) confirm that the afterlife of an event needs to be periodized as carefully as the event itself. An event alone does not always rupture history; rather, the constellation which that event forms with later events creates the conditions in which epochal discontinuity can be thought.

The tenuous, if not imaginary, quality of the individual and of non-reified production in "administered society" is certainly one of Adorno's great themes, one which he expressed most emphatically in the "Culture Industry" chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. But poetry, to which Adorno refers in this context, presents a particular aesthetic case which should not be immediately subsumed under the general view of culture under late capitalism. In reflecting on the specificity of poetry in Adorno's system we observe the emergence of inconsistencies. In his 1957 essay "On Lyric Poetry and Society," Adorno shows the limits of lyric poetry — "the most fragile thing that exists" — in the attempt "to attain universality through unrestrained individuation."²³ The process of individuation fails, and the lyric cannot remain aloof from the "bustle and commotion" of society, because "the demand that the lyric world be virginal, is itself social in nature. It implies a protest against a social situation that every individual experiences as hostile, alien, cold, oppressive" (NL 37, 39). Poetry cannot actualize its own ideal and stand outside the forces of the rationalized social totality. However, the essay on lyric poetry does not entirely endorse the pessimism about culture evident in

23. Adorno, *Notes to Literature* vol. 1, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia UP, 1991) 37, 38. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as NL.

the cultural criticism essay, because it shows poetry as registering an element of protest. Poetry is not simply an ideological attempt “to falsely present some particular values as general ones,” Adorno warns in 1957. The essence of poems, and other works of art, “consists in giving form to the crucial contradictions in real existence”: in direct contradiction to the ideas of ideology critique, “the greatness of works of art . . . consists solely in the fact that they give voice to what ideology hides” (*NL* 39). For Adorno in the late 1950s, poetry has an important mimetic function, one that consists not in reproducing the harmonious narrative of traditional realist forms, but rather in expressing the rifts that realist mimesis represses. The distinction between this revelatory notion of art as expression and the earlier idea that poetry after Auschwitz mystifies knowledge of the social points to the existence of a dual theory of poetry in Adorno. When, in a later discussion, Adorno switches from “poetry after Auschwitz” to “lyric poetry after Auschwitz,” he also shifts his conception of the aesthetic from that in “Cultural Criticism and Society” to that in “On Lyric Poetry in Society.”

Thirteen years after first measuring the possibility of post-Auschwitz culture and after much intervening public debate, Adorno returned to the theme in his essay “Commitment.” This work, better known than “Cultural Criticism and Society,” criticizes Sartre’s then fashionable notion of engaged literature. The Auschwitz section, entitled in one of its English translations as “The Problem of Suffering,” serves as a hinge between a critique of Sartre’s and, especially, Brecht’s politicized aesthetic and a defense of the “autonomous” art of Kafka and Beckett. Adorno devastatingly reveals the contradictions of Sartre’s conception of art, demonstrating that his plays are “bad models of his own existentialism”: “they display in their respect for truth the whole administered universe which his philosophy ignores; the lesson we learn from them is one of unfreedom.”²⁴ Adorno similarly exposes the lack of fit between form and content in Brecht’s satire of fascism. Brecht trivializes fascism, making it appear “mere hazard, like an accident or crime,” so that its “true horror . . . is conjured away” (“C” 308). Adorno is not immune to Brecht’s political claims, but he remains unimpressed by the political level of the work: “If we take Brecht at his word and make politics the criterion by which to judge

24. Adorno, “Commitment,” *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, eds. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York: Continuum, 1982) 304. Hereafter primarily referred to parenthetically in the text as “C.”

his committed theatre, by the same token it proves untrue" ("C" 309). Thus far then, Adorno seems to confirm the aesthetic pessimism we saw in the earlier essay, now extending it beyond bourgeois individualist production into the engaged art of the people.

The example of Auschwitz reveals a third possibility beyond the anti-nomy of political/apolitical art. Adorno begins by self-consciously reiterating his earlier claim, now specified as a citational "saying" about *lyric* poetry, and then goes on to complicate (if not contradict) it:

I have no wish to soften the saying [*Satz*] that to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric; it expresses in negative form the impulse which inspires committed literature. . . . But [Hans Magnus] Enzensberger's retort also remains true, that literature must resist this verdict, in other words, be such that its mere existence after Auschwitz is not a surrender to cynicism.²⁵

The paradoxical situation of art is that this cynicism can be avoided only when kept at bay by a full recognition and remembrance of the horrors of the age. The purpose of art is neither to represent the interests of the proletariat or the individual, nor to grant meaning to abstract humanity, but to remain true to suffering: "The abundance of real suffering tolerates no forgetting. . . . Yet this suffering, what Hegel called consciousness of adversity, also demands the continued existence of art while it prohibits it; it is now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it" ("C" 312). The impossible demand put on art more closely resembles the status of lyric poetry in the 1957 essay — the anguished individual expression of social contradictions — than it does the notion of poetry as that which prevents the comprehension of its own impossibility. But, although lyric poetry is mentioned by Adorno, it does not serve as the primary example of post-Auschwitz aesthetics.

The "Commitment" essay mobilizes a different aesthetic in the wake of the catastrophe from that dismissed in "Cultural Criticism and Society" or partially rescued in "Lyric Poetry and Society" — its name is Beckett. For Adorno, Beckett's writings (as well as Kafka's) enact what others only proclaim: "Kafka and Beckett arouse the fear which existentialism merely talks about. By dismantling appearance, they explode from within the art which committed proclamation subjugates

25. Adorno, "Commitment" 312. In German, "*Satz*" is more neutral than "saying," meaning "sentence" or "phrase," but the sense of self-citation is still present.

from without, and hence only in appearance” (“C” 314-15). In these writers — one who proleptically internalized the disaster, the other who retrospectively maintains its absent presence — the notion of art’s barbarity is not refuted but enacted in order to present the barbarity of the age. This allows them to avoid the more chilling paradox present in “the so-called artistic representation” of historical terror: “When genocide becomes part of the cultural heritage in the themes of committed literature, it becomes easier to continue to play along with the culture which gave birth to murder” (“C” 312-13). Representational art creates the possibility for sadistic identification in members of the audience because it contains a surplus of pleasure: “The so-called artistic representation of the sheer physical pain of people beaten to the ground by rifle butts contains, however remotely, the power to elicit enjoyment out of it” (“C” 312). The problem of pleasure is intrinsic to the non-synchronicity of representation — in retrospect, it seems, any historical situation can be mobilized for the enjoyment of the spectator who consumes history at a spatial and temporal distance. Beckett’s art, Adorno claims, evades this problem through its refusal of realist figuration, but one is justified in asking why it too cannot be appropriated by the culture industry. This is precisely what happens, according to Frederic Jameson, during the transition to postmodernism. Calling Adorno’s essay an “anti-political revival of the ideology of modernism,” Jameson draws attention to the way that “what was once an oppositional and anti-social phenomenon in the early years of the century, has today become the dominant style of commodity production.”²⁶ Adorno’s defense of high modernism need not be understood uniquely, however, as a transcendental defense of a particular ideology of style. Reading Adorno in context demonstrates the specificity of his intervention in a post-Auschwitz culture, even as it inevitably illustrates the contextual limitations of his political and aesthetic vision.

Adorno makes clear that “autonomous” art’s apparent avoidance of social realism should not be confused with ahistoricism. In “Trying to Understand *Endgame*,” written contemporaneously with “Commitment,” he gives a more complete analysis of Beckett and uses this play to add to the “after Auschwitz” chronotope already under construction in his other essays. Adorno once again contrasts Beckett to existentialism,

26. Fredric Jameson, “Reflections in Conclusion,” *Aesthetics and Politics*, eds. Ernst Bloch et al. (London: New Left, 1977) 209.

claiming that “French existentialism had tackled the problem of history. In Beckett, history swallows up existentialism” (NL 244). In its refusal to find any figment of humanity within the post-catastrophic landscape, *Endgame* figures forth “the historical horror of anonymity” (NL 245). The subject, and the subject’s historical sense, may have atrophied, but, for Adorno, this is itself a historical process for which Beckett’s play serves as a registration of the real. If existentialism “negat[es] precisely the particularity, individuation in time and space, that makes existence existence and not the mere concept of existence,” “Beckett poses the decisive antithesis. . . . Instead of omitting what is temporal in existence — which can be existence only in time — he subtracts from existence what time, the historical tendency, is in reality preparing to get rid of” (NL 246). Beckett’s chronotope is thus one of space and time’s tendential erasure — not an abstract negation of particularity, but a concrete process affecting “consciousness’ power to conceive [history], the power to remember” (NL 247).

This chronotope, while certainly incorporating the temporality of the atomic age, among other factors, has intimate ties with the post-Holocaust era. Hiroshima and Auschwitz combine to transform living into halflife, or better, *afterlife*: “After the Second World War, everything, including a resurrected culture, has been destroyed without realizing it; humankind continues to vegetate, creeping along after events that even the survivors cannot really survive, on a rubbish heap that has made even reflection on one’s damaged state useless” (NL 244). The emphasis in “Cultural Criticism and Society” was on the extermination camp as the “final stage” of reification owing its existence to the triumph of an instrumental reason unleashed by the Enlightenment and capitalism. This tendential reading of history — itself a kind of inverted reflection of the concept of progress — is certainly still present, but Adorno’s reflections on Beckett put more emphasis on what comes after the “Final Solution,” on the survival of the ultimate barbarism into an era premised on reparation [*Wiedergutmachung*].

Adorno was writing in the wake of a period of postwar reconstruction during which there was an ongoing attempt to normalize and legitimate West German democracy and its “economic miracle”; this could only work through a selective forgetting of the recent past and an instrumentalization of the state’s financial reparations to individual Jews and to Israel. According to Johannes von Moltke, West Germany’s official

“politics of memory” *vis-à-vis* the Holocaust and Jews served (and, to a certain extent, continue to serve) as “the Federal Republic’s entry-ticket into the Western alliance.”²⁷ Adorno was dubious about the break with the past that this instrumentalization of memory implied. He went so far as to suggest in 1959 that he “consider[ed] the continued existence of National Socialism *within* democracy potentially more threatening than the continued existence of fascist tendencies *against* democracy.”²⁸ Bearing the message that all cannot be made good again, Beckett’s plays and Adorno’s essays intervene in the affirmative postwar cultural politics of Western, and particularly German, society. Adorno finds evidence of the underside of the postwar European “rebirth” in the fate of the characters Nagg and Nell, which represents the hypocrisy of the “welfare system”: “*Endgame* prepares us for a state of affairs in which everyone who lifts the lid of the nearest trash-can can expect to find his own parents in it. . . . The Nazis have irrevocably overthrown the taboo on old age. Beckett’s trashcans are emblems of the culture rebuilt after Auschwitz” (NL 266-67). The “state of affairs” uncovered by Adorno recalls George Steiner’s controversial denunciation of what he termed Germany’s “hollow miracle.” Steiner, who would a few years later bring Adorno’s ideas about Auschwitz to an English-language readership, argued in 1959 that the German language itself was tainted by the afterlife of the Shoah.²⁹ Adorno attempts to expose that hollowness from a strategic position within the Federal Republic, but his account of the cultural devastation extends beyond national boundaries, as ultimately does Steiner’s.³⁰

Both of the essays that privilege Beckett’s autonomous art — finding in them that to which “has fallen the burden of wordlessly expressing what is barred to politics” — end, unsurprisingly, with a paradox. “Commitment” evokes Paul Klee’s painting *Angelus Novus* (the model for

27. Johannes von Moltke, “Exhibiting Jewish Lifeworlds,” *Found Object* 3 (Spring 1994): 15. For an important consideration of the “Jewish question” in postwar Germany, see Anson Rabinbach, “The Jewish Question in the German Question,” *New German Critique* 44 (1988): 159-92. For an Israeli perspective on the politics of *Wiedergutmachung*, see Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million*, trans. Haim Watzman (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993) 189-252.

28. Adorno, “What Does Coming to Terms with the Past Mean?” *Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective*, ed. Geoffrey Hartman (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986) 115.

29. Steiner, *Language and Silence* 95-109.

30. See the other essays in Steiner’s *Language and Silence*, written in the early and mid-1960s and clearly influenced by Adorno.

Benjamin's Angel of History) in order to capture the ambiguity of the chronotope of "after Auschwitz": "The machine angel's enigmatic eyes force the onlooker to try to decide whether he is announcing the culmination of disaster or salvation hidden within it" ("C" 318). In the *Endgame* essay, Adorno claims that in Beckett's "imageless image of death . . . the distinction between absolute domination — the hell in which time is completely confined within space, in which absolutely nothing changes any more — and the messianic state in which everything would be in its right place, disappears" (NL 274). Although Adorno's writing often seems to find in this "last absurdity" confirmation for what he calls in *Minima Moralia* his "melancholy science," we might also find in these later essays that science's "standpoint of redemption."³¹

Perhaps because of the melancholic's refusal to break with a traumatic event, some historical sense is preserved, even if only in the form of the "imageless image" or the "wordless expression." The essay, "Trying to Understand *Endgame*," is dedicated, after all, "To S. B., in memory of Paris, Fall 1958" (NL 244; emphasis added — MR). The patently Benjaminian language and themes of these passages raise interesting questions about the relation between Adorno and the author of the "Theses on the Philosophy of History."³² Most significantly for this project would be the impetus that Adorno takes from the Theses for the construction of a chronotopic constellation between the *Hitlerzeit* and the postwar era which Benjamin never knew. Differentiating historical materialism from historicism, Benjamin claims that the former understands historicity as a retrospective quality of events: facts "[become] historical posthumously." The historical materialist

grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. Thus he establishes a conception of the present as the 'time of the now' [*Jetztzeit*] which is shot through with chips of Messianic time.³³

The kind of memory Adorno produces in Beckett's texts is the effect of a constellation connecting Europe and the Federal Republic with its

31. Adorno, *Minima Moralia* 15, 247.

32. For consideration of Benjamin's influence on Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*, see Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origins of Negative Dialectics* (Hassocks: Harvester P, 1977) and Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London and New York: Verso, 1990) 49-58.

33. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969) 263.

recent past. But while Benjamin is primarily concerned with “blast[ing] open the continuum of history,”³⁴ Adorno’s rather different concern here is to exhibit the continuity which underlies a superficially discontinuous German history.

In a famous study from the late 1960s, Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich argued that the vast majority of German people had never come to terms with their relationship to the crimes of the Nazi era, but had, instead, repetitively and unconsciously attempted to break entirely with the past: “That so few signs of melancholia or even of mourning are to be seen among the great masses of the population can be attributed only to a collective denial of the past.”³⁵ Adorno anticipated this diagnosis of Germany’s “inability to mourn” in his 1959 discussion of working through the past [*Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit*]. He reads what the Mitscherlichs term “rupture” with the past as a surface phenomenon which indicates a deeper continuity: “This collective narcissism [whereby powerless individuals were gratified through identification with the whole] was grievously damaged by the collapse of the Hitler regime; a damage which, however, occurred in the realm of simple fact, without each individual becoming conscious of it and thereby getting over it.”³⁶

In his writings from the late 1950s and early 1960s, we see Adorno refining and reshaping the conception of Auschwitz first mentioned in “Cultural Criticism.” Here he is concerned with the production and reception of culture in a context where rupture and continuity coexist — where, in other words, layers of different conceptions of space and time can cluster around a single name, Auschwitz. He writes from *within* a situation in which the historicity of Auschwitz has not yet settled into a fact. Rather, it floats within certain institutionally determined parameters, as a fact in the making and thus as one of the means and the stakes of various political negotiations. His concern is obviously not with the individual psychology of Germans but with objective “conditions over which [the majority of people] have no control, thereby keeping this majority in a condition of political immaturity [*Unmündigkeit*].”³⁷ To combat such immaturity he recognizes the need to wage a battle over the construction of chronotopes, hence his championing of forms of cultural production,

34. Benjamin 262.

35. Cited in Santner 4.

36. Adorno, “What Does Coming To Terms With the Past Mean?” 122; cited in Santner 5.

37. Adorno, “What Does Coming To Terms With the Past Mean?” 124.

such as that of Beckett, which represent contemporary history as the persistence of dark forces from the recent past. Adorno considers such a historical vision necessary to the opening of alternative futures and not a retreat into defeatism. In his late writings, Adorno will continue this discussion in the realm of metaphilosophical discourse, emphasizing the austere pedagogical and theoretical praxis necessary for truly activating what Benjamin called the Messianic potential of the present.

While I have pointed to a break or shift in Adorno's thinking between the first two moments of his continuing "after Auschwitz" discourse, the historical period which encompasses those two moments does not so much witness a break as mark the development of Germany's post-war reconstruction. Adorno's second reiteration of "poetry after Auschwitz," on the other hand, not only shifts the tenor of his thinking, but was also published in a cultural context where the meaning of the events of World War II was in the process of transforming itself significantly. Because of the different emotional and historical forces unleashed by the Eichmann trial in Israel in 1961, the Auschwitz trials in the mid-1960s, the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, and the 1968 international student revolts, the 1960s saw a rapid and uneven development of "Holocaust consciousness."³⁸ The belated emergence of this historical consciousness varied according to national context, as well as more local and psychological factors, but it remains a social fact that, somewhere in that decade, Auschwitz took on a new significance. The repetition of "after Auschwitz" by Adorno and his followers such as George Steiner both reflects this emergence and helped to shape it.

Adorno's testimony to the persistence of historical memory in unlikely cultural locations (i.e., the writings of Beckett) makes clear that the near-silence and imagelessness of art after Auschwitz should not be confused with actual silence or with a ban on representation *tout court*. "Not even silence gets us out of the circle" of culture and barbarism after Auschwitz, Adorno writes in *Negative Dialectics*. "In silence we simply use the state of objective truth to rationalize our subjective incapacity, once

38. See the essays collected in Saul Friedländer, *Memory, History, and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1993) for insights into the growth of Holocaust memory in different national contexts. For the United States context in particular, see Peter Novick, "Holocaust Memory in America," *The Art of Memory: Holocaust Memorials in History*, ed. James Young (New York: Presitel, 1994) 159-65.

more degrading truth into a lie.”³⁹ Here, Adorno preempts the reading of his proposition that implies that because the horror of the annihilation of the Jews cannot be perfectly imitated or reproduced according to the ideals of a naive realism (as if anything could be), all artistic representation should cease. Adorno disallows evidence of the subject’s incapacity to represent total horror as grounds for the abdication of art. Such a negative aesthetic of silence, he argues, would only be functionally motivated by the desire “to rationalize” its own predestined failure. But this would be no refusal of the administered society which made Auschwitz possible, since “to instrumentalize art is to undercut the opposition art mounts against instrumentalism.”⁴⁰ Art’s role is its “afunctionality,” and thus its success lies in its very failure (although not *any* failure). Hence Adorno values the *proximity* of the art to silence. This proximity is not an abdication but an articulation of suffering. Adorno finds this quality in the poetry of Paul Celan, whom he compares to Beckett on the basis of a common “anorganic” writing practice: “[Celan’s] poetry is permeated by a sense of shame stemming from the fact that art is unable either to experience or to sublimate suffering. Celan’s poems articulate unspeakable horror by being silent, thus turning their truth content into a negative quality.”⁴¹ Such an assessment of Celan in Adorno’s final work takes on added significance, given that the original statement about poetry after Auschwitz is considered in popular mythology a pointed rejoinder to the former’s “Todesfuge.”⁴²

After the disavowal in postmodernism of the “great divide,” as Andreas Huyssen calls it, between high and mass culture, Adorno has frequently been criticized for his conception of an aesthetic realm autonomous from the social.⁴³ Yet Adorno’s comments about art after Auschwitz demonstrate his understanding of the social content of the “silent” aesthetic. In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno echoes his comments in “Commitment” and goes on to suggest links between art and historical understanding: “Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say

39. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* 367.

40. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt (New York: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1984) 442.

41. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 311, 444.

42. For an example of this error, see Alvin Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1980) 13.

43. Andreas Huyssen, “Mapping the Postmodern,” *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1990) 249.

that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems.” He then immediately renders this recantation ambiguous: “But it is not wrong to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living.”⁴⁴ This last thought brings Adorno’s philosophy to the edge of the abyss, but it is only in this position that he finds the resources for a thoroughgoing negation of *what is*.

The guilt of living after the so-called Final Solution, Adorno suggests in this emotionally charged passage, “is irreconcilable with living”: “And the guilt does not cease to reproduce itself, because not for an instant can it be made fully present to consciousness. This, nothing else, is what compels us to philosophize. And in philosophy we experience a shock: the deeper, the more vigorous its penetration, the greater our suspicion that philosophy removes us from things as they are.”⁴⁵ This passage anticipates psychological insights about what has come to be known as “survivor’s guilt,” but, more importantly, recognizes the implications of those insights for culture at large and points us toward the social framework in which this condition’s symptoms should be read. The surprising *personal* quality exhibited by Adorno’s writing testifies to a *social* context in which, during and after the Eichmann trial, survivors were beginning to be recognized as a group that had been silently haunted by a particular set of experiences and expectations about life “after Auschwitz.”⁴⁶

In this light, it is interesting to compare the reflections in *Negative Dialectics* with the famous Eichmann testimony of Holocaust novelist Yehiel De-Nur (whose pen-name, Ka-Tzetnik, is derived from the German acronym for concentration camp). Before literally collapsing on the stand, in “one of the most dramatic moments in the country’s history,” according to an Israeli journalist,⁴⁷ De-Nur described his experience of the camps

44. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* 362-63. The German makes it clear that the “could” and the “can” of these sentences refers not to an ability, but an ethical principle: “nach Auschwitz ließe kein Gedicht mehr sich schreiben . . . ob nach Auschwitz noch sich leben lasse, ob vollends es dürfe. . .” The original verbs *lassen* and *dürfen* used here denote “allowance” and “permission.”

45. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* 364; translation modified — MR. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as *ND*.

46. Miriam Hansen has made a similar point about Adorno’s notion of experience in the context of her brilliant foreword to Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience*, trans. Peter Labanyi, Jamie Owen Daniel, and Assenka Oksiloff (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993): “the ‘structure’ of Adorno’s experience was not merely a generalized perception of ‘horror’; it was the insistence on a fundamental *Zusammenhang* [relation, connection, context], the persistence of the past in the present that maintained the imperative to engage the legacy of mass annihilation across generational boundaries” (xix).

47. Segev 4.

in words which Adorno's formulation echoes: "Time there was different from what is here on earth. . . . And the inhabitants of that planet had no names. . . . They were not born there nor did anyone give birth. Even their breathing was regulated by the laws of another nature. They did not live, nor did they die, in accordance with the laws of this world."⁴⁸ These words could come from Adorno's description of the universe of a Beckett play. This public enunciation of an "Auschwitz" chronotope, from someone who, unlike Adorno, had been at its center, contributed to the climate in which an "after Auschwitz" chronotope could also be spoken. Only beginning in the 1960s could survivors and others who come after begin to bring their respective experiences and expectations to bear on each other in the public sphere. Such a delayed "event" (or the doubling of the event in its working through) also necessitates reflection on the pre-existing modes of reflection; Adorno's late work attempts to bring theory into line with the cultural confrontation with trauma and the attempts at the work of mourning happening all around him.

The passage from *Negative Dialectics* in which Adorno assesses the "guilt" of the post-Holocaust world, also marks the limits of philosophy itself, as Sigrid Weigel has recently argued. What compels philosophy is not only guilt, but the non-synchronicity of guilt and consciousness, those moments that consciousness cannot fully grasp and which therefore return ceaselessly. But if consciousness of "the other of consciousness," i.e., genocide and its aftermath, grounds philosophy after Auschwitz, it also strips away its ground, since it produces the traumatic "shock" that these non-integratable moments of guilt cannot be reconciled with any already existing philosophy of history.⁴⁹ Thinking modern history under the sign of trauma does not, however, lead Adorno to abandon his engagement with modernity, but rather to reformulate it.

The "after Auschwitz" context forces a recognition that philosophy itself has been transformed by the material forces of history which led to the Shoah; in fact, it forces that very materialism of history "upon metaphysics." Such a process makes for some rather ironic philosophical actors: "a new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself" (ND 365). This mutation of philosophy, however, should not be seen simplistically as the symptom of a complete historical

48. Cited in Segev 3.

49. Weigel 129f.

break which would install a radically new stage in Western culture, although much of the rhetoric of “after Auschwitz” would seem to imply this. As Adorno makes clear in a radio broadcast from the same year as *Negative Dialectics*, the categorical imperative not to repeat Auschwitz — here considered as the primary goal of education — is necessary precisely because such a break has *not* taken place. In “Erziehung nach Auschwitz” [“Education after Auschwitz”], Adorno encourages the attempt to build consciousness of the links between civilization and barbarism for the very reason that “the fundamental structure of society and its members, which brought it on, are today the same.” Adorno locates the roots of genocide in the development of modern nationalism and inscribes its potential in a “societal tendency” which cannot be separated from the “great tendencies of progress, of Enlightenment.”⁵⁰

While in “Cultural Criticism and Society,” Adorno seemed to subscribe to a notion of history as the inverse of progress — a theoretical position which appeared to leave no room for the possible redirection of social tendencies — in his later work he mobilizes a more complex view of history, but one which at first glance seems even gloomier. In *Negative Dialectics* he at once negates and affirms different notions of the kind of universal history implicit in the notion of Auschwitz as a stage in a process of reification: “No universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb.” The domination of nature and humanity — epitomized in the Nazi genocide and the threat of nuclear annihilation — “is the unity that cements the discontinuous, chaotically splintered moments and phases of history. . . . History is the unity of continuity and discontinuity” (*ND* 320). In order to provoke a liberating discontinuity which would not be irrational chaos, it will not do to locate a parallel or parasitic progress alongside or within the universal history of barbarism. For Adorno, thought’s resistance to universality comes not from a celebration of difference (what he would call the non-identical) as in much poststructuralism, but rather from a refusal to rationalize or grant meaning to that which already exists. Thus, while the desirability of universality is denied, its stranglehold on history is not. Adorno replaces the affirmation of difference in the present with an appeal to a version of “the theological ban on images” [*Bilderverbot*] that defers the

50. Adorno, “Erziehung nach Auschwitz,” *Gesammelte Schriften* 10.2:675. My translation — MR.

emergence of difference to a post-totalitarian world which has not yet arrived.⁵¹ Echoing his assessment of Celan and Beckett, Adorno holds that “[m]aterialism brought that ban into secular form by not permitting Utopia to be positively pictured; this is the substance of its negativity” (ND 207). Here the aesthetic and the political are shown to possess a similar critical engagement with the present. There are clear links between the ban on articulating utopia and on Celan’s imageless image and Beckett’s wordless expression. The latter are the artistic and discursive correlates of utopia in a theory that doubles historical time, asserting the coexistence of a linear regression and a discontinuous hope which can only be voiced through determined and determinate negation.

Adorno does not propose this theory *as* “universal history,” but as the product, once again, *of* history. Philosophy becomes materialist because “after Auschwitz there is no word tinged from on high, not even a theological one, that has any right to exist unless it underwent a transformation” (ND 367). The philosophy of history responds to material forces, as well. If Adorno ascribes the overarching lines of force to the tendential history of capitalism, he reserves a particular place for Auschwitz:

[T]he capitalist system’s increasingly integrative trend, the fact that its elements entwine into a more and more total context of functions, is precisely what makes the old question about the cause — as opposed to the constellation — more and more precarious. We need no epistemological critique to make us pursue constellations; the search for them is forced upon us by the real course of history. (ND 166)

Drawing attention to the chronotopic dimensions of the Benjaminian constellation in this passage, Fredric Jameson observes “the way in which Adorno here uses the spatiality of the figure of the constellation to argue explicitly against ‘linear causality,’ but in the name of history itself.”⁵² The paradox is that this spatialization of historical understanding is, in some way, the product of the movements of a more progressive, linear history: the “increasingly integrative trend” of capitalism and Enlightenment. The Nazis were, Adorno sometimes implies, the agents of the qualitative transformation whereby history reached a new

51. For a critique of the version of the *Bilderverbot* implicit in Adorno’s approach to Auschwitz, see Klaus Laermann, “‘Nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch’: Überlegungen zu einem Darstellungsverbot,” *Kunst und Literatur nach Auschwitz* 11–15.

52. Jameson, *Late Marxism* 59.

spatialized stage. The exemplary space of this stage is the concentration, or more accurately, extermination camp: "Genocide is the absolute integration. It is on its way wherever men are leveled off — 'polished off,' as the German military called it — until one exterminates them literally, as deviations from the concept of their total nullity. Auschwitz confirmed the philosopheme of pure identity as death" (ND 362). In Adorno, the language of "identity," of "levelling," is directly connected with the domination of exchange value which capitalism sets in place. Thus Auschwitz is at once an effect of reification and the ultimate fulfillment of its tendency to eliminate particularity, in this case the particularity of those human beings not integrated into the Aryan "race."

The name that Adorno gives in *Negative Dialectics* for this relationship that Auschwitz has with the social totality is the "model." The third part of that work is divided into three sections, which Adorno names "models of negative dialectics," and the last, "Meditations on Metaphysics," includes his most extensive reflections on Auschwitz. Adorno's explanation of what he means by "models" is crucial to understanding how the Holocaust intersects with his thought:

They are not examples; they do not simply elucidate general reflections. Guiding into the substantive realm, they seek simultaneously to do justice to the topical intention of what has initially, of necessity, been generally treated — as opposed to the use of examples which Plato introduced and philosophy repeated ever since: as matters of indifference in themselves. The models are to make plain what negative dialectics is and to bring it into the realm of reality, in line with its own concept. (ND xx)

The prominence given to Auschwitz in Adorno's critique of metaphysics makes it almost a model among models. In *The Differend*, Jean-François Lyotard chooses the "after Auschwitz" model as his designation for "an 'experience' of language that brings speculative discourse to a halt." Such a view of the stakes of Adorno's text derives from an understanding of the model as "the name for a kind of experience where dialectics would encounter a non-negatable negative, and would abide in the impossibility of redoubling that negative into a 'result.'"⁵³ Lyotard quite correctly reads Adorno's meditations as a critique of Hegelian dialectics in which the negation of the negation produces an affirmative result. When this experience or encounter with that which

53. Lyotard 88.

cannot be raised up into a positive term takes the form of the Auschwitz event, it results in a shift in the horizon of expectation. The Holocaust leaves a permanent wound in the self-conception of humanity that cannot be overcome, but can at best be prevented from recurring.⁵⁴ Hence Lyotard insists that what results from this event is a lack of result, and Adorno emphasizes the meaninglessness of the event, and thus seeks to shelter it from “committed” or sentimental works of art.

Despite its lack of affirmative result or meaning, the form of the “model” event must henceforth be factored into philosophical discourse as the becoming-temporal of thought. In opening his “Meditations on Metaphysics,” Adorno declared, “We cannot say any more that the immutable is truth, and that the mobile, transitory is appearance. The mutual indifference of temporality and eternal ideas is no longer tenable” (*ND* 361). After Auschwitz, culture — the avowed realm of “eternal ideas” — is folded back into barbarism and the corrosive passage of time. The production of the model is an attempt to think from a place no longer determined by anti-materialist idealism. As the ultimate instance of modern culture’s definitive subordination to barbarism, as the rationalized production of death, Auschwitz not only models the model, it casts a retroactive judgment on the ideology of Enlightenment with its trust in reason and the sanctity of culture. This rejection of an optimistic account of progressive reason does not entail that Adorno abandon reason for the delirium of the irrational since he does not place his hopes in the progressive narrative. Here, Adorno diverges from Lyotard, whose postmodern disavowal of the “grand narratives” of Enlightenment reason is much more thoroughgoing.⁵⁵ Lyotard rejects enlightened modernity even as he remains, like Adorno, faithful to aesthetic modernism.⁵⁶ Adorno, on the other hand, attempts — through a reworking of philosophical form in the light of the catastrophe — to wrench reason free from its instrumental determinations.

54. In a famous passage from one of his historian’s debate [*Historikerstreit*] interventions, Habermas wrote: “There [in Auschwitz] something happened, that up to now nobody considered as even possible. There one touched on something which represents the deep layer of solidarity among all that wears a human face; notwithstanding all the usual acts of beastliness of human history, the integrity of this common layer had been taken for granted. . . . Auschwitz has changed the basis for the continuity of the conditions of life within history.” Cited in Saul Friedländer, “Introduction,” *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution”* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992) 3.

55. See, especially, Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984).

56. Huyssen, “Mapping the Postmodern” 266.

Thus, the concept of the model necessitates a new form of philosophical representation. Adorno borrows the concept of the model, Jameson suggests, from music, and specifically from Schönberg's serialism. In twelve-tone composition the model is "the raw material of a specific composition . . . the particular order and configuration of the twelve notes of the scale which, chosen and arranged in advance, *becomes* the composition, in so far as this last is 'nothing more' than an elaborate series of variations and permutations . . . of that starting point."⁵⁷ The significance of Jameson's understanding of the model, and that which opposes it to the tenor of Lyotard's post-Marxist argument, is that in this musical reading the model is revealed as that fragment which already contains the totality within it. Jameson's wording, however, is somewhat ambiguous, and seems to imply that the relationship between the model and the totality (the composition) is one of what Althusser termed "expressive causality."⁵⁸ The relationship between part and whole in Jameson's musical metaphor seems too simple, a combinatorial logic where the part immediately generates the whole.

Jameson's Hegelian reading does not properly account for the process of "structural causality," which Adorno's account of the model seems to suggest. In this case, we do not simply derive Auschwitz from a history which moves externally to it (as we would in a mechanistic deduction); we grasp that history through the necessary mediation of Auschwitz. But the process is not mere induction either, since Auschwitz does not generate or reflect the totality of the history of modernity. Yet had it not "taken place," the history to be grasped would clearly not be the same. After Auschwitz, modernity and Shoah need to be read in light of each other; our understanding of each is mediated by the other.⁵⁹ The model is not a matter of indifference, as is the example in speculative thought, nor is it simply an element in a

57. Jameson, *Late Marxism* 61.

58. Jameson's wording here is ironic given that he popularized Althusser's critique of "expressive causality," and championing of "structural causality." See Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981) 23-58. For Althusser's development of these ideas, see Althusser, "Contradiction and Overdetermination," *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Pantheon, 1969) 87-128; and Althusser and Etienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 1979).

59. This account of the Holocaust as a possibility within modernity which forever modifies our notion of the latter is close to Zygmunt Bauman's: "From the fact that the Holocaust is modern, it does not follow that modernity is a Holocaust." See Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989) 93.

permutational series. The manner in which thought can arrive at some understanding of that which the model models is less direct. As Adorno wrote in “The Essay as Form,” “the essay has to cause the totality to be illuminated in a *partial* feature, whether the feature be chosen or merely happened upon, without asserting the presence of the totality” (emphasis added — MR). From his account of the essay, we can presume that Adorno’s use of the model is not an attempt to be “systematic,” as Jameson’s metaphor suggests, but rather has the “characteristic of an intention groping its way” (NL 16). The non-assertive, almost blind illumination of essayistic thought is once again the “imageless image,” and *its* model is autonomous art. With the selection of “poetry after Auschwitz” as the partial feature through which to illuminate the Holocaust and its relation to modernity, Adorno preserves a tension between part and whole that maintains both the power of the modern totality and the truth content of its various local expressions.

We can now grasp something of the temporality and location of “after Auschwitz” as Adorno employs it in his late works. In fact, the famous opening line of *Negative Dialectics* — “Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed” (ND 3) — expresses the defunct temporality of lifeless survival which the “experience” of Auschwitz inaugurates, according to the text’s final “Meditations on Metaphysics.” And the place of this thought is revealed as that constricted zone of nearly annihilated expectation, the death camp: “Beckett has given us the only fitting reaction to the situation of the concentration camps — a situation he never calls by name, as if it were subject to an image ban. What is, he says, is like a concentration camp. At one time he speaks of a lifelong death penalty” (ND 380-81). If, in Beckett, the concentration camp is the “unnamable,” in Adorno the camp (Auschwitz) is the repetitively invoked name for something else which must be grasped in a situation of indirect illumination.

That something else is, strangely enough, the yearning for utopia, that which has no-place. Faced with the “lifelong death penalty,” Beckett’s writing

seems stoical but is full of inaudible cries that things should be different. Such nihilism implies the contrary of identification with nothingness. To Beckett, as to the Gnostics, the created world is radically evil, and its negation is the chance of another world that is not yet. As long as the world is as it is, all pictures of reconciliation, peace, and quiet resemble the picture of death. (ND 381)

The significance of positing “another world that is not yet” derives not from any positive qualities of that world (which fall under the image ban), but from the coexistence of an alternative chronotope — the *concept* of another space and time — in a field where the replacement of experience with integrated, administered consciousness obliterates expectation and hope. Elsewhere, Adorno formulates this concept in terms of the indexicality of thought: “utopia is essentially in the determined negation . . . of that which merely is, and by concretizing itself as something false, it always points at the same time to what should be.”⁶⁰ In Bakhtin’s formulation, the indexical function of the chronotope points backwards toward the event — thus underlining representation’s belatedness in relation to that event. In Adorno the necessity of coming after the catastrophe coexists with an anticipatory temporality. The construction of the chronotope blocks the event itself but in so doing casts a shadow whose outline registers utopia. For even if we always come *after* the event in Adorno’s thought (both historically and epistemologically), we are also always *too early* to grasp it. We live in a world where reconciliation has not yet taken place and thus has not yet provided the standpoint from which to view the event from outside the flow of “damaged life.” The repeated citation of Auschwitz is an attempt to make one’s way through that flux, to provide a temporary map of the historical present as the means to a future that would install a break with the conditions which nurtured fascism.

In a sense we return to Adorno’s initial phrasing of “after Auschwitz” where he castigated poetry for blocking knowledge of the “radically evil” social totality. Now, however, we see that some poetic practices (that is, Celan’s, Beckett’s) and Adorno’s writings on poetry seek, through their direct or indirect invocation of Auschwitz, to block a positive comprehension of what, after Auschwitz, can only be known negatively. Only by avoiding “faded positivities” can writing avoid “conspiring with all extant malice, and eventually with the destructive principle itself” (ND 381). The repeated performance of the terrifying chronotope, “after Auschwitz,” holds a place for a time not yet emergent.

IV. Conclusion: After Adorno

If the space and time “after Auschwitz” occupies some middle zone

60. Adorno in conversation with Ernst Bloch in Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg (Cambridge: MIT, 1988) 12.

between past and future events that defy representation, its own substance remains conceptual, which is not to say imaginary. After Adorno one cannot conceive of genocide in quite the same fashion. But when or what is “after Adorno”? Irving Howe remarked, quite correctly, that it is difficult “to think of another area of literary discourse in which a single writer has exerted so strong, if diffused, an influence as Theodor Adorno has on discussions of literature and the Holocaust.”⁶¹ Yet Howe also realized, as did Adorno, that the “speculation that human consciousness could no longer be what it had previously been” after Auschwitz was unfortunately not true.⁶² We can certainly explain this latter fact in Marxist terms, arguing that a change of consciousness could only follow a change in the material organization of society — this is precisely Adorno’s critique of post-war European culture. But the former remark on Adorno’s influence reasserts the question of consciousness and intellectual intervention, while it suggests that that intervention should lie elsewhere than in “speculations” on consciousness.

If Adorno is correct in *Negative Dialectics*, speculation must give way to a new form of dialectical materialist analysis in the wake of Auschwitz. One consequence of this proposition would be the need to take into account the material effects of philosophizing. Instead of seeking in Adorno the reflection of a historical break called “Auschwitz,” we might understand him as producing a series of concepts (in the form of chronotopes) which retroactively pose the possibility of a break, at the same time that they illuminate the eternal return of the same in those places which have not yet worked through the Auschwitz model. Thought “alone” cannot alter history but, in citing and resignifying a discursive chain (such as that connecting Auschwitz to “Auschwitz”), it can keep the past present and the future open. The production of concepts also helps structure the field out of which the agency to alter the spatio-temporal parameters of the present must emerge.

As Howe implies, the major influence of Adorno’s Auschwitz chronotope has taken place in aesthetic realms. This must be taken for its negative as well as its positive implications. Adorno provides complex, contradictory, and frequently misunderstood concepts for evaluating “Holocaust art.” Despite those discouraging adjectives, various interpreta-

61. Howe 178.

62. Howe 198.

tions of Adorno continue to structure critical response to such art in the present, and even when Adorno's name is not mentioned (or even known). One potentially positive effect of my reading of Adorno would be to shift this terrain from what remains a primarily *moralizing* discourse to a *materialist* and *ethical* critique. Instead of evaluating a work's "decorum" according to principles assumed to adhere in the event itself, we can recognize our ambiguous distance from the event, and inquire into the relationship a work establishes between the past it mobilizes and its contemporary context. Reading Adorno's works as interventions in concrete situations meant to produce effects deprives them of their oracular quality, but also increases their relevance and their usefulness in the present.

It is equally true, however, that the particular way in which Adorno's thought structures the field of possibilities limits the kinds of interventions that he would promote. Adorno's aesthetics remain, as Jameson points out, strictly modernist.⁶³ Since modernism no longer represents a challenge to quiescent ideologies, a more properly postmodernist critique would offer a crucial reconsideration of mass culture.⁶⁴ In particular, a full-blown consumer society demands an acknowledgment of the status of the Holocaust commodity. In the midst of postmodernism's proliferation of aesthetic techniques new kinds of historical art are taking shape.⁶⁵ Some postmodern works, such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, challenge the assumptions about the necessary "autonomy" of art after Auschwitz which have emerged from Adorno's (albeit critical) reception, even as they recognize the risks of commodification.⁶⁶

Equally limiting to the project of confronting the historical legacy of genocide is the way in which Adorno focuses primarily on aesthetic

63. Jameson, "Reflections in Conclusion." See also Zuidervaart's extensive critique of Adorno's aesthetics for a useful discussion of its strengths and weaknesses. Zuidervaart is also quite critical of Jameson's theory of postmodernism, although this section of his book is less convincing to me.

64. For a defense of the possibilities of mass cultural representation of the Nazi genocide that pays particular attention to one important mass cultural text, the television mini-series, *Holocaust*, see Andreas Huyssen, "The Politics of Identification," *New German Critique* 19 (1981): 117-36.

65. For the articulation of a "popular modernist" position on the representability of the Holocaust that seeks to elude the outmoded antinomies of modernist art, see Miriam Hansen, "Schindler's List Is Not Shoah: The Second Commandment, Popular Modernism, and Public Memory," *Critical Inquiry* 22 (Winter 1996): 292-312.

66. Art Spiegelman, *Maus*, vols. 1 and 2 (New York: Pantheon, 1986, 1991). On Spiegelman, see Michael Rothberg, "'We Were Talking Jewish': Art Spiegelman's *Maus* as 'Holocaust' Production," *Contemporary Literature* 35.4 (1994): 661-87.

objects, even as he refers them back to the conditions of their production. This is of course ironic since his initial statement of the problematic seems deliberately anti-aesthetic. Adorno's subsequent reformulations, and most of his writings, refine the status of the aesthetic, granting authentic or autonomous art a role of absolute importance in articulating a critique of capitalist society. But the wholesale substitution of reflective and aesthetic practice for other forms of praxis hardly seems justifiable on political or theoretical grounds.

This is not all there is, however, in late Adorno. If the ethico-political call to arms after Auschwitz derives from the necessity of preventing its recurrence, then the pedagogical moment that sometimes surfaces in Adorno's writings and, especially, speeches and radio talks ought to be kept in mind. In those more obviously conjunctural interventions, Adorno stresses the concept of education to maturity [*Erziehung zur Mündigkeit*]. In sketching this notion of "democratic" or "mature political pedagogy," Adorno not only leaves the autonomy of the aesthetic realm but suggests a project of "public enlightenment" whose formulation and actualization remain today as critical as they do unfinished.⁶⁷ Ultimately, this relocation of the confrontation with Auschwitz in the public sphere of democratic education may be as great a contribution to the process of coming to terms with the past as the more famous reflections on representation. In fact, the lively debates surrounding many recent films, literary and historical texts, memorials, and museums seem to indicate a renewed interest in historical understanding that has been spurred precisely by controversies about representation. Viewed retrospectively from the vantage point of such debates, Adorno's contribution is all the more impressive; he brought together the questions of Holocaust representation and education at a moment when they had not yet been fully articulated.

67. Adorno, "What Does Coming To Terms With the Past Mean?" 124-29.