CRITICAL THEORY AND POSTMODERNISM: ON THE INTERPLAY OF ETHICS, AESTHETICS, AND UTOPIA IN CRITICAL THEORY

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I would like to begin with a disclaimer. This paper does not specifically deal with deconstruction, let alone with "deconstruction and the possibility of justice." I am concerned here with the general cultural *Zeitgeist* of the present, which, in the last decade has been referred to as "postmodernism."

The question of postmodernism, although at first sight only tangentially related to the theme of "deconstruction and the possibility of justice," is not without implications for it. Deconstruction, whether its defenders would also describe themselves as postmodernist or not, undoubtedly is among the most influential contemporary approaches in the human sciences which are increasingly skeptical toward modernity and the Enlightenment ideal of reason. This ideal is considered inseparable from several unsalvageable illusions like the myth of the centered, self-conscious rational subject, transparent to itself: the methodological assumption of the transparency of reference and the determinacy of meaning, and the striving for a lucid, rational mode of intersubjective communication among equal minds. Let me leave aside the skeptical question of whether anybody today subscribes to these illusions, and whether in fact the "critique of the Enlightenment" has not become a catch-phrase for obfuscating some fundamental crossroads in contemporary philosophy. These queries will be answered obliquely in this paper, via a strategic *detour*.

The thesis is that already Adorno, who is a "high modernist," engages in a powerful critique of the "identity logic of Western reason" and of the Enlightenment, without, however, forsaking belief in the healing power of rational reflection in attaining individual autonomy and collective justice. Adorno criticizes the drive toward abstract generalizations, which is a mode of grasping the concrete only by reducing it to some replicable instance of a general rule. Adorno demystifies the ideal of rational self-identity, dominant in Kantian

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moral theory and psychoanalysis, as representing a repressive and rigid ego conception. Adorno also rejects the rationalist search for cognitive clarity and transparency in favor of the method of dissonance, juxtaposition, and fragmentation. A closer reading of Adorno may not only alert us to the dialectical tension between high modernism and postmodernism, it may also suggest that a dialogue between critical theory and deconstruction, which so far has been a *dialogue des sourds* (a dialogue of the deaf), must heed the mediating voice of Adorno.[1]

I. MODERNISM/POSTMODERNISM

In the recent, flourishing debate on the nature and significance of postmodernism, architecture seems to occupy a special place.[2] It is tempting to describe this situation through the Hegelianism: it is as if the *Zeitgeist* of an epoch approaching its end has reached self-consciousness in those monuments of modern architecture of steel, concrete, and glass. Contemplating itself in its objectifications, Spirit has not "recognized" and "thus returned to itself," but has recoiled in horror from its own products. The visible decay of our urban environment, the uncanniness of the modern megalopolis, and the general dehumanization of space appear to prove the Faustian dream to be a nightmare. The dream of an infinitely striving self, unfolding its powers in the process of conquering externality, is one from which we have awakened. Postmodernist architecture, whatever other sources it borrows its inspiration from, is undoubtedly the messenger of the end of this Faustian dream which had accompanied the self-understanding of the moderns from the beginning.

Faust, which Pushkin had called "The Iliad of the moderns,"[3] was indeed the quintessential modernist text, interweaving the project of self-development with that of social tranformation. As Marshall Berman has argued in *All That is Solid Melts into Air*,[4] it is no acci-

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[1] See J. Habermas, The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity (F. Lawrence trans. 1987). Habermas's discussion of these issues, however, has not generated the kind of engagement on the part of the postmodernists which one would have wished for. See Norris, Deconstruction, Postmodernism and Philosophy: Habermas on Derrida, 8 Praxis Int'l 426 (1989); Hoy, Splitting the Difference: Habermas's Critique of Derrida, 8 Praxis Int'l 447 (1989). See generally Symposium on Jürgen Habermas's "The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity," 8 Praxis Int'l 377 (1989) (containing the most interesting exchanges so far on these issues).

[2] Parts of the following discussion have appeared in S. Benhabib, Epistemologies of Postmodernism: A Rejoinder to Jean-François Lyotard, in 33 New German Critique 103 (1984) [hereinafter Epistemologies of Postmodernism], reprinted in Feminism/Postmodernism 107 (L. Nicholson ed. 1990).

[3] M. Berman, All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity (1988).

[4] Id. at 37-86.

dent that Faust commits his first truly evil act when he orders Mephisto to burn down the cottage of the old couple, Philemon and Baucis, in order to realize his dream of drying the marshland. Faust, the modernist, is also the developer, the city-builder, the architect. Standing at the beginning of the nineteenth century, watching the glimmerings of the technological progress that the application of the modern natural sciences would make possible, Goethe is in a more realistic position than Descartes, the founder of modern philosophy, to dream of rendering ourselves "*maîtres et possesseurs de la nature.*"[4a]

Almost two and a half centuries ago Descartes lay the conceptual foundations of this Faustian dream. And once more the quintessential modernist appears as the city-builder, as the architect. Here is Descartes, reflecting in his *Discours de la Méthode* on the images of two cities: the one traditional, old, obscure, chaotic, unclear, lacking symmetry, overgrown; the other transparent, precise, planned, symmetrical, organized, functional. The tradition of knowledge is like the old city; it lacks coherence, functionality, clarity, as well as symmetry. Just as the city that emerges from the plan of the single architect is the more "perfect" one, argues Descartes, so too, the system of knowledge developed by a single mind is superior to the overgrown and chaotic medieval habitat of Scholasticism. "[T]here is very often less perfection in works . . . carried out by the hands of various masters, than in those on which one individual alone has worked," writes Descartes.[5] He continues:

> Thus we see that buildings planned and carried out by one architect alone are usually more beautiful and better proportioned than those which many have tried to put in order and improve, making use of old walls which were built with other ends in view. In the same way also, those ancient cities which, originally mere villages, have become in the process of time great towns, are usually badly constructed in comparison with those which are regularly laid out on a plain by a surveyor who is free to follow his own ideas. Even though, considering their buildings each one apart, there is often as much or more display of skill in the one case than in the other, the former have large buildings and small buildings indiscriminately placed together, thus rendering the streets crooked and irregular, so that it might be said that it was chance rather than the will of men guided by reason that led to such an arrangement.[6]

Postmodernism in all fields of culture heralds the end of this

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[4a] R. Descartes, *Discours de la Méthode* 56 (Classiques Larousse ed. 1934).

[5] R. Descartes, Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason, in 1 The Philosophical Works of Descartes 79, 87 (E. Haldane & G. Ross trans. 1978).

[6] Id. at 87-88.

Faustian-Cartesian dream. The end of this dream has brought with it a conceptual and semiotic shift in many fields. This shift is characterized by the radical questioning of the very conceptual framework that made the modernist dream possible in the first place. The following statement by Peter Eisenman, one of the key figures in the modernist/postmodernist constellation in architecture, captures the elements of this new critique quite precisely:

> Architecture since the fifteenth century has been influenced by the assumption of a set of symbolic and referential functions. These can be collectively identified as the classical . . . . "Reason," "Representation," and "History." "Reason" insists that objects be understood as rational transformations from a self-evident origin. "Representation" demands that objects refer to values or images external to themselves. . . . "History" assumes that time is made up of isolatable historical moments whose essential characteristics can and should be abstracted and represented. If these classical assumptions are taken together as imperatives they force architecture to represent the spirit of its age through a rationally motivated and comprehensible sign system . . . But if these "imperatives" are simply "fictions" then the classical can be suspended and options emerge which have been obscured by classical imperatives.[7]

The ideal of the rational, self-transparent subject of cognition, the "clarity and distinctiveness" of whose representations would serve as the foundation for a new city of knowledge, is today viewed as a fiction. The subject has been forever fractured, displaced, and decentered. Since Nietzsche and Freud, we know that "[o]f ourselves we are not 'knowers.' "[8] And since Saussure and Wittgenstein, we can no longer view reference as a clear relation between a sign, a signifier, and a signified. The relation of the sign to the signifier is what constitutes the signified, and creates the space within which reference becomes at all possible. The vision of history as a cumulative continuum, progressing toward some shared goal, and whose essential characteristics can and should be abstracted and represented, was shattered for the European intelligentsia at least since World War I. Undoubtedly, for the large masses of the population it was the Holocaust and the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in this century that first brought home the destructive and uncanny side of the modernist project.

Justifiable as the current postmodernist mood in the culture may

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[7] P. Eisenman, accompanying text to exhibit piece in "*Revision der Moderne*," Deutsches Architekturmuseum, Summer 1984.

[8] F. Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals 149 (F. Golffing trans. 1956).

be, I for one cannot avoid the sense that the postmodernist critique also flattens the internal contradictions and tensions of modernity to the point where this legacy ceases to challenge, to provoke, and to probe. From the beginning, however, the modernist dream not only contained the search for the domination of nature, but also anticipated the ethical-political utopia of a community of free and rational beings. For Kant and Rousseau, the dignity of the moral subject was defined by its capacity to act in accordance with a law of reason that all rational creatures could likewise will to be a principle for themselves. Is this utopia of an autonomous, rational community, "a kingdom of ends" as Kant might say, just as repressive as the project of the domination of nature has turned out to be? Is the rational moral utopia of modernism only possible through the repression of nature and the other within us? Should we celebrate the passing away of the modernist subject? Should we revel in that "heterogeneous presence" called the postmodernist self, lost between a system of signifiers, maybe itself a disappearing referent?"[9] What discomforting ethical thoughts must one entertain if one thinks through the postmodernist project to its end?

We must begin to probe the implications of the postmodernist project not just in aesthetics but in ethics as well. Postmodernism gestures its solidarity with the other, with the "différend," with "women, children, fools and primitives," whose discourse has never matched the grand narrative of the modern masters.[10] Yet can there be an ethic of solidarity without a self that can feel compassion and act out of principle? Can there be a struggle for justice without the possibility of justifying power by reason? What is justice if not the rational exercise of power?

I will approach these questions obliquely by examining the interplay between ethics, aesthetics, and utopia in the thoughts of Horkheimer and Adorno. My suggestion is that the philosophers of high modernism, maybe much like Picasso and Max Beckmann, Klee and Kandinsky, had a more troubled, complex and, in some cases, tortured vision of the project of the moderns. It is not obvious that their tortured questioning of modernity is still not our own. I want to begin with that text which is the pinnacle of high modernism in the European philosophical tradition, written at the time the Cartesian-Faustian dream is disclosed to be a nightmare: the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* by Adorno and Horkheimer.

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[9] Kristeva, *Le Sujet en procés* in Polyoque 55-136 (1977).

[10] See J. Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge 27 (G. Bennington & B. Massumi trans. 1984).

II. THE NIGHTMARE OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

As has often been remarked, the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is an elusive text.[11] A substantial part of it was composed from notes taken by Gretel Adorno during discussions between Adorno and Horkheimer. Completed in 1944, it was published three years later in Amsterdam and reissued in Germany in 1969. More than half the text consists of an exposition of the concept of the Enlightenment, with two excursus, one authored by Adorno on the *Odyssey* and the other authored by Horkheimer on Enlightenment and morality.

In one of the notes appended to the text, "The Interest in the Body," Adorno and Horkheimer write:

> Beneath the familiar history of Europe runs another, subterranean one. It consists of the fate of those human instincts and passions repressed and displaced by civilization. From the perspective of the fascist present, in which what was hidden emerged to light, manifest history appears along with its darker side, omitted both by the legends of the national state no less than by their progressive criticisms.[12]

This interest in the subterranean history of Western civilization is no doubt the guiding thread for the subterranean history of reason which the text unfolds. The story of Odysseus and of the Holocaust, the myth which is Enlightenment and Enlightenment which becomes mythology, are milestones in Western history: the genesis of civilization and its transformation into barbarism.

The promise of the Enlightenment to free man [sic!] from his self-incurred tutelage is defeated by a form of rationality, perfected in the domination of nature. Instrumental reason and the value of the autonomous personality are irreconcilable. "The worldwide domination of nature turns against the thinking subject himself; nothing remains of him but this eternally self-identical 'I think' that should accompany all my representations."[13]

Adorno and Horkheimer read the story of Odysseus in this light. This story reveals the dark spot in the constitution of Western subjectivity: the fear of the self from the "other"—which is identified with nature in this context—is overcome in the course of civilization only

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[11] Parts of this discussion have appeared previously in S. Benhabib, Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory 163-82 (1986) [hereinafter Critique, Norm, and Utopia].

[12] M. Horkheimer & T. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* 207 (1969) [herinafter *Dialektik*]; M. Horkheimer & T. Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment 231 (J. Cumming trans. 1972) (English version of *Dialektik der Aufklärung*)[hereinafter Dialectic of Enlightenment]. All translations in the text are my own.

[13] *Dialektik*, supra note 12, at 27; Dialectic of Enlightenment, supra note 12, at 26.

by dominating the "other." Since, however, the other is not completely alien but the self as nature is also other to itself, the domination of nature means self-mastery and repression. The story of Odysseus distinguishes between the dark forces of nature and the call toward home and civilization. Odysseus again and again is threatened by engulfment and by deindividuation. The call of the Sirens, the temptations of Circe, the cave of the Cyclops beckon the hero to a state in which the line between the human and the animal, pleasure and work, the self and the other disappear. Myth relates the story of how the hero constitutes his identity by repressing these others. But this repression of otherness can only come with the internalization of sacrifice. Odysseus escapes the call of the Sirens only by subjecting himself to them. While his men, whose ears are filled with wax, row his ship away, he, the hero, tied to the mast, is subject to their irresistible charm and is yet carried away by his deaf men who cannot hear his cries. The hero not only overcomes nature by internalizing sacrifice, but also by organizing the labor of others which he can utilize to his ends.

Yet as the regression from culture to barbarism brought about by National Socialism shows, Odysseus's cunning, the origin of Western rationality, has not been able to eliminate humanity's fear of the other. The Jew is the other, the stranger, the one who is human and subhuman. Whereas Odysseus's cunning consists of the attempt to appease otherness via a mimetic act by becoming like it—Odysseus offers the Cyclops human blood to drink, sleeps with Circe, and listens to the Sirens' song—fascism, through projection, makes the other like itself.

> If mimesis makes itself like the surrounding world, so false projection makes the surrounding world like itself. If for the former the exterior is the model which the interior has to approximate, if for it the stranger becomes familiar, the latter [fascism] transforms the tense inside ready to snap into exteriority and stamps even the familiar as the enemy.[14]

Western reason originates in mimesis, in the act to master nature by becoming like it, but it culminates in an act of projection which, via the technology of death, succeeds in making otherness disappear. "Ratio which suppresses mimesis is not simply its opposite; it itself is mimesis—unto death."[15]

Culture is the process through which the human self acquires identity in the face of otherness. Human reason, beginning as magic,

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[14] *Dialektik*, supra note 12, at 167; Dialectic of Enlightenment, supra note 12, at 187.

[15] *Dialektik*, supra note 12, at 57; Dialectic of Enlightenment, supra note 12, at 57.

first attempts to master otherness by becoming like it. Magic develops into ratio. Ratio is the cunning of the name-giving self. Language separates the object from its concept, the self from its other. Language masters externality by reducing it to an identical substratum. Whereas in magic, the name and the thing named, stand in a relationship of "kinship, not one of intention,"[16] the concept which replaces the magical symbol in the course of Western culture reduces the "manifold affinity of being" to the relation between the meaning-giving subject and the meaningless object. The transition from symbol to concept already means disenchantment, *Entzauberung* in Max Weber's sense of the term. Ratio abstracts, seeks to comprehend through concepts and names. Abstraction which can grasp the concrete only insofar as it can reduce it to identity, also liquidates the otherness of the other. Adorno and Horkheimer, with relentless rhetoric, uncover the "structure of identitary thinking" underlying Western reason.

> When it is announced that the tree is no longer simply itself but a witness for another, the seat of mana, language expresses the contradiction that something is itself and yet at the same time another beside itself, identical and non-identical . . . . The concept, which one would like to define as the characterizing unity of what is subsumed under it, was much more from the very beginning a product of dialectical thinking, whereby each is always what it is, in that it becomes what it is not.[17]

With this step criticizing the very structure of Western reason as one of domination as such, Adorno and Horkheimer place themselves in a paradoxical spot. If the plight of the Enlightenment reveals the culmination of the identity logic, constitutive of reason, then the theory of the dialectic of the Enlightenment, which is carried out with the tools of this very same reason, perpetuates the structure of domination it condemns. The critique of the Enlightenment is cursed by the same burden as the Enlightenment itself. Adorno and Horkheimer are fully aware of this paradox and hope that the critique of the Enlightenment can nonetheless evoke the utopian principle of nonidentitary logic as an intimation of otherness. The end of the Enlightenment, of the modernist project gone wild, cannot be stated discursively. The overcoming of the compulsive logic of modernism can only be a matter of giving back to the nonidentical, the suppressed, and the dominated their right to be. Since even language itself is burdened by the curse of the concept that represses the other in the very

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[16] *Dialektik*, supra note 12, at 13; Dialectic of Enlightenment, supra note 12, at 11.

[17] *Dialektik*, supra note 12, at 17-18; Dialectic of Enlightenment, supra note 12, at 15.

act of naming it,[18] we can evoke the other but we cannot name it. Like the God of the Jewish tradition who must not be named but evoked, the utopian transcendence of the compulsive logic of the Enlightenment and modernism cannot be named but awakened in memory. The evocation of this memory, the "rethinking of nature in the subject" (*das Angedanken der Natur im Subjekt*) is the achievement of the aesthetic.

Art and the aesthetic realm in general carry a nondiscursive moment of truth. The recovery of the nonidentical is the achievement of the true work of art.

> That moment of the art work by means of which it transcends reality . . . does not consist in the attained harmony, in the questionable unity of form and content, inner and outer, individual and society, but rather, in those traces, through which discrepancy appears, and the passionate striving toward identity is necessarily shattered.[19]

For Adorno and Horkheimer, the space occupied by the aesthetic is defined by the parameters of the critique of discursive logic. The aesthetic emerges as the only mode of expression that can challenge the compulsive drive of Western reason to comprehend the world by making it like itself, by systematizing it, by abstracting from it, or in Max Weber's terms, by "rationalizing" it. The aesthetic intimates a new mode of being, a new mode of relating to nature and to otherness in general. Insofar as the critique of identity logic is not only a cognitive critique, however, but also an ethical and political critique of a mode of world domination, the aesthetic negation of identity logic also implies an ethical and political project. The utopian content of art heals by transforming the sensibilities of the modern subject: art as utopia, art as healing, but as an ethical and political healing which teaches us to let the otherness within ourselves and outside be. Art releases the memories and intimations of otherness which the subject has had to repress to become the adult, controlled, rational, and autonomous self of the tradition.

In these reflections on art, identity, and the ethical utopia of reconciliation with otherness, we can recognize not only contemporary feminist criticism of male subjectivity but the postmodernist critique of the autonomous self as well. Especially in Adorno's critique of Kant and of traditional psychoanalysis, we begin to see the points where high modernism and contemporary postmodernism converge.

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[18] *Dialektik*, supra note 12, at 16-17; Dialectic of Enlightenment, supra note 12, at 10.

[19] *Dialektik*, supra note 12, at 117; Dialectic of Enlightenment, supra note 12, at 131.

III. ADORNO AND UTOPIA OF THE NONIDENTICAL

The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* takes us to that point where the critique of system-building, abstracting and formalizing Western logic becomes a critique of the rational, autonomous self also cherished by this tradition. The aesthetic emerges as an ethical-political and utopian realm which negates identity logic while intimating modes of a different subjectivity. Particularly, Adorno's critique of the modern moral subject as a compulsively identitary self reveals many affinities with the feminist and postmodernist critiques of the rational, autonomous ego.

Echoing feminist and postmodernist positions already in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer write: "Mankind had to do frightful things to itself before the self, the identical, purposeful, male character of men could be created, and something of this is reflected in every childhood."[20] The rational and autonomous subject of the Enlightenment, the quintessential modernist, is a male subject—women, children, and, we should add, nonmodern peoples are excluded from its reality, precisely because they do not exercise the power of instrumental reason. But I would like to distinguish among two very different strands of the critique of the subject before placing Adorno more explicitly in this context.

There is a postmodernist celebration of the "death of the subject." This line of interpretation begins with the critique of an intentional self, supposedly preceding language or a system of representations in general. The fiction of the intentional subject, which we can most clearly attribute to Descartes, Kant, and Husserl, is a fiction precisely because the subject cannot know itself independently of its system of representations, and if this is so, it cannot be said to precede these representations. Self-consciousness is not some originary act preceding signification and representation; only within a system of representations can the subject be present to itself. "Language speaks us" or "representations constitute us." This is an insight of the linguistic critique of the philosophy of consciousness in our century, and one that is shared by Wittgenstein, Ferdinand de Saussure, and Jacques Derrida, as well as Jürgen Habermas.

This cognitive-linguistic critique of the philosophy of consciousness as represented by Descartes, Kant, and Husserl allows several options: once the sovereign subject preceding any system of significations is displaced by the vision of the subject constituted within a system of significations, one can argue either that the autonomous

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[20] *Dialektik*, supra note 12, at 47; Dialectic of Enlightenment, supra note 12, at 40-41.

subject as such disappears or that the autonomy of the subject must now be reconstituted within a heterogenous system of representations which it can never control. Postmodernists like Lyotard follow the first option and celebrate the death of the subject as a cognitive fiction as well as a moral ideal; the early Lyotard, following Deleuze and Guattari, viewed the subject as a system of quanta of energy, a center of libidinal economy, reacting more than acting.[21]

Adorno's critique of Kant and psychoanalysis follows the second option of rethinking autonomy and subjectivity as the qualities of a subject situated within a system of heterogeneous representations. Adorno's goal is to rethink the autonomy of the self, as a being situated within nature rather than as a being that is its "master and possessor," as Descartes would have it.[22]

The gist of Adorno's critique of Kant in *Negative Dialectics* which spans some eighty pages is the following statement:

> According to the Kantian model, the subjects are free, insofar as, conscious of themselves, they are identical with themselves; and in such identity they are once more unfree, insofar as they stand under its compulsion and perpetrate it. The are unfree as non-identical, as diffuse nature, and as such free because in the stimulations that overcome them—the non-identity of the subject with itself is nothing else—they will also overcome the compulsive character of identity.[23]

In Adorno's view, insofar as the tradition identifies autonomy with a rigid and compulsive moral consciousness, one must bid farewell to this ideal. Autonomy is the capacity of the subject to let itself go, to deliver itself over to that which is not itself, but to remain "by itself in otherness." The Kantian moral ideal, by contrast, "presupposes the internalization of repression, as the I which remains self-same develops into a steady instance; Kant absolutizes this I as the necessary condition of ethical life."[24] If so, would Adorno's ideal be, like that of the postmodernists, a subjectivity without the subject, a self that was not self-same, an "I" whose pure apperception need not accompany all our representations? Yet for Adorno the dissolution of the self can only be regressive:

If under the immeasurable pressure which weighs upon it, the sub-

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21 V. Descombes, Modern French Philosophy 184-85 (L. Scott-Fox & J. Harding trans. 1980) (citing J. Lyotard, *Economie Libidinale* (1974)).

22 R. Descartes, supra note 4a, at 56.

23 T. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* 292 (1973)[hereinafter Negative Dialektik]; T. Adorno, Negative Dialectics 299 (E. Ashton trans. 1979) (English version of Negative Dialektik)[hereinafter Negative Dialectics]. All translations in the text are my own.

24 *Negative Dialektik*, supra note 23, at 266; Negative Dialectics, supra note 23, at 271-72.

> ject, as schizophrenic, falls into the condition of dissociation and ambivalence, of which the historical subject has divested itself, so the dissolution of the subject is equal to the ephemeral and condemned image of a possible subject. If its freedom once demanded that myth stop, so now it emancipates itself from itself as from a final myth.[25]

Under present conditions, "ego weakness," "the transition of the subject into passive and atomistic, reflex-like behavior," is the norm. The autonomous self cannot be replaced by the reflex-like ego ideal of the present; we must think of autonomy as the condition of an ego with fluid boundaries, who does not disappear or disintegrate in the face of otherness. The rationalist utopia of the Enlightenment, the ideal of the autonomous self, is destroyed in the course of history, because such rationalism defines reason against nature, and as the repression of nature. Identitary logic, the deep structure of Western reason, denies otherness within and without. Autonomy then means self-mastery, self-repression, and self-control; but autonomy which destroys otherness is itself subject to the revenge of those forces it has eliminated. History documents this return of the "repressed." The rationalist-moral utopia of the Enlightenment is rejected by Adorno in favor of the utopia of the nonidentical; individual autonomy is now understood as the capacity of the self to let "diffuse nature be" and yet retain a coherent sense of selfhood. At the social level this would imply a form of togetherness in diversity, or unity in difference.

"Utopia," writes Adorno, "would be the nonsacrificial nonidentity of the subject" ("*Utopie wäre die opferlose Nichtidentität des Subjekts.*").[26] The ability of the subject to be "by-oneself-in-otherness" is like the capacity to forget oneself in the aesthetic experience of the *Naturschoene*. The "naturally beautiful" is an allegory, a cipher, and a sign of reconciliation. One must not think of this in essentialist categories, as an eternally given and unchanging content of beauty. The "naturally beautiful" is antithesis, the antithesis of society, and as undetermined, the antithesis of determination. It is a mode in which the mediation between subject and object, humans and nature can be thought of. The "other" is that utopian longing toward the nonidentical which can only be represented as "allegory" and as "cipher."[27]

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[25] *Negative Dialektik*, supra note 23, at 275; Negative Dialectics, supra note 23, at 281.

[26] *Negative Dialektik*, supra note 23, at 275; Negative Dialectics, supra note 23, at 281.

[27] The critique of utopianism by postmodernists takes two forms: those like Lyotard who identify utopian thinking with the rationalist and authoritarian political experiments of the French and Bolshevik revolutions; and those like Derrida, who criticize utopianism less for its politically authoritarian implications, but more for its "essentialist" assumptions about a final end, an unambigious state, a transparency of being—in short, utopian thinking is considered a form of "eschatoteleology." There are different strands of utopian thinking in the Frankfurt

The utopia of a nonsacrificial nonidentity of the subject is intimated in that noncompulsory relation to otherness which forces the subject to transcend rigid ego-boundaries.

IV. THE ETHICS AND POLITICS OF THE NONIDENTICAL

In a wonderful article, entitled "On the Dialectic of Modernism and Postmodernism," Albrecht Wellmer has laid bare the gist of Adorno's reflections of modern art as they bear on questions of morality and politics. Wellmer writes:

> For Adorno modern art meant the farewell to a type of unity and meaningful whole, represented in the epoch of great bourgeois art by the unity of the closed work and the unity of the individual self. Aesthetic enlightenment discovers, as Adorno sees it, in the unity of the traditional work as well as in the unity of the bourgeois subject something violent, a lack of reflection and something illusory: i.e., a type of unity which was only possible at the price of the repression and exclusion of the disparate, the non-integrated, the silenced and the repressed. . . . The open forms of modern art are for Adorno the response of an emancipated aesthetic consciousness to the illusory and violent nature of such traditional totalities of meaning. . . . The "opening up" or "de-limitation" of the work is to be thought of as corollary of a progressive capacity to aesthetically *integrate* the diffused and dispersed. . . . [W]e could say that the new—i.e., open forms of aesthetic synthesis in modern art point to new forms of psychic and social "synthesis." . . . [Modern art] would suggest new types of aesthetic, psychological-moral and social "synthesis"—of "totality"—in which the diffused and the non-integrated, the senseless and the split off would be brought

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School; whereas Marcuse, particularly in *Eros and Civilization*, represents the essentialist tradition, Adorno, following Benjamin, belongs to the tradition of "negative utopianism." Utopia can never be named; it is the gesture of the other, of the Messianic hope which transcends the present. The roots of this mode of utopianism lie less in Greek philosophy than in Christian and Jewish mysticism and Gnosticism. See Scholem, Walter Benjamin, in Über Walter Benjamin 132 (1968); J. Habermas, Bewusstmachende oder rettende Kritik—Die Aktualitüat Walter Benjamins 1972, in Kultur und Kritik 302 (1973).

In his keynote address to the "Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice" conference, Derrida cites Levinas. "Levinas speaks of an infinite right: in what he calls 'Jewish humanism,' whose basis is not 'the concept of man,' but rather the other; 'the extent of the right of the other' is a 'practically infinite right'. . ." Derrida, Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority," 11 Cardozo L. Rev. 919, 959 (1990). It would be fascinating to investigate the influence of the Jewish mystical and utopian tradition on critical theorists like Adorno and Benjamin on the one hand, and Levinas and Derrida on the other. It is, of course, no coincidence that Derrida has extensively drawn on the work of Walter Benjamin. See id. at . What has not been adequately noted, however, is the extent to which Benjaminesque motifs are present not only in the work of Adorno but also in Habermas's reflections as well. See Critique, Norm, and Utopia, supra note 11, at 327-43.

home to a sphere of non-violent communication . . . .[28]

The project of bringing home the diffused, the senseless, and the split off in "a sphere of non-violent communication" is how critical theory attempts to think beyond modernism while not abandoning the utopian legacy of the Enlightenment. Indeed, new options have emerged in the present with the demise of the classical episteme: we can either celebrate the death of the modernist subject or seek to transform the embattled self of modernity into a new self that can appreciate otherness without dissolving in it, that can respect heterogeneity without being overwhelmed by it. This, I think, is the only plausible ethical and political option. The first option, the celebration of the death of the subject *tout court*, transforms postmodernist thought into a "*froehliche Wissenschaft,*" a gay science, in Nietzsche's terms, that affirms multiplicity and heterogeneity but can no longer criticize it. Postmodernism then becomes status quo thinking in avant-garde garb.

The joyful eclecticism and historicism of postmodernism, the savoring of the "play of surfaces," is a conciliatory impulse. Proceeding from the wrong assumption that all transformatory ethics and politics must presuppose an authoritarian vision of a future totality, the postmodernist critique of various left traditions turns into a reconciliation with the given.[29] But neither the equation of utopia with totalitarianism nor the equation of transformatory practice with authoritarianism is compelling. Surely we can think beyond the failure of the rationalist utopias of progress to a new utopia, not of appeasement and rest, but of constant integration and differentiation. "The project of bringing home the diffused, the repressed, and the marginalized" is an endless task.[30] The task of thinking through to a new model of synthesis or unity which does not flatten the unified, of abstraction which does not eviscerate the content it abstracts from, of conceptualization that does not dub irrational what it cannot find the right words for—this task need not be understood as an eschatoteleology, but can instead be viewed as a constant challenge to the imagination to transcend the rationalism of the modernist project without forsaking reason itself.

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[28] Wellmer, On the Dialectic of Modernism and Postmodernism, 4 Praxis Int'l 337-57 (1985) (footnote omitted).

[29] See Epistemologies of Postmodernism, supra note 2, at 117 (containing my own critique of Lyotard).

[30] Wellmer, supra note 28, at 357.