

Adorno's Aesthetic Theory at Fifty: Introductory Remarks

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“Great works wait. While their metaphysical meaning dissolves, something of their truth content, however little it can be pinned down, does not.”¹ This hopeful remark appears in Theodor W. Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*, a work that was first published in 1970, just a year after the author’s death. Fifty years later we can still hear in this remark a double entendre. In both art and personal life, we must surrender any hope for metaphysical eternity, but we can nonetheless affirm the survival of what we might call the “truth content” that is preserved in either an artwork or any “work” that survives long after its creator has passed. It is no less true for great works of philosophy, which are born with an aura at a particular time and place. No doubt this aura, too, is vulnerable to decay, but the work continues to awaken new thoughts well after the aura has dissolved.

We will never be done reading *Aesthetic Theory*. It is admittedly the case for any work of philosophical importance that the task of its interpretation is ongoing and potentially infinite. But for a work such as *Aesthetic Theory* this truism may carry an enhanced truth. Because the author left it unfinished, all of us in the community of readers are burdened with the task of completing the work itself, as if each critical encounter were not only an interpretation but also

1. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 40 (hereafter cited as *AT*). For the original, see Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 17.

an attempt at a conclusion, however provisional our verdict might be. Added to this burden is a further irony: although Adorno finished most of the book, its so-called introduction is only a draft. He gave the book a finale but not an overture, at least not one that was ready for publication. We can hardly be done with our interpretation if the author did not leave us a clear directive as to how we should even begin.

Over the last half century the interpretative literature on *Aesthetic Theory* has flourished, though the lack of any consensus on its meaning is self-evident.² When the book was first published by Suhrkamp Verlag in 1970, it was not uncommon (especially among those associated with the radical student movement of the late 1960s) to express regret that its author had retreated from politics into aesthetics. Those who mourned their teacher's early passing when he had not yet reached his sixty-sixth birthday also mourned the apparent gap between theory and praxis that had perhaps only widened thanks to his skeptical remarks on the prematurity of any leap from one to the other. The memory of Adorno's troubled relations with the student Left in Germany only enhanced the sense that his turn to aesthetics had been a turn away from social responsibility. This was especially the case insofar as his distinctive conception of aesthetic autonomy seemed to complicate any strong sense of artistic "engagement." Art, Adorno wrote, is "the plenipotentiary of a better praxis." But he hastened to add that, in its anticipation of a better world, art was also "the critique of praxis," since current modes of social activity only reinforced the status quo. "Art's *promesse du bonheur* means not only that hitherto praxis has blocked happiness but that happiness is beyond praxis" (*AT*, 12). For students of critical theory who felt that any realization of true happiness requires a concrete transformation of existing society, it has been tempting to read Adorno's conception of art as an apologia for political quietism.

No less challenging has been the fact that Adorno's own aesthetic sensibility inclined him to embrace only a rather narrow canon of art, chiefly musical but also literary, confined mostly to the European tradition of high modernism. His interests and also his knowledge of art beyond the European sphere remained limited, and his stringent criterion for what he called "successful" art was so demanding, or discriminating, that very few writers or composers or artists were permitted inclusion. His notorious remarks on jazz, though confined to just a few essays and often misconstrued as symptoms of elitism and anti-Americanism (or worse), illustrate a more general disregard for demotic

2. The literature is vast. See, e.g., Zuidervaart, *Adorno's "Aesthetic Theory"*; Huhn and Zuidervaart, *Semblance of Subjectivity*; Endres, Pichler, and Kittel, *Eros und Erkenntnis*.

styles of aesthetic expression and, of course, a pronounced hostility to any trends in art that yield to the pressures of commodification. This hostility may help explain the strange fate of *Aesthetic Theory*, which made its belated appearance at a moment in art history when the modernist values its author cherished were falling into eclipse and competing movements (such as pop art and postmodernism) were already ascendant. In yet another instance of the aging of the avant-garde, Adorno's aesthetic criteria came to seem antiquated right at the moment he announced them. No less significant was his belief in the importance of form. This emphasis is so pronounced that he has often been charged with "formalism," even though this indictment may do a certain injustice to his dialectical conception of the relation between form and content. All the same, it is certainly true that his tastes inclined him toward a distinctive stream of chiefly European high-modernist aesthetics, spanning little more than three centuries, or what he was not ashamed to call "a limited phase of humanity." Repeating a sentiment ascribed to G. W. F. Hegel, Adorno went so far as to speculate that "art may have entered the age of its demise" (*AT*, 3).

It has taken many years for the atmosphere of regret and misunderstanding to dissipate, and the task of reckoning with *Aesthetic Theory* in all its dialectical complexity remains an ongoing and collective effort, of interest to scholars from a variety of disciplines, including but not limited to philosophy, literature, art history, history, and musicology. This wide circle of interpretation surely reflects the erudition of its author, but it also reminds us that the book has lessons that overflow all disciplinary bounds. *Aesthetic Theory*, after all, is not a book confined to the question of art in the narrow sense. Its premise is that art also has implications beyond art, that even when art may seem most hermetic or self-enclosed, it is like a monad: a windowless structure that nonetheless reflects the entire world beyond itself. Works of art are therefore foreign to the world but part of it: "Their truth content cannot be separated from the concept of humanity" (*AT*, 241).

This special issue of *New German Critique* originated in a series of lectures on *Aesthetic Theory* that took place at Harvard University during the spring semester of 2019 in anticipation of the book's fiftieth anniversary. The lecture series ran alongside a graduate seminar on the same topic, and it would be a true oversight if I did not express my gratitude to the many students who participated in the seminar and enriched the discussion there and in the lectures. I

must also note that the seminar at Harvard was preceded by an intensive graduate seminar on *Aesthetic Theory* that I had the pleasure of offering at Cornell University in the School of Criticism and Theory in the summer of 2018. The students who participated in the seminar at Cornell also deserve my heartfelt thanks. Many of the same scholars who presented in the Harvard series revised their lectures for publication here, and I am grateful for their dedication, and their patience, as the task of submission and revision proceeded, albeit more slowly and less smoothly than they might have hoped. I am confident that their efforts were worthwhile; the essays published in this special issue are superb, and they testify to the longevity of Adorno's reflections. We can feel confident that the task of understanding will continue in the fifty years to come, and that the truth content of the author's posthumous masterpiece will continue to unfold.

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References

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