

Aesthetics without Autonomy: Heidegger and Adorno

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ABSTRACT. This paper aims to show that the Modern association of aesthetics' dignity with its perfectly autonomous nature — an association that developed through the eighteenth century and culminated with the establishment of such autonomy in Kant's third *Critique* — makes in fact impossible an authentic recognition of aesthetics' dignity. From here, I will also attempt to demonstrate that both Heidegger's and Adorno's aesthetic thought do justice to their contemporaneous character by assuming this fact and accordingly relinquishing the idea of perfect autonomy. Lastly, it will have to be seen if this step allows, in the thought of those authors struggling with the premises of Modernity, for the restitution to aesthetics of an authentic dignity.

1. The Aesthetic and the Modern Subject

I will start with a brief reflection on Kant's and Hegel's aesthetic thought, provided that they reveal in the first place how the establishment of a nexus between aesthetics' dignity and its autonomy from theory and action is in truth associated with the conviction that the human *logos*, the human and finite reason, is the only true basis for freedom and valid knowledge; ultimately, with the confidence in the Modern self. At the same time, they also show the fate which awaits aesthetics from such a perspective.

It is undeniable that for Kant reason rules the spheres of theory and practice. True knowledge is for him — as for all Moderns since Descartes — that which is formed by the representations of the rational self, in other words, by the representations which — one way or another — abide by

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the law of reason. In particular, the only valid knowledge is that which is shaped by reason in agreement with its forms and its rules or concepts, that is, all the judgements in which reason is “determinant”. And freedom is, concomitantly, understood — also as in all Moderns — as rational autonomy. But autonomy, beyond its correlate of independence from others, is also fundamentally understood as a submission to the (moral) law of reason: it is the submission to that law which, clearly, allows the individual to discover his own truth and therefore to break free from all that is not his true self, becoming autonomous. However, it is well known that Kant also incarnates the culmination of the endeavour to establish the dignity of aesthetics, especially when he associates such dignity with the necessity of recognising aesthetics’ autonomy from the spheres of theory and practice. That is to say, the recognition of aesthetics’ dignity depends, in the thinker who concludes the Enlightenment, on its independence from the sphere where, according to his own thinking, *determinant* reason rules¹. Now, what I am really interested in highlighting from that notion is that, precisely because of all those factors, because it is understood that aesthetics can only be valued if it is determined as autonomous and because at the same time the sphere from which it thus needs to part is that which holds all forms of objectivity, because — to put it differently — validity and truth can only be found where the *logos* rules, aesthetics’ sought dignity seems doomed to be lost². Aesthetics’ total autonomy from determinant reason undoubtedly involves the threat of relegating it to a merely subjective space, with value only within the private sphere: if we may, a space of irrationality³.

Such a result seems to be avoided from the outset by Hegel’s aesthetic thought, which, besides, never renounces the confidence in the Modern reason, in its legality (even if such legality is determined differently from that of Kant), nor, at least apparently, the assumption that the recognition of a sphere’s dignity involves the acknowledgement of its autonomy.

¹ The aesthetic judgement is in fact a reflective and not a determinant one: see Kant, 1790, Einführung.

² The Kantian assumption of the subjective, “aconceptual”, character of the aesthetic judgement can be found in Kant 1790, §§ 6, 9, 33.

³ At this point, as is well known, Gadamer and Adorno agree: see Gadamer 1960, pp. 92 ff. and Adorno 1970, pp. 526-528.

Understanding art as a dimension of the absolute spirit, as an objective expression of the Idea (of reason), Hegel effectively confers upon aesthetics all the objectivity from which it was deprived by Kant's conceptualisation. And as a result, he restores its dignity: as an expression of rational contents, art is also a space of truth; its content is true and objective⁴. Moreover, *prima facie* and in keeping with Hegel's own ideas, such conception doesn't entail the surrender of its autonomy. Of course, due to the dialectical nature of the spirit, of Hegel's reason, all the dimensions or "stages" in which it is expressed, depend on all the others, but aesthetics isn't less autonomous than politics, history or religion: from Hegel's premises there is no room for a higher level of autonomy than that of which also benefits aesthetics; it makes no sense to speak of an autonomy *from* reason when reason is precisely the absolute. And at this point the other Hegelian insight that I would like to highlight becomes apparent: this new conception, that now reinstates aesthetics' dignity, determines the *logos* itself as absolute. Hegel makes patent that true knowledge, science, is nothing but the very movement of the (rational) concept, and freedom's only possible origin is the association with the (dynamic) legality of reason, with the true nature of the self: that is the only imaginable form of autonomy. It thus becomes obvious that aesthetics' dignity doesn't stem from the recognition of its specific difference, of what in art transcends the *logos* in a way or another, but precisely from its internal and essential connection with the *logos*. That is to say, it becomes clear that aesthetics' recovery of its dignity *only apparently* respects its autonomy; in truth, it pays the price of being changed into a mere "means" of expression of the *logos* that — given its conceptual nature — will only feel "at home" in philosophy, in theory⁵. In fact, the value in Hegel of arts and aesthetics proceeds solely from its "ideal" nature, that is, from its capacity to express adequately the ideal content that in philosophy will at last be truly free⁶. Or, to put it differently,

⁴ The Hegelian arguments against the "subjective" and "formalist" aesthetics, such as the Kantian one, can be found in Hegel 1830, § 41; Hegel 1842, "Erster Teil". For the connection that he establishes between art and truth and the objective determination that this way, the aesthetic and aesthetics gain, S. Hegel 1842, p. 140.

⁵ For arguments that show the dominion of the "idea" in the Hegelian art or its "idealistic" condition S. Hegel 1842, for instance, p. 132, 140.

⁶ What the famous dictum of art's death means (S. Hegel 1842, p. 25) is nothing else

art's value is based only on the submission to its other, to the concept, of its specific difference, its "aesthetic" and sensible nature. In short, aesthetics' newfound dignity in reality stems solely from its subordination to the *logos*, which has been made absolute. And at this point it becomes inevitable to hold doubts on the authenticity of such dignity: does it make any sense to speak of the dignity of a sphere when its very source springs from its association with its other rather than from its own nature, rather than from its aesthetic or sensible quality?

And nonetheless, from this viewpoint, it could well be said that we were led to such a result by Kant's own initiative. Let's recall: Kant's establishment of Modern reason as the only source of objectivity and validity, together with his claim of aesthetics' autonomy, forbade him *malgré lui* consolidating firmly aesthetics' dignity. Now, at this point we can see that Hegel does nothing but avoid that undesirable conclusion while respecting Kant's "rationalism" or "modernism", even radicalising this Kantian commitment by elevating to absoluteness the Modern subject: reason⁷. In this way, and to phrase it differently, the "Hegel case" brings to light the fact that within the Modern program, from the faith in Modern reason as conceptual legality, the task of assuring aesthetics' dignity — which entails avoiding its devaluation to a merely subjective space — not only requires stealthily stripping it of its autonomy, betraying surreptitiously the association between dignity and autonomy that is also properly Kantian and Modern, but also turns out to be truly unachievable⁸. From such premises, either aesthetics assumes its "otherness" with respect to the *logos*, its true autonomy, in which case its value is reduced to that of the subjective and private pleasures — this is the case of Kant —, or it maintains only an autonomy that masks its effective subordination to the *logos* and thus turns its objectivity and worth into the dignity of a slave — that is the result

but the thesis that art is only worth, has only dignity, as long as it is "ideal (art)".

⁷ It could be said that Hegel's difference with Kant comes indeed from his very early, unconditional and complete, grasping all dimensions of the Kantian reason, commitment to the Kantian task: S., for instance, Hegel 1802, pp. 301 f. ss.

⁸ We assume in fact Hegel's exceptional brilliance regarding the comprehension of Modernity, regarding its possibilities as well as its limits. In other words: where Hegel turns out not to be able to fulfil a modern goal we should assume that it cannot be achieved from the modern premises at all.

of the Hegelian twist. In this way it now seems inevitable to conclude that aesthetics' dignity will not be reached neither while it is conceived as the absolute otherness of the *logos* nor while it is transformed into a mere expression of such *logos*.

2. Heidegger and Adorno Confronted with Modernity

Now, the fate of the aesthetic will henceforth be investigated in the work of Heidegger and Adorno considering they share two assumptions that, in line with what has been said, readily open the door to the possibility of reaching an authentic recognition of the dignity of the aesthetic. On the one hand, as contemporary, post-Hegelian or post-Modern thinkers, both accuse the shortfalls of the Modern *logos* and abandon, in different ways, the utopia of a human reason capable of conquering the whole of reality, of a human *logos* made absolute. Modern reason, to put it simply, ends up in both cases, and in undoubtedly very different ways, hurt forever by the acknowledgement of its limits. And on the other hand, both authors defend the dignity of the aesthetic abdicating explicitly (and not covertly, as occurred in Hegel's case) its perfect autonomy. That is to say, they openly break away from Kant's association between the dignity of the aesthetic and its independence from the spheres of "authentic" knowledge and "authentic" freedom; they break away from the ideal of the autonomy of the aesthetic. In light of the conclusions reached in the previous section, it will come as no surprise that we should hold encouraging expectations regarding the possibility of this new perspective to allow an authentic recognition of the value of the aesthetic.

(a) To begin with, we will provide a general outline of the way Heidegger and Adorno express their distance to the Modern understanding of the *logos*. It could be said without fear of oversimplifying that assuming the finitude of the Modern self, of its will and its knowledge, both authors are led to admit the necessity of thinking both knowledge and freedom "beyond themselves" or beyond such a subject, that is to say: beyond the limits imposed by the philosophy of subjectivity. Both conclude that truth or authentic knowledge will not emerge from the pure or "theoretic" reason that promises the truth in as much as assumes being able to represent "adequately" the whole of the real, but rather will only be possible under

the condition of its connection to its Other, of its Other being “heard of”. And concomitantly both abandon the association between freedom and the ideal of perfect autonomy, the ideal of subordination to reason through which the individual would attain the truth of his self and shake off all that doesn’t belong to his authentic (rational) self — either to be liberated from the others, as is still in part the case for Kant, or to become linked to the others, as is the case for Hegel. In few words: the fact that both of them acknowledge the finitude of the (modern) self means that both of them renounce to a self-sufficient, self-confident or autonomous self, that both of them replace such a subjectivity by a “kind of being” that has no clear bounds, that -in one or another way- is outside itself, and, indeed, that can be said, in a general sense, regarding the Heideggerian *Da-sein* as well as the Adornian subject.

(b) If we now take into account, furthermore, that the other of the *logos* is by definition all that is sensible, that which constitutes the specific difference of the aesthetic, it becomes obvious that claiming the opening to their Other of theory and practice, of the spheres where the *logos* — in one or other of its versions — is anyhow inescapable, entails the necessity of aesthetics to also meet knowledge and practice. And in fact, as anticipated, the aesthetic thought of both authors effectively assume the renunciation of aesthetics’ autonomy. But it is not merely a question of the aesthetic abandoning the security of its private domain in the face of a new *logos* demanding it— which would, besides, only reconfirm the primacy of the latter.

Rather, the very fate of modern thought aesthetic thought seems to have made clear for both of them that only by recognising the internal nexus between the aesthetic and its Other, and assuming at the same time the limits of this Other, that is, only associating the aesthetic to a *logos* determined by its finitude, determined as well by its dependence towards its other — be it defined as material or “mimesis”, as nothingness or even as the very silence —, appears the possibility of a true recognition for the aesthetic. In fact: the modern idea that the dignity of the aesthetic depended on the foundation of its autonomy from real knowledge and freedom was hand in hand associated to the conception of a closed, self-sufficient or autonomous, self. Only because both Heidegger and Adorno have abandoned such a conception of our being, are they in condition to overcome

the claim for aesthetic autonomy.

It is true that on this point, regarding the specific mode of linking the aesthetic to its Other, it is particularly difficult to associate both authors' philosophy without distorting it. In any case, in order to evaluate the proximity and the distance between their respective conceptions of art, or the aesthetic in general, it will help trying first to clarify their respective ways of taking a distance from the modern determination of the *logos* because from this point it will be easier in fact to understand also their respective conceptions of that Other that should come "into play", or *im Gespräch*, with the aesthetic.

3. Art's Heteronomy and Dignity by Heidegger

In the case of Heidegger, the *logos*, to which the aesthetic will be associated, can't be understood as anything but "language" and, in fact, as the language of a world or a (historic) people, that is, by no means as the rational subject of Modernity⁹.

And so, the knowledge in question, the knowledge that Heidegger acknowledges in general and the only one that can really "listen" to the work of art, can't be more than the comprehension or the interpretation that is always already built into a language, a form of knowledge that, as such, always contains what is not known or said, that rests precisely on the no-being of what hasn't yet been brought to light and of what has already sunk into obscurity: a knowledge that is, this way, always historic, *geschichtlich*¹⁰. And according to that, truth, re-thought from the Greek *aletheia*, corresponds to a *logos* or a language that does not belong to the subject anymore,

⁹ "Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes" makes explicit that art, as far as it makes possible the happening (*Geschehen*.) of the truth of what is, of beings, is in the end (true or authentic) language, poetic word or *Dichtung*, and in "Hölderlin und das Wesen der Dichtung" becomes even more clear that the essence of language is to be found in the poetic saying because its words preserve the original condition of language: the *dia-logue*. See Heidegger 1935/36, pp. 73 ff. and Heidegger 1944, pp. 38-43. On the other hand, every time that Heidegger tries to illuminate the essence of the authentic thinking, of the thinking that belongs to our essential determination, he "comes back" to its determination as *logos*, as (original) language. See for instance Heidegger 1951/52, pp. 166 f.

¹⁰ This knowledge is called from *Sein und Zeit* on "(pre-)understanding" (*Verstehen*.) and is, this way, inextricably connected to "interpretation" (*Interpretation*.) See Heidegger 1927,

that cannot be thought from the Aristotelian “proposition” and, so, that does not rest anymore on the possibility of representing adequately the real (understood, of course, as “object”, *Gegen-stand*) but on the power to “reveal” or bring to light (to the light of the *logos*, to language) the real being of reality¹¹.

Similarly, the only form of freedom conceivable for Heidegger, and the only meaningful also in relation to the aesthetic, the one that will also determine the way of being by poetic expression and reception, is that which stems from the *Gelassenheit* that lets be what is as well as what is not, a form of freedom that, this way, shows clearly its connection to a conception of the human being — of the *da* of the *sein*, not anymore of the “self” — as pure openness, as a way of being thrown open into the world, as a “being-outside-oneself” which ultimately elevates heteronomy to the status of an irreducible hallmark of its being and makes autonomy definitively unthinkable¹².

Now, departing from this point, what is especially apparent is that the Heideggerian *logos* is very far away from the modern subject or, in Adorno’s words, from the instrumental reason. It conveys in its own nature the possibility of becoming modern reason, the subject of science and rational auto-determination, but, precisely because of that, it is previous to it: this *logos* is the “origin” of the *ratio* that, however, has forgotten it and perverted it. On the other hand, and unlike science, the poetic saying (*das Dichten* in general or *das dichterisches Sagen*) is precisely the saying or the word that has not abandoned that origin, that remains by the *Ursprung*, that has always being between what is and what is not, between silence and language, that

¹¹ For Heidegger’s understanding of truth, see Heidegger 1931/32. For the way in which truth “takes place” in the work of art, see Heidegger 1935/36, esp. pp. 35 ff.

¹² As is well known the whole *Sein und Zeit* is an exposition of the way of being (outside itself) of the *Dasein*, but this general determination appears already in the Introduction (see Heidegger 1927, esp. § 5). As for the liberation that accompanies the *gelassen sein*, the stillness that approaches the things suspending the will, respecting their mystery in an active-passive attitude that “waits” instead of planning, and that constitutes the condition of possibility of the authentic thinking or meditation, see Heidegger 1944/45 and Heidegger 1955. And for the determination of the poetic saying as the word that comes out from the quiet listening, from the same *gelassene* attitude, see for instance “Andenken” in Heidegger 1943, esp. pp. 123 f.

has not lost its connection to silence or nothingness¹³. And that is why it is, unlike the scientific saying, the theoretic and rational knowledge, “original”. Art or poetry, *dichten*, conquers by Heidegger all the dignity that the modern knowledge, the knowledge of the modern *logos*, loses. And similarly it is in this poetic saying and listening, in the pronunciation and the preservation of the poetic word, where the true form of freedom, die *Gelassenheit*, takes place: where the domination or power relations can be overcome.

It seems now that the Heideggerian movement consists in rethinking knowledge and freedom, the realms where *logos* has always felt at home, in such a way that both of them, *logos* itself, end up by pertaining to the aesthetic: they do not seem to be the Other of the aesthetic anymore. And, however, we have started by affirming that Heidegger —like Adorno— recognizes the need of a way of dialogue between art, *dichten*, and its Other. At this stage, we should make explicit that, on one hand, we have also assumed the modern identification of this Other with the realms where *logos*, according to its modern comprehension, is determinant or dominant, but, on the other hand, we have also anticipated that this Other would be rethought by Heidegger and Adorno. Taking that into account I think we are justified to locate and examine the Heideggerian relation between the aesthetic and its Other in the *Gespräch* between *dichten* and *denken*, between art and thinking, that he establishes. His redetermination of the *logos* conveys in fact the replacement of philosophy, understood as theoretical thinking, by a way of thinking that consists rather in “asking” the real —and the real now includes of course what is “named” by the most original word, by the poetic saying. This way, the realm of thinking, what has traditionally been the Other of the aesthetic, is also recognized as an original way of saying, of letting the real come to the light, as another form of the true and original *logos*¹⁴. Both of them, *dichten* and *denken*, these two

¹³ See Heidegger 1944, esp. p. 37 and Heidegger 1935/36, esp. pp. 80 f.

¹⁴ For the conception of thinking as an activity of asking, while staying by the question instead of answering it, see, for instance, Heidegger 1933, p. 111. Thinking is asking because it is always referred to “something” that can only be while withdrawing (to Being itself), and that is also what the poetic saying, das *Dichten*, listens to. And finally this is also what approaches the poetic word, its naming, to the philosophical asking: see for instance Heidegger 1951/52, pp. 13 f.

forms of the *logos*, become now two forms in which truth takes place, two ways of “revealing” (*entbergen*) the real as that which reveals and hides itself. Both involve knowledge and freedom because they are two ways of an authentic listening and so of a *gelassen* behaving to the real, and two ways of an authentic saying, naming or asking, the real¹⁵. The poetic naming (*Nennen*) and the philosophical asking (*Fragen*) share the same origin and the same dignity.

But now, like in the case of Kant, the ghost of subjectivism still comes back to haunt us, the primacy conquered by the aesthetic seems to warn us of the danger of its link with the oblivion of reason, of its universality and objectivity. Especially if we are not ready to abandon the whole modern project, if we adopt, for instance, the Adornian point of view, we can see in the oblivion of art’s relation to science, in the definitive rejection of the modern *logos* as a worthy interlocutor for art, the danger of resending poetry, the aesthetic in general, to the sphere of privacy, of the merely “subjective” or irrational. And similarly, if we stress the way in which the Heideggerian *logos* claims to have overcome all kinds of dominance relations, how —on the one hand— the work of art, *das Dichten*, brings to their truth the light of a world as much as the darkness of the earth, and how —on the other hand— the authentic thinking, *das Denken*, does not bring to words nothing but what it listens to, how “peaceful” it respects the moment of the *entbergen* as much as the one of the *verborgenheit*, it could be easy to conclude not only that every possibility of according a critical power to art has been lost, but also that philosophy has been devoured by the poetic saying and finally doomed to a similar fate: to pure subjectivism¹⁶. It could seem that because the Heideggerian *Dichten* has completely overcome all the oppositions that are inherent to the modern reason, its relation to philosophy should also be devoid of any kind of opposition or fight, maybe even of any kind of difference: becoming the model of the *logos*, the most original form of *logos*, the poetic saying would finally transform philosophy

¹⁵ The poetic saying is in fact the saying that “names” the Gods themselves and, this way, gives a history, a language, to the people (*Volk*): see Heidegger 1944.

¹⁶ For the “quiet” place from which emerges the “authentic” thinking, where it “happens” (*ereignet*) as the in-between that separates and joins man and being, see Heidegger 1957. For the truth of art that comes out from the space between earth and world, see Heidegger 1935/36, esp. pp. 40–49.

into a mere way of *Dichten*. Both ways of saying would fall together in an original and “romantic” past, previous to all power relations, to the whole modern rationality, and should be recovered jumping over the whole history of the modern world in order to open a “new beginning” that wouldn’t be less romantic or utopian.

And however, we reckon it is not so. Certainly *Dichten* and *Denken* are no more than two forms of the same *logos*, and certainly this *logos* is what we find when we get rid of our times or our world through the “step back” or the “new beginning”, but on the one hand what that “respectful” and “peaceful” *logos* listens to is Being (*das Sein*), and Being’s most essential structure is precisely that of *polemos*: *Streit*.¹⁷ That means that the activity of *logos*, its corresponding or listening, must also have the form of a battle. And in fact it is undeniable that Heidegger assumes from the very beginning that if both, world and earth, light and darkness, gain their truth in the work of art it is because in this work takes place (*geschieht*) a fight, a dispute or *Auseinandersetzung* which is the very condition of the identity of each extreme¹⁸. And this “difference” between earth and world persists in the relation between poetry and thinking or philosophy. We consider that, in fact, even the thinking of the late Heidegger is true philosophy and not just a way of poetry, that his readings of Hölderlin’s poetry are still philosophy, because, as interpretations that listen and ask the poetic word, they bring to (other) words what in the poetic saying is given while withdrawing, and, so far, they also fight with the poetic word. But it is certainly so because in the end the “thinking saying” (*das denkerische Sagen*) is also, as true saying or *logos*, a fight in itself, against itself¹⁹.

This way, the place from which Heidegger thinks poetry, the “in-between” of the “poetic thinking” in which he situates himself, does not erase, thus, absolutely the difference between light and darkness, between

¹⁷ See Heidegger 1935, pp. 66 ff.

¹⁸ S. Heidegger, 1935/36, p. 46. In the work of art or in the poetic saying a fight takes place because in it, or through it, Being comes to light and Being is in itself *polemos*. That is the reason why our own relation to such words, to *Dichtung*, takes also the form of a fight, not only against that saying but also against ourselves: See Heidegger 1934/35, pp. 22-24.

¹⁹ There is also an insurmountable withdrawing by the authentic thinking, it always remains the “unthought” and so the necessity of keeping on fighting, of keeping on asking: see Heidegger 1934/35, pp. 40-42.

logos and silence, even when the mutual belonging of such opposites is definitively conceived as constitutive. And that “persisting difference” is what explains that his thinking, as philosophy, do not stop listening to the modern philosophy, to the very history of Metaphysics, what explains that Heidegger never forgets how in the modern oblivion of Being speaks Being itself.

And at this stage the Heideggerian “new beginning” that, specially from an Adornian point of view, seems to be not only “romantic” but also naïve, devoid of any connection to our world and our history, turns out not to be so far away from what has been already said, from our history: is it really something other than the “unsaid” that inhabits what has already been said? Even more: if the Heideggerian “repeating” the history of Western Metaphysics aims precisely to set free what, belonging to that saying, has however been forgotten, if the “new beginning” should be understood precisely along these lines, could we still condemn it because of its “romanticism”? Should we keep on denying its critical power?²⁰

4. Art’s Heteronomy and Dignity in Adorno.

Regarding Adorno, from the very outset, difficulties appear to be opposite. It is constantly repeated that Adorno’s appreciation of the “concept” draws him very much apart from Heidegger’s counter-Modern inclinations, that while the latter’s thought sinks into the literary speech or even poetry, Adorno’s philosophy really (or rationally) *dia-logues* with art, that in general his attachment to the concept takes him away from any post-modern position. And concomitantly, it is assumed that his ideal of emancipation, his loyalty to the modern ideal of freedom, still links him to concepts like “reconciliation” or “totality” which prove in fact incomprehensible outside the modern project: in contrast to what happens with Heidegger, it thus seems that the notion of freedom proposed by Adorno would still ex-

²⁰ *Sein und Zeit*’s introduction makes clear that Heidegger understands (his) thinking from the very start as a path, an asking, that should open the possibility of a “new beginning” (in the history of Western Metaphysics) and Adorno already in 1931 reacts against such a conception in “Die Aktualität der Philosophie” (see Adorno 1931, pp. 329-331, 339 f.). It is undeniable that the kind of reading we propose here owes a lot to the Derridian point of view, to his way of re-reading Heidegger or to the way in which Heidegger is re-written through his work.

clude — as the modern one — the shadow of estrangement, dependence or alienation. In short: it seems that his commitment to the concept and to the ideal of autonomy could still be understood as a commitment to the enlightened *logos*.

But, departing from this interpretation, it also seems that, as a result, his conception of the aesthetic could end up subordinating it to rational, “enlightening”, activity, to the activity of modern reason, even if the latter has been now basically characterized by its critical power, understood as critical reflection. Briefly, Adorno’s recognition of the aesthetic could be threatened now by the opposite danger, that is: by the danger of being reduced to a form or instrument of the critical thought.

In order to examine the problem we will now, as we did in the case of Heidegger, depart from Adorno’s conception of *logos*. He certainly does not come back to a premodern sense of *logos* that would “peacefully” unify the “original” art and the “original” thinking as two forms of the same. Although he recognises the connection between the language of the myth and the language of reason, of the “clever” or instrumental reason that has already come into play with Odysseus, he spares the name of “reason” or *logos* for the latter²¹. That means that for him the *logos*, in fact, has always been “enlightened” reason (what we have called modern reason), that at least potentially it has always had the fundamental features of the modern science and its subject, that is, all the features that follow from the dominion of the identity’s moment (over the multiplicity of nature). Odysseus’ *logos* had already the form of a strategy oriented to get power, moved by a will to power; it conveyed a knowledge that provided autonomy — actually the very identity of a self — and, this way, power over the Other²². In other words, the language that was not myth, the *logos sensu stricto*, has always been a dominant word; when the language ceases to be an “image”, when it becomes a proper sign, it is already a manipulating one, an instrumental one, a language that fights from the very beginning against its Other to impose its law, the identity of the law or the law of identity.

Now, this explains that Adorno himself, as philosopher, does not rec-

²¹ For the dialectics that Adorno establishes between myth and reason, that is, for the way in which the latter emerges from the first, continues it and at the same time “perverts” it, see, for instance, Horkheimer/Adorno 1944/69, pp. 27 f.

²² See Horkheimer/Adorno 1944/69, pp. 64-66.

ognize any other place from which the criticism of Modernity could be carried out than the very enlightened reason²³. The modern *logos* can only be criticised by the modern *logos*, it can only be self-criticised. Of course, Adorno acknowledges the *hybris* of modern reason, the barbarism that its oblivion of its own limits, of the limits of its knowledge and of the ideal of autonomy, has brought up, but he assumes that such result can only be attacked from the inside, paying attention to science and preserving in some way the emancipatory ideal²⁴. And this assumption clearly renders absurd the idea of a “step back” or a “new beginning” that could save us from the crisis of Modernity, and shows this way the distance that undoubtedly separates him from Heidegger²⁵. The modern *logos*, the enlightened reason to which the instrumental “inclination” is inherent, is not the result of a perversion of the original *logos* that took place, *ereignete* or *geschah*, in a moment of history, and that, because of that, could be simply left behind: it describes the very condition of *logos* itself. And, similarly, it becomes also very apparent that the features most properly associated to the aesthetic, those that exceed reason, specially, what Adorno calls “mimesis” or “materiality”, constitute a real Other of thinking or philosophy. Concept and mimesis, rational construction and expression, have always been enemies in a dialectic fight²⁶. The relation between art and philosophy can by no means consist in a respectful and peaceful listening. Their battle is from the very beginning and for ever unavoidable.

However it must be remembered that the aesthetic itself has the very same structure: the same work of art is the place where construction and

²³ For his rejection of the mere possibility of any kind of knowledge that would not be rational, that would step over reason, see Adorno 1966, pp. 24 f.

²⁴ This is not the conclusion (since negative dialectics admit no conclusions) but the presupposition on which the whole *Dialektik der Aufklärung* rests.

²⁵ His criticism on Heidegger’s thinking can be found not only in Adorno 1931, but also in Adorno 1966, pp. 104 ff. and especially in Adorno 1962/64. In this last case the criticism on Heidegger’s contempt for the enlightened reason, concept and science, on his oblivion of the material or social moment of our being and our *logos*, crosses over the whole work.

²⁶ The dialectics of mimesis and concept, or of expression and construction — together with the one between the beautiful and the ugly or between the aura and the technique — are central in Adorno’s *Ästhetische Theorie* in order to present the very structure of the work of art (see Adorno 1970, pp. 74-97), but it expresses in the end the relation between nature or myth and reason that was already presented in the *Dialektik der Aufklärung*.

expression, mimesis and concept, subject and object, strike up their battle. And it is precisely because of this that -in a way that does not seem to be so far from the Heideggerian one- the battle between thinking and art must be thought at the same time as a meeting, as a fruitful dialogue: the identity of their structure is not less powerful than their opposition²⁷. And once again this identity, the moment of unity, is also present in the own dialectic or fight that determines the movement of philosophy. In the same way that the peaceful unity by Heidegger was crossed over by difference, the difference or opposition that is so crucial for the Adornian critical thought is crossed over by the moment of unification. If the Adornian work of art has a critical power it is not only because it dislocates reality, the fiction of totality that masters our societies, but also because it “promises” or “thinks” another totality, a reconciliation that transcends reality²⁸. And this is also the reason why the work of art itself calls the activity of concept, can be understood—which does not mean exhausted-by thinking. And the other way round, if philosophy can be critical it is not only because it interprets reality through the (unity of the) concept, not only because—as long as it moves in the universal element of the concept- it necessarily transcends the fractured reality to *the possibility* of a totality or conciliation, but also because its concepts get broken where the real breaks, because it keeps *materially* stuck to the real, because it also keeps a mimetic relation to it²⁹. In fact, the conceptual moment of Adorno’s critical theory has the form of the “constellation”, which means that the concepts are guided by the real “enigma”, that they do never get rid of the material or, if you want, the “aesthetic” moment. That is why the constellation never gives a definitive sense, answer or conclusion to the (real) problems but the simple illumination of a *possibility* of conciliation or peace that emerges from the very fragments of reality³⁰. This possibility is the possibility of a different sense, the possibility to interpret the real

²⁷ For the negative dialectic relationship between thinking and art, see Adorno 1966, pp. 26 f. and Adorno 1970, pp. 506 f., 515 f.

²⁸ See Adorno 1970, pp. 14-27.

²⁹ For Adorno’s understanding of the critic work as a “materialistic interpretation”, see Adorno 1931, pp. 336 ff.

³⁰ For the concept of constellation, see Adorno 1931, pp. 335 ff. and Adorno 1966, pp. 164 ff.

in a different way.

It is exactly this double relation that for Adorno links the concept of philosophy to the aesthetic what renders impossible to assimilate his thought to the modern tradition: its link to the aesthetic speaks for its distance to the actual reality that has brought about Modernity, it denounces the same double relation that his philosophy keeps regarding reality and its reason. His modern allegiance, his “loyalty” to the ideal of emancipation and to conceptual reflection, especially when considered together with his “listening” to art, turns out to be precisely the proof of the “post-modern” condition of the subject and the reason that he envisages, that is, the expression of his awareness that maintaining autonomy as an ideal is necessary in order to renounce properly to the modern and oppressive conception of autonomy, of his knowledge that assuming the impossibility of getting totally rid of the thirst of absoluteness is precisely a necessary condition to shake off the yoke of the instrumental reason.

And now, at this stage, will we keep on saying that the different sense that should emerge from the critical activity, that the “difference” the “materialistic interpretation” of the social “enigmas” can bring about, is really so far away from the “new beginning” that thinking, according to Heidegger, should try to open now and again? In conclusion, we reckon that, beyond the distance between Heidegger’s and Adorno’s thought, the tension in which both find themselves regarding the *logos*, regarding the reason which in Modernity hasn’t refrained from showing its dominant vocation, and the concomitant tension according to which they determine the relation between philosophy and the aesthetic makes at last an authentic recognition of the aesthetic possible, and certainly because it makes the simultaneous recognition of its relation to truth and freedom — understood of course in a post-modern manner — possible.

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