

from Aesthetic Theory, Theodor Adorno.  
Trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor  
(University of Minnesota Press, 1997)

## Translator's Introduction

Every translation must fit one world inside another, but not every work to be translated has been shaped by emphatic opposition to the world into which it must be fitted. This is, however, the case with *Aesthetic Theory*, which Theodor Adorno was able to write only by leaving the United States, where he had lived for a decade during the war years, became a citizen, and often thought he might need to remain. Any review of the many American phrases that Adorno scornfully quotes throughout *Aesthetic Theory*—the “tired businessman,” the “pin-up,” the “what do I get out of it?”—will confirm that not least of all the book was written in refusal of a country that it depicts as a completely commercial order. Even so unproblematically scannable a phrase as “Only what is useless can stand in for the stunted use value” draws on the transformation of distinctly European experiences of aristocracy. In the United States, such an idea, if it gets as far as cognition, falls askance of the inheritances of a puritanical mind that has always suspected that art does not properly work for a living and might encourage others to do the same. And just opening to any page, without bothering to read a word, one sees that the book is visibly antagonistic. No one from the land of edutainment would compose these starkly unbeckoning sheer sides of type, uninterrupted by chapter titles or typographic markers, that have severed and jettisoned every approach and patched over most every apparent handhold.

The book's stylistic peculiarities derive, as a whole, from what makes *Aesthetic Theory* inimical to an American context: that it is oriented not to its readers but to the thing-in-itself. This is not, as will be immediately suspected, motivated by indifference to its readers. On the contrary, the book makes itself remote from its

consumption out of interest in, and by its power of, self-immersion. *Aesthetic Theory* is an attempt to overcome the generally recognized failing of aesthetics—its externality to its object—that Barnett Newman once did the world the favor of putting in a nutshell when he famously quipped, speaking of himself as a painter, that “aesthetics is for me like what ornithology must be like for the birds.”<sup>1</sup> Art-works are after all unique, not least in that, when they are experienced, they are experienced from within. It is possible to vanish into a novel or a painting and be half-surprised, looking away for a moment, that the world was ever there at all. Anyone turning to aesthetics would expect that, to call itself aesthetics, it would be allied with what is exceptional in the experience of its object. But what is discovered instead is a discipline that throughout its history has worked at the conceptual undergirding of standards of beauty, the sublime, taste, art’s dignity, and so on, while failing to achieve the standard of the experience of what it purports to treat. The suspicion is irrepressible that either aesthetics is the work of the willfully deaf, blind, and insensate or that art is under a spell that prohibits its inner comprehension, as if here one is permitted entry as nowhere else only on the condition that one leave empty-handed and never be able to say what the difference is between it and just having been distracted.

Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* means to breach this externality of aesthetics to art. It is hardly the first effort to do so. But when aesthetics has become dissatisfied with itself and tried to escape its externality it has almost always taken the form of pretending to be art in a pictorial, effusive voice, or it has offered to act as maître d’ to a specialized domain of pleasure. Either effort, however, only camouflages the presupposition that intellect must renounce knowing art from within. *Aesthetic Theory*, by contrast, is oriented to an early aphorism that Adorno wrote about music that was seminal to his thinking about art as a whole: “We don’t understand music, it understands us.”<sup>2</sup> The aesthetics required by this perception would be remote to all art appreciation; its sight lines would run opposite those angled by the intensifying need for art that makes people mill around art museums in constantly greater numbers: it would be art’s own understanding; the presentation of its truth content.

Conjuring this genie out of the bottle would seem to require the sacrifice of subjectivity to what is beyond itself. If the thing-in-itself is to speak, subjectivity’s own voice must only interfere. This thesis could perhaps look for confirmation in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in which Adorno and Horkheimer show that fascism did not simply coax cornered reason into delirium but was itself a potential implicit in reason’s own compulsion toward all-encompassing domination. Yet the authors never sought to subvert subjectivity or to countermand enlightenment, the course of subjectivity’s development as reason. If enlightenment had come to a dead end in fascism, its abrogation would make terror permanent. Rather, Adorno and Horkheimer took the side of enlightenment and tried to discern the logic of its failure. What they showed was that it missed its aim of human emancipation from

natural necessity and the second nature of social constraint because the domination of nature unwittingly requires the sacrifice of subjectivity. The recognition that *in maxima potentia minima licentia* is millennia old. But *Dialectic of Enlightenment* took this thought in a strictly modern direction: if the self is progressively limited and deprived through the domination of its object, if humanity is subordinated to necessity by the struggle against it, then the emancipation of the subject depends on its capacity to emancipate its object, and this requires all possible subjective spontaneity.

Adorno’s thesis that subjectivity could only be transcended by way of subjectivity, and not by its limitation, is one way of formulating his seminal insight: that identity is the power of nonidentity. The philosophical means for giving shape to what is more than subjectivity would be, paradoxically, those of conceptual cognition that, since Kant’s Copernican turn, specifically limited knowledge to the world constituted by subjectivity this side of the thing-in-itself. As Adorno wrote in the introduction to *Negative Dialectics*, he considered it the task of his thought “to use the strength of the subject to break through the fraud of constitutive subjectivity.”<sup>3</sup> The power of identity—manifest in Kant’s transcendentalism as concepts that constitutively define the likeness of the world with the subject—would go beyond constitutive subjectivity if concepts could be developed in such a way as to present what is more than conceptual in them. That concepts are more than their definitional content is implicit in the idea of a dialectic of enlightenment: for if enlightenment regresses to the natural necessity that it attempts to dominate, then concepts, which ostensibly serve to identify the world with its knower, are actually artifacts most deeply shaped by what enlightenment never mastered. Identity must be more than identity in that it draws back into itself what it purports to overcome. The concealed content of enlightenment, the content of concepts, would be that nature that subjectivity sought to dominate in its own rise to power.

This defines Adorno’s approach in *Aesthetic Theory* to the possibility of breaching the externality of aesthetics to art: an aesthetics that wants to know art from within—to present what art itself understands—would consist of what a contemporary nominalist intelligence, always verging on irrationalism, dismisses as the oppressive, overstuffed furnishings of an age credulous of absolutes: natural beauty, art beauty, truth, semblance, and so on, the fundamental concepts of aesthetics.

Although these concepts emerged in the effort to master their material, they are more than that. Freed from the compulsion of domination they would potentially reveal their participation in what they sought to dominate and the impress of that through which they developed. Aesthetic concepts would become the memory of nature sedimented in art, which for Adorno takes shape in *Aesthetic Theory* as the unconscious, mimetically written history of human suffering against which enlightenment elsewhere seals itself off. Only this content could possibly bring reason’s struggle for domination to its senses and direct its power to what would ac-

usually fulfill it. Thus Adorno organized *Aesthetic Theory* as a paratactical presentation of aesthetic concepts that, by eschewing subordinating structures, breaks them away from their systematic philosophical intention<sup>1</sup> so that the self-relinquishment that is implicit in identity could be critically explicated as what is nonintentional in them: the primacy of the object.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout his years in the United States, Adorno on many occasions met with the rejection of his work by publishers who saw his writings simply as disorganized. It was obvious to Adorno that what he was pursuing required his return to Germany if only because in the 1950s publishing was still less commercially unified than in the United States and permitted writers greater control over their work than here.<sup>4</sup> One event did, however, finally prompt him to leave. When the editorial board at the Psychoanalytic Society of San Francisco finished with his essay "Psychoanalysis Revised," he found that "the entire text was disfigured beyond recognition, the basic intention could not be discerned."<sup>5</sup> As Adorno recounted, the head editor explained that the standards to which the essay had been adjusted, which made it look like every other essay in the journal, were those of the profession: "I would only be standing in my own way"—Adorno was told—"if I passed up its advantages. I passed them up nevertheless."<sup>6</sup> Adorno moved back to Europe.

Adorno's sense that staying here would have impossibly burdened his work was confirmed long after the fact by the first English translation of *Aesthetic Theory* in 1984.<sup>7</sup> The publisher, partially against the will of the translator, discarded the book's form as a superstitiously imposed impediment that would only stymie the book's consumption.<sup>8</sup> Diametrically opposed to the course the book took in its various drafts in Adorno's own hands, a process that led in the final version to the rejection of the division of the book into chapters, the 1984 translation arrived on bookstore shelves divided into numbered chapters with main headings and subheadings inserted in the text. Paragraph indentations were distributed arbitrarily throughout, completing the image of a monodirectional sequence of topic sentences that could be followed stepwise from chapter 1 through chapter 12. This subordinated the text's paratactical order to a semblance of progressive argumentation that offered to present the book's content conveniently. This device provided a steady external grip on the book while causing it to collapse internally. For in lieu of any argumentative structure in the text itself, because it contains no homogeneous substance that can be followed from start to finish, the flaring clarity of paragraph indentations only produced a contrast by which the simulated paragraphs appeared murky in their refusal to parse into stages of thesis and evidence. And whereas the paratactical text demands that every sentence undertake to be the topic sentence and that the book be composed of long, complex phrases, each of which seems under the obligation to present the book as a whole, the 1984 translation carved up sentences in the image of declarative vehicles of content. The original paratactical text is concentrically arranged around a mute middle

point through which every word seeks to be refracted and that it must express. The text cannot refer forward or backward without disturbing this nexus through which the parts become binding on each other. The linear argumentative structure imposed on the text by the translation thus dismissed the text's middle point as a detour and severed its nexus. Compulsory unification serves only to fragment: the imposed structure set whole passages adrift whose suddenly evident isolation required further apparatus to span them. Therefore, transitional phrases were interpolated such as: "as we saw" or "as we said" or "let us remember." The narrative persona that was projected into the text at these points and elsewhere was credible insofar as it seemed to substantiate an argumentative model of knowledge and its transmission. But this further contributed to muffling a text that, by its own standards, succeeds only insofar as what is particular in it begins to speak for itself. The rejection of the work's form as a supposition was carried over to the treatment of the original's many Greek, Latin, and French concepts and phrases. They were rendered literally, in English, and without any marking, as if their content was clear enough once they had been freed from their alphabetical inconvenience. Thus, for instance, *chorismos*—the contrary of *methexis*—was translated as "separatism," obfuscating the articulation of the problem of the participation of idea and object from Plato to Benjamin that is, so to speak, the topic of *Aesthetic Theory* and the whole of Adorno's writings. The many American phrases, which have such abrupt expressive power in the original, were likewise seamlessly absorbed into the scenery. Almost ingeniously the language of the 1984 text pulls away from the movement of thought that can still be sensed gesturing underneath, giving the book a disembodied quality, as if it were dubbed rather than translated. Subordinated to the principle of exchange by its coerced identity with the subject's form of consumption, *Aesthetische Theorie* in translation became a model of what it protests against: the primacy of the constitutive subject. The irony is, of course, that by narrowing the distance of the book from its readers, ostensibly for their own good, but fundamentally to sell it to them, the work was put beyond them.<sup>9</sup>

This volume is an entirely new translation of *Aesthetische Theorie*. The spatial organization of the text is identical to the original. The major sections of the English text are divided only where the original divides. The sentence structure and phrasing of the original were maintained wherever possible, given the tremendous differences of English syntax from the original. All words foreign to the original, including English words, occur here in italic. This translation, however, took its lead not so much from the aim to copy the appearance of the original, but rather from Adorno's description of the hearing implicit to Mahler's music: an "amplified" and consequences are virtually present."<sup>10</sup> In *Aesthetic Theory* this amplification occurs, however, not in the mimetic response of musical passages to each other but in the medium of concepts as their subterranean, dynamic relations.

The coherence of these subterranean relations depends on the text's paratactical form and survives only by a density of insight, not by external structure. This defines the text's—and its translation's—particular vulnerability: the slightest slackening of intensity threatens to dissolve the text into a miscellany. Nothing supports the text except the intensity with which it draws on and pushes against itself. With few exceptions paratactical works are therefore short, fragmentary, and compacted by the crisis of their own abbreviation. Paratactical texts are intensive, almost to the denial of their quality of extension; and the more extensive the paratactical work actually is—and *Aesthetic Theory* is almost unparalleled in this—the greater the potential for its unraveling at each and every point. The text therefore requires a rhetoric that will heighten concentration and density and absorb the dozens of ways in which it is constantly exposed. Every reader will note the work's recurrence to abrupt, staccato, sometimes delphically abbreviated expression that heightens the push-pull of the text. Because it rejects certitude as a standard of truth in favor of exactness of insight, it necessarily tends toward the apodictic. Adorno is also able to produce concentration out of nowhere by beginning sentences with long-haul subordinate clauses that engage with a "That . . ." that grips cognition like the ratchet on a rollercoaster with a demand for cooperative anti-gravitational struggle to the top of the first slope so momentum can be discovered shooting down the main clause into any number of concluding subordinate sweeps. A paratactical text is inimical to exposition, and Adorno uses the most condensed gestures to invoke rather than propound relevant philosophical arguments: a single "sickness unto death" does the work of all of Kierkegaard, "positive negation" all of Hegel and any phrasing that even subliminally hints at "in the age of" is expected to conjure the entire argument of Benjamin's "Artwork in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," to which the book is, as a whole, a response. Out of the same demand for density, Adorno refers wherever possible to artists and artworks in the familiar: *Recherche* is more than enough for Proust's title, the *Marriage* could not be anything but that of Figaro, and George is plenty for Stefan George.

Wherever parallel linguistic resources were available these and Adorno's many other techniques of condensation and heightening have been used to maintain the density of this translation. In the case of some titles and authors, however, especially of German authors and works that have become progressively unknown in the aftermath of World War II, they are too improbably remote even to pretend they could be recognized and had to be provided with first names and full titles. And there is another technique of condensed reference, used constantly by Adorno, that could not be incorporated at all because it is uniquely a potential of the original vis-à-vis English. As is well known, German is able to refer by pronouns with specificity across any distance of text, long or short, and juggle many nouns with referential consistency. Adorno employs this linguistic resource to an extreme in order to avoid the repetition of nouns in a text that is allergic to even

the few millimeters of slack such repetition would feed in. In some passages the weave of pronouns becomes so remote and tenuous that it seems it could only be followed by someone who would comprehend their referents anamnesticly, as if known from eternity. They demand a level of concentration that inhabits the text completely. Since English has no comparable pronominal structure, this internal weave of reference could not possibly be matched in translation. It has, therefore, throughout been necessary to choose between potential glibness and precision of reference. Without exception the latter was preferred, however ungainly the result. This is the recognition of an aporia of translation and its result is not entirely a betrayal of Adorno's text. For however difficult his writing may be, it is never vague or simply evocative.

This translation has not supposed that it is simply a failed replica of the perfections of the original. The original has plenty of problems of its own that it imposes on the translation. Some of these problems are reciprocal with the capacities of the original. On one hand, for instance, this paratactical text provides unmatched freedom: Since the text does not labor under schematic requirements it can and must take a decisively new breath for every line; those insights that authors of traditional forms know to be some of the best of what they have thought but must constantly reject as structurally inapposite are what at every point motivate a paratactical text. But, on the other hand, this paratactical style is, by that same measure, unable—as mentioned—to refer backward or forward: Adorno never writes, "as mentioned." Every transition must be a transition in the object itself if it is not to unhinge the text. Thus the text is deprived of a major technique for building on what has been, or of explicitly organizing itself toward what will be, developed elsewhere; and it cannot take the sting out of repetition by acknowledging it. Instead, Adorno is constantly compelled to start anew saying what has already been said. The text produces a need for repetition that is its innermost antagonist. Thus Adorno throughout repeatedly restates major motifs: that the artwork is a monad, that it is a social microcosm, that society is most intensely active in an artwork where it is most remote from society. If Adorno is a master of thematic variation and able to use the dynamic energy of these repeated motifs not just to justify what is waiting to be said, but as a catapult for new insights, all the same, anyone who actually studies the book will rankle at a repetitiveness that really is as inevitable as it comes to seem. The text is single-mindedly concerned with escaping jargon and developing what is potentially new in concepts that have become rigidified and obsolete, but the obligatory repetitiveness of its formulations courts jargon and makes the central motifs of the work vulnerable to facile trivialization by anyone who cares to do so. The paratactical capacity that prompts the text's protean insights engenders repetition that becomes disorienting: all those markers that measure out space and time longitudinally in traditional forms are discarded and there is a constantly looming sense of being caught in a vortex, as if there is

no knowing whether one has been through a particular passage before, or if perhaps one has never left the spot. The virtual presence of the whole of the text at any one point is impeded by the form in which it is maintained.

This level of repetitiveness is damaging to the original and it takes its toll on the translation. More regrettable, however, because it does not derive from any capacity of the text, is the repetition that originates in the fact that it is an opus posthumous. Adorno completed *Aesthetic Theory*, but he did not finish it: every section that he intended to write for the book was written; the main body of the text was for the most part complete and composed at the highest level that Adorno achieved in any of his work. Yet Adorno did not live to carry out the final, crucial revision of the text. In this revision he would have rewritten a significant number of passages, inserted a group of passages that had accumulated in various ways external to the main text in the decade during which the book was written, and he would have written a new introduction to the book that would have replaced a draft with which he was dissatisfied.<sup>11</sup> After Adorno's death, this editing work could only partially be fulfilled by his longtime student and friend, Rolf Tiedemann, and by Adorno's widow, Gretel Adorno. They deciphered Adorno's handwriting in the main text, collected the fragments into the *Paralipomena* that in this edition comes after the main text, and appended the "Draft Introduction" and an excursus entitled "Theories on the Origin of Art." At the end of this volume they have provided an afterword in which they describe in detail the state of the text at Adorno's death and how they constructed the present volume. As they point out, they could not rewrite passages even when the needed improvements were self-evident. And the intense philological pressures in a country whose Protestantism invented the discipline and where there are, for instance, left-wing and right-wing editions of Hölderlin, prohibited the exclusion of even obviously contradictory formulations. What weighs most on this text, weighs on it literally: there is much more here than is needed, by about one-fifth. In his final revision Adorno would have been able to discard a great deal. The repetitive discussions of classicism and genius, for instance, which now seem strewn around, could have been grouped and condensed. And had Adorno had the chance to definitively position three extensive sections that were still external to the text at the time of his death, he would have been able to exclude duplicate passages that permit their integration at several different points. The editors combined and inserted these extensive sections in plausible ways, but there is no doubt that this has resulted in several overlong main parts that disturb the organization of the book. For instance—as Tiedemann and Gretel Adorno point out—various aspects of "Situation" are needed in the book's development from "Art, Society, Aesthetics" to "On the Categories of the Ugly, the Beautiful, and Technique." But the sheer girth of "Situation" combines so much material that it diffusely interferes with the tightly wrought organization of the first five main parts. It is, furthermore, questionable whether the excursus,

"Theories on the Origin of Art," could have been included in the final version. Although it is obviously germane to the problems Adorno treats throughout *Aesthetic Theory*, it is a research essay and in majority stylistically at odds with the rest of the text; and it doesn't make sense to have an "excursus" in a text that is all paratactical divagation anyway. As a guess, however, it is easy to imagine how parts of the excursus could have been used in the new introduction that Adorno wanted to write.

Nothing is to be done about these layers of repetitiveness in the text. They burden the book at every point. But it is worth knowing that however overlong the book is, there is nothing to skim. There is, for instance, much in the *Paralipomena* that is not to be found anywhere else in the text. And if Adorno found the "Draft Introduction" inadequate, it may take some years of research to figure out why. It is in any case probably the best place to begin reading *Aesthetic Theory*. The paratactical organization of the book does not mean that it can be read equally well in any direction. It is not argumentative; it does not seek to convince; but it does present a logic of insight that has a distinct forward direction that develops concentrically, and, as indicated, this is best perceived by initially reading "Situation" separate from the first five main parts. *read 'Draft Introduction' first*

The less finished main parts, such as "Situation," were often more difficult to translate than the more finished parts, though this was only a slight difference of degree. No reader will imagine the linguistic mayhem out of which this translation is built. And the ditches, craters, and rubble over which each English sentence passes are more than crushed syntax. The historical breach on the other side of which German now stands makes even this translator involuntarily prefer to say the "original" rather than the German, and made it necessary to say, page by page, that it is, or was, a Jewish language, too. This translation is allied with Adorno's return to Germany in that his need to return there to be able to write works such as *Aesthetic Theory* was inseparable from an impulse to pick up the severed threads of what was not fascist in Germany's past and the value of which, however alloyed, he never doubted. His enormous importance in the postwar decades was that he succeeded in helping to reestablish Germany's own relation to that past, not in the search of the primal or in alliance with any antihumanism, but—as in *Aesthetic Theory*—in defense of a modernism that would not betray the hopes of the past.<sup>12</sup>

This is not to say that Adorno returned to Germany to fit in and help restore the nation to what it once was. What he wrote was completely unpalatable to the former-Nazi faculty, still in its prime, that controlled Frankfurt University after the war. They rejected writings such as *Minima Moralia* as unscholarly and the whole of Adorno's work as essayistic and fragmentary and saw to it that he was not offered a professorship. Only under coercion did they grudgingly bestow on him what became known as a *Wiedergutmachungsstuhl*, a faculty position made

not because he merited it as a philosopher, but in reparation to a Jew who had been deprived by the war of his property, his teaching post.<sup>13</sup> Barely two decades after his return, leftist students who had idolized him and embraced his works rioted in his seminars because he refused to lead them to the barricades. Adorno's freedom to teach was forcibly rescinded, as it had been in the thirties. In the summer recess following the student demonstrations of 1969, he died of a heart attack while trying to finish this book.

After Adorno's death, interest in his writings soon dissipated, and today, when he is studied in Germany, he is regarded mainly as a historical curiosity and more likely to be diminished than admired. For over a decade, the most thorough, widely read, and esteemed history of his work—Rolf Wiggerhaus's *The Frankfurt School*—dismisses him as a bitter, hyperemotional complainer, monotonously prejudiced in his views, irresponsibly protean in his thought, and unable to formulate testable hypotheses.<sup>14</sup> Wiggerhaus's book, in that it embodies a generation's rejection of Adorno echoed in dozens of similar works, points up the fact that *Aesthetic Theory* is currently as obliquely remote to Germany as it is to the United States. And this remoteness is requisite to any plausible value it may have. For as Adorno wrote in constantly varied formulations, only what does not fit in can be true. He would not have been interested in seeing this book "received" here. Like all those works whose strands Adorno returned to Germany to pick up, when *Aesthetic Theory* is seen for what it is, it stands outside and looks in. Although the book does in many ways appear obsolete to us—today no one would try a dialectical reversal, now nothing seems precisely the opposite of anything else, and that shift of quantity into quality such as when water cooling becomes ice is no longer an inspiring mystery—this perspective that condescends from the vantage of being up-to-date as to the odd cut of an old coat or dress reveals its delusiveness when instead it is wondered how we look to it. For even though students once complained that Adorno had no interest in praxis but was preoccupied only with art, from the book's perspective it will be noticed that the word has completely disappeared from contemporary language, whereas for this book on art, "Praxis would be the ensemble of means for minimizing material necessity, and as such it would be identical with pleasure, happiness, and that autonomy in which these means are sublimated." Much of what catches the eye as obsolete in *Aesthetic Theory* is what would be new if it were not blocked; here what is perceived as old hat masks the disappointment of what can no longer be hoped for. *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.

What is hard about translation is not—as those who have never tried it imagine—finding the right word. The right word is always there, it just can't be used: inevitably it starts with the same letter as the three words on either side of it and, in a

translation, pulling four oranges says fake, not jackpot. Line by line, the wrong word is always, unbearably, coming to the rescue. The sureness with which translation taps fate puts the I-Ching to shame: the word needed at any one point has somehow always just been used in the previous clause to cover for some other right word that would not fit. If translation were just pinning the tail on the donkey it would be easy, but the donkey is running and the translator is riding another beast, going in some other direction: each language, and each and every word, has its own momentary vector. So, for instance, even when the original wants to dictate the right word—e.g., *Programm*—directly into English, with only a slight shift of spelling, it turns out that the English equivalent now instinctually summons up computers—not the self-understood political sense of the original—with barely containable textual implications. Since the right word was always waiting, and had to be left waiting, this translation is made of whatever else was handy: a carrot for the nose, lightbulbs for eyes, some feathers for the mustache. Propped on a bench in the distance with its back to the sunset, perhaps it even looks alive. But it is not to be leaned against and neither will it bear all that much scrutiny. In German this book is almost too interesting to read; for those many passages in English where this is no longer the case, where it was just not possible to find any better way to do it, for the many sentences that were each finally accepted as not really but sort of what it means, I can only say, it was not for lack of trying.