

---

## Adorno's 'Ban' on Poetry After Auschwitz<sup>1</sup>

Jeffrey D. Todd

---

**N**o doubt many of you will be acquainted with Theodor W. Adorno's controversial dictum "[...] nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben ist barbarisch [...]." And although Adorno has a great many friends in the American academy, you might well be infuriated by this particular statement. It is remarkable, among other things, for its tone: it has often been referred to as a "verdict" for the reason that it sounds legislative, law-giving, as if the co-author of a book on the authoritarian personality<sup>2</sup> had learned too much from his subject. This provocative declaration has had both its adherents and its opponents, and has elicited a great number of responses in post-war German literature, a choice sampling of which is to be found in Petra Kiedaisch's recently published Reclam volume entitled *Lyrik nach Auschwitz? Adorno und die Dichter*.<sup>3</sup> What I propose today is to examine critically Adorno's dictum in the context of the essay in which it was published, as well as speak briefly about some of the follow-up statements he made, in which he which amplifies, qualifies, and finally retracts his original pronouncement. It is noteworthy that Adorno's dictum, though often cited, is seldom read closely and in context. It is certainly permissible to leave out a discussion of the original context when the main point of an essay is something other than Adorno's statement; it is also understandable, in consideration of the pains awaiting those who would read Adorno in the original. But it is still a risky business: risky because, when you read Adorno's statement in context, your understanding is very different than when you read it out of context.

Here is the original pronouncement in its immediate context from the essay "Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft," written in 1949, published singly in 1951:

Kulturkritik findet sich der letzten Stufe der Dialektik von Kultur und Barbarei gegenüber: nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch, und das frisst auch die Erkenntnis an, die ausspricht, warum es unmöglich ward, heute Gedichte zu schreiben. Der absoluten Verdinglichung, die den Fortschritt des Geistes als eines ihrer Elemente voraussetzt und die ihn heute gänzlich aufzusaugen sich anschickt, ist der kritische Geist nicht gewachsen, solange er bei sich bleibt in selbstgenügsamer Kontemplation (30).

So concludes the essay. Key concepts for Adorno's argument are: "Barbarei," "Dialektik," "Kritik," "Kultur," "Kulturkritik," "Verdinglichung," and "Geist." You will notice that the word "Auschwitz" was left out. The way Adorno's phrase is commonly bandied about, one would think that the relation between Auschwitz and poetry was the focal point of Adorno's essay. It is not. In fact, Auschwitz is only mentioned this once. The actual focal point of Adorno's essay is his criticism of the culture industry. Let us examine some salient aspects of that critique.

Adorno's fundamental theoretical construct, though often not employed in an explicit manner, is a dialectic of sorts. As is well known, that dialectic contains two antagonistic terms, a thesis and an antithesis. Adorno then applies this theoretical construct to the social order. The primary given, the thesis of the dialectic, is the socio-economic base. Adorno's term in this essay for that social order, which he deems to be profoundly unjust, is "Barbarei." This way of referring to the social order is absolutely negative, and therefore makes it difficult to speak of anything positive within that order. And in fact, Adorno really does not have anything heartening to say in this essay. As we shall see, not only did Adorno apply the term "Barbarei" to advanced capitalism, but also to the communism of his day. On the other hand, the antithesis is formed by productions of the "Geist," the human mind, both individually and collectively, with works of art being chief among them. These productions are called "Kultur," and they form the antithesis to the social infrastructure in Adorno's sociology of art because they contain the *negative* reaction to all of that order's injustices and flaws. However, economic pressure has been exerted on culture to join in conformity with barbarism. According

to Adorno, culture has largely ceded to that pressure. Adorno describes this process:

Je vollkommener die gegenwärtigen gesellschaftlichen Ordnungen, voran die östliche, den Lebensprozeß, die "Muße" inbegriffen, einfangen, um so mehr wird allen Phänomenen des Geistes die Marke der Ordnung aufgeprägt. Entweder sie tragen als Unterhaltung oder Erbauung unmittelbar zu deren Fortbestand bei und werden als ihre Exponenten, nämlich gerade um ihrer gesellschaftlichen Präformiertheit willen, genossen. Als allbekannt, gestempelt, angetastet, schmeicheln sie beim regredierten Bewußtsein sich ein, empfehlen sich als natürlich und erlauben die Identifikation mit den Mächten, deren Übergewicht keine Wahl läßt als die falsche Liebe. Oder sie werden durch Abweichung zur Rarität und abermals verkäuflich (Adorno, "Kulturkritik" 18).

All phenomena of the mind tend to take the stamp of their social order. I say "tend to" because Adorno wishes to avoid any mechanistic view of social causality.<sup>4</sup> This process of assimilation can be either direct or indirect: either works of art are enjoyed precisely because they contribute directly to the social order, or, if they resist assimilation (through their explicitly critical nature), they become prized as curiosities and for that reason saleable. Even *Erbauungsliteratur*, or edificational literature, which many consider to be effective in cultivating a type of consciousness to some extent independent and critical of everyday life, even this Adorno denounces as part and parcel of the culture industry. Finally, the phrase "voran die östliche" is interesting: Adorno saw culture under communism as even more subject to the processes of assimilation than that under Western capitalism, because the communist government was so intent on controlling literary production and steering it in a particular direction.

This synthesis of culture and barbarism has created a "culture industry," in which works of art become "Waren" or "wares" and their critical potentialities ignored. This state of the work of art within the culture industry is called "Verdinglichung," or reification: the work of art has become a "thing" to be sold. Adorno's pessimism is such that he often writes as if the assimilation of culture to barbarism were

complete. For example, he states not merely that poetry is difficult to write but that it is "unmöglich." However, an antithesis to culture has arisen called "Kulturkritik." One might expect the spirit of dialectical antagonism to be saved by the appearance of this new critical element, but one would be mistaken, for even this criticism is subjected to the same totalizing, assimilative pressures to which culture has succumbed; even it is "angefressen" by them. Will it suffer the same fate? The only ray of hope for the critical mind lies expressed in negative form in the final eight words of our principal passage: "[...] solange er bei sich bleibt in selbstgenügsamer Kontemplation." The implication is that, if the critical mind does not remain in the state of "selbstgenügsame Kontemplation," it may continue to flourish.

In all this, the concept "Auschwitz" is not an integral part of the theoretical argument. The word does have an emphatic function: invoking Auschwitz dramatizes the urgent need for social critique, and thereby heightens the scandal of its deflection. However, the key word for Adorno's theoretical argument is the adjective "barbarisch." In this place, the word takes on a meaning very different from the pejorative one which it has in common usage. It has the very specific contextual meaning of "an act which participates in or reproduces the state of Barbarism." In this sense, "barbarisch" is a descriptive rather than a pejorative term. On the other hand, Adorno has taken no pains to disclaim or disavow its normal pejorative sense. Indeed, the pejorative force of the term fits in perfectly with Adorno's negative rhetoric. The entire statement, interpreted in light of Adorno's theory, would thus mean: "After Auschwitz it is 'barbaric' to write poetry, because poetry has become reified through its assimilation by the culture industry." It would seem that Adorno takes quite a hard line: that a poem written under the present conditions can only be barbaric. This hard-line interpretation is further confirmed by Adorno's statement that it has become "impossible" to write poetry. What is the meaning of "impossible" here? Does he mean that poems or verse cannot be written at all? Of course not, because if no verse can be written, there would be no poems to call "barbaric." What then does he mean by "impossible?" I submit that he is writing about poems that are in some sense true, about poems which have the power to reveal something essential about the human condition to us. True poetry is impossible, because it is inevitably distorted either in its

creation or its reception by an ubiquitous culture industry. Thus, what makes it "barbaric" to write poetry after Auschwitz also makes true poetry "impossible."

Note the extremism of Adorno's rhetoric in this essay: the social order is reduced to "barbarism"; it is "barbaric" and even "impossible" to write poetry after Auschwitz.

Does not the extremism of Adorno's rhetoric and argumentation present a problem? Some commentators say that it does not. Both Donahue and Kiedaisch adduce a theoretical justification for Adorno's extremism. Donahue explains it, citing a phrase from Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, as a rhetorical stratagem of "overshooting the object" (58), while Kiedaisch calls Adorno's dictum a "Satz" (15) that represents a provocative starting point for further reflection on the topic.<sup>5</sup> If we accept these explanations, Adorno is freed from the charge of placing a ban on or, more precisely, of declaring the impossibility of poetry. But upon release, Adorno has to pay a fine: we must look at his statement as "rhetoric" of some sort or other, and are likely not to take his argument very seriously as a result. And in fact, both Kiedaisch and Donahue fail to discuss the implications of Adorno's theoretical argument in any depth in their attempts to justify him.<sup>6</sup>

For those of us who consider all statements equally groundless "rhetoric," this is not a particularly high price to pay. It is kind of a flat tax placed upon every utterance regardless of origin. But then, if there can be no question of the referential truth or falsity of statements, there is no reason why I should prefer to consult Adorno on these issues over the bumper sticker on my friend's car, except perhaps that I prefer Adorno's more complex wordplay. But I submit that this is too high a price to pay, and that Adorno himself did not want to pay it. He himself was obviously concerned about the referential truth or falsity of his statement. The strongest proof of this is that, as we shall see later, Adorno himself ultimately came to recognize the untenability, indeed, the falsity of this early statement. Another proof is that he modifies his position, having realized that something in his statement, though provocative, was not as he wanted it to be.

What is the trouble with his early position? On an empirical level, one could retort that some very fine poetry, perhaps most notably Celan's "Todesfuge," is published directly after the war. But a more serious objection, in my opinion, is the theoretical one. Cultural critique and poetry, as stated earlier, are both phenomena of the *Geist*, and Adorno gives us no reason for believing that cultural critique has a greater share of critical consciousness than poetry. So, if poetry is impossible, should not cultural critique be impossible as well? Or, if cultural critique is still possible, should not poetry also be possible? <sup>7</sup> Remember, Adorno calls poetry "unmöglich," but cultural critique is only "angefressen" by reification. I submit that Adorno must choose: either the culture industry is in fact not quite so total and ubiquitous as Adorno makes it sound, or it is total, and neither cultural critique nor poetry is possible. The latter of these two positions would be particularly difficult for Adorno to maintain, since it would deny the viability of his own culture-critical undertaking. Adorno must have felt the force of these objections, because he subsequently altered his position.

Finally, the question whether Adorno's position amounts to a ban on poetry is a ticklish one, and depends on how much weight you give the word "barbarisch." But in any case, it is hard to construe this initial statement as the encouragement to write poetry Enzensberger felt it to be. <sup>8</sup> The reason, following Adorno's argument, is that the ills of poetry are first and foremost the ills of society. We cannot ask of poetry that it heal itself. We must first heal society, then the healing of poetry will follow. This is the position presented in "Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft."

\* \* \*

A later statement on the subject of poetry after Auschwitz reflects an ambivalence: the desire to retain his original statement in some capacity and yet, to grant that a type of poetry might be possible in theory if not in actuality. The statement appeared in the essay "Engagement," originally presented as a talk for Radio Bremen in 1962. The essay argues just how difficult it is to create art which resists the assimilation of the culture industry. Here is the relevant passage:

Den Satz, nach Auschwitz noch Lyrik zu schreiben, sei barbarisch, möchte ich nicht mildern; negativ ist darin der Impuls ausgesprochen, der die engagierte Dichtung beseelt. Die Frage einer Person aus Morts sans sépulture: 'Hat es einen Sinn zu leben, wenn es Menschen gibt, die schlagen, bis die Knochen im Leib zerbrechen?' ist auch die, ob Kunst überhaupt noch sein dürfe; ob nicht geistige Regression im Begriff engagierter Literatur anbefohlen wird von der Regression der Gesellschaft selber. Aber wahr bleibt auch Enzensbergers Entgegnung, die Dichtung müsse eben diesem Verdikt standhalten, so also sein, daß sie nicht durch ihre bloße Existenz nach Auschwitz dem Zynismus sich überantworte (Adorno, *Noten* 125-6).

On the one hand, Adorno explicitly expresses the wish not to soften his position, on the other, it is obvious that he leaves the door open for some form of art, and hence of poetry—but not just any form. Art is challenged to justify itself in the face of the terrible events of history, and can survive only under the condition that it not be used as a tool for the cynicism of the culture industry. In particular, Adorno propagates the Sartrean notion of "littérature engagée," an expressly politicized notion of literature.

Adorno's position has indeed changed. In "Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft," true poetry was impossible; here, Adorno no longer uses such absolute language. I stated earlier that Adorno had to choose. He has chosen to admit the possibility of poetry rather than to claim the impossibility of cultural critique. And while he does not explicitly admit that true poetry is being written, he does vaguely envision the theoretical conditions that a true poetry would have to meet. The rigidity of his original position has softened.

There is also something new in this later position: in a discussion of Arnold Schoenberg's *Der Überlebende von Warschau*, Adorno renders more explicit an argument regarding the relation between poetry and Auschwitz:

Durchs ästhetische Stilisationsprinzip, und gar das feierliche Gebet des Chors, erscheint das unausdenkliche Schicksal doch, als hätte es irgend Sinn gehabt; es wird verklärt, etwas von dem Grauen weggenommen; damit allein schon widerfährt

den Opfern Unrecht, während doch vor der Gerechtigkeit keine Kunst standhielte, die ihnen ausweicht (Adorno, *Noten* 127).

The principle of stylization is the source of injustice in the representation of Auschwitz. Therefore, art should not stylize when representing Auschwitz: one should find a way to let the horrors appear in an unvarnished a fashion as possible. Any concession to aesthetic pleasure in works representing the holocaust should be resolutely eschewed. Adorno's essay documents just how difficult it is even for works which are expressly "committed"—he speaks at length about Brecht's work—to live up to their purposes. Adorno's proscription against stylization has been taken up by numerous commentators: in particular, it is one of the main themes in the important collection of papers entitled *Probing the Limits of Representation*. Moreover, a recent paper by Joachim Seng argues that this thought moved Paul Celan to a change in his poetic style, to develop a "grauere Sprache," which found expression first in Celan's poem "Engführung."<sup>9</sup>

In "Engagement," Adorno's thinking on lyric poetry after Auschwitz ceases to be purely pessimistic and begins to make stipulations, if not on how poetry should be written, at least on how it should not be written. Here again we see very clearly how his negative dialectic works: it might not show us how things ought to be, but at least how they ought not be.

\* \* \*

Adorno finally retracted his statement definitively in 1966 in a passage from his *Negative Dialektik*: "Das perennierende Leiden hat soviel Recht auf Ausdruck wie der Gemarterte zu brüllen; darum mag falsch gewesen sein, nach Auschwitz ließe kein Gedicht mehr sich schreiben" (353). Let us recall that, in "Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft," poetry after Auschwitz was impossible and barbaric, and therefore without justification. Here, albeit somewhat reluctantly, Adorno explicitly reinstates poetry's right to existence, using the term "Recht" to make his point. What has brought about this justification? Why is poetry again possible? It is justified and possible at least as an expression of suffering or complaint. The survivors of Auschwitz must be able to

express their grief, rage, and despair. Walt Whitman's optimistic hymns to the world, on the other hand, would be unacceptable to Adorno after Auschwitz. What makes the bitter pill of retraction no doubt easier to swallow is that Adorno can now justify poetry according to his own theory. Poetry expressing suffering and complaint contains within itself that negation, that antagonistic relationship to social conditions which Adorno demands from art. This is a poetry after Adorno's own heart.

Thus, the idea of Auschwitz, peripheral and merely emphatic in Adorno's original statement, has assumed a central place in his later musings about a valid poetry. Moreover, Adorno did not maintain the absolute, inflexible rhetoric of "Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft," but he does maintain throughout these statements, not that it is impossible, but at least that it is tremendously difficult for art in general, and poetry in particular, to escape the tentacles of a culture industry which tends to soften those "hard sayings" which the great prophets, teachers, and artists have to speak to us. And in so doing, he has performed a valuable provocative function, even if one might not share his point of view.

*University of Cincinnati*

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Read at the Kentucky Foreign Language Conference, April 1996. The style of the paper prepared for oral delivery has been retained.

<sup>2</sup> T. W. Adorno, et. al. *The Authoritarian Personality*. (New York: Harper, 1950).

<sup>3</sup> This volume is indispensable for anyone doing research on the topic of Adorno's sentence and its resonances. It consists of a collection of Adorno's utterances on the subject of poetry after Auschwitz, as well as theoretical reflections on and literary reactions to those utterances by noted literary figures.

<sup>4</sup> Adorno criticizes social thinkers for having imported the concept of causality into the social from the natural sciences: "Die herkömmliche transzendente Kritik der Ideologie ist veraltet. Prinzipiell macht durch ungebrochene Transposition des Kausalbegriffs aus dem Bereich der physischen Natur in die Gesellschaft die Methode eben jene Verdinglichung

sich zu eigen, die sie zum kritischen Thema hat, und fällt hinter ihren Gegenstand zurück" (Adorno "Kulturkritik", 29). For a discussion of the status of causality in Adorno's view of the interaction between the socio-economic base and social productions, see the chapter "The Social Dimension" in Peter Uwe Hohendahl's recently published work on Adorno, *Prismatic Thought* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> Kiedaisch attempts to determine "what Adorno meant" by considering the entire corpus of his statements synchronically. My approach is different: I examine each of these statements singly and show the changes in his position.

<sup>6</sup> Donahue gives considerable space to a discussion of Adorno's dialectical thinking process, but does not concentrate long on individual statements. This approach tends to homogenize Adorno under the rubric of "dialectical thinking," whereas the diachronic approach employed here individualizes Adorno's statements and reveals difference.

<sup>7</sup> Donahue does not see this dilemma; or, if he sees it, he does not discuss it. One reason for Donahue's sanguine interpretation of Adorno's dictum is his assertion that Adorno simply did not mean what he said about poetry after Auschwitz: it is a view "that Adorno here articulates but does not subscribe to." "Instead," Donahue says, "Adorno delivers in that much-quoted remark a pointed overstatement of a position dialectically antithetical to his own" (58). Besides the confusion inherent in Donahue's concept of a statement that is an "overstatement" of an "antithetical position," I would question the authority upon which he chooses to assert that *this* statement in particular is the overstatement. If Adorno had this habit of exaggerating, how is one to sift between what he meant and did not mean seriously, if in fact he meant anything seriously at all? I suspect that Donahue has simply obeyed his sense that Adorno's statement about post-Auschwitz poetry is outrageous and an exaggeration. But such a subjective methodology has little to recommend it. To avoid critical quicksand of this sort, I have kept to solid ground and have taken the logical structure of Adorno's argument seriously. In so doing, I believe I am able to demonstrate that, on the basis of his argument regarding the culture industry, Adorno could indeed conclude that poetry is impossible. On the other hand, I see no evidence in "Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft" to believe Donahue's assertion that Adorno's real position is "antithetical" to the one he actually articulates. Now, if one takes Adorno's later positions together with the earlier, one can make such a case, but this methodology is ahistorical and forces Donahue to ignore the specific argumentation of the early essay.

These are very involved issues, and require a good deal more space than either Donahue or I have granted them. Donahue was obliged to tackle the entire subject of Adorno's philosophy of poetry for presentation at the

Johns Hopkins workshop on "Zero Hour 1945," and my objections to his paper are doubtless attributable to these restrictions.

<sup>8</sup> Enzensberger's statement, originally published in 1959, is reprinted in Kiedaisch (73-76). As we shall see, Adorno comes to recognize the validity of Enzensberger's words, and incorporates them in his own position.

<sup>9</sup> Janz' book was the first to call attention to certain connections between Adorno's and Celan's philosophies of poetry. However, it would be hasty to assume that a personal affinity existed between the two. Celan reflects on Adorno's original statement with bitter irony: "[...] jetzt, beim streng nach Adorno und auch sonst deutscheuropäisch denkenden Merkur, weiß man endlich, wo die Barbaren zu suchen sind [...]" (Celan 32). Furthermore, in a note written on an offprint of his prose fragment "Gespräch im Gebirg," Celan wrote of Sils Maria as the place "wo ich den Herrn Prof. Adorno treffen sollte, von dem ich dachte, daß er Jude sei [...]" (quoted in Federmann 91).

#### Works Cited

- Adorno, Theodor W. "Engagement." *Noten zur Literatur* III. Bibliothek Suhrkamp 146. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1965. 109-35.
- . "Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft." *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft I. Schriften* X, 1. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977. 11-30.
- . *Negative Dialektik*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1966.
- Celan, Paul. "Die Wahrheit, die Laubfrösche, die Schriftsteller und die Klapperstörche." *34 x erste Liebe*. Ed. Robert Neumann. Frankfurt: Bärmeier und Nickel, 1966.
- Donahue, Neil. "Adorno's Philosophy of Poetry after Auschwitz from a Postwar Perspective." *Revisiting Zero Hour 1945: the Emergence of Postwar German Culture*. Eds. Stephen Brockmann and Frank Trommler. Washington D. C.: American Institute for Contemporary German Studies, 1996. 57-70.
- Federmann, Reinhard. "Bio-bibliographie der Pestsäule." *Die Pestsäule* 1 (1972): 89-95.
- Friedlander, Saul ed. *Probing the Limits of Representation*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992.
- Janz, Marlies. *Vom Engagement absoluter Poesie. Zur Lyrik und Ästhetik Paul Celans*. Frankfurt: Syndikat, 1976.
- Kiedaisch, Petra ed. *Lyrik nach Auschwitz? Adorno und die Dichter*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1995.
- Seng, Joachim. "Von der Musikalität einer 'graueren' Sprache." *Germanisch-romanische Monatsschrift* 45 (1995): 419-430.