

***Philosophy and / as Literature:
Some Remarks on Theodor W. Adorno
and Richard Rorty***

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ABSTRACT. This paper takes up the issue of the relation between philosophy and literature, which has somehow characterized the whole history of Western philosophy, and it does so in terms of a discussion of Theodor W. Adorno's approach to this topic. My account of Adorno in this paper is largely descriptive, and I attempt to capture his view by emphasizing its dialectical complexity: that is, the fact that Adorno constantly sought to avoid *either* a simple opposition of philosophy and literature, *or* their simple identification. Finally, I argue that such a dialectical approach can perhaps provide a richer and better understanding of the relation between philosophy and literature than other approaches, such as Richard Rorty's, who took deconstructionism and pragmatism to their most extreme, and claimed that philosophy should be conceived as nothing more than a kind of writing.

Talk, it's only talk

Arguments, agreements, advice, answers, articulate
announcements [...]

Babble, burble, banger, bicker bicker bicker, brew ha-ha,
boulderdash, bally-hoo [...]

Comments, clichés, commentary, controversy, chatter,
chit-chat, conversation, contradiction, criticism [...]

Debates, discussions, these are words with a D this time,
dialogue, diatribe, dissention, declamation, double talk [...]

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Too much talk, small talk, talk that trash
Expressions, editorials, explanations, exclamations,
enfadulations
It's all talk

ADRIAN BELEW. *Elephant Talk*

I.

It is a well known fact that Theodor W. Adorno was always concerned with the arts, including poetry and literature. This is clearly witnessed, among other things, by his philosophical interpretations of narrative and poetical works. Taking a look at the contents of his many collections of papers, one is astonished by the richness and complexity of his confrontation with many authors, including Goethe, Hölderlin, Heine, Balzac, Dickens, Mann, George, Hofmannstahl, Proust, Valéry, Huxley, Beckett, and Kafka. Among them, one might especially recall the influence of Samuel Beckett, to whom Adorno's unfinished *Aesthetic Theory* was to be dedicated, and whose dramas — “historio-philosophically supported by a change in the dramatic *a priori*: positive metaphysical meaning is no longer possible in [...] a substantive way (if indeed it ever was)”¹ — represented to him “the only true relevant metaphysical productions since the war”²: namely, “the only fitting reaction to the situation of the concentration camps”³.

Anyway, the aim of this paper is not to linger on Adorno's relevant interpretations of poems and novels. Rather, I will try to analyze his basic conception of the relation between philosophy and literature, and to explain how and why he gave so much importance to the expressive, rhetorical, and ‘stylistic’ aspect of philosophizing.

This issue is already addressed in Adorno's first writings of the early 1930s, later published in the first volume of his collected works. As a matter of fact, what we find in such short texts as *The Actuality of Philosophy*, *The Idea of Natural History*, and the *Thesis on the Language of*

¹ Adorno 1982, p. 3.

² Adorno 2000a, p. 117.

³ Adorno 1990, p. 380.

the Philosopher, is the precise demand (although still expressed in a somewhat ‘embryonic’ way) for a new kind of dialectics: namely, one based on the valorisation of the “exact fantasy” as “*organon* [...] of philosophical interpretation”⁴, and above all on the rescue of the “*aesthetic* dignity of words”⁵. The same issue, however, would be later brought on a further development in his major works, such as *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (written together with Max Horkheimer) and *Negative Dialectics*, in which dialectics is conceived as “a critical rescue of the rhetorical element”⁶.

As is well known, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Horkheimer and Adorno pose “a civilizational-historical statement, a summary judgment on millennia of Western culture”⁷, and identify the tendency to explain and manipulate the world by means of discipline, identity and uniformity, as an essential feature of both myth *and* enlightenment. So, in the first pages of the book they claim: “Myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology. [...] Just as myths already entail enlightenment, with every step enlightenment entangles itself more deeply in mythology”⁸. At the same time, they distinguish myth *and* enlightenment from a previous and almost unknown magical phase: one in which, according to them, human beings were still capable of experiencing the qualitatively different, the foreign, and the immeasurable.

To be sure, Horkheimer and Adorno never ‘glorify’ the magic stage as opposed to myth and enlightenment, since magic “is bloody untruth”⁹ for them. Nonetheless, they claim with a sense of approval that the “world of magic still retained differences whose traces have vanished even in linguistic forms. [...]. Magic like science is concerned with ends, but it pursues them through mimesis, not through an increasing distance from the object”¹⁰. Hence, the shift from magic to myth *and* enlightenment implied, among other things, a relevant change in our own relation to language: “At the magical stage dream and image were not regarded as mere signs of

⁴ Adorno 2000b, p. 37.

⁵ Adorno 2007, p. 38.

⁶ Adorno 1990, p. 56.

⁷ Berman 2002, p. 116.

⁸ Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, pp. XVIII and 8.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

things but were linked to them by resemblance or name. The relationship was not one of intention but of kinship”¹¹.

According to Adorno, however, even in an enlightened-disenchanted world like ours there are traces of the ancient openness of experience to the differences, the particulars, and the qualitative aspects of the real. Accordingly, he stresses the significance of some pre-conceptual and non-rational moments of human experience which might serve as possible ‘correctives’ to the growing sterility of rationality, progressively decayed during the modern age to mere instrumental reason. Among these moments of our experience, Adorno pays a special attention to the expressive impulse, the “most subjective experience” which, at the same time, “is objectively conveyed [because] suffering is objectivity that weighs upon the subject”¹².

For our specific purposes, it is probably the tight connection established by him between the concepts of *Ausdruck*, *Darstellung*, and *Rhetorik*, which is of particular interest. According to him, indeed, since “all approved traditional philosophy from Plato down to the semanticists has been allergic to expression”¹³, the latter found shelter in language and rhetoric: that is, in “the *presentation*”, which “is not an external matter of indifference to [philosophy] but immanent to its idea”, its “integral, nonconceptually mimetic moment of *expression*. [being] objectified only by *presentation in language*”¹⁴.

From this point of view, it is probably true that it is “impossible to understand Adorno’s ideas without understanding *the ways in which he presents them*, that is, his *style*, and without understanding the reasons for his preoccupation with style”¹⁵. In fact, his particular dialectical approach leads him to reject any sharp disjunction between *what* is expressed and *how* it is expressed, i.e. between *form* and *content*¹⁶, and claim that the

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Adorno 1990, p. 18.

¹³ Ibid., p. 55.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 18 (our italics).

¹⁵ Rose 1978, p. 11 (our italics).

¹⁶ In fact, as we read in Adorno’s early *Theses on the Language of the Philosopher*: “The distinction between form and content in philosophical language is not a disjunction in an eternity without history. [...] It is based on the view that concepts and, with them, words are abbreviations of a multiplicity of characteristics whose unity is constituted solely by

form of presentation is not something external to the matter itself, but rather belongs constitutionally to it.

II.

Now, with regard to Adorno's peculiar way of writing it has been noticed that he "wrote in a variety of styles, some more, some less abstruse", and that he "is, however, notorious for his esoteric style"¹⁷. Among the several stylistic strategies adopted by him, one might recall the use of "impersonal and passive constructions", as well as other "stylistic strategies [...] directed at the experience of the reader" and described by him "as 'shock', 'exaggeration', 'fantasy' or 'provocative formulations'"¹⁸. In addition to this, I would like to point out his constant and close attention for some apparently 'marginal' or less important aspects of the text-composition, such as: the choice of titles¹⁹, the use of punctuation marks and foreign words²⁰, the importance of corrections and erasures²¹, the usefulness of dictation — which "makes it possible for the writer, in the earliest phases of production, to manoeuvre himself into the position of critic"²² —, and even the pagination and binding of books²³. Finally, it is worth noticing that Adorno often disregards "the norms of the standard philosophical argument", choosing to put "in its place [...] the mode, half way between argument and trope", of the chiasmus:

consciousness. [...] Words [however] are never merely signs of what is thought under them, but rather history erupts into words, establishing their truth-character. The share of history in the word unfailingly determines the choice of every word because history and truth meet in the word" (Adorno 2007, pp. 35-36). The same issue is taken up in many later writings of Adorno, such as the *Aesthetic theory* for example, where the idea of the dialectical entwinement of form and content is 'applied' to the interpretation of artworks (see Adorno 2004, pp. 185-192).

¹⁷ Rose 1978, p. 12.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 12-13.

¹⁹ See Adorno 1992, pp. 3-11.

²⁰ See Adorno 1991, pp. 91-97 and 174-184.

²¹ Adorno 2005, § 51, pp. 85-87.

²² Ibid., § 135, p. 212.

²³ See Adorno 1992, pp. 20-31.

Adorno usually inverts the term of the second of two antithesis in order to turn them into a chiasmus, thus: AB BA. Each antithesis is usually a tautology which has importance in itself. The use of chiasmus stresses the transmutation of processes into entities which is the fundamental theme of Adorno's work. He presents this theme in this way in order to avoid turning processes into entities himself. Sometimes he uses chiasmus directly, for example, 'the subject is the object, the object is the subject'; or, 'history is nature, nature is history'. At other times it can be seen to inform the whole structure of a piece. His article on static and dynamic as sociological categories depends overall on the development of the chiasmus 'static presupposes dynamic, dynamic results in static'²⁴.

From a theoretical point of view, it must be said that the ground of Adorno's mistrust against the traditional presentation-forms of philosophy probably resides in his basic mistrust against philosophy's traditional demand for a systematic comprehension of the real. In particular, one of the reasons why he dismisses the canonical form of the philosophical treatise is that "the idea of the master-work [...] reflects the idea of creation and totality": "A continuous presentation [contradicts] material that is full of antagonisms", since it "assumes the givenness of totality and thereby the identity of subject and object, and it suggests that man is in control of totality"²⁵.

Consequently, a philosophy grounded on the unshakable conviction that "The whole is the false"²⁶ would need alternative forms of presentation that shake off, already on a stylistic level, "the illusion of a simple, basically logical world that so perfectly suits the defense of the status quo"²⁷. Even Adorno's most 'systematic' or treatise-like works, indeed, seem to aim at deconstructing the systematic building from within, rather than at erecting a new philosophical edifice. And so, for example, with reference to the Introduction to *Negative Dialectics* it has been noticed that this

rund fünfzig Seiten lange Kapitel kennt keine Herleitung einer These, nicht deren schrittweise Exposition und Begründung, sondern

²⁴ Rose 1978, p. 13.

²⁵ Adorno 1984, pp. 165, 163 and 159.

²⁶ Adorno 2005, § 29, p. 50.

²⁷ Adorno 1984, p. 163.

präsentiert sich als ein kunstvoll gewirktes Netz aus einigen wenigen, ständig variierten Gedankenmotiven. Nicht genug damit, daß hier jede aufsteigende Linie einer Argumentation zu fehlen scheint, wird auch graphisch der Strom des Textes kaum unterbrochen; nur an insgesamt drei Stellen sind zwischen den stets sehr umfangreichen Abschnitten größere Abstände gelassen, so daß ein gewisser Neuanfang suggeriert wird. Schon dem äußeren Erscheinungsbild nach ähnelt die 'Einleitung' daher weniger einem wissenschaftlichem Text als einem Stück moderner Prosa; die Sätze wiederholen ständig nur dieselben paar Grundgedanken, variieren sie um immer neue Nuancen, ohne eine These zu begründen oder ein Argument voranzutreiben²⁸.

Anyway, apart from *Negative Dialectics* and *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique. Studies in Husserl and the Phenomenological Antinomies*, most of Adorno's works were written in alternative presentation forms and styles. As I'll try to show in the next paragraph, the most important ones were aphorisms, essays, and the so called 'paratactical composition'.

III.

Every Adorno reader certainly knows *Minima moralia*, a collection of 153 "ingenious aphorisms" and "vivid scenes taken from [...] apparently unassuming or remote subjects" that "fascinated [...] even Thomas Mann"²⁹. As is testified by a letter dated October 31, 1945 "in which he told his parents about these aphorisms", in taking the decision to adopt such a fragmentary form Adorno was mostly "inspired by a renewed reading of Nietzsche"³⁰. Apart from these biographical circumstances, however, the guiding philosophical reason why he adopted this kind of presentation form consisted in the fact that

the attempt to present aspects of our shared philosophy from the standpoint of subjective experience, necessitates that the parts do not altogether satisfy the demands of the philosophy of the which

²⁸ Honneth 2006, p. 11.

²⁹ Müller-Doohm 2005, p. 344.

³⁰ Ibid., 304.

they are nevertheless a part. The disconnected and non-binding character of the form, the renunciation of explicit theoretical cohesion, are meant as one expression of this. [...] If today the subject is vanishing, aphorisms take upon themselves the duty 'to consider the evanescent itself as essential'³¹.

Hence, it comes as no surprise if "the striking aphorism" has been defined "the most appropriate form of presentation" for Adorno's philosophy: namely, the only form "capable of expressing in language his secret ideal of knowledge"³². As it's been noticed, indeed, *Minima moralia's*

fragmented, aphoristic style was no accident: to Adorno negation and the truth it precariously preserved could be expressed only in tentative, incomplete ways. Here Critical Theory's fundamental distrust of systematizing was carried to its extreme. The location of philosophical insight was no longer to be found in abstract, coherent, architectonic systems, as in Hegel's day, but rather in subjective, private reflection³³.

Beside aphorisms, however, other forms of presentation played an important role in Adorno's production. One of them, as I said, is surely represented by the essay form, as testified by the simple fact that among the twenty volumes of his collected works, at least eleven are collections of essays. In the programmatic writing entitled *The Essay as Form*, Adorno explains the peculiar features and general philosophical significance of this form. He claims indeed that "the essay provokes resistance" because it doesn't dress "itself up with the nobility of the universal, the everlasting, and today — when possible — with the primal", and because "it is reminiscent of the intellectual freedom that, from the time of an unsuccessful and lukewarm Enlightenment, [...] all the way to the present has never really emerged"³⁴. From this point of view, the essay somehow transgresses "the orthodoxy of thought", and "the law of [its] innermost form [...] is heresy"³⁵.

³¹ Adorno 2005, pp. 18 and 16.

³² Habermas 1994, p. 225.

³³ Jay 1996, p. 277.

³⁴ Adorno 1984, pp. 151-152.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

Quite interestingly, Adorno then attributes to the essay form some basic features of his own negative dialectical way of philosophizing. For example, he explains that “Its concepts are neither deduced from any first principle nor do they come full circle and arrive at a final principle”³⁶; that “the essay, in accordance with its idea, draws the fullest consequences from the critique of the system”, “does justice to the consciousness of the non-identity”, “does not strive for closed, deductive or inductive, construction”, and “takes the anti-systematic impulse into its own procedure”³⁷. At the same time, the essay (as well as negative dialectics) “is not situated in simple opposition to discursive procedure. It is not unlogical; rather it obeys logical criteria in so far as the totality of its sentences must fit together coherently”, but “it develops thoughts differently from discursive logic”³⁸. Given these basic assumptions, Adorno is thus legitimated in defining the essay “the critical form *par excellence*; [...] it is the critique of ideology”, even “more dialectical than the dialectic as it articulates itself”³⁹.

It thinks in fragments just as reality is fragmented and gains its unity only by moving through the fissures, rather than by smoothing them over. [...] Its totality, the unity of a form thoroughly constructed in itself, is that of non-totality. [...] Its weakness testifies to the non-identity that it has to express, as well as to that excess of intention over its object, and thereby points out to that utopia which is blocked out by the classification of the world into the eternal and the transitory. In the emphatic essay, thought gets rid of the traditional idea of truth. [...] The essay becomes true in its progress, which drives it beyond itself [...]. In this the very method of the essay expresses the utopian intention⁴⁰.

Finally, apropos of the ‘paratactical composition’, I would like to point out that, unlike aphorisms and essays, this stylistic solution represents a sort of original invention of Adorno. An invention of decisive importance for

³⁶ Ibid., p. 152.

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 157-158 and 160.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 169.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 166.

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 164-165, 159 and 161.

him, indeed, as testified by his decision to adopt it for his last, great and unfinished work, namely the *Aesthetic Theory* posthumously published in 1970.

Adorno's basic concept of a negative, i.e. non-conciliatory and non-systematic kind of dialectics, led him indeed to experimenting ways of thinking and writing based on parataxis rather than on hypotaxis, i.e. on coordinating rather than subordinating the elements of the speech⁴¹. As a matter of fact, while the former perfectly embodies the basic aim of negative dialectics "to break the compulsion to achieve identity"⁴² — that is, to let the non-identical and the non-conceptual be 'freely', but at the same time not irrationally, expressed without being subsumed under the category of the identity —, the latter instead exemplifies the intrinsic violent nature of traditional logics grounded on "the all-subjugating identity principle"⁴³.

One of the best explanations of what he meant by 'paratactical composition', or even 'spider's web', is probably given in *Minima moralia*, where we read:

Dialectical thinking [...] means that an argument should take on the pungency of a thesis and a thesis contain within itself the fullness of its reasoning. All bridging concepts, all links and logical auxiliary operations that are not a part of the matter itself, all secondary developments not saturated with the experience of the object, should be discarded. In a philosophical text all the propositions ought to be equally close to the centre⁴⁴.

In turn, one of the best explanations of the 'constellation' (another guiding concept of Adorno's philosophy, tightly linked to that of parataxis), can be found in the essay *Skoteinos, or How to Read Hegel*. Here, indeed, we read:

The specificity of philosophy as a configuration of moments is qualitatively different from a lack of ambiguity in every particular moment, even within the configuration, because the configuration itself

⁴¹ On the notion of parataxis, see Adorno's long and complex homonym essay (in Adorno 1992, pp. 109-149), where the concept provides the basis for a detailed analysis of Hölderlin's poetry.

⁴² Adorno 1990, p. 157.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 320.

⁴⁴ Adorno 2005, § 44, p. 71.

is more, and other, than the quintessence of its moments. Constellation is not system. Everything does not become resolved, everything does not come out even; rather, one moment sheds light on the other, and the figures that the individual moments form together are specific signs and a legible script⁴⁵.

The adoption of the ‘paratactical composition’, however, was anything but easy. As Adorno’s biographer refers, “The planning of a volume on aesthetics to appear in Suhrkamp goes back to 1960. Publication was envisaged for 1964”⁴⁶. The *Editors’ Afterword* to the book shows that Adorno started to dictate a first draft of the *Aesthetic Theory* on May 4, 1961, while the last version he left to us dated June 16, 1969. Meanwhile he had repeatedly changed the book’s structure and style, shifting from a first draft articulated in short paragraphs, to a second one he turned to write on October 25, 1966: “The division into paragraphs gave way to one by chapters. [...] Dictation continued throughout 1967”, and according to a diary note the “‘rough dictation of *Aesthetic Theory* was finished’ on December 25, 1967”⁴⁷.

Anyway, even this version bears little resemblance to the one which was later published, since “it turned out that this time the second draft was itself only a provisional version”⁴⁸. So, Adorno shifted from the subdivision in chapters to a continuous text, whose inner articulation was only granted by white spaces in the page, and in summer 1968 he said that the book was almost ready in draft form. Nonetheless, Adorno was still unsatisfied, and “months later he was still saying, in a letter to Marcuse” dated January 24, 1969, that he was “desperately burying [himself] in [his] aesthetics book” and “had never tried to write a book in which ‘the arrangement of the material presented such difficulties [...]’”⁴⁹.

A few passages from Adorno’s epistolary probably represent the best proof of the unforeseen problems pertaining to “the organization of the

⁴⁵ Adorno 1993, p. 109.

⁴⁶ Müller-Doohm 2005, p. 610 note.

⁴⁷ Adorno and Tiedemann 2004, p. 461.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Müller-Doohm 2005, p. 470.

text and above all [...] the relation of the presentation to what is presented”⁵⁰ that he had to face. Here, indeed, he writes:

It is interesting that in working there obtrudes from the content various implications for the form that I long expected but that now indeed astonish me. It is simply that from my theorem that there is no philosophical first principle, it now also results that one cannot build an argumentative structure that follows the usual progressive succession of steps, but rather that one must assemble the whole out of a series of partial complexes that are, so to speak, of equal weight and concentrically arranged all on the same level; their constellation, not their succession, must yield the idea⁵¹.

And still in another letter, he says that “the difficulties in the presentation of *Aesthetic theory*” actually consist in this:

that a book’s almost ineluctable movement from antecedent to consequent proved so incompatible with the content that for this reason any organization in the traditional sense — which up until now I have continued to follow (even in *Negative Dialectics*) — proved impracticable. The book must, so to speak, be written in equally weighted, paratactical parts that are arranged around a midpoint that they express through their constellation⁵².

IV.

After this analysis of Adorno’s search for style, let’s make now a very short digression on the way in which the philosophy-*and*-literature relation, on the whole, has characterized the Western tradition.

It is a well known fact, indeed, that already the pre-Socratic thinkers revealed their truth by poetic means, writing poems conventionally known as *On nature*. Let’s think of, for example, Anaximander’s saying⁵³, whose

⁵⁰ Adorno and Tiedemann 2004, p. 462.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ “The Non-limited is the original material of existing things; further, the source from which existing things derive their existence is also that to which they return at their de-

dark, attractive, and semi-poetical style is explicitly pointed out by Simplicius⁵⁴ and Teophrastus, who “criticizes Anaximander [...] for speaking more poetically than it is necessary”⁵⁵. Or let’s recall Parmenides’ poem, whose proem presents a mythical narration that Werner Jaeger even compared to Hesiod’s *Theogony*⁵⁶. But one might also mention Plato: on the one side, he condemned indeed the traditional Greek *Paideia* based on “the untrue stories” which “Homer and Hesiod both used to tell”⁵⁷; on the other side, however, in his dialogues he showed an indisputable poetical and dramatic talent⁵⁸. And one could recall Aristotle as well, who notoriously evaluated poetry as even “more philosophical and more elevated than history, since poetry relates more of the universal, while history relates particulars”⁵⁹.

In general, I think we could probably agree that from the origins of Greek philosophy until the modern and contemporary ages, most thinkers have considered their discipline as something quite different from poetry and literature: that is, as something concerning truth and the very essence of the real, rather than ‘fiction’ and the mere surface or appearance of things. However, after Romanticism and above all during the last century something has changed, and many thinkers and writers have emphasized the resemblances, rather than the differences, between poetry, literature and philosophy. Let’s think of, for example, Friedrich Nietzsche (with his famous definition of truth as “A movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished”⁶⁰), Martin Heidegger (who, after his famous ‘turn’ of the

struction, according to necessity; for they give justice and make reparation to one another for their injustice, according to the arrangement of Time” (Fragment nr. 12 B 1 in the Diels-Kranz Collection: quoted from Freeman 1948, p. 29).

⁵⁴ Fragment nr. 12 A 9 in the Diels-Kranz Collection.

⁵⁵ Heidegger 2002, p. 249.

⁵⁶ Jaeger 1947, p. 93.

⁵⁷ Plato, *The Republic*, II, 377 d 5-6, p. 62. On this particular issue, see among others Gadamer 1980.

⁵⁸ I owe this remark, as well as the preceding reference to Werner Jaeger’s interpretation of Parmenides, to Gentili 2003, pp. 16-17.

⁵⁹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, IX, 1451 b 5-7, p. 59.

⁶⁰ Nietzsche 2006, p. 117.

early 1930s, viewed poetical language as a precious resource for the development of a new kind of non-metaphysical thought), and many other philosophers belonging to most of the leading traditions of contemporary thought.

As it's been noticed, indeed: "Our discipline seems so singular a cross-breed of art and science", and it is so hard to "think of a field of writing as fertile as philosophy has been in generating forms of literary expression", that "it is somewhat surprising that only lately has it seemed imperative to some that philosophy be viewed as literature: surprising and somewhat alarming"⁶¹. In fact, the history of Western philosophy has been, among other things,

a history of dialogues, lecture notes, fragments, poems, examinations, essays, aphorisms, meditations, discourses, hymns, critiques, letters, summae, encyclopedias, testaments, commentaries, investigations, tractatuses, *Vorlesungen*-, *Aufbauen*-, prolegomena, parerga, *pensées*, sermons, supplements, confessions, sententiae, inquiries, diaries, outlines, sketches, commonplace books, [...] and innumerable forms which have no generic identity or which themselves constitute distinct genres: *Holzwege*-, Grammatologies, Unscientific Postscripts, Genealogies, Natural Histories, Phenomenologies, and whatever the *World as Will and Idea* may be or the posthumous corpus of Husserl, or the later writings of Derrida, and forgetting the standard sorts of literary forms — e.g., novels, plays, and the like, which philosophers have turned to when gifted those ways⁶².

Now, regardless of the different opinions one may have on this subject, what we know for sure is that Richard Rorty represents the most radical, resolute, and consistent interpreter of the philosophy-as-literature line of thought. Already in his Introduction to the 1967 influential anthology *The Linguistic Turn*-, indeed, Rorty "envisioned six possibilities for the future of philosophy": among them "the later Heidegger's poetic meditation on the problem of being"⁶³. Since the very beginning of his philosophical career, then, Rorty focused on the idea that philosophy *could* (or even *should*)

⁶¹ Danto 1986, pp. 135-136 and 141.

⁶² Ibid., 141.

⁶³ West 1989, p. 196.

“cease to be an argumentative discipline, and grow closer to poetry”⁶⁴, that “the science/poetry/philosophy distinctions we have lived with are outmoded”⁶⁵.

According to him, during the 20th century three main conceptions of the aim of philosophizing were developed, namely a scientific, a poetic, and a pragmatist-political conception. The second and the third views are to be understood as reactions to the “familiar ‘scientific’ answer [...] to the question of how we should conceive our relation to the Western philosophical tradition” which was “common to Husserl and his positivist opponents”⁶⁶, and can be respectively associated to the names of Heidegger and Dewey. With Heidegger, Rorty thus “turns away from the scientist to the poet”, and claims “that the philosophical tradition needs to be reappropriated by being seen as a series of poetic achievements”⁶⁷.

Furthermore, Rorty invites us to consider metaphysics as “that genre of literature which attempted to create unique, total, closed vocabularies”: namely, “as an inauthentic form of poetry, poetry which thinks of itself as antipoetry, a sequence of metaphors whose authors thought of them as escapes from metaphoricality”⁶⁸. From this point of view, he praises “a general turn against theory and towards narrative”⁶⁹, urges the adoption of “the idea of a seamless, undifferentiated ‘general text’”⁷⁰, and accordingly places thinkers like Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida within the context of a more general tendency to *level off genre distinction* between philosophy and all other kinds of writing. This obviously matches his own view of the relation between philosophy and literature, clearly expressed by the idea that philosophy “is delimited, as is any literary genre, not by form or matter, but by a tradition — a family romance involving, e.g., Father Parmenides, honest old Uncle Kant, and bad brother Derrida”⁷¹.

Finally, Rorty sometimes points out the existence of a sort of primacy of literature over philosophy itself, given its greater importance in social

⁶⁴ Rorty 1992, p. 34.

⁶⁵ Rorty 2006, p. 21.

⁶⁶ Rorty 1991b, p. 9.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., pp. 105 and 37.

⁶⁹ Rorty 1989, p. XVI.

⁷⁰ Rorty 1991b, p. 87.

⁷¹ Rorty 1982, p. 92.

and political matters. He explains indeed that literary texts may help us discover “more resourceful ways for describing [ourselves] or altering [our] vocabularies for a variety of purposes”, and thus may give us the chance “to enlarge ourselves by enlarging our sensitivity and our imagination”⁷². In other words, “the poets and novelists help us become friendlier and more tolerant”, and “expand our range of sympathy” in a way that philosophers cannot do, and this is precisely what constitutes literature’s “contributions to moral progress”⁷³. Hence, according to him, we should pay more attention “to our novelists than to our philosophers or to our poets”, and instead of thinking “that philosophy tells [us] how to read nonphilosophy” we should rather “read philosophical treatises in the same way [we] read poems — in search of excitement and hope”⁷⁴.

V.

After this digression, let’s return now to Adorno. On the one side, as I said, he always paid great attention to the ‘stylistic’ dimension of philosophical texts, and thus to the close relation between philosophy *and* literature. On the other side, however, he never accepted the idea of philosophy *as* literature, that is, the idea of reducing it to just a kind of writing — though he obviously couldn’t know Rorty’s ideas, but rather confronted himself with thinkers like Heidegger.

To be sure, my aim here is neither to provide a comparison between Adorno and Rorty — since this would obviously require a close examination of their different backgrounds and deep philosophical presuppositions⁷⁵ — , nor to linger on the latter’s plausible yet questionable read-

⁷² Rorty 2006, p. 124.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 68.

⁷⁴ Rorty 1998, p. 137.

⁷⁵ It is a well known fact, indeed, that Frankfurter critical theorists and American pragmatists never had good relations, as testified for example by Horkheimer’s claim that “pragmatism and empiricism and the lack of genuine philosophy [were] some of the foremost reasons which [were] responsible for the crisis which civilization would have faced even if the war had not come” (Horkheimer’s letter to Pollock dated June 9, 1943: quoted in Wiggershaus 1995, p. 344). Whereas Rorty, for his part, when asked about philosophers like Marcuse and Adorno, says that although they immigrated to the United

ings of Heidegger and Derrida⁷⁶, which somehow underlie his provocative and subversive views. Rather, I will try to make use of this contrast to highlight some interesting features of Adorno's dialectical approach to the philosophy *and/as* literature question, and show why, in my eye, it provides a richer and better understanding of this issue than the mutually contradicting views (exclusionists VS. reductionists) that have probably been predominant for most part of the Western tradition.

In general, I think it should be recognized, on the one hand, that many aspects of the question concerning philosophy *and* literature are perhaps illuminated by Rorty's pragmatic interpretation and ironical approach; on the other hand, however, there is a great deal that is wanting in this line of interpretation. As it's been noticed, indeed, while the deconstructionist-textualist-neopragmatic theses hold "that philosophy must be treated as a genre of literature because it is ineluctably metaphoric, [...] in fact it only becomes interestingly metaphoric when it is first decided to treat it as literature"⁷⁷. In other words, "philosophical texts are kept alive as metaphors when they have long since stopped seeming plausible as structural hypotheses, a tribute to their vivacity and power, their status as literature being a consolation prize for failing to be true"⁷⁸.

Hence approaches like Rorty's perhaps run the risk not only of appearing untenable, but also of dissolving both philosophy *and* literature into a mere play of forms. Whereas in Adorno's view, as we have seen, it is indeed impossible, or at least mistaken, to reduce a philosophical writing (as well as a work of art) to either form or content, i.e. to separate abruptly forms from contents, such a separation being the symptom of a non-dialectical and hypostatizing way of thinking. In Adorno's eye, indeed, the attempt to level off genre distinction between philosophy and all other kinds of writing would collide with philosophy's intrinsic demand for an objec-

States in the 1940s, "they never noticed America, and the things they used to say about America were just absurd. They lived here in exile without really believing that this was a real country" (Rorty 1994, p. 111)

⁷⁶ On these topics, see for instance Guignon 1985-86, and Fabbri 2008, according to whom Rorty tries to "domesticate Derrida and to make him pacific, restrained, inoffensive. To turn a monster into a pet. A puppy" (Fabbri 2008, p. 126).

⁷⁷ Danto 1986, p. 158.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

tive (even if negative, fragile, and historically-determined) truth⁷⁹. A demand that deflationists like Rorty, for their part, explicitly debunk, when they say that there is “less to say about truth than philosophers had usually believed”, because truth simply is not “a goal of inquiry”⁸⁰. From this point of view, while Adorno still aimed at ‘philosophizing in a strong sense’⁸¹, Rorty explicitly attempts to provide “examples of what a group of contemporary Italian philosophers have called ‘weak thought’”⁸².

All this has obviously wide and profound consequences on still other aspects of the two thinkers’ philosophical discourses. For example, while Adorno still aims at a critical rescue of metaphysics, and sharply criticizes “the pragmatism that dissolves metaphysics a priori”⁸³, Rorty’s explicitly attempts to ‘demetaphysicize’ the Western culture, where metaphysics is simply understood by him as “the endless attempt to make the intellect sovereign over the imagination”⁸⁴. On the whole, it’s been noticed that philosophers like Derrida and Rorty somehow seem to conceive

philosophical works [as] all play and no work (they do not, that is, seek to produce that effect called ‘truth’). Philosophy is turned into a form of ‘literature’ (‘a kind of writing’, in Rorty’s words), i.e., *fiction*. Philosophy’s world is but a dream world. When everything becomes textuality and intertextuality and nothing but, the real world of human concerns and human praxis vanishes into the black hole of free-floating signifiers. This is indeed nihilism, a joyful nihilism perhaps, but nihilism nonetheless⁸⁵.

Anyway, regardless of such complex and general themes, what matters for our specific purposes is that Adorno would have probably considered unacceptable Rorty’s aestheticization of philosophy — an aestheticization

⁷⁹ Adorno, indeed, attributes “a temporal core to truth instead of contrasting truth as something invariable to the movement of history” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, p. XI), and even speaks of the “fragility of truth” (Adorno 1990, pp. 33-35). Nonetheless, he always maintains that “Truth is objective, not plausible” (Ibid., p. 41), and thus sharply criticizes every form of relativism (Ibid., pp. 35-37).

⁸⁰ Rorty 1998b, pp. 21 and 27.

⁸¹ See Adorno 1973-74, chapter XXV.

⁸² Rorty 1991, p. 6.

⁸³ Adorno 1990, p. 373.

⁸⁴ Rorty 1998a, p. 138.

⁸⁵ Madison 1991.

which, by the way, is only ‘theoretical’, since ‘in practice’ he always maintained a simpler, more concise, less impressive and less sophisticated prose than Adorno (not to mention Heidegger or Derrida). It is not by accident that the opening lines of Adorno’s 1933 book on Kierkegaard peremptorily claim: “Every time someone tried to understand the works of philosophers as if they were poetries, their intrinsic truth content was missing”, since interpreting philosophy *as* literature tears it away “from the standard of the real” and thus “deprives it of the possibility of adequate criticism”⁸⁶. And in the abovementioned *Der Essay als Form*, he writes: “When philosophy supposes that by borrowing from art it can do away with objectifying thought and its history [...], it only approximates a washed-out pseudo-culture. [...] Under the spell of such developments, language [...] approximates pseudo-art”⁸⁷.

To be sure, Adorno argues that “although art and science have separated from each other in history, their opposition is not to be hypostatized”⁸⁸, which could seemingly appear similar to some of the philosophy-*as*-literature thesis. But then he adds: “the separation of knowledge from art is irreversible”, and hence “the internal boundaries between art and science will not be obviated by good will or over-arching planning”⁸⁹. This implicitly testifies his intention to preserve the specificity of each of these cultural genres, and thus his contrast with a view like Rorty’s, according to whom it is now time to hypothesize “an intellectual life” which “would not make much of the line between ‘philosophy’ and something else, nor try to allot distinctive cultural roles to art, religion, science, and philosophy”⁹⁰.

Given these assumptions, it comes as no surprise that Adorno sharply criticizes both those philosophers who, like Heidegger, abandon philosophy in favour of a sort of pseudo-poetry (which, by the way, is the same reason why Rorty appreciates Heidegger!), and those thinkers who, like the positivists, show great indifference to the form of presentation. Indeed, he argues that “it would be better just to liquidate philosophy once and for all and to dissolve it into particular disciplines than to come to its

⁸⁶ Adorno 1979, p. 9.

⁸⁷ Adorno 1984, pp. 154-155.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 156-157.

⁹⁰ Rorty 1991a, p. 76.

aid with a poetic ideal which means nothing more than a poor ornamental cover for faulty thinking”⁹¹. At the same time, however, he claims that the positivist indifference to the formal dimension runs the risk of leading to both stereotyped forms and ‘dogmatized’ contents.

According to a positivist procedure — he writes indeed — the content, once rigidly modelled on the protocol sentence, should be indifferent to its presentation. Presentation should be conventional, not demanded by the matter itself. Every impulse of expression — as far as the instinct of scientific purism is concerned — endangers an objectivity that is said to spring forth after the subtraction of the subject [...]. In its allergy to forms, as pure accidents, the scientific mind approaches the stupidly dogmatic mind. Positivism’s irresponsibly bungled language fancies itself to be responsibly objective and adequate to the matter at hand; the reflection on the spiritual becomes the privilege of the spiritless⁹².

In the end, on the basis of all these critical remarks, I think that Adorno’s ‘solution’ makes it possible to conceive the peculiar standing-in-between science and art of philosophy, and thus to avoid some traditional dichotomies. Dichotomies which perhaps even an anti-dichotomic and groundbreaking thinker *par excellence* like Rorty, against his own intentions, does not fully succeed in getting rid of. This is the case, for example, of his sharp polarization of two opposite and irreducible ways of philosophizing: *either* “philosophy-cum-science [as] paradigmatic human activity”⁹³, *or* philosophy as metaphor, fiction, poetry, and novel. Since the very beginning, instead, Adorno has aimed to put together (or better to merge, to fuse) argument *and* experience, stringency *and* expression, objectivity *and* subjectivity, conceptuality *and* metaphoricity. With regard to his philosophy and his style, it’s been correctly noticed that “Inasmuch as it is rigorous, [it] is aesthetic, and inasmuch as it is aesthetic, it is rigorous”⁹⁴. From this point of view, the relation between philosophy *and* literature, for Adorno,

⁹¹ Adorno 2000b, p. 30.

⁹² Adorno 1984, p. 153.

⁹³ Rorty 1991b, p. 36.

⁹⁴ Gandesha 2006, p. 5 note (To be true, this statement originally refers only to Adorno’s style. Nevertheless, I think that it can be ‘generalized’ and applied to his whole concept of philosophy).

is not to be conceived as *either* mutually exclusive *or* reductively inclusive. Rather, I think he would agree with the idea that “to claim resolutely the togetherness” of philosophy *and* literature “doesn’t imply that the former is reduced to the latter”, since “if it is true that philosophy is made of the very same stuff as literature, [...] this does not make it identifiable with literature”⁹⁵.

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⁹⁵ Givone 2003, pp. 10-11.

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