

On the Conundrum of Form and Material in Adorno's Aesthetic Theory

As little as art is to be identified by any other element, it is simply identical with form.

For no select category, not even the aesthetically central concept of the law of form, names the essence of art and suffices to judge its products.¹

My ambition in what follows is to elucidate Theodor W. Adorno's conception of form—or, failing that, at least to examine the antinomy or contradiction suggested by my two epigraphs from his *Aesthetic Theory*. Adorno leaves no doubt that form is a principal concept of his aesthetics: art is, whatever else it is, "identical with form" (AT, p. 140).² But Adorno was, as we know, a dialectical rather than an analytic thinker; that is, his practice was not to clarify concepts but to put them into play in a movement in which nothing is able to appear except in virtue of what it is not.³ And so form is never a concept that stands on its own; it is always mediated—for example, by the artist's assorted materials of construction, or by the artist's subjectivity, or for all of that by the modern world in all of its administered, commodified, not to say popular renditions. (Kitsch, Adorno reminds us, "lurks in art, awaiting ever recurring opportunities to spring forth" [AT, p. 239].) Form is the transformation of what is given into something *other*, that is, something unreal, nonidentical, outside the grasp of concepts, categories, or distinctions, not to mention purposes, functions, or positions in any standing order of things. This radical exteriority is what Adorno means by the autonomy of art. But the paradox of autonomy is that it leaves us with almost nothing to say about what a work of art is. It is possible that a purely autonomous work

would be a nonentity, as if autonomy were a limit-concept rather than a positive property of art. The end of art—"To make things of which we do not know what they are" (AT, p. 114)—is antinomic, like my two epigraphs.

This indeterminacy of art is, of course, the premise that initiates and, indeed, regulates Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*: "It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore" (AT, p. 1). The self-estrangement of the work of art (as we have known for more than a century) is the distinctive feature of modernism: nothing, "not even the aesthetically central concept of the law of form, names the essence of art" (AT, p. 7). The modernist work is precisely that for which there is no general concept as to what counts as art, which also means that there are no criteria that could *exclude* anything as a work of art. The difficulty is that it is precisely the thesis of aesthetic nominalism (in which *anything goes* as a work of art) that Adorno wants to contest (perhaps without hope of defeating it). Marcel Duchamp's name is nowhere mentioned in *Aesthetic Theory*, but there is no doubt that Duchamp would play Adorno's nemesis, precisely because what Adorno seems to reject is the very idea that a work of art can simply be a "found object," that is, something merely empirical or a mere social product, like the urinal of Duchamp's *Fountain*. Hence Adorno's apparent complaint against the more extreme forms of modernism: "*Action painting, l'art informelle*, and aleatorical works [in which the] aesthetic subject exempts itself from the burden of giving form to the contingent material it encounters, despairing of the possibility of undergirding it, and instead shifts the responsibility for its organization back

on the contingent material itself . . . [in] its literality [contingent material] is alien to art" (AT, p. 221).⁴

The notion of "giving form to contingent material" is all very well, but unfortunately what Adorno means by this is no more self-evident than is the nature of art. What exactly is his idea of form, and—while we are at it—is there anything in his theory that applies specifically to literary or poetic form? Before I conclude I want to take a look at Adorno's essay on paratactic form in Hölderlin's late hymns, as well as his essays on two modern German figures seldom studied outside of Germany, Rudolf Borchardt (1877–1945), an early or quasi-modernist poet whose politics and poetics are perhaps beyond clarification, and Hans G. Helms (b. 1932), a poet, musician, and avant-garde performance artist who flourished after World War II and who also happened to be one of Adorno's students at Frankfurt. In these essays, in contrast to *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno gives us some extended examples of the complex relationship between form and materiality; that is, he addresses specifically the idea that in poetry, language is not made of concepts but is (relatively) free of the forms and conventions of discursive intelligibility, as if the task of form were to materialize language (and thereby free it from utility or systems of exchange). Indeed, Adorno never descended more deeply into darkest modernism than he did in these essays (which show how wrong it is to think that Adorno accepted only Proust, Kafka, Joyce, and Beckett into his modernist canon).⁵ As Adorno puts it in the essay on Hölderlin, in poetry, language "becomes a constitutive dissociation" whose paratactic forms "evade the logical hierarchy of a subordinating syntax."⁶ It is this insubordination or evasion of hierarchies (and therefore of totality) that is perhaps a key to Adorno's conception of form.

I have said that Adorno's way of thinking is dialectical (in its own eccentric way) rather than analytic. What this means is that (among other things) his conception of form is not *formal*, at least not in the classical or Aristotelian sense of an artifact reposing in the unity, integrity, and harmony of its disparate elements. On the contrary, Adorno calls each of these classical terms (unity, integrity, harmony) into question, or perhaps one should say this: he subjects each of them to a dialectical reversal or determinate negation. Con-

sider these passages (where the emphasis in each case is mine):

What is heterogeneous in artworks is immanent to them: It is that in them that opposes unity and yet is needed by unity if it is to be more than a pyrrhic victory over the unresisting. That the spirit of artworks is not to be equated with their immanent nexus—the arrangement of sensuous elements—is evident in that *they in no way constitute that gapless unity*, that type of form to which aesthetic reflection has falsely reduced them. (AT, p. 89)

Dissonance is the truth about harmony. . . Art, whatever its material, has always desired dissonance. (AT, p. 110)

[Form] is the nonviolent synthesis of the diffuse that nevertheless preserves it [the diffuse] as what it is in its divergences and contradictions, and for this reason form is actually an unfolding of truth. A posited unity, it constantly suspends itself as such; essential to it is that it interrupts itself through its other just as *the essence of its coherence is that it does not cohere*. (AT, p. 143)

Art that makes the highest claim compels itself *beyond form as totality and into the fragmentary*. (AT, p. 147)

Artworks . . . that negate meaning must also necessarily be disrupted in their unity; this is the function of montage, which disavows unity through the emerging disparateness of the parts at the same time that, as a principle of form, it affirms unity. . . . [In montage the] *negation of synthesis becomes a principle of form*. (AT, pp. 154–155)

The articulation, by which the artwork achieves its form, also always coincides in a certain sense with *the defeat of form*. (AT, p. 146)

The analytic thinker lives or dies by the law of non-contradiction. But not Adorno. In his case, dialectical thinking is governed by a rule of nonidentity and, as Hauke Brunkhorst suggests, by the *transgression* or *liquification* of boundaries.⁷ "To proceed dialectically," Adorno says in his *Negative Dialectics*, "is to think in contradictions," which is to say according to a "logic of disintegration" that aims at the breakdown of every sort of totality; or, to put it in a slightly different way, it is thinking whose goal is to avoid closure, resolution, or synthesis.⁸ This is how I read him anyway: *my* Adorno is a *serial* thinker (using the word 'serial' in its poetic rather than twelve-tone musical sense) whose desire is to stay in motion (that is, to keep pace with the history of art).⁹ Adorno's

motto, "The whole is the false," turns Hegel on his head (and overturns Hegel's aesthetics, with its end-of-art thesis).¹⁰

To gain some purchase on Adorno's paradoxes, we might begin by observing that, in keeping with dialectical procedures, the work of art for Adorno is as much an event as it is an object; that is, it is something whose mode of existence is fluid, dynamic, and irreducible to the thinglike condition in which it is nevertheless constituted as a *work*. And this is the case in at least two senses, namely with respect to our relation to the work (that is, in our experience of it) but also objectively in terms of the work's relationship to itself.

For example, it is in the nature of the work (as a fact of its autonomy) to resist our efforts to objectify it either empirically or conceptually, which is why nominalism can never be defeated (Adorno, to add one more paradox to the inventory, is an antinomialist who says: "Art has no universal laws" [AT, p. 308]).¹¹ In the section of *Aesthetic Theory* on "Semblance and Expression" [*Schein und Ausdruck*], Adorno writes:

When artworks are viewed under the closest scrutiny, the most objectivated paintings metamorphose into a swarming mass and texts splinter into words. As soon as one imagines having a firm grasp on the details of an artwork, it dissolves into the indeterminate and undifferentiated, so mediated is it. This is the manifestation of aesthetic semblance in the structure of artworks. Under micrological study, the particular—the artwork's vital element—is volatilized: its concretion vanishes. The process, which in each work takes objective shape, is opposed to its fixation as something to point to, and dissolves back from whence it came. (AT, p. 101)

—as if it were in the nature of the integrated work to disintegrate upon contact. What Adorno has in mind, of course, is that the work of art is not an intentional object in any phenomenological sense; that is, it is not strictly a phenomenon at all but is, on the contrary, an *illusion* of objectification. This is what "aesthetic semblance" means: "Artworks become appearances [*Erscheinung*], in the pregnant sense of the term—that is, the appearance of an other [*eines Anderen*—when the accent falls on the unreality of their own reality. Artworks have the immanent character of being an act, even if they are carved in stone, and this endows them with the quality of being something momentary and sudden [*Plötzliches*]. This

is registered by the feeling of being overwhelmed when faced with an important work. . . . Under patient contemplation artworks begin to move" (AT, p. 79). As Brunkhorst has pointed out, "Adorno has a strong predilection for romantic metaphors of fluidity and amorphousness, of the diffuse and the impulse which overwhelms the ego."¹²

However, this mobility or instability of the work, its epiphanic appearance, is not just an event in our subjective experience; it is what the work is in itself:

The artwork is a process essentially in the relation of its whole and parts. Without being reducible to one side or the other, it is the relation itself that is a process of becoming. *Whatever may in the artwork be called a totality is not a structure that integrates the sum of its parts.* Even objectified the work remains a developing process by virtue of the propensities [*Tendenzen*] active in it. Conversely, the parts are not something given, as which analysis almost inevitably mistakes them: Rather, they are centers of energy that strain toward the whole on the basis of a necessity that they equally perform. The vortex of this dialectic ultimately consumes the concept of meaning (AT, p. 178, emphasis added).

Of course—or, as one might say, *as usual*—Adorno here is less than clear. It is not just that the work of art is temporal rather than spatial in its constitution (although Adorno certainly inclines toward this view, since music is for him—despite his rejection of hierarchies—the prototype of all art [AT, p. 122]); it is rather that the work is constituted as an antinomy of objectification and incompleteness, closed and open form. Hence this (famously) paradoxical statement: "That in drama not the text but the performance is taken to be what matters, just as in music not the score but the living sound is so regarded, testifies to the precariousness of the thing-character in art, which does not, however, thereby release the artwork from its participation in the world of things. For scores are not only almost always better than the performances, they are more than simply instructions for them: they are indeed the thing itself" (AT, p. 100). (To which one might add that, for Adorno, this superiority of the score is emphatically so in the case of a work by Schönberg, which for Adorno has "the character of untouchability, a refractoriness that rebuffs the listener" [AT, p. 302].)

However one figures it, for Adorno the modernist work is one that is divided against itself or,

to put the matter dialectically, it is constituted as a struggle between “the law of form” (AT, p. 3) or the “rationality of construction” (AT, p. 35) and the anarchic resistance of material to any effort to bring it under control; and the idea is not to resolve this struggle or overcome resistance but to register it as the truth (the truth-content or *Wahrheitsgehalt*) of the work of art. We could call Adorno’s theory an aesthetics of resistance, but perhaps this is not to say very much, since “resistance” is one of the clichés of modernism, as Johanna Drucker has recently argued.¹³ Perhaps it would be more apt to think of it as an aesthetics of freedom, or of the agitated and unruly. The task of art is to preserve what is refractory to the formal conditions that make art possible—to preserve what resists the *cruelty* of art (“The purer the form and the higher the autonomy of the works,” Adorno says, “the more cruel they are. . . . What art in the broadest sense works with, it oppresses” [AT, p. 50]). As Adorno says very early in *Aesthetic Theory* (in a passage that contextualizes my second epigraph):

In artworks, the criterion of success is twofold: whether they succeed in integrating thematic strata and details into their immanent law of form and in this integration *at the same time maintain what resists it and the fissures that occur in the process of integration*. Integration as such does not assure quality; in the history of art, integration and quality have often diverged. For no single select category, not even the aesthetically central concept of the law of form, names the essence of art and suffices to judge its products. Essential to art are defining characteristics that contradict its art-philosophical concept (AT, p. 7, emphasis added).

By “its art-philosophical concept” I take Adorno to mean (at least) the classical ideal of unity that, for example, remains the centerpiece of Hans-Georg Gadamer’s philosophical aesthetics (as in *The Relevance of the Beautiful*). By contrast, it is the breakup of unity, that is, the resistance of material to integration into a totality—the autonomy of parts with respect to the whole—that sets the modernist work apart from the classics of tradition. It is also what makes the work of art an allegory of critical theory, that is, a critique of a modernity for which integration into a totality gives the definition of order, rationality, and things as they are. In modernism (as distinct from modernity), art confounds the order of things by way of “the aesthetic

conception of antiart; indeed without this element art is no longer thinkable. This implies nothing less than that art must go beyond its own concept in order to remain faithful to that concept” (AT, p. 29), as if the task of form were to articulate the materiality of the artwork in all of its heterogeneity and fragmentation.¹⁴ Hence another of Adorno’s mottos: “Only what does not fit into this world is true” (AT, p. 59).

This is perhaps what Adorno means when he says that what characterizes modernist art is a “crisis of semblance,” which is something like the Russian formalist (and also Brechtian) notion of estrangement or the disruption of illusion (that is, the illusion that the work is not an artifact): “The strict immanence of the spirit of artworks is contradicted . . . by a countertendency that is no less immanent: the tendency of artworks to wrest themselves free of the internal unity of their own construction, to introduce within themselves caesuras that no longer permit the totality of the appearance [*Erscheinung*]” (AT, p. 88).¹⁵ The caesura is a paratactic event, a break in the integrity of what is formed. The point here is that the modernist artwork, in contrast to tradition, does not form a hermeneutical circle, a subordination of parts to a whole; this is the source of its enigmaticness or *Rätselcharakter* (AT, p. 118), that is, its “fracturedness [*gebrochensein*]” (AT, p. 126), its repudiation of the concept of meaning (AT, p. 152), and its refusal of closure: “Art that makes the highest claim,” Adorno says, “compels itself beyond form as totality and into the fragmentary. The plight of form is most emphatically manifest in the difficulty of bringing temporal art forms to a conclusion; in music composers often speak of the problem of a finale, and in literature the problem of a denouement, which came to a head in Brecht. Once having shaken itself free of convention, no artwork was able to end convincingly” (AT, p. 147). Hence the definitive importance of open forms like that of the cubist collage, with its dissociated surface of “found” materials, as well as that of *montage*—“the sudden, discontinuous juxtaposition of sequences” (AT, p. 154): “all modern art,” Adorno says, “may be called montage” (AT, p. 155)—which has its equivalent in the seriality of certain forms of modern music as well as many examples from modern and contemporary poetry, starting perhaps with Pound’s *Cantos* and fanning out in all directions—from Louis Zukofsky’s “A” (1978) and Charles Olson’s *Maximus Poems*

(1950–1970) to Jack Spicer's *Language* (1964) and Lyn Hejinian's recent *A Border Comedy* (1994–1997)—

I began all this months ago, years maybe—in June, anyway, of 1994
 I thought I could, as it were, follow a poem that kept itself apart from me
 And from itself
 A short lyric of shifts
 A page or two at most
 A poem of metamorphoses, a writing in lost contexts
 I would write a line or two
 No more
 And go away
 And come back another day only to add something that would change everything
 On the scale of poetry¹⁶

(Meanwhile, Adorno's *Philosophy of New Music* contains this intriguing footnote: “The closed artwork is bourgeois, the mechanical artwork belongs to fascism, and the fragmentary work—in its complete negativity—belongs to utopia.”)¹⁷

Here perhaps would be the place to refer at last to Adorno's essay “Parataxis: On Hölderlin's Late Poetry” (1964), in which Adorno aims to refute Heidegger's reading of Hölderlin, by treating Hölderlin as an avant-garde poet for whom “the category of unity, like that of the fatherland, is not central” (NL, p. 119). What *is* central is the refusal of the hierarchical or architectonic form of the Ciceronian period in favor of something Adorno calls “subcutaneous form” (NL, p. 130). Subcutaneous form is an anarchic formation that cannot be closed in a synthesis. Hölderlin's late hymns, Adorno says, “may be constitutively incapable of completion” (NL, p. 138).¹⁸ Whereas discursive language “is chained to the form of judgment and proposition and thereby the synthetic form of the concept,” in poetry “aconceptual synthesis turns against its medium; it becomes a constitutive dissociation” (NL, p. 130)—in other words, a paratactical “transformation of language into a serial order whose elements are linked differently than in the [form of] judgment” (NL, p. 131). Hence “the anticlassical quality” of Hölderlin's late poetry—“its rebellion against harmony” (NL, p. 133), its fragmentation, and above all its displacement of the lyric subject onto *language as such* (language freed from its function of discursive signification and the norms of semantic transparency):

Linguistic synthesis contradicts what Hölderlin wants to express in language. . . . Whether intentionally on Hölderlin's part or simply by the nature of things, this occasioned the sacrifice of the period, to an extreme degree. Poetically, this represents the sacrifice of the legislating subject itself. It is in Hölderlin, with that sacrifice, that the poetic movement unsettles the category of meaning for the first time. For meaning is constituted through the linguistic expression of synthetic unity. The subject's intention, the primacy of meaning, is ceded to language along with the legislating subject. (NL, p. 136)

So Hölderlin is the first modernist. Anyhow, the idea that paratactic form displaces the writing subject onto language is one of modernism's most venerable doctrines, incarnated perhaps most perfectly in many of the writings of Gertrude Stein (but one should also consult Maurice Blanchot on the theory and practice of the fragment).¹⁹ The idea presupposes (that is, opposes) the thesis, proposed by various versions of logic, linguistics, and philosophy of language, that the subject is constituted by the logical form of the proposition: the ability to say “I” and to recognize oneself as such is entailed in the power of the predicate. The “I” is what is implicitly asserted in every assertion.²⁰ But the dissociation of fragmentary writing—the juxtaposition or, as Adorno might put it, the *constellation* as against the interconnection of phrases—deprives the subject of a place to present itself. There is no starting point, endpoint, or any standpoint in between. As Jean-François Lyotard says of parataxis in *The Differend*:

Conjoined by *and*, phrases or events follow one another, but their succession does not obey a categorical order (*because; if, then; in order to; although. . .*). Joined to the preceding one by *and*, a phrase rises out of nothingness to link up with it. Parataxis thus connotes the abyss of Not-Being which opens between phrases, it stresses the surprise that something begins when what is said is said. *And* is the conjunction that most allows the constitutive discontinuity (or oblivion) of time to threaten, while defying it through its equally constitutive continuity (or retention). . . . Instead of *and*, and assuring the same paratactic function, there can be a comma, or nothing.”²¹

“Abyss of Not-Being” is perhaps a bit of Gallic hyperbole, but the point is that parataxis is outside the logical and cognitive “phrase regimens” on which identity depends, so nothing follows from the *I think*, just as nothing makes it possible. *Je est*

un autre, in Rimbaud's famous line, and so is everything else—including language, which no longer operates in the service of meaning.

But then what *is* language when it is no longer in the service of meaning? This, basically, is the question at work in Adorno's essays on Rudolf Borchardt (1967) and Hans G. Helms (1960). Not surprisingly, Adorno's answer has largely to do with music, which means (for him) atonality. "In everything he wrote," Adorno says of Borchardt, "he made himself an organ of language. . . . Language murmurs and rustles through [*durchrauschen*] him like a stream. . . . The speaking gesture of almost every line he wrote is not so much the gesture of a person speaking but rather, in its intention, the epiphany of language" (NL, p. 193). Hence the *Rätselcharakter* of his poems: "They are not objects of contemplation, especially by the criterion of visual concreteness, but linguistically they are full of sensuousness. . . . The speaking energy that holds language to its objectification in his poetry causes the poems to approximate music" (NL, pp. 193–194)—not, however, in terms of the "music-like effects" that one finds in Rilke and Trakl, but rather in virtue of the sheer sonic materiality of language, its *Rauschen* or dissonance. Imagine poetry as the experience of this *Rauschen*, as in these lines from Borchardt's "Pause," in which something like an uncontrollable and entirely nonsemantic sound overtakes the poet:

"O Rauschen tief in mir,
Was aber hast du, das ich gerne hörte?
Ist den ein Ton in dir
Der mich nicht störte?"²²

Adorno writes: "In making the flow of words autonomous and in composing with tonal values and sounds rather than with the content of what is said, [Borchardt's] poems tend toward the hermetic" (NL, p. 204). In fact, the materiality of Borchardt's verse is not particularly dense by comparison with much of modernist poetry (the work of Paul Celan, for example). Helms, however, is another thing entirely. The work to which Adorno proposes to introduce us in his essay on Helms is unpronouncably entitled *FA: M'AHNIESGWOW* (1959), is at once a concrete or visual poem made of orthographic and typographical constructions, with large helpings of white space, and a work of sound—or acoustical—poetry (*Lautpoesie*) in

the tradition of the German *Hörspiele* or "hear-plays" that have flourished on German radio since the 1950s (Helms's published text is accompanied by a ten-inch disk recording). The text (a Joyce-like mulligan stew of skewed languages—German, French, English, Latin) begins as follows:

1) Haud ego terrerbar, sed mater mea tassam coffeae effundibat. Tat, quae lamentation inibat! Mais non—; da mi livae mille, mater o tam magnanima mea, sic ut posit cylindriculos herbarum nicotianarum emere. Hoc delicatum era! ita simili: terque vita mihi ante acta (PRAETERITA) in facultate recordante mea formulat hodie, par me donc, nec splendor divinus nec regina caelitem illic est, tror mig. Ma cosi un'argenteum habebande, more than ego, real'n armum VAUVOW, dej cläffit innerte taschum schajüts er dande.

2) Was wird er den machen? Wenn ers macht, macht ers fein, lieb Michaelilein Krümmnäschenbohr, ein tauwer sottive im Herzen der Blüschchen glugluhicksodörhüüt (h); studierimek türkiyimac indilüftikugg approtzikaq ohrnientallistikick?

3) "Gelllt!" her midde Penunse, barraufn Tisch oder Ware zurück. Betrüger? Neiin, nie, nur Suhmklein philanthropikuss: herrrr—: nuja bittischeen ei'-danküfiil -pflegeh. . . .²³

Perhaps understandably, Adorno himself does not cite, much less analyze, any "passages" from *FA: M'AHNIESGWOW*; instead he restricts himself to the statement of some "Presuppositions (*Vorassetzungen*)" (the title of his essay), the first of which is that the concept of *verstehen*, understanding, has no application to such a work: "Essential to such a text is the shock with which it forcibly interrupts communication. The harsh light of unintelligibility that such a work turns toward the reader renders the usual intelligibility suspect as being shallow, habitual, reified—in short, preartistic. To translate what appears alien in qualitatively modern works into current concepts and contexts is something of a betrayal of the works themselves" (NL, p. 95).

To be sure, as Adorno says, "language cannot completely dispense with its significative moment, with concepts and meanings. . . . Even a stammered sound, if it is a word and not a mere tone, retains its conceptual range, and certainly the internal coherence of a linguistic work, without which it could not be organized as a linguistic unity, cannot dispense with the conceptual

element” (NL, pp. 98–99). Gertrude Stein made the same point when she said that one has to write in English; poetry is not nonsense verse.²⁴ But in *FA: M'AHNIESGWOW* the material of language (letters, phonemes, morphemes, words) is organized serially rather than discursively, which enables Adorno to link Helms to modern (or modernist) music. With respect to poetics, Adorno seems very much to follow Paul Valéry, who solidified the poetry/music analogy introduced by Mallarmé (and by Walter Pater somewhat earlier and perhaps to less effect), except of course that Adorno has a very different theory of music; one cannot imagine what Valéry would have made of Adorno, much less of Helms. At any rate this is how Adorno describes the form of Helms's work:

The whole is composed in structures, put together in each case from a series of dimensions, or, in the terminology of serial music, parameters, that appear autonomously, or combined, or ordered hierarchically. A model may help to clarify the affinity of this procedure with the serial technique in music. The crisis of meaning as a phenomenal whole perceptible in the texture of its parts did not lead serial composers to simply liquidate meaning. [Karlheinz] Stockhausen retains meaning, that is, the immediately apperceptible context, as a limit value. A continuum extends from this to structures that renounce the customary mode of hearing meaning, namely the illusion of a necessity linking one sound to another. These structures can be grasped only in something like the way the eye surveys the surface of a picture as a whole. Helms' conception stands in an analogous relationship to discursive meaning. Its continuum extends from quasi-narrative portions intelligible on the surface to parts in which the phonetic values, the pure expressive qualities, completely outweigh the semantic values, the meanings. (NL, p. 104)

In other words, in keeping with the concept of form developed in *Aesthetic Theory*, the parts are autonomous and in motion with respect to the whole, thus breaking with “the illusion of a necessity linking one sound [or word, or letter] to another.” Not surprisingly, Helms was a great admirer of John Cage, whose recourse to chance operations in the composition both of sounds and texts seems to be one of the principal models on which *FA: M'AHNIESGWOW* is based—as much Cage as Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (to which, to be sure, Helms pays tribute with some obvious parodies):

Mike walked in on the : attense of ChJazzus as they sit-tith softly sipping sweet okaykes H-flowered, purrhushing 'eir goofhearty offan-on-beats, holding moisturize'-palmy sticks clad in clamp dresses of tissue d'arab, drinks in actionem fellandi promoting protolingamations e state of nascendi; completimented go !scene of hifibrow 'n' teasuckers tits slips peeptwats enthralled, all that sniff-flin' e-van beshmoosed kinda; lus'bearinnanals figs fags rue-sodomighties, gomorrhoeae, trip-blades nymphridgs painseederastless, senily hardchancryote apperciverts, her-mac-pros'a-dishts faetishits snarks chromosollip-sists . . .²⁵

—and so on, for a full page, before breaking into new or different configurations of noise.

It appears to be a common practice among Adorno scholars to fold *Aesthetic Theory* back into his earlier writings on modern music, as David Roberts does when he writes that “[t]he elaborations of the late *Aesthetic Theory* add nothing essentially new. . . . Not only is *Aesthetic Theory* incapable of going beyond the limits of the earlier construction, it even retreats from its logic to circle endlessly, inconclusively, in the empty space of a modernism which has lost all historical contours, has been evacuated of all historical events and figures merely as a backdrop to the invocation of the exclusive pantheon of authenticity”—namely, Kafka, Beckett, and so on.²⁶ Likewise the recent *Cambridge Companion to Adorno* contains several entries on Adorno's theories of music but none on *Aesthetic Theory*, which generally is mentioned only in passing throughout the volume.²⁷

By contrast, I think it is important to attach the example of Helms to *Aesthetic Theory* as a reminder that Adorno's great abstract work, arguably the most important work of philosophical aesthetics since Kant and Hegel, is also very much an expression of its time, namely, that of the turbulent European and North American art-worlds of the 1950s and 1960s—John Cage and Jackson Mac Low, Guy Debord and the Situationists, Henri Chopin and acoustical poetry, the “verbocovisual” poems of the Brazilian Noigandres group, Fluxus, the Vienna Aktionists and other performance- and body-art figures, Minimalism and the various conceptual art movements, the New American Poetry and the New York School of Poets, particularly John Ashbery's poetry, among many other examples of formal anarchism. (Here I would recommend a very provocative essay by Mary Caputi on “Theodor Adorno and

the Performance Art of Cindy Sherman.”)²⁸ In his essay on Helms, Adorno writes: “The moment of the absurd, which is constituent of all art but has hitherto been largely hidden by the conventional moment, has to emerge and express itself. The so-called unintelligibility of legitimate contemporary art is the consequence of something peculiar to art itself. Its provocativeness carries out the historical judgment on an intelligibility that has degenerated into misunderstanding” (NL, pp. 97–98). Likewise in *Aesthetic Theory* he writes that “art is now scarcely possible [without] experiment” (AT, p. 37), particularly as this means that the production of the work is not under programmatic control and that what will emerge cannot be foreseen.

The argument here seems to be that the work of art, if it is art at all, should be in advance of our capacity to receive it. “Works are usually critical in the era in which they appear; later they are neutralized, not least because of changed social relations. Neutralization is the social price of aesthetic autonomy” (AT, p. 228). (Recall the artist Lawrence Weiner’s remark: “When my work is assimilated into the art context, it will change something. I hope it won’t be considered viable living art in ten years. . . . As what I do becomes art history the minute culture accepts it, so it stops being art.”)²⁹ But more than this it appears that the work of art always constitutes a limit of philosophical aesthetics, that is, a limit of the explanatory power of aesthetics, and that the experience of this limit is part of what constitutes an experience of art:

The better an artwork is understood, the more it is puzzled on one level, the more obscure its constitutive enigmaticalness [*Rätselhaftes*] becomes. It only emerges demonstratively in the profoundest experience of art. If a work opens itself completely, it reveals itself as a question and demands reflection: then the work vanishes into the distance, only to return to those who thought they understood it, overwhelming them for a second time with the question: “What is it?” [*Was ist das zu überfallen?*]. (AT, p. 121)

In other words, the work of art provokes aesthetics by producing things “of which we do not know what they are.” In this respect *Aesthetic Theory* is a determinate negation of aesthetics as a positive theory, as if it were Adorno’s thesis that, contra Hegel, the movement of the history of art always and repeatedly brings the philosophy of art to an

end. This seems at any rate to be the upshot of Adorno’s “Draft Introduction” to *Aesthetic Theory*, which begins by saying that the task of aesthetics is self-critical:

Art does not stand in need of an aesthetics that will prescribe norms where it finds itself in difficulty, but rather of an aesthetics that will provide the capacity for reflection, which art on its own is hardly able to achieve. Words such as material, form, and formation, which flow all too easily from the pens of contemporary artists, ring trite; to cure contemporary language of this is one of the art-practical functions of aesthetics. (AT, p. 341)

It seems to me that one achievement of Adorno’s theory is to defamiliarize the traditional concepts of aesthetics—unity, integrity, harmony, but also form and material—and to give us in their place an aesthetics of the fragment, arguably the once and future formal category of modernism.

A modernist aesthetics, like modernist art and music, is under a standing obligation to reinvent itself as it goes along—a phenomenon that one sees in contemporary poetry, with its strong commitment to poetics (writings on poetry by poets) as a way of tracking or even initiating the changes in form and material that keep the practice of poetry from becoming self-evident in its procedures and results. In one of his later essays, “Vors une musique informelle” (1961)—in part a polemic against the rigid use of the twelve-tone system of musical composition—Adorno recurs to the term *musique informelle* “as a small token of gratitude towards the nation for whom the tradition of the avant-garde is synonymous with the courage to produce manifestos. In contrast to the stuffy aversion to ‘isms’ in art, I believe slogans are as desirable now as they were in Apollinaire’s day. *Musique informelle* resists definition in the botanical terms of the positivists. If there is a tendency, an actual trend, which the word serves to bring into focus, it is one which mocks all efforts at definition.” *Musique informelle* is “athematic music,” a “free atonality”: “What is meant,” says Adorno, “is a type of music which has discarded all forms which are external or abstract or which confront it in an inflexible way.”³⁰ It is an instance of open form—

music whose end cannot be foreseen in the course of production. . . . From this point of view *musique informelle* would be the idea [*Vorstellung*] of something

not fully imagined [*vorgestellt*]. It would be the integration by the composer's subjective ear of what simply cannot be imagined at the level of each individual note, as can be seen from Stockhausen's "note clusters" [*Tontrauben*]. The frontier between a meaningless objectification which the composer gazes at with open mouth and closed ears, and a composition which fulfills the imagination by transcending it, is not one that can be drawn according to any abstract rule.³¹

Here perhaps one could begin to imagine aesthetics as a kind of negative theology: that which in the end does not actually predicate anything of the work of art—as, for example, in the case of one of Ad Reinhardt's "Black Paintings," which Reinhardt describes as follows:

A square (*neutral, shapeless*) canvas, 5 feet high, as high as a man, as wide as a man's outstretched arms (*not large, not small, sizeless*), trisected (*no composition*), one horizontal form negating, one vertical form (*formless, no top, no bottom, directionless*) three (*more or less*) dark (*lightless*) noncontrasting (*colorless*) colors, brushwork brushed out to remove brushwork, a mat flat, free-handpainted surface (*glossless, textureless, non-linear, no hard edge, no soft edge*) which does not reflect its surroundings—a pure, abstract, non-objective, timeless, spaceless, changeless, relationless, disinterested painting—an object that is self-conscious (*no unconsciousness*) ideal, transcendent, aware of no thing but Art (*absolutely no anti-art*).³²

One wonders what Adorno would have made of this. If we follow the dialectic of *Aesthetic Theory*, Reinhardt's work is a purely antinomic artifact, an iconoclastic icon: in other words, a perfect work of art.

GERALD L. BRUNS
Department of English
University of Notre Dame
Notre Dame, Indiana 46556

INTERNET : gerald.l.bruns.1@nd.edu

1. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 140, 7, respectively. Hereafter cited within the text as 'AT' with the relevant page numbers in parentheses.

2. Perhaps not many will agree that form is a key concept for Adorno. Lambert Zuidervaart touches on form only in passing in *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory: The Redemption of Illusion* (MIT Press, 1991), esp. pp. 123–125, 128–130, 166–

168). Christopher Menke, meanwhile, thinks that form and material are "borderline" concepts in *Aesthetic Theory*; see his *The Sovereignty of Art: Aesthetic Negativity in Adorno and Derrida* (MIT Press, 1998), p. 74. Shierry Weber Nicholson attaches more importance to the question of form in *Exact Imagination, Late Work: On Adorno's Aesthetics* (MIT Press, 1999), pp. 103–135 ("Configurational Form in the Aesthetic Essay and the Enigma of *Aesthetic Theory*"), where configurational (or constellational) form is paratactical, like the form of *Aesthetic Theory* itself. See Ninhi Kinya, "Form Should Not Be Tautological: Hegel and Adorno on Form," *The Japanese Journal of Aesthetics* 47 (1996): 25–36. I am indebted to J. M. Bernstein's discussion of Adorno's aesthetics in *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), esp. pp. 197–206.

3. "Art," says Adorno, "can be understood only by its laws of movement, not according to any set of invariants. It is defined by its relation to what it is not. The specifically artistic in art must be derived concretely from its other; that alone would fulfill the demands of a materialistic-dialectical aesthetics. Art acquires its specificity by separating itself from what it developed out of: its law of movement is its law of form. It exists only in relation to its other; it is the process that transpires with its other" (AT, p. 3).

4. Actually, I think Adorno could have found a place for Duchamp in his aesthetics by observing that the Readymades are not just *found* objects but have been staged, that is, recontextualized and, therefore, implicitly conceptualized as art. *Fountain* may be made from a urinal, but with its signature, "R. Mutt," and its displacement from the world of commodities to the exhibition, gallery, studio, museum, or history of art, it has been transformed into something *other*. See Marjorie Perloff, "The Conceptual Poetics of Marcel Duchamp," in *21st Century Modernism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2003), pp. 78–114. See also J. M. Bernstein, "Readymades, Monochromes, Etc.: Nominalism and the Paradox of Modernism," *Diacritics*, 32, no. 1 (Spring 2002), 83–100.

5. See David Roberts, *Art and Enlightenment: Aesthetic Theory After Adorno* (University of Nebraska Press, 1991), p. 132.

6. Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, 2 vols., trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson (Columbia University Press, 1991–1992), vol. 2, pp. 130–131. Hereafter cited within the text as 'NL' with the relevant page numbers within parentheses, all from volume 2.

7. See Brunkhorst, "Irreconcilable Modernity: Adorno's Aesthetic Experimentalism and the Transgression Theorem," trans. Colin Sample, *The Actuality of Adorno: Critical Essays on Adorno and the Postmodern*, ed. Max Pensky (SUNY Press, 1997), pp. 43–61, esp. p. 46. See also Susan Buck-Morss, "The Logic of Disintegration: The Object," in *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* (New York: Free Press, 1977), pp. 63–81.

8. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1983), pp. 144–145. Indeed, as J. M. Bernstein says, the aim of dialectical thinking is not to resolve contradictions but to experience them reflectively. See Bernstein, "Negative Dialectic as Fate: Adorno and Hegel," in *Cambridge Companion to Adorno* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 19–50, esp. pp. 35–39.

9. See Joseph Conte, "Seriality and the Contemporary Long Poem," *Sagetrieb* 11 (1992): 35–45, esp. p. 37: "The series describes the complicated and often desultory manner in which one thing follows another. Its modular form—in which individual elements are both discontinuous and capable of recombination—distinguishes it from the thematic development or narrative progression that characterize other types of the long poem. The series resists a systematic or determinate ordering of its materials, preferring constant change and even accident, a protean shape and even aleatory method." See also Conte's book on serial form, *Unending Design: The Forms of Postmodern Poetry* (Cornell University Press, 1991).

10. Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from a Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: New Left Books, 1974), p. 50.

11. In the section of *Aesthetic Theory* on "Universals and Particulars" Adorno writes: "That universal elements are irrevocably part of art at the same time that art opposes them, is to be understood in terms of art's likeness to language. For language is hostile to the particular and nevertheless seeks its rescue. Language mediates the particular through universality and in the constellation of the universal, but it does justice to its own universals only when they are not used rigidly in accord with the semblance of their autonomy but are rather concentrated to the extreme on what is specifically to be expressed" (AT, p. 204).

12. Brunkhorst, "Irreconcilable Modernity," p. 46.

13. Adorno's is, to be sure, a "negative aesthetics" in Johanna Drucker's sense of this term in her critique of the snobbery of academic theory, which (like Adorno) wants to keep the work of art separate from the social order (mass culture, consumer culture, the art market), and which "has rigidified into predictable categories of thought, each identifiable by their characteristic vocabulary of the 'abject,' the 'subversive,' the 'transgressive,' the 'resistant,' or other negative keyword." See *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity* (University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. xv. But Adorno's aesthetics is also negative in the sense in which his dialectical thinking is negative, namely, that he conceives the modernist artwork as an *expression* of the struggle of form and material—in contrast, say, to the classical or humanist (or Yeatsian) aesthetic of *sprezzatura*, where the idea is to conceal the labor of artmaking.

14. See Zuidervaart, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*, pp. 167–168: "The best works of art respect the unique identity of the nonidentical and do not force an identity of form and content. They achieve a peaceful fragile reconciliation of the one and the many. In such works, artistic form is a nonviolent synthesis preserving divergent and contradictory impulses, something even suspending itself for the sake of disparate content. Adorno thinks of artistic form as an identity that makes the nonidentical less alien but lets it remain distinct." Compare p. 199: "For an artwork to be successful, its form must preserve traces of the amorphousness that form tends to repress." See also James Martin Harding, "Aesthetic Theory and Fragmenting the Unities of Negation" in *Adorno and "A Writing of the Ruins": Essays on Modern Aesthetics and Anglo-American Literature and Culture* (SUNY Press, 1997), pp. 26–47.

15. See Thomas Huhn, "Adorno's Aesthetics of Illusion," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 44 (1985): 181–189. See also Fredric Jameson's discussion of the

"crisis of *Schein*" in *Late Marxism, Adorno and the Persistence of the Dialectic* (New York: Verso, 1990), pp. 165–176.

16. Lyn Hejinian, *A Border Comedy* (New York: Granary Books, 2001), p. 63.

17. Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. 183. Recall Adorno on the essay as form: "Even in its manner of its presentation, the essay may not act as though it had deduced its object and there was nothing left to say about it. Its self-relativization is inherent in its form: it has to be constructed as though it could always break off at any point. It thinks in fragments, just as reality is fragmentary, and finds its unity in and through the breaks and not by glossing them over"; *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1, p. 16.

18. Compare this to what Adorno says in his essay "Schönberg and Progress": after complaining that the twelve-tone method is simply the working of a "self-positing system of rules," he goes on to observe the ways in which in his late work Schönberg would interrupt the system. In particular: "The need to finish works was unknown to him." *Philosophy of New Music*, p. 94.

19. See Blanchot, "The Fragment Word (*parole de fragmentation*)," in *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 308: "A new kind of arrangement not entailing harmony, concordance, or reconciliation, but that accepts disjunction or divergence as the infinite center out of which, through speech, relation is to be created: an arrangement that does not compose but juxtaposes, that is to say, leaves each of the terms that come into relation *outside* one another, respecting and preserving this *exteriority* and this distance as the principle—always already undercut—of all signification. Juxtaposition and interruption here assume an extraordinary force of justice."

20. In his *Negative Dialectics* Adorno writes: "Except among heretics, all Western metaphysics has been peephole metaphysics. The subject—a mere limited moment—was locked up in its own self by that metaphysics, imprisoned for all eternity to punish it for its deification. As through the crenels of a parapet, the subject gazes upon a black sky in which the star of the idea, or of Being, is said to rise. And yet it is the very wall around the subject that casts its shadow on whatever the subject conjures: the shadow of reification, which a subjective philosophy will then helplessly fight against" (pp. 139–140).

21. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 66, §100.

22. Rudolf Borchardt, "Pause," *Gedichte*, ed. Gerhard Schuster and Lars Korten (Stuttgart: Verlag Klett-Cotta, 2003), p. 39. See Ulrich Plass's discussion of Adorno on Borchardt in *Language and History in Theodor Adorno's Notes to Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 73–87; and also Plass's elucidation of *Rauschen* in this same volume, pp. 66–68. See also Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1, p. 69.

23. Hans G. Helms, *FA: M'AHNIESGWOW* (Köln: M. Dumont-Schauberg, 1959), vol I, np.

24. In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein writes: "She experimented with everything in trying to describe. She tried a bit inventing words but soon gave that up. The English language was her medium and with the English language the task was to be achieved, the problem solved." See *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein*, ed. Carl Van Vechten (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), p. 112.

25. Hans G. Helms, *FA: M'AHNIESGWOW*, np.

26. Roberts, *Art and Enlightenment*, p. 59.

27. *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno*, ed. Thomas Huhn (Cambridge University Press, 2004). See the entries by Robert Hullot-Kentor ("Right Listening and a New Type of Human Being"), Max Paddison ("Authenticity and Failure in Adorno's Aesthetics of Music"), Lydia Goehr ("Dissonant Works and the Listening Public"), and Andrew Bowie ("Adorno, Heidegger, and the Meaning of Music") for those that do mention *Aesthetic Theory*. With one or two exceptions, there is little close reading of *Aesthetic Theory* in *The Semblance of Subjectivity: Essays on Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Thomas Huhn and Lambert Zuidervaart (MIT Press, 1997)—see particularly Shierry Weber Nicholson's "Aesthetic Theory's Mimesis of Walter Benjamin"

(pp. 55–92) and Heinz Paetzold, "Adorno's Notion of Natural Beauty" (pp. 213–236).

28. *Feminist Interpretations of Theodor Adorno*, ed. Renée Heberle (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006).

29. Quoted in Willoughby Sharp, "Lawrence Weiner in Amsterdam," *Avalanche* 4 (1972): 71.

30. Theodor W. Adorno, *Quasi una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, trans. Rodney Livingston (London: Verso, 1998), p. 272.

31. Adorno, *Quasi una Fantasia*, pp. 303–304.

32. "Art as Art," *Art News* 65 (1966): 72. See also "The Black-Square Paintings," in *Art-as-Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, ed. Barbara Rose (New York: Viking Press, 1975), pp. 82–83.