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Chapter 1: DRAFT

Context:

This is the first draft of the first chapter of my dissertation, which is tentatively titled “American Subtraction: Aesthetic Hostilities in Late Modernism, 1925-1960.” This draft has two parts: the first maps out what I see as an impasse in current criticism and tries to read make sense of that impasse dialectically; the second part, which will most likely become the seed for the second chapter, tries to mediate this critical impasse through a comparative reading of two texts, William Carlos Williams’s poetics (in *Spring and All* and *The Embodiment of Knowledge*) and Theodor Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*, that will at first seem to occupy opposite sides of this impasse.

The concept of “anaesthetics” is at this early stage still a little undefined, but I’m eventually going to try to theorize it in order to describe the way in which certain American modernists challenge the typical notion of aesthetic autonomy (in which a work of art has a separate existence from the world it represents) by creating works that recede into the worlds they represent. In so doing, they aspire toward a kind of transparency, or immediacy, or formlessness.

Basic questions to keep in mind:

Does an attention to the aesthetic dimensions of a literary text necessarily obscure or defamiliarize its social reality, namely its affiliations with the nation?

If not—if aesthetics and nationalism are not at odds—why is America and the idea of America so often the vehicle and the object of anti-aestheticism?

Ideology of the Anaesthetic: American Adorno

The thing that saves your work is opacity, and don't you forget it. Opacity is NOT an American quality. Fizz, swish, gabble of verbiage, these are echt Amerikanish [sic, truly American]

--letter from Ezra Pound to William Carlos Williams, dated November 10, 1917

In an introduction to a special issue of *American Literature* published in 2004 devoted to the role of aesthetics “after cultural studies,” Christopher Castiglia and Russ Castronovo open their essay by noting a certain skepticism toward the concept of aesthetics in American popular discourse. The term “aesthetics,” although never explicitly defined in their account,

has a disruptive, nearly utopian character. Contrary to the lineage that Terry Eagleton traces, wherein the aesthetic remains inseparable from the project of Enlightenment and, by extension, the dominant political interests of the bourgeoisie (a category like ‘autonomy’ in Eagleton’s work refers both to the work of art and the bourgeois individual), here, “aesthetics” offers a model for recognizing difference, for realizing political resistance, for the unsettling of identity and, in turn, for imagining collective political transformation. According to them, the study of aesthetics has been revitalized because it promises—without necessarily securing—“post-identity or non-normative forms of collectivism” (428). (It makes sense in this regard that critics like Wai Chee Dimock, Rebecca Walkowitz, and Paul Gilmore would embrace the category of the aesthetic, since each of them attends to the ways in which aesthetic experience unsettles national formations.) The crucial aspect of their formula for my purposes is neither this “unsettling of self” produced in an aesthetic encounter nor the non-normative collectives it brings into view, but the fact that aesthetic work is always incomplete and therefore always ongoing, which is to say that the term helpfully names a set of relations which I will go on to argue cannot, finally, be reconciled or reified. This fundamental incommensurability will make sense later on as I begin to trace out some of the disciplinary hostilities that motivate my project.

For now, though, allow me to explain the “suspicion” towards aesthetics that Castiglia and Castronovo identify in their essay. Their sole example of this rather ambiguous doubt concerns an unnamed political commentator, whose description of the vanishing differences among the candidates in the Democratic primaries led this anonymous pundit to conclude that their differences were “aesthetic” at best (qtd in Castiglia 423). What the commentator meant by “aesthetic” is unclear, they note, but nevertheless speculate that he or she probably meant “superficial.” Castiglia and Castronovo conclude that “in the current

cultural moment in the United States, aesthetics have come to seem superficial and even suspect,” calling on the rise of reality television as further evidence of a culture-wide aversion toward anything aesthetic (423). As they point out, however, this aversion is not only expressed on behalf of popular culture, but occurs in academic contexts as well: the rejection of aesthetics enables one to focus on the “real”—whether that real is constituted politically, or historically, or both—as though excluding or refusing the “aesthetic” is the first step toward ensuring the realness or urgency of a problem.

What Castiglia and Castronovo fail to explore in their introduction, however, is the particularity and the sheer scope of this aversion, which is to say that their identification of an anti-aesthetic strain in the U.S., while correct, remains at once too general and too specific. Too specific because aesthetics has long been the object of and site of skepticism from several critical angles (cultural studies and historicisms of various kinds). After all, Raymond Williams traced the history of this skepticism as far back as 1842, when the concept was dismissed as a “silly pedantical term”; indeed, Williams himself would go on to claim that “aesthetic considerations” apart from their social implications are “irresistibly displaced and marginal” (32). (The negative form, “anaesthesia,” which I will return to at length later in this chapter, was in use since the early 18th century and therefore predates the medical advances that would later adopt the term.) Following Williams, then, it’s possible to say that the suspicion toward aesthetics is not current at all, despite what Castiglia and Castronovo argued in 2004. Rather, it’s nearly as old as “aesthetics” itself.

Further, the superficiality associated with aesthetics that has come to condemn it—or that has almost always condemned it—does not belong to this concept alone. In an entry titled “Formalism,” Williams notes how the superficiality so often attributed to the concept of “form” emerges as early as 17th century England; “it is a ridiculous thing,” Francis Bacon

writes, “to see what shiftes theis Formalists have ... to make superficialities to seeme body, that hath depth and bulk” (Bacon, 1607-12). It is this slippery suspicion of both “form” and “aesthetics” on the basis of their superficiality that allows me to use the terms interchangeably. For Williams, the concept of “form” is constituted by the irresolvable problematic of surface and depth, or surface and substance, given how it has “spanned the whole range [of meanings] from the external and superficial to the inherent and determining” (138).¹ And if we widen the critical frame beyond Williams, we can locate the opposition of form against life (or “the real” in Castiglia and Castronovo’s usage) nearly everywhere: in Georg Simmel’s sociology of modern conflict, in Sir Herbert Read’s preference for the “form of life” rather than the “life of form,” and, of course, in Plato. Within the admittedly broad opposition between form and life—or, using the terms with which I began, surface and substance—the suspicion toward the category of aesthetics (and, I would add, “form”), a suspicion inherent in the problematic of aesthetics as Raymond Williams defines it, is neither new nor particularly American. What, then, occasions Castiglia and Castronovo to speculate about the status of aesthetics in America in a journal devoted to the study of literature? What, in other words, does aesthetics have to do with “America” at all, let alone American literature?

I begin with Castiglia and Castronovo’s introduction because it foregrounds both the attempt to broach the uneasy relation between “aesthetics” and *Americanness* and the difficulty of such an attempt. Why does the question of the relation between America and aesthetics—or, one might say, the Americanness of anti-aestheticism—remain unanswered in their account, particularly in the context of democracy, one of America’s most paradigmatic forms? Put another way, how does the cultural baggage of “America” shape or

¹ Marius Bewley’s *The Eccentric Design* (1959) opens by acknowledging how “a word that stands for so much sometimes ends up by meaning little” (13).

articulate the history of anti-aestheticism to which it belongs? Here, I'm invoking "America" not only as the place or bounded terrain where this anti-aestheticism happens to occur, but as a trope with an internal logic or set of logics. This is to say that my project is equally interested in America as a geographical fact or national entity *and* as a trope that carries a certain rhetorical force—in this case, a kind of ingrained skepticism toward aesthetic discourse. Why—with few notable exceptions—has the majority of recent scholarship devoted to the return of *form* and *aesthetics* ignored American literature, and the American novel in particular? This chapter will embark on these questions concerning the impasse between "America" (as nation, as place, as logic) and "aesthetics" through a pair of suspicions, both of which utilize "*Americannes*?" as a tropological resource for reconceptualizing aesthetic form. If, as Eagleton has argued, the history of aesthetic theory remains bound to its ideological underpinnings in the bourgeoisie's struggle for political hegemony, then the obverse must also be the case: the antagonism toward the category of aesthetics must also have an ideological basis.² It is one of the larger aims of this chapter to consider the ideological motivations that subtend and organize anti-aesthetic rhetoric.

If the narrative of aesthetic aversion that I have thus far presented seems overstated, allow me to approach it again, this time from the opposite direction. Any account of the many American phrases that populate Theodor Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*—the "pin up," the "tired businessman," the "what do I get out of it?"—will confirm the familiar impression of Adorno's complete alienation from and general hostility toward America, specifically American capitalism which is both "pure" (or unencumbered by other economic structures, i.e. feudalism) and advanced. In his preface to the 1997 edition of Adorno's aesthetic opus,

² One of the particular challenges of this project will be explaining why any account of this relation or antagonism must be regarded dialectically. Adorno is therefore not only a subject of my project; his insistence on dialectical critique has informed this project's method, shape, and structure.

Robert Hullot-Kentor outlines the difficulty of translating Adorno's text into English, remarking that "*Aesthetic Theory* wants to be what is German that is not German, and if it finds real resonance here, it will be with what is American that is not American, none of which could be put on a list of national character traits" (xx). Following this remark, one might say that Adorno's aesthetic project negates all national affiliations, in that it embraces and even aspires to become "that which is not American" but also "that which is not German." And yet, Hullot-Kentor goes on to claim that "the book's stylistic peculiarities derive, as a whole, from what makes *Aesthetic Theory* inimical to an American context" (xi). Trading one slippage for another—the task of translation here is not measured in linguistic difference (as is so often the case), but rather according to a cultural or national hostility—Hullot-Kentor's claim repeats the familiar image of Adorno as "sensitive European mandarin," who, the story goes, was at such odds with this culture industry that he was able to revise the history of aesthetic thought only by leaving the U.S. for good, despite having spent the twelve most productive years of his life in this country (158).³ Though this is likely an alibi and not the real reason behind Adorno's departure—it is probably the case that Adorno left based on his falling out with the Psychoanalytic Society of San Francisco—this anecdote and its repetition in the preface to *Aesthetic Theory* crystallizes the apparent and persistent antagonism between *Americanness*—again, both a cultural generalization and a formal logic—and modern aesthetics. It is as though Adorno's exile within, and eventual departure from, the U.S. formed the basis of his opus on aesthetic distance—as though, conversely, no self-styled aestheticism could be accommodated in the U.S.

What I've tried to demonstrate thus far is that suspicion here runs both ways, that each subject mirrors, and is therefore constituted by, the skepticism of the other. [FN: A

³ Jay, Martin. "Adorno in America." *New German Critique* 31 (1984): 157-182.

study of this skepticism so understood calls for a dialectical approach. More on this later.] That suspicion is expressed on both sides of this relation concretizes it as a relation worth examining, rather than as an arbitrary pairing. Thus, America is not simply the coincidental site of anti-aesthetic rhetoric, and one of the theorists most responsible for modern aesthetics doesn't just happen to leave the States without at least producing, albeit indirectly, this anti-American alibi in his wake. The combination of these examples gives America and the idea of America a unique, if hardly paradigmatic, place in the record of contemporary aesthetic discourse. The function of "Americanness" in each example I've offered is the same: it marks a kind of horizon or "no man's land" to proper aesthetic appreciation. [Does "Americanness" have any content apart from its suspicion of aesthetics?]

Given how this antagonism is mutually constituted, how then is it possible to speak about the aesthetic qualities of American literary texts, or, perhaps less obviously, the *American* qualities of *aesthetic* texts? Must one, like Adorno, always write from a position of alienation or disorientation to broach what seems like an impasse between one and the other?

The remainder of this chapter will attempt to mediate this rather abstract opposition through a reading of an aspect in William Carlos Williams's poetics, which is partially what I'm referring to with the phrase "American Adorno" in the title of this chapter. The aim of this reading is not to fix either Williams or Adorno on either side of the Atlantic in order to claim, once and for all, that they are truly "American" or "un-American." Instead, and perhaps more modestly, I want to examine the unusual proximity between the two, and to ask what the resemblance between Williams and Adorno does to the aversion between the idea of America and aesthetic thought.

“Works of art” declares Williams in 1923’s *Spring and All* must be “real, not ‘realism’ but reality itself-- / they must give not the sense of frustration but a sense of completion, of actuality—it is not a matter of ‘representation’— [...] but of separate existence” (204). The idea of art’s separate existence recalls Williams’s claims about Poe just a few pages earlier: as the “first American poet,” Poe had to be a man of “great separation” (198). Walter Benn Michaels has commented on the echo between the work of art’s anti-representational character—its absolute “separate existence” from the world—and the logic of American nativism, which proceeds via a kind of tautology: “what we are (Americans) is what we must strive to be (American)” (84). According to Benn Michaels, the identity of both the modern American and the modernist work of art are predicated on their capacity for self-reference at the expense of a relation to the rest of the world. I want to avoid taking issue with Benn Michaels for now [eventually I will be arguing the opposite: that “America” is not the site of aestheticism as it appears in Benn Michaels account, but anti-aestheticism] and simply ask: how is aesthetic autonomy and non-representation exclusively American? Making this argument forcefully, it seems, means that Benn Michaels must reproduce the logic of exceptionalism that is in some sense his object of critique.

The notion of artistic separation and exclusion comes up again in Williams’s treatise on the organic nature of education, *The Embodiment of Knowledge* (written five years after *Spring and All*). It is here that Williams derives a humanist model of learning wherein knowledge acquires a body, or an immediate concreteness that must be apprehended sensorily before the student can assimilate it. That knowledge in Williams’s creative conception has a body means that it does not merely signify, but has a weight, texture, and shape as certainly as does its human counterpart. It is in this context that Williams defines the inert work of art, which does not mean, but simply aspires to *be*. “A work of art can have, justifiably, no such

meaning without doing itself violence. It has, justly, no ‘meaning’. It is a work of art. And that, on the other hand, is precisely its significance” (119). This Greenbergian formula, in which the purest work of art can only refer to its conditions of existence—abstract painting, for instance, can ultimately only refer to its own flatness—is taken to its most logical end, in which the work of art no longer means at all. Williams continues:

There is but one burden justifiable to a work of art. That is itself—as part of a whole. It must at best, quite truly, mean *nothing* as the antisymbolists say. A chemical experiment or discovery fraught with terrific consequence for the world, in the moment of its conception and execution and perfection, can and does mean *nothing*, in the same way. The glow that suffuses the chemist, *sensation with a vengeance* if one must be so stupid, relates to the art of chemistry purely. *Nothing may ever come of the thing any more than it may come of the amazing formula of the differential calculus. These things carry no symbolism, they have no meaning.* (119, my emphasis)

Consider this fantasy of the chemist attuned to aesthetic reception (“sensation with a vengeance”) and her discovery of the “art” of chemistry—a pure, non-instrumental art which means nothing and can therefore never function as a means—against Adorno’s explanation of the paradoxical autonomy of the work of art:

An artwork is real only to the extent that, as an artwork, it is unreal, self-sufficient, and differentiated from the empirical world, of which it nevertheless remains a part. [...] In aesthetic semblance the artwork takes up a stance toward reality, which it negates by becoming a reality *sui generis*. Art protests reality by its own objectivation (279)

To the extent that the very mechanics of aesthetic autonomy—separation from the world, self-reference—seem American, then, they are also Adornornian by the same logic. How, I want to ask, is it possible to reconcile this “America”—self-sufficient and self-evident (carrying “no symbolism,” it does not mean but simply *is*)—with the “America” of the *Culture Industry*, the one that seems resistant—even “inimical” to use Hullo-Kentor’s term—to the concept of aesthetics? Are these two Americas reconcilable, or is it possible to see them as two extremes of the same contradiction? [It may be that there are two Americas, each of which appear to emerge only on the condition of the cancellation or suspension of the other. I need to think this through further, but it may help me differentiate my (dialectical) argument from Benn Michaels.] At stake in this question is, among other things, the content of “America” in these contexts: is “America” a free-floating signifier that can be transposed easily into any anti-aesthetic rhetoric, or is it instead rooted firmly in a particular historical and theoretical setting?

What I’m going to eventually argue, I think, is that Williams’s poetics do not in fact endorse the separation of art from the world, but instead model a kind of receding of art into the world. *Anaesthetic*, then, is the term I use to describe works that are not autonomous, but which recede into the world and aspire to be indistinguishable from it. The “an” prefix, then, refers to the work of art’s lack of boundaries. In William Carlos Williams, James Agee, and Flannery O’Connor, one finds a range of writers whose works aspire toward transparency, immediacy or formlessness. In this way, I draw on Alain Badiou’s recent work to examine late modernism’s “subtractive” aspects, or the mode by which a text exposes its “vanishing difference” from the world.⁴ One also finds in each a sustained engagement with American nativist discourses, whether in Williams’s interest in the organic American

⁴ Badiou, Alain. *The Century*, p. 55.

intellectual or in the complex and varying regionalisms of James Agee and Flannery O'Connor. The larger project tries to consider the relation between expressions of late modernist American nativism and modes of aesthetic negativity (blank verse and documentary realism are among the project's most important genres).

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[NOTES]

- 1) Is anaesthetics—or aesthetic negativity—still a kind of aesthetic? What's at stake in this question? Why anaesthetic, as opposed to unaesthetic or anti-aesthetic? What, exactly, is the “an-” in anaesthetic suspending? The text's materiality? Its autonomy?
- 2) Think about Kant's distinction between beauty as an inherent, objective property and as an effect of the subject's judgment. Email Daniel Block and ask about the singularity / generality dimension of his question, or of Kant's argument.
- 3) Orientalism—what does the place of Pound's “China” do to your binary between America and Europe? How might you complicate this binary by accounting for modernism's Orientalism. See Josephine Park on this topic.
- 4) Who—or what—is producing this aversion? Is it a recent phenomenon that is mapped onto literary texts by contemporary critics? Is it a deliberate strategy employed by Williams et al, or is it a problem inherent to the structure of their work (and therefore independent from them)?
- 5) What about American new criticism?? And pragmatism, whose influence on American thinking about art is “massively” important.
- 6) How is what you're describing similar to Christopher Bush's account of *japonisme*, which functions like a pure aesthetic in that it seems impervious to, or withdrawn from, national categories?