

Translating the Exilic The Cultural Problematik of Reception of Adorno-in-English

– Jatin Wagle*

Introduction

The untranslatability of Adorno is his most profound and cruel truth.¹ In his Foreword to the English edition of *Prisms*, the only book of his to be translated into English in his lifetime, Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno speaks of “the difficulties which confront *such texts* in the English-speaking world”². He goes on to refer to what he calls the “Anglo-Saxon norms of thought and presentation”, and we may infer that the elements of such thought and presentation, to his mind, comprise: commonsense, “unreflected and thinglike” facts, and generally accepted notions of classification and scientific validity. Though he claims familiarity with them through his own English language writings in his period of exile³, he appears to present as a contrast the concerns that presumably shape his own thinking, i.e. transcendence of commonsense, awareness of the “processes of infinite mediation” that underlie facts, and a mode of reflection that “illuminates the realm of facticity” by diverging “radically from the accepted canon of scientific validity”⁴. He goes on to commend Weber’s “meticulous and thoughtful” translation of *Prisms* that aids the individual essays in becoming concrete instances of the author’s broader epistemology.

However, the preface ends with somewhat stilted phrases of thankfulness: “...

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1 Samuel M. Weber, “Translating the Untranslatable”, in T. W. Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1967), p. 15.

2 Adorno, *Prisms*, p. 7. [Emphasis added.]

3 He mentions his contributions to *The Authoritarian Personality* [with Else Frankel-Brunswick, Daniel J. Levinson, R. Nevitt Sanford (New York: Harper and Row, 1950)]; his essays on music sociology for the Princeton Radio Research Project [*Radio Research* (New York, 1941).]; and studies such as “How to Look at Television” [*The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 158-77; First Published: *The Quarterly of Film, Radio and Television* VIII (Spring 1954), pp. 213-35.]; and “The Stars Down to Earth” [*Telos* 19 (Spring 1974), pp. 13-90; First Published: *Jahrbuch für Amerikastudien* 2 (Heidelberg, 1957).]

4 Adorno, *Prisms*, p. 7.

the author could wish for nothing better than that the English version of *Prisms* might express something of the *gratitude* that he *cherishes* for England and for the United States – the countries which enabled him to survive the era of persecution and to which he has ever since felt himself *deeply bound*.⁵ Elsewhere, while commenting on his experiences as a scholar-in-exile in America, he implicitly opposes his formation as a central European intellectual to the climate of social sciences research in America: “The direction marked out for me through my first thirty-four years was thoroughly speculative...in my case inseparable from philosophical intentions. I thought it suited me personally and was objectively necessary to *interpret* phenomena, not to ascertain, organize, and classify facts, let alone to make them available as information, not only in philosophy, but also in sociology.”⁶ Later, in the same essay, he clarifies that though he was grateful to have found refuge in the United States, he was loath to give up who he was, and the “*tension* between these two attitudes should to some extent describe the manner in which [he] related to [his] American experience”⁷.

In the long years since the publication of *Prisms*, it is through the continued translation of the writings of thinkers like Adorno that the tenebrous distances separating the two languages and approaches have been illumined. Here, I wish to employ ‘translation’ as a central trope to unravel the complex politics of the reception of ‘Adorno-in-English’ since, I believe, it is in the figure of translation that the problematik coalesces. Also, the ‘tension’ of the exile, torn between gratefulness to his hosts and the desire to hold on to his self-identity, may be captured through this motif. Thus, the telescoping *Adorno-in-English* is a conscious attempt to simultaneously capture several aspects of the problematik related to the reception of English translations of Adorno’s *oeuvre*. Rendering of Adorno into English transfigures the English language⁸

5 Adorno, *Prisms*, p. 7. [Emphases added.]

6 “Scientific Experiences of a European Scholar in America”, in Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 216. [Emphasis retained.]

7 “Scientific Experiences of a European Scholar in America”, in Adorno, *Critical Models*, p. 216. [Emphasis added.]

8 It is quite obvious that it is not only the language of the translations of Adorno’s works that bears the marks of this process, but even the language of the second-order discourse on Adorno appears to be intensely affected by Adorno’s style. However, what is of significance

and the Anglo-American intellectual discourse as much as it does Adorno's 'original' writings in German⁹, and perhaps creates a new, exilic¹⁰ discourse that is neither the Adorno of the German 'original' nor simply the English language before it came into contact with the writings of the consummate "late stylist"¹¹. Thus, Adorno-in-English may be viewed as a metaphor for the complex of post-war relationships between the two languages and their intellectual cultures. However, it needs to be borne in mind that such discourse is not monolithic¹², in that the translations of Adorno are of uneven quality¹³ and the appropriations of a diverse kind.

is that Adorno-in English has flowed deep into the idiom of English language cultural and philosophical criticism. Frequently, it can be observed that those who debunk his writings for being arcane and hermetic, and therefore, elitist, actually appear to be mirroring his style.

9 However, it needs to be mentioned here that Adorno's German is already quite 'foreign' to his own linguistic sphere. *Adorno-Deutsch*, in its desire to challenge effortless readings, seeks to resuscitate the archaic, dormant potential of the language. In the process it employs, among others, strategies towards the concretization of expression such as parataxis and nominalization to a degree that is uncommon in conventional German.

10 Ironically, Adorno was 'forced' into close proximity with English in his lifetime – in his period of exile – first at Oxford, and then in New York and Los Angeles. His creative and critical engagement with the language as well as the Anglo-American culture can be witnessed in the most poignant expression of his exilic experiences, in *Minima Moralia* [*Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1993; First Published: 1951); translated as *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, by E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2002; 1978)]. A shorter and more prosaic account of his experience as a scholar in exile can be found in "Scientific Experiences of a European Scholar in America", in *Critical Models*, pp. 215-42. For an insightful reassessment of *Minima Moralia* and Adorno's exile in Los Angeles, see Nico Israel, "Damage Control: Adorno, Los Angeles, and the Dislocation of Culture", *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 10.1 (1997): 85-113.

11 See Shierry Weber Nicholsen, *Exact Imagination, Late Work: On Adorno's Aesthetics* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1997), p. 8. See also, Edward W. Said, "Adorno as Lateness Itself", in *Adorno: A Critical Reader*, ed. Nigel Gibson and Andrew Rubin (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 193-208.

12 However, in practice some commentators treat Adorno's *oeuvre*, if not as a monolith then as somewhat unproblematically centred around a single subjectivity. Even though Adorno's work resists systematization profoundly, it can be observed that many scholars tend to see it as a naturalized continuum; discussions regarding 'breaks' in his thought are rare. A more self-conscious attitude is on display, when commenting on his analysis of Adorno's works, Jameson states, "I have considered these writings synchronously, as parts of a single unfolding system, as though the various Adornos, in the various stages of their youth and decay..., were all 'sitting around a table in the British Museum' together.", from the Introduction titled "Adorno in the Stream of Time" to *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, The Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 1990), p. 3. [Quotation marks retained.]

13 In his assessment of the available English translations of the Adorno-texts till the late eighties, Jameson comments on their unevenness and goes on to suggest that E. F. N. Jephcott's *Minima Moralia*, and Rodney Livingstone's *In Search of Wagner* "are elegant Anglo-English". He welcomes the "stronger German accent" of John Cumming's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, but finds "altogether misguided" Christian Lenhardt's strategy of breaking up sentences and paragraphs and producing an unrecognizable "literate and respectable British" *Aesthetic Theory*. He is even more critical of E. B. Ashton's *Negative Dialectics*, in which he finds that "the most basic terms are misrendered, making whole passages...altogether

In the complex ecology of Adorno-reception, I detect four rather divergent strands that sometimes militate against one another: the two languages presupposing two diverse intellectual orientations and their differing potentials in terms of the articulation of philosophical content; contemporary political/theoretical frames in the Anglo-American academe that seek to selectively appropriate the writings of Adorno, as also the disciplinary turfs that attempt to site Adorno's rather transdisciplinary *oeuvre*; and finally, the self-conscious form of his work that strives to resist easy cooption or consumption. It is obvious that the afterlife of Adorno in Germany should have impacted the reception of his writings in the Anglo-American world¹⁴; and equally, the influence of English language Adorno criticism on Adorno-reception in Germany¹⁵, especially in the last three decades, should have been considerable. However, I propose to say little about this aspect of the problematik since it is for me relatively a *terra incognita*. Thus, what follows is a tentative and exploratory mapping of some of the positions underlying the translations of Adorno's writings as well as the second-order commentary and criticism that his work has occasioned in the English-speaking world.

incomprehensible". ('A Note on Editions and Translations', in *Late Marxism*, p. ix.) For a discussion around Christain Lenhardt's translation (New York: Routledge, 1984) of *Ästhetische Theorie*, see Bob Hullot-Kentor, "Adorno's Aesthetic Theory: The Translation" and Christian Lenhardt, "Reply to Hullot-Kentor", *Telos*, No. 65 (Fall 1985): 147-52. For incisive, critical comments on the more recent translation by Hullot-Kentor, see James Buhler, Review Essay "Adorno Today", *Modernism/Modernity* 6.2 (1999): 161-8. The references to *Aesthetic Theory* in the present essay are to the Hullot-Kentor translation.

14 Martin Jay, while commenting on the work of the "descendents" of the Frankfurt School in Germany, speaks about a more familiar second generation of the School that comprises Jürgen Habermas, Alfred Schmidt and Albrecht Wellmer. He then goes on to mention a third generation of the School, a group of intellectuals less-known to the English readership, including figures like Axel Honneth, Peter Bürger, Oskar Negt, Helmut Dubiel, Claus Offe, Alfons Söllner, Hauke Brunkhorst, Detlev Claussen, W. Martin Lüdke and Christoph Menke. ['Preface to the 1996 Edition' to his *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. xv.] In my exploratory account, I have attempted to comprehend Habermas's impact on Adorno reception; however, I do not find myself competent to write about the contribution of the other intellectuals mentioned by Jay.

15 For instance, according to Martin Jay the German translation of his *The Dialectical Imagination* could rise above the contemporary controversies in Germany and help generate a serious historical interest in the Frankfurt School, as it was perceived to be the work of an outsider with no political axe to grind. ['Preface to the 1996 Edition' to his *The Dialectical Imagination*, pp. xiv-xv.]

I. Rendering German Theory into English

German sentences have a history; sentences in English tend to be stillborn.¹⁶ In his introduction to *Prisms*, titled “Translating the Untranslatable”, one of the first translators of Adorno, Samuel M. Weber speaks primarily of the inevitable failure of the translator’s task. Weber, in what is perhaps the earliest attempt to explore the extent of difficulty involved in rendering Adorno into English, depicts it as a crisis, of orientation, thought and language. In the first instance, he questions the rather common and glib distinction between the translation of poetry and that of philosophy, and contends that it dissolves with the likes of Adorno. In his words, “(The essays collected in *Prisms*) are literature, if by literature is meant language in which imagination, fiction and form are moments which constitute the ‘content’, a content which in principle can be distinguished from that of *Dichtung*, if at all, through its less mediate relation to truth.”¹⁷ In the writings of Adorno, Weber goes on to suggest, thought and the form that its articulation takes, correspond to sculpt “conceptual concreteness”. However, with the “empirical orientation” that structures the horizons of the English language, naturalised tangibles and their immediacy are taken to be concrete, while the concreteness of all that is intangible and invisible is suspect. Thirty years later another translator of Adorno, who can probably compare with Weber in his meticulousness and talent, appears to exude greater confidence, when he claims, “This translation has not supposed that it is simply a failed replica of the perfections of the original.”¹⁸ However, Robert Hullot-Kentor detects in *Aesthetic Theory* a distinct contrariness to the American context (of the future reception of his translation)¹⁹, since he finds that “...it is oriented not to its readers but to the

16 Remark made by Samuel M. Weber, while comparing the syntactical structures of the two languages, in his translator’s introduction in Adorno, *Prisms*, p. 13.

17 Weber, “Translating the Untranslatable”, in Adorno, *Prisms*, p. 11. (Emphasis retained.)

18 Robert Hullot-Kentor, “Translator’s Introduction”, in T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. xvii.

19 This assessment could be read ironically in the context of the following remarks regarding the presentational form of Hullot-Kentor’s translation by Buhler in his review essay: “...the current translation...on the authority of the German edition refuses even to indent paragraphs. Hullot-Kentor’s translation is therefore an extraordinarily strange-looking book in an American context; strange in a way that is not true of German texts, where lack of indented paragraphs is not uncommon. At the level of presentation Hullot-Kentor followed

thing-in-itself.” He attributes this to the “self-immersion” of the text in the primacy of its object; its negation of the externality of aesthetics.²⁰

Weber goes on to bemoan the semantic incompatibility of the English language with the German philosophical vocabulary. The demand for “empirical concreteness” repudiates the legitimacy of the “determinate indeterminacy” of German terms. He claims that in English “the tyranny of empiricism is far more effective in estranging the entire speculative dimension from the realm of ordinary discourse.”²¹ According to him, while the philosophical German abstracts from the familiar language of everyday activities, the English language through its latinization dilutes the effective “truth-content” of philosophical vocabulary. It is as though in English, the philosophical is severed from the everyday realm and bequeathed to the so-called experts. However, it must be added in this context that one of the knottiest aspects regarding the rendering into English of any work broadly belonging to the German Idealist tradition is historical, i.e. the systematic misrendering of crucial German terms by the early English translators of the key texts belonging to this tradition and the continued employment of such mistranslations by the later translators as these terms by then are so well-entrenched in the secondary scholarship that their replacement appears to call for massive effort and radical revisionings of attitudes.²² In his essay “On the Question: ‘What is German?’”, Adorno appears to underscore the untranslatability of German philosophical terms: “...the impossibility of conveying without violence not only high-reaching speculative thoughts but even particular, quite precise concepts such as those of *Geist* [spirit, mind, intellect], *Moment* [moment, element, aspect], and *Erfahrung* [experience],

the easy solution and refused to translate, as though the presentational form somehow exists apart from the content.” (Buhler, “Adorno Today”, p. 163.)

20 Hullot-Kentor, Translator’s Introduction, in Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, pp. xi-xii.

21 Weber, “Translating the Untranslatable”, in Adorno, *Prisms*, p. 12.

22 A rather conspicuous instance of such skewed practice is the translation of the title of Immanuel Kant’s *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, which has traditionally been rendered as *Critique of Judgement*, where *Urteil* and *Urteilskraft* are distinguished merely as judgement and Judgement – a rather arbitrary capitalization and without any real significance in English. It is only recently that a new version carries the obviously correct translation, *Critique of the Power of Judgement* [Ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001)]. This text belongs to the Cambridge series of new translations of the writings of Immanuel Kant, and one is tempted to suggest here that the Hegel translations too are in urgent need of some such effort.

including everything with which they resonate in German, speaks for a specific, objective quality of the German language.”²³

However, for Weber, “the most serious obstacle to the development and articulation of dialectical thinking in English is not semantic but syntactic.” He goes on to remark that the “tendency of English syntax to break thought down into its smallest, self-contained, monadic parts is probably the most formidable barrier to dialectics.”²⁴ Hohendahl appears to relate such concern to Adorno and the attempt to render his writings into English, when he states, “(Adorno’s) style, the embeddedness of his thoughts in the language of German idealism, makes it exceedingly difficult to communicate his ideas in modern English prose, which demands simplicity, brevity, and clarity.”²⁵ The lack of inflections and gendered nouns²⁶ in the English language as well as its impatience with lengthy sentences, Weber believes, precludes both hypotactic and paratactic clauses. On the other hand, he claims, the German language with its syntactical flexibility, its relatively non-hierarchical clausal structure and substantives that can take long appositional clauses can effectively embody dialectical thought.²⁷ According to Weber, therefore, German has the possibility – either wakeful or slumbering – to reach within its deeper recesses and resuscitate itself; he appears to doubt the presence of any such historical potential in English.

It is quite evident that though Adorno too believed in the immanence of the speculative dimension to German, he was all too aware of its pitfalls, when he observed, “...the German language...apparently has a special elective affinity with philosophy and particularly with its speculative element that in the West is so easily suspected of being dangerously unclear, and by no means completely without justification. Historically,...the German language has

23 Adorno, *Critical Models*, p. 213.

24 Weber, “Translating the Untranslatable”, in Adorno, *Prisms*, p. 13.

25 Peter Uwe Hohendahl, Preface, *Prismatic Thought: Theodor W. Adorno* (Lincoln, University of Nebraska press, 1995), p. vii.

26 The lack of gendered nouns in English is one of the more common impediments faced by the translators of German prose. As Pickford explains in his Preface, “While Adorno could rely on the gender specificity of German to transform relative pronouns into the turning points of dialectical reversals and qualifications, the English translation must tolerate a brute repetition of nouns...”, in Adorno, *Critical Models*, p. xi.

27 Weber, “Translating the Untranslatable”, in Adorno, *Prisms*, p. 13.

become capable of expressing something in the phenomena that is not exhausted in their mere thus-ness, their positivity and givenness.”²⁸ He goes on in a similar vein to assert that German has retained a power of expression far exceeding that of languages like English. However, in an exilic turn of thought, he warns against the danger of becoming complacent and taking the “metaphysical excess”²⁹ of the German language as the guarantee of its truth. And, in an incisive critique that ranges beyond the linguistic, he says, “In the tradition, self-righteous German profundity was ominously in accord with suffering and its justification. ... If there is still anything profound, that is, not content with the blindly inculcated notions, then it is the denunciation of every clandestine agreement with the unconditionality of suffering.”³⁰

It is generally said that though Adorno was intensely self-aware as regards linguistic expression and underscored the complex relationship of thought and language, he did not really articulate a systematic philosophy of language.³¹ However, it seems to me that in an essay titled “Words from Abroad”, he posits a deeply critical theory of language – which, I feel, could be read in the spirit of alterity and exile – when he states, “Language participates in reification, the separation of subject matter and thought. The customary ring of naturalness deceives us about that. It creates the illusion that what is said is immediately equivalent to what is meant. By acknowledging itself as a token, the foreign word reminds us bluntly that all real language has something of the token in it. It makes itself language’s scapegoat, the bearer of the dissonance that language has to give form to and not merely prettify. Not the least of what we resist in the foreign word is that it illuminates something true of all words: that language imprisons those who speak it, that as a medium of their own it has essentially failed.”³²

28 Adorno, “On the Question: ‘What is German?’”, *Critical Models*, p. 212.

29 Adorno, “On the Question: ‘What is German?’”, *Critical Models*, p. 213. While Pickford translates the German term *Übershuss* as ‘excess’, Weber refers to it as ‘surplus’. (Weber, “Translating the Untranslatable”, in Adorno, *Prisms*, p. 14.)

30 Adorno, “On the Question: ‘What is German?’”, *Critical Models*, pp. 213-4.

31 Some scholars have attempted to uncover an unstated theory of language through a close reading of his writings. See the chapter titled “The Discourse of Philosophy and the Problem of Language” in Hohendahl, *Prismatic Thought*, pp. 217-242. See also the chapter titled “Language: Its Murmurings, Its Darkness, and Its Silver Rib”, in Nichol森, *Exact Imagination, Late Work*, pp. 59-102.

32 Adorno, *Notes To Literature, Volume One*, Trans. Shierry Weber Nichol森 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 189.

Thus, it is not surprising that some of the more self-reflexive and meticulous translators of Adorno discuss and explain their renderings of problematic German terms.³³ In fact, it can be said that self-aware, literal renderings of Adorno's words are likely to have far greater success in terms of their coherence and communicability, as compared to the unselfconscious versions that seek to make Adorno 'readable' in English. It is, therefore, evident that the translation of Adorno's *oeuvre* demands a high degree of awareness of the multiple traditions of German Idealism, Critical Theory and philosophical aesthetics. However, above all, it seems to require a self-conscious and critical engagement with the project of translation. Therefore, it is only befitting that a continuous and critical engagement with the project of translation forms a substantial aspect of the second-order discourse on Adorno.³⁴ A thorough acquaintance with the body of Adorno-scholarship reveals that many accomplished translators of Adorno have also produced insightful commentaries, and several discerning commentators have had something to say about the task of translating Adorno³⁵ – it is almost as though if one translates Adorno well, one can develop insights into his work. I wish to extend this argument further by stating that Adorno's work demands a sort of translation-exercise from all its readers, and not only from those who read him in German.

33 For instance, Pickford, in his Preface to the *Critical Models*, lists a few recurring German words and their translations and clarifies the logic behind the rendering. A similar procedure is employed in his 'Translation Notes' by Redmond, the web-translator of Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*. Also, he goes on to retain some of the vexed German terms in the body of the translation. (T. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, Trans. Dennis Redmond. This translation is available as a freeware at the URL: <<http://www.efn.org/~dredmond/nd.html>>).

34 Hullot-Kentor offers a close and insightful reading of the excursus "Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment" in Cumming's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and lists the flawed renderings of individual phrases and statements. [Robert Hullot-Kentor, "Back to Adorno", *Telos*, No. 81, (Fall 1989): 27-29.] He goes on to retranslate the excursus and in an accompanying piece reiterates his criticism of Cumming's translation. [Robert Hullot-Kentor, "Notes on *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: Translating the Odysseus Essay", *New German Critique*, No. 56 (Spring/Summer 1992): 101-08; for his translation of the essay in the same issue, see "Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment": 109-41.]

35 Jameson, in his text on Adorno, actually takes up a list of specific mistranslated German terms from E. B. Ashton's *Negative Dialectics* and offers alternatives. ('A Note on Editions and Translations', in *Late Marxism*, pp. ix-x.)

II. Appropriate Adorno

The whole is the false.³⁶

Aesthetic totality is the antithesis of the untrue whole.³⁷

Martin Jay, while speaking about the status of Critical Theory in the late twentieth century, suggests that it has “outlived the moment of recovery and absorption of Western Marxism in the 1970s.” He appears to ascribe a certain malleability to this school of thought, when he observes, “Frankfurt School managed to become an enduring fixture in the theoretical landscape of the late 20th century... the general impulses of Critical Theory are still identifiable a quarter century later, even as its work has been hybridized and amalgamated with other theoretical tendencies.”³⁸ In a narrative that appears to be inattentive to its own ironies, Jay states that even when the larger paradigm of Western Marxism weakened and its several variants appeared to have faded, Critical Theory seemed to correspond rather unexpectedly with the concerns of an age that has been described as postmodern – the cultural climate that articulates the post-Fordist system of flexible accumulation.³⁹ He goes on to claim, “As questions of political economy and political praxis have been marginalized and those of culture and aesthetics gained center stage, the School’s varied and far-reaching explorations of these domains have stirred renewed interest and controversy.”⁴⁰ Though later he appends a somewhat weak disclaimer suggesting that Critical Theory cannot be reduced to “a prolegomenon to postmodernism”⁴¹, it is clear that Jay’s narrative sandwiches the reception of the Frankfurt School between the binaries of Western Marxism and postmodernism. The irony cannot be missed when one

36 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 50. The translator’s note here reads: “Inversion of Hegel’s famous dictum: *Das Wahre ist das Ganze* – the whole is the true. (*Phänomenologie des Geistes*, p. 24; *The phenomenology of Mind*, p. 81).” The German original reads: “Das Ganze is das Unwahre.” [*Minima Moralia* (Suhrkamp Verlag, 1993), p. 57.]

37 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 288.

38 Martin Jay, ‘Preface to the 1996 Edition’ to *The Dialectical Imagination*, p. xv.

39 Jay, ‘Preface to the 1996 Edition’ to *The Dialectical Imagination*, pp. xvi-xvii. He clarifies though that the reception of the School has been more hospitable in the United States; whereas, in the Federal Republic “the battle lines between post-modernists and second generation Critical Theorists have been sharply drawn.”

40 Jay, ‘Preface to the 1996 Edition’ to *The Dialectical Imagination*, p. xvii.

41 Jay, ‘Preface to the 1996 Edition’ to *The Dialectical Imagination*, p. xvii.

reads the implication that it is the present retreat from politics to culture that has given a new lease of life to the School – especially when today this particular tradition of critical thought appears to militate against the banality and complicity of postmodernist cultural studies. Jay’s awareness of such resistance is apparent when he avers, “...Critical Theory has served for some in the new context as a bulwark against what has seemed the most nihilistic, relativistic and counter-enlightenment implications of certain postmodern theories.”⁴² Jay’s useful account, to my mind, suffers from the lacunae that are imminent when the complex and varied receptions of the Frankfurt School and Critical Theory are read as a relatively unproblematic and cohesive narrative. It can be observed that the intellectual responses to the individual members of the School have traversed diverse trajectories that have sometimes collided against each other.⁴³ In my opinion, therefore, it is far more profitable to look at Adorno’s reception as a more-or-less distinct narrative, only loosely aligned with the fate of Critical Theory as a whole.

Though Adorno’s work has “aged”⁴⁴ in the present – it is read as a classic in some contexts and rendered seemingly irrelevant in the others – often elevated to the status of the epigraph, or frequently consigned to the lowly footnote; strangely, it appears to speak to a variety of concerns in the contemporary intellectual universe. Andrew Rubin seems to paint this as a glaring paradox, when he characterizes Adorno as a “deeply Eurocentric” thinker who never articulated a theory of imperialism or colonialism, “wrote little about sexual difference”, “rarely mentioned race” in his work, passionately advocated arcane dissonant music, and yet “has appealed to precisely those fields that are motivated by a fundamental attention to the absences in [his] vast body of writing”.⁴⁵ It can be said with some certainty,

42 Jay, ‘Preface to the 1996 Edition’ to *The Dialectical Imagination*, p. xix.

43 It may be observed that the afterlives of Benjamin and Adorno, though comparable initially, have diverged to such an extent that it is easy to forget that their intellectual development actually had a lot in common. Cultural Studies textbooks, for instance, routinely contrast Benjamin’s seminal essay “Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” with Adorno’s Jazz essay, completely ignoring the fact that both the pieces are products of intellectual interdependence. Secondly, it can be also seen that the Habermasian reception in the English-speaking world has been largely oppositional to that of the first generation of the School.

44 Nichol森, *Exact Imagination*, pp. 1 and 5.

45 Rubin, “The Adorno Files” in *Adorno: A Critical Reader*, p. 172.

and not without irony, that Adorno has transcended the originary moment of his reception in the English speaking world – that he has spoken in different languages to different groups and has meant diverse things to differing intellectual positions. In his study on Adorno's *Prismatic Thought*, Peter Uwe Hohendahl finds that Adorno's "work has become the site of heated discussions and controversies because it has been claimed for different and conflicting intellectual agendas"⁴⁶. In the diverse forcefields of appropriation that characterize the American reception of Adorno, Hohendahl appears to discount the so-called historical approach⁴⁷ and foreground the role of poststructuralism. He focuses on "the interface between reading and appropriation" to draw out "a tentative typology of recent Adorno criticism in the United States", and distinguishes four different modes of appropriation: Marxist, explicitly political criticism; poststructuralist revisionings; postmodernist critiques; and finally, what Hohendahl calls "a return to the 'authentic' Adorno".⁴⁸

Shierry Weber Nicholzen, however, has quite a different take on the subject. According to her, the problem is not that Adorno has been over-appropriated but that his Anglo-American reception is marked by a lack of imaginative appropriation. Nicholzen claims that unlike the diverse and creative reception of Benjamin, Adorno's reception has been relatively unitary and bound by narrower concerns. This is so because a great deal of effort has gone into

46 Hohendahl, *Prismatic Thought*, pp. 3-4.

47 As an instance of this approach, he cites Eugene Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism: An Historical Study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin, and Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982). However, to my mind, an account only of its kind, primarily analysing the complex debates on literary modernism among Marxists in early twentieth century, could hardly be an example of a generic historical perspective. A better example could be Martin Jay's intellectual biography *Adorno* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984). As also Jay's excellent historical survey of the Frankfurt School till its post-war return to Frankfurt, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996; originally published: Boston: Little, Brown, 1973). However, according to Jameson, this chronicle is broadly from Horkheimer's point of view. (Jameson, *Late Marxism*, p. 253.) For a critical and exhaustive history, see Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories, and Political Significance*, trans. Michael Robertson (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1994). However, Hullot-Kentor rightly points out that this text "embodies a generation's rejection of Adorno" in Germany, in that it "dismisses him as a bitter, hyperemotional complainer, monotonously prejudiced in his views, irresponsibly protean in his thought, and unable to formulate testable hypotheses." (Hullot-Kentor, "Translator's Introduction", in Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. xx.)

48 Hohendahl, *Prismatic Thought*, p. 4.

merely locating or contextualising his *oeuvre*, trying to fathom his exact position, rather than creatively contemporizing his work.⁴⁹ She goes on to suggest that the relative indigence of Adorno criticism gestures towards a deeper, more basic and continued miscomprehension of his work in the Anglo-American context. Her answer to this complex riddle, I believe, is quite insightful. She states that the English language criticism on Adorno has undervalued the “aesthetic dimension” of his work, and by extension, neglected his insistence on the “presentational form [*Darstellungsform*] of his work”⁵⁰. For her, it is the aesthetic aspect of Adorno’s *oeuvre* that articulates the inseparability of form and substance in philosophy – the configurational or constellational form that enunciates a conceptual rationality. She goes on to claim that to locate Adorno’s true actuality for the present we must delve deeper into the connection drawn in his work “between the aesthetic dimension and a nondiscursive form of truth”⁵¹.

I find Hohendahl’s detailed graph of the Anglo-American second-order discourse on Adorno quite illuminating. However, I wish to amend it in two basic ways. Firstly, I wish to underline the need for problematizing the naturalised ‘metacontexts’ of Adorno criticism. It is obvious that most readings of Adorno’s *oeuvre* take its originary ur-context to be a settled site. Almost always, it turns out to be any one of the following: the shared concerns of an intellectual grouping in Germany called Frankfurt School of Critical Theory; the political tradition of Western Marxism; defence of autonomous literary and artistic modernism; “dark enlightenment” that philosophically repudiates the enlightenment project; or even, proto-poststructuralism. I believe we need to question these basic hermeneutic frames before we set out to sketch the topography of Adorno-reception. However, this should not be seen as a call to continue the seemingly endless quest for fixing Adorno’s ‘authentic’ position; on the other hand, it should also not be taken as a recommendation for subjecting Adorno’s work to fanciful, decontextualized readings. I merely wish to suggest that if Adorno could be freed of the familiar pigeonholes – or, at the minimum, if a modicum of scepticism is introduced about the rehearsed

49 Nicholzen, *Exact Imagination*, pp. 1-2.

50 Nicholzen, *Exact Imagination*, p. 3.

51 Nicholzen, *Exact Imagination*, p. 3.

contexts of his readings – a greater dynamism could be introduced in the narratives traced by the voluminous scholarship on Adorno.⁵²

My second argument is regarding the disciplinary contexts of Adorno criticism. It is evident that Adorno's complex trans- and inter-disciplinary *oeuvre* has been read from multiple disciplinary locations. And, in the process, the courses of individual disciplines – both emergent as well as established – have impinged on the afterlife of Adorno. It can even be argued that the familiar metacontexts of Adorno-scholarship are the outcome of complex configurations interrelating theories and disciplines. If the mutual, interdependent correlation of theoretical approaches and disciplinary sites is recognized, then it follows that while charting out the map of Adorno criticism we should account for how such academic contexts have informed the reception of his *oeuvre*. However, according to Detlev Claussen, this rather unitary tale of solely academic readings of Adorno's work needs to be related to the “extra-academic” beginnings of Critical Theory, situated within the experience of the “failed revolution in Germany”, and its complex relationship with a Marxist variety of theory of society that simply cannot be reduced to a purely academic exposition. He claims, therefore, that the prevalent Anglo-American reception of Frankfurt School, insofar as it is an academicisation of Critical Theory, is in itself a distortion.⁵³

If Hohendahl's graph is redrafted with the added vector of disciplinarity, it can be observed that certain theoretical positions appear to have greater affinity with specific academic locations. For instance, in the eighties – the period of emergence of Cultural Studies – Adorno served as a straw man in the high art/popular culture debate; he was caricatured as an elitist who defended autonomous modernism in an arcane language. There have been serious attempts to engage with the postmodernist critique of Adorno from other perspectives and disciplinary locations, and many have pointed out that this is an obviously flawed characterization, based on partial – and many a time

52 Obviously, this is not an attempt to undermine the significance of the sizeable Adorno-scholarship. Following Nichol森, I merely wish to point out that these interpretive scaffolds have “aged” and their unselfconscious deployment needs to be questioned.

53 Detlev Claussen, Personal communication, dated 7th August 2004.

filtered through inadequate English translations – knowledge of his *oeuvre*.⁵⁴ However, one notices that it still remains the dominant view from within Cultural Studies; it is almost as though the summary dismissal of this difficult European intellectual has become an aspect of the disciplinary orthodoxy.

The last point that I wish to stress concerns the impact of the developments in post-Adornian critical theory in Germany on the Anglo-American Adorno-criticism. Among the so called ‘second generation’ of critical theorists, Jürgen Habermas has occupied a strategic site of interpretation vis-à-vis the supposed legacy of the thinkers of the Frankfurt School. Habermas paints Adorno’s thought as “self-affirmation gone wild”⁵⁵ – a *cul-de-sac* reached by the autonomous subject and *avant garde* modernist art. He goes on to claim that his ‘theory of communicative action’⁵⁶ has broken through the impasse of older critical theory, and therefore, superseded it. In this peculiar context, the impact of Habermas and the Anglo-American Habermasians on the reception of Adorno should be considered as an important forcefield – not so much of appropriation but of the displacement of Adorno criticism.

A Self-reflexive Digression

Here, I am tempted to digress a little from the main storyline about Adorno’s reception in the Anglo-American intellectual universe. Where matters of philosophy and intellectual intercourse are concerned, I live on the periphery of the English-speaking world. It was purely a matter of fortuitous accident that the university where I was enrolled as a postgraduate student happened

54 Most postmodernist/cultural studies assessments of Adorno are primarily based on their reading of the essay “Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” [Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1993)]. The more recent and relatively complex assessments also consider the originally unpublished sections from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* entitled “The Schema of Mass Culture” [*The Culture Industry*, pp. 61-97.], and *Composing for the Films* (1947), as also the essays written in the sixties such as “The Culture Industry Reconsidered” [*The Culture Industry*, pp. 98-106.] and “Transparencies on Film” [*The Culture Industry*, pp. 178-186; (Originally Published: 1966).] For more details, see below the subsection on ‘Postmodernist Versions’.

55 See Jürgen Habermas. “Theodor Adorno: The Primal History of Subjectivity - Self-Affirmation Gone Wild”, in his *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1983), pp. 99-109.

56 Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action - Vol.1 Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), and *The Theory of Communicative Action - Vol. 2 Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987).

to subscribe to *Telos*, a quarterly of critical thought, brought out by the Telos Press at New York. This scholarly periodical is not directly a part of the American academia and has thus retained the status of an independent, nonconformist journal. *Telos*, whose back-numbers traced a chronicle detailing the encounter between central European critical thought and American New Left, was possibly the most vigorous aspect of my relationship with Critical Theory. However, the moot purpose of this digression is not nostalgia, but a self-reflexive admission of my thoroughly mediated relationship with Adorno and his reception amongst the more advantaged English-reading audiences. However, if I could put to some use my distance from the centres of intellectual production, I would say that the rather idiosyncratic and chequered career of *Telos* could be viewed as a metaphor for the eventful journey of the 'Adorno-in-English'.

To paint the picture in broad strokes, *Telos, Quarterly Journal of Critical Thought* commenced publication in 1968 as a scholarly endeavour of the American "non-conformist" New Left attempting "to mediate between European and US critical theory"⁵⁷. In the seventies, the defining features of the journal were its robust, critical engagement with continental theory – from Phenomenology to Western Marxism; its attempt to relate European theoretical insights to the specific situation of the United States; and its sharp, combative, and polemical style.⁵⁸ By the eighties, the journal appeared to have moved away further from the older Critical Theory paradigms and experimented with currents as diverse as Foucault on the one hand and Habermas on the other. However, by the mid-nineties, it seems to have taken a neoconservative turn and embraced the European Right's critique of liberalism.⁵⁹ As I had noted earlier, in its early years *Telos* regularly published

57 Renate Holub, "Between Europe and the USA: The Rise and Decline of the Journal *Telos*", *Bad Subjects*, Issue # 31 (March 1997).

58 When describing the intellectual atmosphere in the United States in the seventies, Martin Jay speaks about the multiple contexts defined by the last years of the Vietnam War, the still potent New Left, and the gradual emergence of Western Marxism as a novel, radical category. And, while characterizing the response of scholarly journals on the Left, he remarks, "Journals like *New Left Review*, *Telos*, and *New German Critique* tumbled over each other in their eagerness to present, explicate and apply ideas that promised to help subvert the status quo." ['Preface to the 1996 Edition' to his *The Dialectical Imagination*, p. xiv.]

59 The editors of the journal call this "new populism". Holub blames this rightward shift on the journal's continued obsession with the "hegemonic Europe", "Between Europe and the

originally translated pieces of the Frankfurt School theorists, and thus, played a key role in introducing Critical Theory to the American audiences.⁶⁰ In the seventies, the journal published more than ten freshly translated pieces authored by Adorno. A cursory look at these pieces reveals an engagement with diverse aspects of his *oeuvre*: cultural critique⁶¹, literary and music criticism⁶², epistemology and philosophy⁶³ and politics⁶⁴. In the eighties, there is a noticeable waning of interest and only two original Adorno-pieces figure in the pages of the journal.⁶⁵ However, there are a few critical voices that call for a more engaged rereading of Adorno⁶⁶. These voices become more articulate in the early nineties, and there seems to be a reawakening of interest in Adorno, especially his musicological works. However, *Telos's* serious engagement with the abstruse German thinker appears to have come to an informal close with an impassioned piece that valorises and reclaims Adorno for the struggles of the future and an acerbic polemical rejoinder from Piccone, the journal's irrepressible editor, which dismisses such claims.⁶⁷

II. A. Political Critiques

Hohendahl begins with the posthumous German response to Adorno in the seventies; with the background of the left-wing students' protest movements

USA", *Bad Subjects*, Issue # 31.

60 This is not to say that it was the only journal to do so. The other journals where Adorno's essays have been published are: *Diogenes*, *Kenyon Review*, *New Left Review*, *Salmagundi*, and another important journal brought out by the Telos Press, *New German Critique (NGC)*. In fact, *NGC* published a 'Special Issue on Adorno', No. 56 (Spring/Summer 1992). Though *NGC*, an interdisciplinary journal of German Studies, comes closest to *Telos* in terms of its engagement with German Critical Theory, it should be noted that it has an academic affiliation with the department of German Studies at the Cornell University, Ithaca.

61 "Theses Against Occultism" and "The Stars Down to Earth: The Los Angeles Times Astrology Column", No. 19 (Spring 1974); "Culture and Administration", No. 37 (Fall 1978).

62 "Lyric Poetry and Society", No. 20 (Summer 1974); "Alienated Masterpiece: The Missa Solemnis", No. 28 (Summer 1976); "Music and Technique", No. 32 (Summer 1977); "On the Social Situation of Music", No. 35 (Spring 1978); "Music and the New Music", No. 43 (Spring 1980).

63 "The Actuality of Philosophy", No. 31 (Spring 1977); "Metacritique of Epistemology", No. 38 (Winter 1978-79).

64 "Resignation", No. 35 (Spring 1978).

65 "The Idea of Natural History" No. 60 (Summer 1984), and "The Aging of the New Music", No. 77 (Fall 1988).

66 See Robert Hullot-Kentor, "Back to Adorno", No. 81 (Fall 1989).

67 See Robert Hullot-Kentor, "Theory of the Future" and Paul Piccone, "Does Critical Theory Need Saints or Foundations?", No. 87 (Spring 1991). This issue also carries a Special Section on Musicology that includes Adorno's "Marginalia on Mahler" and three essays on Adorno and popular music.

and Adorno's rather complicated relationship with them, Adorno-reception appears to have been dominated by the concerns of the New Left. According to Hohendahl, while figures like Oskar Negt, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Claus Offe and Wolfgang Iefèvre moved away from the older generation of the Frankfurt School, Habermas occupied the so-called middle ground.⁶⁸ The central targets of the 'political' critique were: Adorno's scepticism of direct political action which was perceived as quietism; his pessimistic account of the capitalist system that led to the formulation of the 'totally administered society', and his affinity to autonomous aesthetics. However, an engaged analysis of his late works – especially his occasional essays and his radio addresses – reveals his direct and profound engagement with questions of social praxis.⁶⁹ However, in the United States, again in the context of students' movement, he was unfavourably compared to Herbert Marcuse on this count. Paul Piccone and others, associated with the journal *Telos* – vastly responsible for introducing some of the more obscure texts of the Frankfurt School into the American intellectual realm – also emphasized the need to develop a critique of the Critical Theory. By the eighties, Adorno was specially targeted for his allegedly dehistoricized critique of rationality and the Western Civilization, the perceived containment of the emancipatory impulse to questions of "particularity, autonomy and nonidentity", allegedly totalizing and "increasing hermetic" analysis of "the logic of domination", and "politically impotent esthetic maneuvers"⁷⁰. Jameson, the most Adornean among the Marxists, dubbed his late opus *Negative Dialectics* as a failure, in as much as

68 Hohendahl, *Prismatic Thought*, p. 5. Habermas's putative equidistance from Adorno as well as his erstwhile students could be seen as a strategic move, as later he emerged as the most prominent member of the so called 'second generation' of Critical Theory. However, his deep differences with the radical students' movement become clear from what Martin Jay calls his "imprudent condemnation of 'left fascism'". [Preface to the 1996 Edition' to his *The Dialectical Imagination*, p. xiii.]

69 See Henry W. Pickford, "Critical Models: Adorno's Theory and Practice of Cultural Criticism", *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 10.2 (1997): 247-270. See also the amended version of this essay entitled "The Dialectic of Theory and Praxis: On Late Adorno", in *Adorno: A Critical Reader*, pp. 312-40. For the translations of the essays originally published in German in collections such as *Eingriffe: Neuen kritische Modelle* (1963) and *Stichworte: Kritische Modelle 2* (1969), see T. W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, Trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). Also, for a balanced account of Adorno's late, more politically engaged writings and his relationship with students' protest politics, see Russell Berman, "Adorno's Politics" in *Adorno: A Critical Reader*, pp. 110-31.

70 Paul Piccone, General Introduction, *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, Ed. Andrew Arato & Eike Gebhardt (New York: Continuum, 1982), pp. xvi-xvii.

it was an attempt to “save philosophy”.⁷¹ However, in his *Late Marxism* – an instance of affirmative appropriation of Adorno– he reverses his judgement and claims, “It now seems to me possible, then, that Adorno’s Marxism, which was no great help in the previous periods, may turn out to be just what we need today.”⁷² However, it can be observed that it is the ‘political’ critique that constructs a persona of Adorno as a pessimistic aesthete.⁷³

II. B. Poststructuralist Rereadings

According to Hohendahl’s narrative sequence, in the eighties, poststructuralism upturns the political critique and responds favourably to what it perceives to be the ‘non-Marxist’ themes in Adorno’s work: the conception of negative dialectics, the thoroughgoing critique of Western rationality, his espousal of nonidentity, and his refusal to submit to systematization of thought. Hohendahl connects Adorno’s poststructuralist reception to the almost simultaneous Deconstructive appropriation of Walter Benjamin’s writings.⁷⁴ However, I believe, broadly speaking the trajectories taken by the reception histories of the two theorists remain divergent right from the seventies. Though this is not really the place to go into this, it is my understanding that Benjamin lends himself to be more vigorously appropriated by various positions, since he had allowed for the coexistence of dissimilar, sometimes opposing, perspectives in his rather amorphous *oeuvre*. To come back to the poststructuralist reinvention of Adorno, it focuses primarily on his epistemological scepticism and discounts the questions of political praxis. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* – a text where Horkheimer and

71 Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth Century Dialectical Theories of Literature*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 58. Cited by Hohendahl, *Prismatic Thought*, p. 6.

72 Jameson, *Late Marxism*, p. 5.

73 However, to employ an Adorno-like turn of thought here, this characterization tells us less about Adorno and more about his ‘political’ critics! In Russell Berman’s words: “By labelling Adorno politically impossible, his critics provide themselves an illusory security in their own political self-understanding. ...His consistent assertion of the autonomy of theory from practice, within a dialectical interdependence, as well as that leitmotif of Critical Theory since the thirties, the need for reason to reflect upon itself, amount to admonitions to caution which could only irritate a left which, since the student movement, has spiralled through dogmatism, sectarianism, and conformism, only to land in today’s more moderate but no less reified political correctness.” (“Adorno’s Politics”, in *Adorno: A Critical Reader*, p. 111.)

74 Hohendahl cites as an example, Rainer Nägele, ed., *Benjamin’s Ground: New Readings of Walter Benjamin* (Detroit MI: Wayne State University Press, 1988).

Adorno sought to remind the enlightenment of itself, “if humanity were not to be wholly betrayed”⁷⁵ – is read as an irrevocable denunciation of the enlightenment project; its self-reflexivity is taken to be its self-destruction. In Martin Jay’s words: Adorno is construed “as a rigorous antimetaphysical thinker who struggle(d) against any form of (Hegelian) synthesis”⁷⁶. His assault in *Negative Dialectics* on traditional epistemology of identity and his valorisation of the particular, the nonconceptual and the nonidentical is seen as proto-poststructuralist. Rainer Nägele seeks to cobble together “a constellation of Critical Theory and Deconstruction”⁷⁷, and in the attempt, brings about an “extorted reconciliation”⁷⁸ between Adorno’s negative dialectic and the Derridean ‘différance’.

Another, more recent example of the poststructuralist assessment of Adorno is an anthology edited by Max Pensky.⁷⁹ His approach is somewhat different – and in a sense post-Adornean; he seeks to read Adorno to reflect on the questions raised by poststructuralist theory.⁸⁰ In his mapping emerges a pattern of shared philosophical affinities: contrapuntal readings of traditional philosophy; distrust of philosophical systems; critique of rationality and the inclination towards the marginal. Therefore, he sees poststructuralism and Adorno’s philosophical writings as “parallel efforts to recover an ethics of alterity by way of an immanent overcoming of the tradition of philosophical idealism.”⁸¹ This description appears to be reasonably apposite where Adorno’s philosophical questioning is concerned. However, most poststructuralist theory hardly qualifies as “an immanent overcoming” of

75 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Cumming, p. xv. [Translation modified.]

76 Hohendahl, *Prismatic Thought*, p. 7.

77 Rainer Nägele, “The Scene of the Other: Theodor W. Adorno’s Negative Dialectic in the Context of Poststructuralism”, *Boundary Two* 11 (1983): 1-2, 67. Cited in Hohendahl, *Prismatic Thought*, p. 7. For an interesting comparison with French poststructuralism, see Peter Dews, *Logics of Disintegration: Post-structuralist Thought and the Claims of Critical Theory* (London: Verso, 1987).

78 Title of an essay by Adorno, where he critiques Lukács’ attack on modernism, “Extorted Reconciliation: On Georg Lukács’ *Realism in Our Time*” in *Notes To Literature, Volume One*, pp. 216-240. Also, translated as “Reconciliation under Duress”, in *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. Perry Anderson et al (London: Verso, 1977). I feel this phrase aptly characterizes the attempts to appropriate Adorno from various positions.

79 Max Pensky, ed., *The Actuality of Adorno: Critical Essays on Adorno and the Postmodern* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).

80 Buhler, “Adorno Today”, p. 163.

81 Pensky, ed., *The Actuality of Adorno*, p. 6. Quoted by Buhler, “Adorno Today”, pp. 163-4.

Idealism. Ironically, its relationship with Adorno's thought is somewhat similar; i.e. an effort to overcome – and, not really through any immanent process – elements that it finds inconvenient such as the emphases on autonomous subjectivity and the concept of totality.

Poststructuralism also uses a strategy of fragmentation, by which it highlights the internal disparities within Critical Theory, and in the process, sets Adorno apart as a distinct thinker. In this narrative, Adorno appears to move away from Marx and the other Critical Theorists and gravitate closer to thinkers such as Nietzsche, Heidegger and Lacan. However, several key moments of Adorno's work militate against such cooption: his relentless critique of Heidegger in *The Jargon of Authenticity*, his consistent espousal of the concept of totality; his complex but decidedly 'pre-structuralist' understanding of language⁸²; the sustained defence of the autonomy of the subject in the 'totally administered society'; and the unquestionable commitment to the emancipatory task of critical thought. Thus, in the words of Martin Jay, "his stubborn reluctance to give up on the questions of social justice and truth..., or forego any hope for finding a political means to realize them"⁸³ constitutes his anticipatory rejection of poststructuralism.

II. C. Habermasian Displacements

Habermas in his ostensible re-reading of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* declares that in this text, Horkheimer and Adorno turn to Marquis de Sade and Nietzsche, the foremost "nihilistic *dark* writers of the bourgeoisie", to script "their blackest, most nihilistic book, in order to conceptualize the self-destructive process of Enlightenment".⁸⁴ A comparison with Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*, according to Habermas, validates this thesis.⁸⁵

82 See the chapter titled "The Discourse of Philosophy and the Problem of Language" in Hohendahl, *Prismatic Thought*, pp. 217-242.

83 Jay, 'Preface to the 1996 Edition' to *The Dialectical Imagination*, p. xix.

84 Jürgen Habermas, "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Re-Reading *Dialectic of Enlightenment*", trans. Thomas Y. Levin, *New German Critique* No. 28 (Spring-Summer 1982): 13. (Emphasis retained.) This piece has also been published in Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge Mass.: Polity Press, 1987), pp. 106-30. See Ch. 4 of this text for a critique of Nietzsche, "The Entry into Postmodernity", pp. 83-105.

85 For an account of Nietzsche's place in Adorno's work, see Karin Bauer, *Adorno's Nietzschean Narratives: Critiques of Ideology, Readings of Wagner* (Albany: State

Elsewhere, he reiterates, “It is no longer Marx, but Nietzsche who points the way. It is no longer a theory of society saturated with history, but a radical critique of reason denouncing the union of reason and domination.”⁸⁶ Furthermore, he questions the very grounds of such critical analysis: “If enlightenment is caught up in an unstoppable process of self-destruction, where then would such a critique, which made this diagnosis, have a right to such a diagnosis?”⁸⁷ He goes on to say that the “incomplete and one-sided” text “does not do justice to the elements of reason in cultural modernity which are contained in...the bourgeois ideals”, such as “the (ethical) self-reflexion of the sciences”; “the universalist foundations of law and morality”, as practised in democratic institutions and “in individualistic patterns of identity formation”; and “the productivity and the liberating force of an aesthetic experience”⁸⁸. He thus defends his putative “unfinished project of modernity”⁸⁹ in the face a “critique so *far-reaching* that the very project of Enlightenment itself was threatened”. Habermas extends his judgement about Adorno’s full-scale desertion of the enlightenment to the structure of his late philosophy: *Negative dialectics* and its “paradoxical concept of non-identity” and *Aesthetic Theory* “which deciphers the concealed mimetic content in the most advanced works of art”⁹⁰. Against these rather sweeping allegations I wish to contrast a statement made by Adorno in *Minima Moralia*: “Not least among the tasks now confronting thought is that of placing all the reactionary arguments against Western culture in the service of progressive enlightenment.”⁹¹

In spite of the textual evidence to the contrary, it was perhaps Habermas’s stature, both in and outside the Federal Republic, which made this totalizing

University of New York Press, 1999). In this text, for a critique of Habermas’s reading of Nietzsche and Adorno, see “Habermas’s Nietzsche”, pp. 13-4.

86 Jürgen Habermas, “Nachwort” (Afterword) to an edition of *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, published in 1986 (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag), p. 282. Cited in a sharp, polemical critique of Habermas’s re-readings of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* by Robert Hullot-Kentor, “Back to Adorno”, *Telos*, No. 81, (Fall 1989): 10.

87 Habermas, “Nachwort”, p. 282. Cited in Hullot-Kentor, “Back to Adorno”, *Telos*, No. 81: 10.

88 Habermas, “Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment”, p. 18.

89 See, Jürgen Habermas, “Modernity - An Incomplete Project”, in Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983), p. 8. [Cited in Stephen F. Eisenman, “Aesthetic Theory – Review”, *Art Journal* (Spring 1999).]

90 Habermas, “Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment”, p. 30.

91 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 192.

interpretation quite influential. However, Hullot-Kentor appears to be – implicitly but comprehensively – refuting the Habermasian allegations, when he asserts, “...in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*... Adorno and Horkheimer show that fascism did not simply coax cornered reason into delirium but was itself a potential implicit in reason’s own compulsion toward all-encompassing domination. Yet the authors never sought to subvert subjectivity or to countermand enlightenment, the course of subjectivity’s development as reason. If enlightenment had come to a dead end in fascism, its abrogation would make terror permanent. Rather, Adorno and Horkheimer took the side of enlightenment and tried to discern the logic of its failure. What they showed was that it missed its aim of human emancipation from natural necessity and the second nature of social constraint because the domination of nature unwittingly requires the sacrifice of subjectivity.”⁹²

There appears to be a remarkable convergence between the substance of the poststructuralist and Habermasian readings of Adorno; only the avowal and rejection pattern is inverted: the poststructuralists valorise Adorno’s critique of enlightenment and instrumental rationality, whereas Habermas finds it destructive; while Deconstruction celebrates Adorno’s supposed proximity to Nietzsche, Habermas derides it. Though the locations of the critique are disparate, there is little difference between the substantive characterizations of Adorno’s *oeuvre*. This leads me to suspect that Habermas is not really attempting to co-opt Adorno to his position. Instead, he is simply trying to push him out of the critical theory bracket into a newer, according to him destructive, intellectual position of poststructuralism.⁹³ Habermas’s *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* is supposed to be about “his rejection of the ‘paradigm of consciousness’ and its associated ‘philosophy of the subject’ in favour of the through-and-through intersubjectivist paradigm of ‘communicative action’.”⁹⁴ However, even a cursory glance at the structure of the text gives us a clue about this strategy,

92 Hullot-Kentor, “Translator’s Introduction”, in Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, pp. xii-xiii.

93 For another attempt at such displacement, see Habermas. “Theodor Adorno: The Primal History of Subjectivity - Self-Affirmation Gone Wild”, in his *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, pp. 99-109.

94 Thomas McCarthy, Introduction, Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. x.

as regards Adorno's position. This text comprises twelve lectures, and traces the narrative thread from Hegel and Schiller, through Nietzsche and Heidegger as well as Derrida and Foucault, to Habermas's clearheaded resolution. We find the essay on Adorno and Horkheimer sandwiched between a lecture on Nietzsche, titled "The Entry into Postmodernity" and a piece on Heidegger, titled "The Undermining of Western Rationalism through the Critique of Metaphysics". Thus, almost in a patricidal gesture, the heir to the tradition of critical theory, Jürgen Habermas seeks to 'transcend' his former teacher by relegating him to a 'dark' tradition from which he alone can rescue the enlightenment-modernity.

II. D. Postmodernist Versions

Martin Jay believes that the members of the first generation of the Frankfurt School prepared the ground for the advent of postmodernism rather unsuspectingly. He suggests, "...their reluctant jettisoning of a triumphalist notion of impending human emancipation, based on a single story of species-wide progress produced by class struggle, resonates with the characteristic postmodernist abandonment of any meta-narrative, especially one culminating in redemption."⁹⁵ However, it can be observed that in the eighties, the postmodernist reception of Adorno was dominated by the debates on the divide between high art and low culture, where it depicted Adorno as the elitist champion of a difficult and exclusivist modernism, whose strong criticism of the popular smacked of latent racism and class bias. According to Andreas Huyssen, "Adorno served as a straw man in the high/low debate that then energized the emerging field of postmodern studies and their attack on high modernism. Adorno's rigorous insistence on the autonomy of modernist art was mistakenly equated with a conservative defense of the high cultural canon. ...His detractors, rarely familiar with the complexities of his writings, many of which were not available in English or, if so, in exceedingly poor translations, could thus bask in the glow of breaking a lance for American popular culture and racial correctness."⁹⁶ Also, as Hohendahl points out, unlike the poststructuralist approach, which appropriates Adorno's work

95 Jay, 'Preface to the 1996 Edition' to *The Dialectical Imagination*, p. xvii.

96 Remarks made in "postscript 2000" to his essay titled "Adorno in Reverse: From Hollywood to Richard Wagner", in *Adorno: A Critical Reader*, p. 51.

thinking it to be compatible with the writings of Derrida, “postmodernist discourse sets its own normative standards against which Adorno has to be read.”⁹⁷

The postmodern position mainly concentrates on two essays by Adorno: The chapter on industrially produced consumer culture in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, titled “Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” and an essay entitled “On Jazz” in *Prisms*. The postmodernists appear to critique Adorno’s analysis of mass culture on four counts: firstly, that it views popular culture solely in terms of the logic of domination – as a manipulative apparatus of the ‘totally administered society’; secondly, that in the ‘culture industry’ formulation, popular culture is portrayed as an undifferentiated entity – repetitive, uninspiring and manipulative; thirdly, that it characterizes the popular audiences as passive masses which consume the products of commercial culture in an indiscriminating manner; and lastly, that mass culture is opposed to *avant garde* works of art that are seen as embodying a ‘negative’ content that resists the logic of domination. However, in the context of the dialectical theory of culture that informs Adorno’s writings on high and low art, these observations seem simplistic. While describing the radical break between high culture and commercially produced mass culture, Adorno claims that both bear the “stigmata” of twentieth century capitalism. He goes on to say, “Both are torn halves of an integral freedom, to which however they do not add up.”⁹⁸ Thus, Adorno stresses the brokenness of the two spheres; any attempt to force them together can only result in further pathologies. His statement from the culture industry essay in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* makes his approach very clear:

The purity of bourgeois art, hypostatized as a realm of freedom contrasting to material praxis, was bought from the outset with the exclusion of the lower class; and art keeps faith with the cause of that class, the true universal, precisely by freeing itself from the purposes of the false. Serious art has denied itself to those for whom the hardship and oppression of life make a mockery of seriousness and who must be glad to use the time not spent at the production line in being simply carried along. Light art has accompanied autonomous art as its shadow. It is the social bad conscience of serious art. The truth which the latter could not apprehend because of its social premises

97 Hohendahl, *Prismatic Thought*, p. 12.

98 Adorno to Benjamin, March 18, 1936, in *Aesthetics and Politics*, pp. 123-25. Quoted in Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism*, p. 157.

gives the former an appearance of objective justification. The split between them is itself the truth: it expresses at least the negativity of the culture which is the sum of both spheres.⁹⁹

According to Bernstein, “There is evident strain involved in a thesis which claims autonomous, bourgeois art is what sustains the true universality of the claims of the oppressed, while the art produced for the masses, which is quite other than an art of the masses, is critiqued as the reproduction of the alienated needs of mass society. Rather than attempting to hide this strain, which after all only reflects the fact that the achievements of culture belong to society as a whole and not just the ruling classes, Adorno emphasizes the dialectical entwinement of high and low art”¹⁰⁰. In this regard, it is important to remember Adorno’s specific views about the necessity of autonomous artworks. With their tenebrous, ‘negative’ content, they would perhaps cease to exist in a perfect society; however in our present, indigent social world, their false reconciliation, through an affirmative art, with a repressive order would be disastrous. In his words, “It is not unthinkable that humanity, once it has attained realization, no longer needs a closed, immanent culture; [however] today a false abolition of culture, a vehicle of barbarism, threatens.”¹⁰¹

99 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, Trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 107-8.

100 J. M. Bernstein in his Introduction to Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, p.7.

101 Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie* (Suhrkamp Verlag: Frankfurt am Main, 1970), p. 424. Quoted in Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism*, p. 155.