The "Last Philosophy" Enquiring into the "First"

The Influence of Classical Thought on Theodor W. Adorno

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ABSTRACT

Adorno discerned a modern quality in the classical tradition, and by incorporating this tradition into his writings he implied that there is still contemporary relevance in the classical works of the past. Classical philosophy and literature not only provided source material for his theories, but it will be shown that there is more to learn about the multiple functions of Adorno’s writings and his process of writing them. This study seeks to examine and interpret some of Adorno’s major writings that incorporated classical ideas and figures in order to locate how this ancient tradition contributed to his formulation of critical social and political theory. There are interesting and relevant implications for politics and political philosophy to be drawn from the entwinement of Adorno’s work with classical thought, and it is the goal of this study to illuminate some of these implications. By looking at how classical thought influenced Adorno’s deliberative writing process, the purpose of his writings becomes clearer. Ultimately, this study finds that his frequent use of classical literature and philosophy forms a political gesture against the standardization and domination of thought in modern society.

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Chapter I – Introduction

In his afterword to Theodor W. Adorno's 1965 lecture on metaphysics, *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems*, Rolf Tiedemann explains how Adorno looks to the ancient philosophers Plato and Aristotle as "a 'last philosophy' enquiring into the 'first.'"[1] Adorno's interests were not limited to philosophy, and throughout much of his writings Adorno sporadically referred to classical notions, concepts, and figures such as Homer or Aristophanes, "mimesis" or epic, to support his arguments and supplement his studies, be it his social and political theory or philosophy and aesthetics. Although Adorno referred to preceding traditions frequently, classical thought – the intellectual and cultural tradition of ancient Greece and Rome – maintained a precarious position in Adorno's reflections on philosophy, society, politics, and aesthetics in modernity.

On the one hand, Adorno was interested in antiquity because the insights ancient thinkers devoted to metaphysics, ethics, politics, and aesthetics provided a crystallized, historical perspective that gives insights into the problems that arise from Adorno's own thoughts about philosophy, politics, society, and aesthetics in modernity. David Gross describes how Adorno "felt free to look backward into the past in order to find there what [he] could not find or draw out of present circumstances."[2] Adorno looked towards the ancients as a "'last' philosophy enquiring into the 'first,'"[3] in order to see whether and how far classical ideas were still palpable in the administered world of the modern era.[4] In short, Adorno discerned a modern quality in the classical tradition and believed that

[1] Rolf Tiedemann, Afterword to *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems*, by Theodor W. Adorno, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 195.
[2] David Gross, "Rescuing the Past," *Telos* 86 (1990), 25.
[3] Tiedemann, *Metaphysics*, 195.
[4] Ibid., 194-95.

there was still much that this intellectual tradition may provide for analysis of contemporary culture.

On the other hand, there are some qualities in ancient thought that Adorno heavily censured. The systematization of thought, some perspectives on morality, and early criticisms of aesthetics are just a few examples. But it is not so much that Adorno criticized the classical period for developing these ideas, as it was that Adorno lamented what many of these ideas had become in the modern era. The conflict between criticizing the classical tradition and incorporating many of its ideas does not necessarily suggest that the classical tradition is somehow detrimental to Adorno or his theoretical reflections. On the contrary, by investigating a variety of different features, figures, and ideas from antiquity, Adorno was able to incorporate insights from classical thought in order to contribute to and substantiate some of his own theories about philosophical methods, society, politics, and aesthetics in contemporary Western civilization.

This is the premise on which this study is based. In this thesis, I am interpreting some of Adorno's major writings that incorporate classical ideas and figures in order to locate how this ancient tradition contributed to his formulation of critical social and political theory. There are interesting and relevant implications for politics and political philosophy to be drawn from the entwinement of Adorno's work with classical thought, and it is the goal of this study to illuminate some of these effects. In the next section of this introduction, I review the interdisciplinary approach Adorno takes in his theoretical studies. In the subsequent section, I explain how this thesis will be interpreting "classical thought" and detail why Adorno was interested in incorporating aspects of this

intellectual tradition into his social theories. The final section of the introduction will briefly present the structure of the thesis.

I.i – Why Adorno?

Adorno begins his last major work, *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), by stating, "it is self-evident that nothing about art is self-evident."[5] The same can be said about much of his writings. To say authentic aesthetic works reveal social reality, but also what that very same reality is not, or that "myths already entail enlightenment [and] with every step enlightenment entangles itself more deeply in mythology,"[6] sounds paradoxical. This aspect makes Adorno very difficult to read, but just a Steven Helmling describes in his own experience with Adorno, it can be transformative.[7] Reading any of Adorno's works is challenging, but it is also very rewarding because of the alternative perspective his works provide for understanding social and political systems and structures in modernity. Adorno aimed to call into question previous as well as modern ways of thinking in order to foster new and critical insights and interpretations of modern life. In his unfinished work *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno urged readers to perceive theory as art and art as theory. His collaboration with Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), is a scathing cultural critique that provokes normative beliefs about contemporary society and his enormously diverse collection of essays, *Notes to Literature* (1958-61), are all just a few

[5] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, eds. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Contiuum, 2002), 1.
[6] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 8.
[7] Steven Helmling, "A Martyr to Happiness: Why Adorno Matters," *The Kenyon Review* 28 (2006), 170.

of Adorno's worthwhile analyses of society, politics, aesthetics, philosophy, and culture precisely because of their exhaustive insight and challenging composition.[8]

Reading and interpreting Adorno is challenging because of the period in which he was writing, but also because of how the academic community at the time received him and his ideas. For the most part, Adorno was one of the most intellectually notorious academics in the Federal Republic.[9] Thomas Mann explains that Adorno grew up at a time and in an area in which much of his theoretical, political, aesthetic, philosophical, and musical interests could be developed, all of which led the scholar to have a significant impact in the Frankfurt academic community.[10] Adorno is intellectually rooted in Kant and Hegel and he embraced the avant-garde modernism of thinkers like his close friend Walter Benjamin. Some of the most influential thinkers on Adorno were Marx, Nietzsche, and his compatriots at the Frankfurt School. But despite his intellectual familiarity with the philosophers and figures common to much of the German intelligentsia, Adorno never really assimilated into the academic community, as Habermas recalls:

> In every institutional setting he was "out of place," and not as if he intended to be. To his university colleagues this out-of-the-ordinary man was not exactly uncanny, even if he was considered suspect. However,

[8] Ibid. 157.
[9] Gerhard Schweppenhäuser, *Theodor W. Adorno: An Introduction*, trans. James Rolleston (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 8.
[10] Ibid., 2. Schweppenhäuser refers to Thomas Mann, *The Story of a Novel: The Genesis of* Doctor Faustus, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961) for Mann's remarks on Adorno.

> academic philosophy…never really acknowledged this unusual intellectual.[11]

This should not discourage readers of Adorno. In all of his work, Adorno sought to empower ideas and critically reconceptualize the entwinement of politics, aesthetics, philosophy, and society in a way that very few thinkers before and after him have been able to replicate.[12] Unlike the positivistic philosophy he often criticized, Adorno strove to challenge the socio-political state of society and advocated for a theoretical method that was capable of self-reflexive deliberation.

For Adorno, changing the way individuals think requires tackling some of the normative notions in society. In his overview of Adorno, Gerhard Schweppenhäuser describes how Adorno perceives an inner contradiction in modern mass society in which human fulfillment is promised through inhuman, repressive social actions.[13] This process is exacerbated, according to Adorno, by the way in which human thought is fragmented and formalized into concepts and disciplines.[14] While there have been sporadic movements in contemporary academia to rescue interdisciplinary study, for the most part, much of academic and social life still abides by formal separation and categorization, hindering productive thinking and rendering critical analysis unable to scrutinize the status quo, as Adorno might put it.

As Helmling indicates, the challenge in reading Adorno is that he protested this differentiation and does not separate sociology, from philosophy, aesthetics, from

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[11] Jürgen Habermas, *Philosophical-Politics Profiles*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1983), 190.
[12] Schweppenhäuser, *Theodor W. Adorno*, viii.
[13] Ibid., 6.
[14] Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 20.

politics, "so you, as reader, cannot extract the aesthetic parts from the part that makes Adorno so difficult, namely the philosophy."[15] This is what makes Adorno so innovative and still so relevant. Adorno sought to analyze the various facets of social life in an unsystematic but inclusive way. Mann describes why Adorno takes this approach:

> This strange intellect persisted in a lifelong refusal to choose professionally between philosophy and music. It was all too clear to him that he was really pursuing the same goals in the two divergent fields. His dialectical way of thinking and his immersion in the philosophy of society and history – these traits are inseparable from his musical passion.[16]

From a passion in philosophy and music, Adorno later incorporated his other interests of sociological and political theory into his dialectical method in an attempt to examine Western civilization under the thumb of capitalism. Regarding Adorno's amalgamation of disciplines, Helmling states how the Frankfurt theorist "[wanted] to rejoin the discourses not to reconcile them, but to bring them into friction with each other: not to assimilate them, but to sharpen the individuality of each in its critical abrasion against the others."[17]

So, why Adorno? Why consider looking into such a well-studied individual? What could there be left to learn from and about Adorno? We should still study Adorno because even though society has historically moved on and developed in many ways Adorno could not have predicted, there is still something very prescient and insightful in his diagnoses of modern culture. His concerns about capitalism, inequality, mass

[15] Helmling, "A Martyr to Happiness," 158.
[16] Thomas Mann on Adorno in Schweppenhäuser, *Theodor W. Adorno*, 3.
[17] Helmling, "A Martyr to Happiness," 160.

violence, the domination of nature, technology, and much more are still unresolved issues, only in even more brutal forms.

This thesis attempts to introduce some aspects of Adorno's theory, and it is not intended to be a comprehensive review of all of his writings. Specifically, my study concentrates on the influence of classical thought on Adorno. This historical tradition has influenced Adorno's studies of philosophy, sociology, ethics, and politics, but so far has been overlooked over the period his writings have been available. Knowing now that Adorno integrated various different disciplines into his theoretical method of analyzing the social world, I intend to examine how it is Adorno incorporated another intellectual tradition that seemingly does the same in order to discern how Adorno entwined his theory with classical thought and used it to inform his socio-political analyses of culture.

I.ii – Why Classical Thought?

Why classical thought? To what extent does classical thought influence Adorno? Adorno considered some of the most prominent works and influential ideas of classical thought and included many of them into his writings. For example, the notions of "mimesis" and "praxis" are fundamental to his study of art in *Aesthetic Theory*, and the *Odyssey* is an indispensible resource for framing the dialectic of enlightenment in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. When Adorno incorporated classical ideas into his various theories, he reinterpreted them to serve a more critical purpose. Adorno used ancient ideas and texts as tools of analysis and cultural criticism. He intertwined them into the content of his other influences to produce perspicacious critiques of modernity. In Adorno, "mimesis" is not just imitation in the way Plato or Aristotle understand it, nor is

Homeric epic poetry merely narrative in dactylic hexameter. Just as Adorno and Horkheimer recount in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* how enlightenment and myth "confront and define one another,"[18] each classical recursion Adorno made confronted his theory and helped to shape it so that his observations on the political state of modern society are not just informed by contemporary insight, but also the profound and extensive understanding of ancient thought in surprisingly similar matters. But what was so appealing about classical thought for Adorno?

First, for the purposes of this study, "classical" will generally refer to Hellenic and Roman literature, art, culture, and philosophy. I do not want to oversimplify the contributions of Greece and Rome to the Western tradition, but in order to see how the classical tradition impacted Adorno, he must have use it in his writings. Throughout his works, journals, and letters, Adorno preferred to invoke the Hellenic tradition rather than the Roman tradition. Despite this fact, I have included examples of his occasional uses of Roman figures and ideas in addition to Greek figures, literature, and ideas.

Adorno discerned a modern quality in classical sources and much of this quality may be attributed to the historical and material conditions of that era (8th century B.C.E. – 5th century C.E.). For the most part, communities in the classical period were societies of equal citizens who systematically applied reason as a means to understand the world.[19] Ancient Greece and Rome were radically different civilizations than any of the previous civilizations of the Eastern Mediterranean. For the first time in history, individuals organized themselves into small autonomous city-states (*poleis* pl., *polis* sg.) and not in

[18] Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment," trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, *New German Critique* 56 (1992): 111.
[19] Ian Morris and Barry B. Powell, *The Greeks: History, Culture, and Society*, (London: Pearson, 2010), 1.

monarchical or theocratic kingdoms.[20] In each *polis*, most free male inhabitants were considered equal and these Aegean societies instituted the initial concept of citizenship as a means to coordinate within the *polis*. These new socio-political associations engendered the formation of novel ways of contemplating and understanding humanity.[21]

For being historically distant periods, Hellenic and Roman thought informs a lot of contemporary culture. For instance, the first ideas regarding democracy and law have origins in ancient Greece. The existing fields of economics, military strategy, and religion were also cultivated by the Greeks and the Romans and were very influential for a long time after these civilizations gave way to others. Despite these contributions to human civilization, modern culture tends to suggest that the methods, ideas, and thought processes of the past are somehow less rational than those of the enlightened present.[22]

The Greeks and the Romans were interested in what they could learn about the past in order to progressively inform the direction of the present. Thucydides represents this mentality in his famous proclamation: "I have written my work, not as an essay which to win applause of the moment, but as a possession for all time."[23] Such a mentality suggests that in classical societies, reason was already evolving into new and insightful forms, unlike the blinded and "barbaric" reason Adorno believes characterizes the present.[24]

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[20] Ibid., 4.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Barry Hindess, "The Past is Another Culture, " *International Political Sociology* 1 (2007): 335.
[23] Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*, ed. Robert B. Strassler (New York: Free Press, 2008), 16.
[24] Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xiv.

Revisiting the Greeks and the Romans, though, does not mean interpreting classical culture as a model for how to live and think absolutely; many endeavors were successful, but there were also many that were failures. Impressive as ancient culture is, it is still not perfect by today's standards. Hellenic and Roman societies often endorsed slavery and their democracies excluded women and foreigners. More often than not, city-states like Athens, Corinth and Sparta were engaged in frequent wars with one another like the Peloponnesian War or the Corinthian War. The history of the Roman Empire is more like an historical account of war in Europe. Yet, instead of turning from the ancients, many individuals are influenced by antiquity – Adorno among them. The ancient Greeks and Romans lived in a very different world, but they struggled with the same principles that concern thinkers of the contemporary world like freedom and justice. The difficulties in antiquity engendered a perspective that sought to locate what it is that makes up humanity. In order to do so, classical societies embraced and encouraged self-critical thought as a method that could help to reveal the fundamental principles of humanity.

These periods of struggle created a condition within which classical thinkers endeavored to reveal the fundamental principles of humanity. But to do so required novel perspectives on the process of thinking and, as a result, many Greeks and Romans concluded that critical introspection via human reason was the only possible way to discover truth. At the very beginning of the Western tradition, ancient thinkers wanted to explain why and how societies form, politics develops, the purpose of human existence, and the potential of art. This sort of critical reflection led to many prominent and influential thinkers taking human thought in all sorts of directions like Plato and Aristotle

in metaphysical and ethical philosophy, the earliest instances of historical writing and politics with Herodotus, Thucydides, and Livy, the cultivation of art and theater with Ovid and Aristophanes, and the list goes on.

Adorno is not the first German philosopher to refer back to antiquity for insight into modern culture. The tradition of neoclassicism was a significant part of the intellectual fashion in Germany from the early to mid-eighteenth century until its decline after World War II and was chiefly concerned with the humanistic idea of self-transformation through contemplation and understanding of the arts and sciences.[25] Perhaps the most unorthodox neoclassicist was Frederich Nietzsche who reinterpreted ancient Greek and Roman aesthetics and metaphysics in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). Using classical thought, Nietzsche emphasized the detrimental effects that an enlightened rationality can have on metaphysical and existential inquiries and emphasized the need to maintain a historical connection to social, political, and philosophical questions. The final goal of philology, according to Nietzsche, was to maintain a link between history and philosophy and to criticize the practices of an unphilosophical present.[26] Adorno's recursion to the classical past indicates that he thought along similar lines and sought to use the classical tradition in similar way as Nietzsche had before him.

When Adorno and Horkheimer write in the preface to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that the book seeks to "explain why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism,"[27] they were trying to make sense of the world in the very same ways that classical thinkers did. Adorno incorporated classical ideas

[25] Suzanne L. Marchand, *Down from Olympus: Archaeology and Philhellenism in Germany, 1750-1970* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), xvii.
[26] Ibid., 130.
[27] Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xiv.

because he found that the classical tradition already asked questions about violence, existence, aesthetics, and politics and offered compelling answers about similar structures, systems, and situations in modernity.

Adorno integrated classical ideas not merely to learn about the past, but to see if the ancient past could contribute to his understanding of the modern society that he lived in. What Adorno saw in classical philosophy and literature were surprisingly contemporary insights that could have a profound effect on identifying what he thought of as "barbaric" trends of modern society. As Gross suggests, the classical tradition was significant for Adorno as " something that needed to be remembered and recovered, since it was said to contain, in a way that the culture of the culture industry did not, utopian dreams and possibilities which are provocative and critical when juxtaposed to the present."[28] Following the introduction, this thesis seeks to reveal how the thinkers and figures of antiquity contribute to the thinking of one of modernity's most influential philosophers.

I.iii – Structure of the Thesis

Even though there have been many analyses of Adorno regarding the diverse intellectual traditions that impacted his theories, from basic reviews of his German Idealist foundations to the impressions of avant-garde modernism in his aesthetic theory, the classical tradition – one of the most historically influential intellectual traditions – is largely unexamined in the literature on Adorno. A possible reason for this may be that, with the exception of the "Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment" essay in *Dialectic of*

[28] Gross, "Rescuing the Past," 26.

Enlightenment, Adorno does not systematically review or discuss any classical thinkers in any of his writings outside of metaphysics, making the impact such a tradition has on his theories difficult to locate.

What this thesis attempts to accomplish is discern what possible influences the classical tradition had on Adorno and the political implications of that entwinement for his writings. For the most part, the influence classical thought had on Adorno is situated in aesthetics and philosophy. Keeping with Adorno's interdisciplinary method of analysis though, just as his aesthetic observations are intertwined with his political and sociological theory, or philosophy and music, these aesthetically-related political analyses provide significant insight into the systems of power in modern society. In the concluding chapter, I unfold my interpretation of the influence classical thought had on Adorno's theoretical enterprise and I relate how these observations constitute a form of essayistic-political practice in modernity. Chapters II through IV will elaborate on a selection of some of the most prevalent instances throughout some of Adorno's works that illustrate his recursion to the ancients and entwinement with classical thought. In Chapter II, I present the impact the ancient debate between Plato and Aristotle had on the formation of critical aesthetics in *Aesthetic Theory*. In Chapter III, I focus on two essays from *Notes to Literature* that have classical thought as a motivating force for Adorno's aesthetic analyses. In Chapter IV, I review how Adorno and Horkheimer interpreted the *Odyssey* in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in order to explain how and why seemingly rational systems produce irrational cultures.

Chapter II – Classical Philosophy in *Aesthetic Theory*

After the publication of *Negative Dialectics* in 1966, Adorno devoted a significant amount his time towards completing his interdisciplinary study of art, *Aesthetic Theory*.[29] Unfortunately, the text is incomplete. Even though many scholars consider *Aesthetic Theory* to be his magnum opus, it remained unfinished at the time of his death in 1969 and was published posthumously in 1970. *Aesthetic Theory* incorporates themes, motifs, and ideas from all of Adorno's interests ranging from German Idealism to Irish literature, French prose-poetry to American pragmatism. But as some scholars like Brian O'Connor and Jeanne-Marie Gagnebin have suggested, the view of art that Adorno takes throughout this work was considerably influenced by classical aesthetic philosophy.[30]

A common reading of this study of aesthetics posits that Adorno was attempting to compound philosophy and art, or that his objective was to reduce theory to aesthetics. In this study, I interpret Adorno to be trying to unravel and discover the dialectical connection between art and society in order to distinguish how critical aesthetics is conducive to the rational uncovering of self-consciousness by entwining aesthetics with theory while keeping them distinct. Adorno refers to many classical thinkers and figures like Homer, Euripides, Horace, and Epicurus to help him develop his theory of social aesthetics. In addition, O'Connor suggests how the famous debate between Plato and Aristotle regarding the purpose of imitative aesthetics also has a profound effect on

[29] Schweppenhäuser, *Theodor W. Adorno*, 9.
[30] See Brian O'Connor, *Adorno*, (London: Routledge, 2013), Ch. 6 for O'Connor's analysis of Adorno's aesthetics, as well as Jeanne-Marie Gagnebin, "The Concept of Mimesis in Adorno and Benjamin," *Sociological Abstracts* 16 (1993): 67-86 for how Gagnebin examines Adorno's interpretation of the Platonic criticism of mimesis.

Adorno.[31] The debate on aesthetics between these two ancient philosophers contributed to Adorno's perception of art as the "configuration between mimesis and rationality."[32] Adorno's understanding of the work of art does not clearly side with Plato nor Aristotle, but takes aspects of each philosopher to inform his theory of critical art. While Adorno's aesthetic theory is an interpretation of many different subjects like philosophy, society, and art, this chapter will look at how Plato and Aristotle differ in their conceptions of aesthetics and the social implications of imitation, as well as how this debate influenced Adorno.

II.i - Plato, Aristotle, and the Role of Mimetic Art in Society

Throughout the majority of his writings one of the most unstable and most conflicted concepts for Adorno is that of "mimesis."[33] From *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno goes through different interpretations and theoretical considerations about what "mimesis" entails. For Adorno, "mimesis" is more than just the formalized notion of imitation. As Helmling suggests, mimesis is an evolving idea for Adorno, similar to "philosophy," or "enlightenment," one that can change according to its context and is crucial for understanding social processes and structures, political power, and the function aesthetic works.[34] The ancient quarrel between Plato and Aristotle assisted Adorno in developing one interpretation of "mimesis" as a form of aesthetic imitation. Both of these ancient philosophers approach aesthetic imitation differently. Through the first debate about the purpose of artistic imitation in Western tradition,

[31] Brian O'Connor, *Adorno*, (London: Routledge, 2013), 155-56.
[32] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 127.
[33] Steven Helmling, *Adorno's Poetics of Critique* (London: Continuum, 2009), 124.
[34] Ibid., 7-8.

Adorno was able to develop his notion of mimetic aesthetics and authentic art.[35] But before reviewing the influence that each of these ancient philosophers had on Adorno, it is necessary to briefly review how it is Adorno generally perceives mimesis.

Like Aristotle, Adorno understood mimesis as "the imitation of an action."[36] Adorno interpreted "action" as an act operating within an historical and material reality. "Imitation," on the other hand, is the purpose of art.[37] Works of art are fundamentally imitations of the external world. For Adorno, "art could and should be a means of understanding historical reality,"[38] but because art exists in history it is susceptible to reinterpretation at varying points in history. Despite the possibility of differing historical interpretations of mimetic aesthetics, like that of Plato in *Republic*, mimesis nonetheless perseveres as long as there is aesthetic activity. For Adorno, the work of art is "a refuge for mimetic comportment,"[39] and as such mimetic behavior is directly intertwined with aesthetic activity. As O'Connor points out, this relation informs the continuity Adorno perceives between mimesis and aesthetics.[40] Art allows individuals to see and understand rationalized human behavior and, through the process of imitation, it may also reveal and respond to the irrational.[41] Along similar lines, Adorno says, "that art, something mimetic, is possible in the midst of rationality, and that it employs its means, is a response to the faulty irrationality of the rational world as an overadministered world."[42]

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[35] O'Connor, *Adorno*, 155-56.
[36] Theodor W. Adorno et al., *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 2007), 149.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid., 147.
[39] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 53.
[40] O'Connor, *Adorno*, 154.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 53.

Adorno's effort to explain art as a mimetic activity in modernist artworks is not without recourse to the earliest and perhaps the most influential philosophical debate on aesthetics between Plato and Aristotle. Going as far back as *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno referred to Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Poetics* for insight into previous formulations of aesthetics. Between these two ancient thinkers are drastically different theories concerning the mimetic dimension of art. In his attempt to grasp a sense of aesthetic mimesis, Adorno referred back to ancient Greece and considered some of the most prominent reflections from this ancient debate so that they may help to direct his aesthetic analyses.

Adorno referred to Book X of *Republic* in which Plato returns to the topic of poetry that is first introduced in Books II and III. Just like the majority of Plato's other writings, Book X is in the form of a Socratic dialogue. The focus of the dialogue is on answering Socrates' question, "What is imitation?" Plato already states his conclusion about imitative art at the onset through Socrates' assertion that "imitative poetry is the last thing that we should allow."[43] Plato follows up with: "Everything of that sort [i.e. imitative/mimetic art] seems to me to be a destructive influence on the minds of those who hear it."[44] Merely claiming that imitative art negatively influences the human mind does not keep with the scrupulousness of Plato's other Socratic dialogues, so the dialogue continues in order to elaborate on this staunch position about aesthetic imitation.

Socrates claims that artists appear to create forms, like the scenes in a painting or the imagery in poetry, but according to Socrates, artists are actually only creating

[43] Plato, *The Republic*, ed. G. R. F. Ferrari, trans. Tom Griffith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 313.
[44] Ibid.

nonsubstantive, imitative simulacra. In this sense, painters only paint the appearance of real objects, and poets (along with tragedians, comedians, etc.) create word-pictures, so to speak, of real forms. Socrates develops an example of this notion and explains how a painter only paints an image of a couch that is twice removed from the ideal form of the original couch. The painter comes second to a craftsman, who constructs couches from the knowledge of the ideal couch that exists in nature/produced by a god.[45]

To conclude his criticism of aesthetic imitation, Socrates explains why art is appealing to people even though it is just an illusion. Socrates' explanation describes art as a negative aspect of society; mimetic art is appealing because it is essentially tricking the onlooker.[46] The artist creates a deceptive illusion that results in the distortion of the mind. And here is Plato's last charge against art: all mimetic art – poetry, theater, painting – is the lowest form of social activity because the creators of such art attempt to stimulate the audience by appealing to emotions and desires, which are the elements of the mind lacking in reason. This kind of stimulus is irrational and fails to support any true philosophical investigation in the upper mind, according to Plato.

Thus, Book X of *Republic* forms the infamous Platonic criticism of art in which the term "imitation" or mimesis is reduced to a simple likeness of material reality. This example conforms to the rest of Platonic metaphysics in which material forms are just illusory reproductions of the ideal/ natural form of objects. For Plato, anything that exists in a material form is already the imitation of the ideal form. Art that seeks to represent material reality is unable to contain or represent any form of truth-content because it is

[45] Ibid., 313-17.
[46] Ibid., 317.

only copying the appearance of the perfect, ideal version.[47] It is too far gone from the original ideal form, and that distance from the ideal renders it unable to retain any semblance of the ideal in its aesthetic medium. For Plato, artworks are copies of already imperfect appearances of the perfect ideal form. Furthermore, Plato argues that the purpose of philosophy is to pursue truth; its direct concern is with the ultimate and ideal "reality" and is not distracted by peripheral inquiries into what does not and cannot ever locate truth.

This does not go unnoticed by Adorno. He identified what he considered as the "bad marks Plato distributed to art,"[48] and rejected the argument in *Republic*. Adorno claimed how Plato's dismissal of art from society is the philosopher's "spitefully invented decadence."[49] The first insight into art in Western society only seems to disparage it, and Adorno does not appreciate Plato's annulment of such a socially significant activity. He continues his response to Plato by stating how:

> [Plato's] aversion to the lies of poets, which are after all nothing but art's semblance character, which Plato hoped to summon to the support of the status quo – all this taints the concept of art in the same moment in which it was first consciously reflected upon.[50]

The differences in the attitudes towards mimetic aesthetics are one of the "central preoccupations of philosophical aesthetics as a discipline,"[51] according to Frederic

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[47] Rebecca Bensen Cain, "Plato on Mimesis and Mirrors," *Philosophy and Literature* 1 (2012): 189.
[48] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 238.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Frederic Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2007), 127.

Jameson. On the one hand, there is Plato followed by Kant, and on the other there is Aristotle and later, Hegel.[52] Adorno is aware of this division in philosophical aesthetics and briefly mentions this rift in "The Essay as Form." As evinced by his response to Plato, Adorno believes that there is more to the work of art itself than purposeless representation and unlike Kant, he believes that the work of art is exhaustive and "encompasses an infinite number of aspects."[53] For Adorno, art has "its own inherent essence [that] is always *more than* its existence."[54] Between the two major attitudes on aesthetics, Adorno adopts a notion of mimesis and art more along the lines of Aristotle, than Plato.

How does Aristotle differ from Plato in his view of imitative art? Aristotle's *Poetics* gives an account of mimetic art that takes a much different view of art than Plato as an attempt to understand the rationalistic qualities of human behavior through aesthetic activity. Whereas Plato believed that aesthetics could not ever be similar to philosophy, Aristotle transforms mimetic aesthetics *into* philosophy, as something that is able to consider truth instead of as an activity that hinders thought. Aristotle reconceptualizes mimetic art as an activity that may reveal meaning in human social and theoretical processes contrary to the Platonic notion that imitation and aesthetics are incomplete facsimiles of material reality. Aristotle, then, is more in line with Adorno's conceptualization of aesthetics, whereby "the work wants its truth and untruth to be

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[52] Ibid.
[53] Adorno, "The Essay as Form," in *Notes to Literature: Volume One*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 15.
[54] Adorno, "Commitment," in *Notes to Literature: Volume Two*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 92. Emphasis added.

grasped."[55] This is only possible if the work of art is not written off as trivial representation, but understood as a philosophical activity.

Aristotle begins his analysis by delineating what he considers as imitative aesthetic forms: "Epic poetry and Tragedy, Comedy also and Dithyrambic poetry, and the music of the flute and the lyre in most of their forms, are all in their general conception modes of imitation."[56] Throughout *Poetics*, Aristotle posits that imitative acts are a manifestation of natural human inclinations. This is a distinctly human capacity and differentiates humanity from the rest of nature. "Imitation…is one instinct of [human] nature,"[57] as Aristotle puts it. The process of learning about the external world and of all its structures, components, and variability is accomplished through aesthetic imitation. Aristotle posits that, as a natural act, mimetic art is a way human beings develop intellectually:

> The instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood, one difference between him and other animals being that he is the most imitative of living creatures, and *through imitation learns his earliest lessons*.[58]

If an individual can imitate "men…as they are,"[59] then there is a degree of understanding in the imitator of all of the elements that make up human behavior and thought where the external aesthetic manifestation may imitate what it is that comprises humanity accurately and verifies a degree of knowledge about humanity or distinct aspects of

[55] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 15.
[56] Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. S. H. Butcher (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications Inc., 1997), 1.
[57] Ibid., 6.
[58] Ibid., 5. Emphasis added.
[59] Ibid., 3.

humanity. Simply put, for Aristotle, mimetic aesthetics is conducive to learning about humanity and what humanity consists of.

Additionally, through the process of imitation, the imitator acquires knowledge of the "other" aspect of social reality. By engaging in imitation as an aesthetic activity the imitator also inquiries into the character of human social processes and thought. This inquiry into the character of human activity affirms certain perspectives and notions about humanity, but the aesthetic activity also negatively informs the imitator. By representing the object as something it appears to be, better than it appears, or even as worse than it appears, the individual learns about what it is they seek to imitate, but also everything that they do not. Through the mimetic process, the subject acquires knowledge about what exists and is able to distinguish between the existence of the object and nonexistence, the thesis and antithesis of social reality. As Michael Davis points out, mimetically-oriented aesthetic activity is necessary to the activity of philosophical thought itself.[60] Thus, Aristotle's argument is that human appreciation of art is really an appreciation of the experience of understanding and challenging the possibilities of human knowledge that is accomplished through the medium of art's mimetic form.

> No less universal is the pleasure felt in things imitated. We have evidence of this in the facts of experience. Objects which in themselves we view with pain, we delight to contemplate when reproduced with minute fidelity: such as the forms of the most ignoble animals and of dead bodies. The cause of this again is, *that to learn gives the liveliest pleasure*, not only to philosophers but to men in general…Thus the reason why men

[60] Michael Davis, *Aristotle's* Poetics*: The Poetry of Philosophy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1992), 147.

> enjoy seeing a likeness is, that in contemplating it they find themselves learning or inferring, and saying perhaps, 'Ah, that is he.' For if you happen not to have seen the original, the pleasure will be due not to the imitation as such, but to *the execution*, the colouring, or some such cause.[61]

For Aristotle, the process of imitation and the experience of producing that imitation are what are fundamental to human cognitive development. This reasoning is what makes Aristotelian aesthetic theory so different from Plato. Art is not just a mundane representation of another form or figure, but *through the imitative process* it becomes an activity that is concerned with learning about what constitutes human behavior and thought. In Aristotle's conception of mimetic art, the artwork imitates the external world and the internal processes of human development, or in other words, art imitates the internal, natural, and variant qualities that produce and reveal themselves in and through humanity. Mimesis in artworks, for Aristotle, is the act of perceiving the external world and observing each separate and distinct aspect of it as a means to challenge its boundaries and learn from its possibilities, culminating in the activity of aesthetic imitation that symbolizes an affirmation of knowledge.

Aristotle's project in *Poetics* is not to reaffirm the Platonic notions of aesthetics as mere representation of some other form or figure, but to posit an alternative interpretation of mimesis in artworks as an effort to imitate and thereby comprehend human processes as fundamentally philosophical acts.

[61] Aristotle, *Poetics*, 5-6. Emphasis added.

O' Connor underscores how Adorno's reflections on aesthetics emerge from modern artworks in the twentieth century, but that his conception of aesthetic mimesis and its contribution to experience and thought is similar to Aristotle's.[62] For both thinkers, the aesthetic process is concerned with self-reflection and intellectual development. Plato, on the other hand, thought that art was a bane on society for preventing what he believed was true philosophical activity. This opinion ultimately leads to his devaluation of art. Although the Platonic notion of aesthetics does not coincide with much of *Aesthetic Theory*, it is still an instructive influence for Adorno as a perspective on art that developed his theory against.

For the most part, Adorno considers Plato's critique of art as politically opportunistic: "Plato's assessment of art shifted according to his estimation of its presumptive political usefulness."[63] The derision of mimetic aesthetics in *Republic* makes it impossible to recognize that there are compelling aspects of human behavior and rationality within the aesthetic experience. Adorno suggests that it is Plato's inability to recognize the compromise between society and the socially critical essence of the artwork led him to suppress the dialectic of rationality and mimesis immanent to art.[64] Plato did not trust any form of mimetic aesthetics and sought to negate its critical content. This is why Adorno says that, "Plato's critique of art is indeed not compelling,"[65] and what is more is that what "Plato had indicted [was] a lie."[66] Plato rejects what Adorno and

[62] O'Connor, *Adorno*, 155.
[63] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 15.
[64] Ibid., 54.
[65] Ibid., 83.
[66] Ibid.

Aristotle perceive as the purpose of mimetic art, precisely because it catalyzes critically rational thought and kept his faith in his own metaphysics and theory of forms.

> Plato's ontology, more congenial to positivism than dialectic is, took offense at art's semblance character, as if the promise made by art awakened doubt in the positive omnipresence of being and idea, for which Plato hoped to find surety in the concept.[67]

The central problem that Adorno had with Plato is that he focuses too much on the form of the work of art and not what is learned about human thought through the imitative process. Instead, a theory of art "must at the same time be the critique of art."[68] Aesthetic criticism must be a critique of the entire process of art from its preceding deliberative inception, to the experience of producing the aesthetic imitation, and then to its final aesthetic form.

Aristotle, on the other hand, reveals the possibilities mimetic art has for human beings and what it means to have a rationally conceived aesthetics in his approach to mimesis and art. From Aristotle, Adorno developed a theory of art in which, "mimesis ties art to individual human experience."[69] What Adorno considered as authentic art is similar to how Aristotle described it. Authentic art attempts to identify social processes through rationalistic aesthetic activity, not through merely representing it, but through imitating it. The aesthetic imitation announces the process of rationally deliberating about reality and falsity and prods the limitations of human capability to identify and work to understand reality. The mimetic quality in art is a nonconceptual, subjectively produced

[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid., 30.

form that "defines art as a form of knowledge and to that extent as 'rational,'"[70] but it only affects its audience insofar as it reflects the processes of social reality.

The external mimetic appearance of the artwork is the culmination of the artist's internal deliberation about the material world. But if it strives to be authentic art, it must expose its opposite. The work of art is only able to critically affect an audience as an imitation of external social reality if it also reveals the possibilities of its unreality or irrational state.[71] In *Poetics*, Aristotle describes how tragedy uncovers this distance between rationality and irrationality and, according to Davis, it allows an authentic, mimetic work of art to separate actual knowledge of the material world from the plight of an irrational one.[72] In this sense, all authentic, mimetic art involves purification, or, as Adorno perceives it, a cathartic gesture.

While Adorno agreed with Aristotle's conception of mimesis to an extent, he diverged from Aristotle at the point of mimetic art and purification, or catharsis. Aristotle posits that all mimetic art is necessarily a process of purification or catharsis.[73] This implies that different artworks, while being processes of purification, are limited in exactly what is being expressed and released. For tragedy, this may be serious emotions like empathy or distress, and for comedy it could be humor and lightheartedness. Aristotle's theory contends that authentic art must stand apart from the ordinary state of existence so as to be an authentic representational imitation of it and that it is necessary for artificial boundaries, like the idea of genre or style, to be placed around the "other" so as to make it discontinuous with the rest of reality. In other words, aesthetics should be

[70] Ibid., 54.
[71] Davis, *Aristotle's* Poetics, 39-40.
[72] Ibid., 38-39.
[73] Aristotle, *Poetics*, 16-19.

formalized. Adorno, though, believes that these boundaries are repressive and limit authentic expression and critical cognition:

> The purging of the affects in Aristotle's *Poetics* no longer makes equally frank admission of its devotion to ruling interests, yet it supports them all the same in that his ideal of sublimation entrusts art with the task of providing aesthetic semblance as a substitute satisfaction for the bodily satisfaction of the targeted public's instincts and needs: Catharsis is a purging action directed against the affects and an ally of repression. Aristotelian catharsis is part of a super-annuated mythology of art and inadequate to the actual effects of art.[74]

So while Adorno did incorporate many different classical thinkers into his study of art and society, Plato and Aristotle had a significant impact on his aesthetic theory. Plato influenced Adorno negatively, while Aristotelian aesthetics helped Adorno augment and develop his theory. By rejecting Plato's denigration of art and its supposed inability to incite rational thought about society, Adorno, with the assistance of Aristotle, formed a theory of art in which authentic art "cause[s] people to wonder, just as Plato once demanded that philosophy do."[75] By working through the ancient debate on aesthetics, Adorno cultivated a counter position to the Platonic criticism of aesthetics in which mimesis and art are conducive to rational thought and a critical understanding of external social processes.

By explaining how it Adorno incorporated classical aesthetic philosophy into his study of art, we have a more comprehensive understanding of how Adorno perceived the

[74] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 238.
[75] Ibid., 126.

role of art in society. Both Plato and Aristotle contributed to the development of Adorno's theory of authentic art in *Aesthetic Theory*, but just as his dialectical method of analysis intertwines disciplines, such that aesthetics is fastened to philosophy and sociology, this also necessarily informs his political theory. For Adorno, the imitative and representational qualities of art as a medium for comprehending social realities are extrapolated to his critique of political art, propaganda, and advertising that are used for overtly political purposes, and even further to an analysis into the motivations of such art, which, according to Adorno, are for justifying and reinforcing the dominant systems of power in society.[76] The political quality of Adorno's writings about aesthetics in modern society will be revisited in Chapter V, but for now the following chapters will further inquire into how classical figures and ideas assisted Adorno in shaping a theory of aesthetics that ultimately augmented his political critiques of contemporary society.

[76] O'Connor, *Adorno*, 156-57.

Chapter III – Dialectical Aesthetics in *Notes to Literature*

It is inevitable that one comes across a series of classical thinkers throughout many of the essays in Adorno's *Notes to Literature*. The frequency and breadth with which Adorno refers to classical thought suggests how influential this tradition was for Adorno throughout the formation of his own thoughts about society, politics, aesthetics, and philosophy. Some of the thinkers Adorno emphasizes include a series of Hellenic and Roman poets including Alcman, Sappho, Pindar, Bacchylides, Horace, and Ovid; playwrights like Euripides and Plautus; the Old Comedians Aristophanes and Alcaeus; the often-cited philosophers Plato and Aristotle; a few politicians like Cicero and Lucullus; and the epic poets Homer and Virgil. The two Adorno essays that this chapter will review are "Is Art Lighthearted?" and "On Epic Naiveté." These essays are examples from *Notes to Literature* that have classical thought and figures as significant influences behind Adorno's analyses. The first section will focus on the aesthetic critique "Is Art Lighthearted?" where Adorno includes Ovid and Aristophanes into his observations about how critical aesthetics should function in society. For Adorno, Ovid represents the dialectic of lightheartedness as a function of critical aesthetics in social praxis, whereas the works of Aristophanes provide models for recovering the dialectic of lightheartedness following the formalization of the serious and lighthearted qualities of art. The other essay that this chapter will examine is "On Epic Naiveté," in which Adorno investigates the content of Homeric epic in order to identify the autonomous quality of artworks. In this account, scrutinizing epic allows Adorno to analyze the origins of the history of reason and the dialectical qualities of autonomous art.

III.i – Comedy and Tragedy: Seriousness and Lightheartedness

Even though Adorno is often perceived as a pessimistic individual, the purpose of laughter and lightheartedness is a prevalent theme throughout his work.[77] Adorno concludes his fourth and final volume of *Notes to Literature* with, "Is Art Lighthearted?" The essay is a series of Adorno's thoughts on the social and aesthetic significance for two archetypal styles of literature – comedy and tragedy – that Adorno ultimately includes into his analyses of the emotive experience in authentic art.[78] In "Is Art Lighthearted?" Adorno recalls his now-popular statement from the essay "Cultural Criticism and Society" that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric…it has become impossible to write poetry today,"[79] and argues that, "because Auschwitz was possible and remains possible for the foreseeable future, lighthearted art is no longer conceivable."[80] The lighthearted and cheerful quality of artwork is conditioned by a society that has escaped the violence of nature, but in a world that maintains the possibility of being violent,

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[77] See, for example, "Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment," in Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002). In this section, Adorno and Horkheimer revisit Teiresias's prophecy of Odysseus and the oar that is mistaken for a winnowing fan as something that is intended to be "compellingly comic" and is a crucial example of how, through laughter, "nature becomes aware of itself as such and thus abjures its destructive violence" pp. 59-60. Later, in "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," Adorno and Horkheimer describe how laughter is no longer the spontaneous expression of happiness, but an "instrument for cheating happiness," as a co-opted human act that represents the suffusion of complete social and economic administration, pp. 111-15.

[78] Ulrich Plass, *Language and History in Theodor W. Adorno's* Notes to Literature (London: Routledge, 2007), 175.

[79] Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1983), 34.

[80] Theodor W. Adorno, "Is Art Lighthearted?" in *Notes to Literature: Volume Two*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 251.

authentic lightheartedness remains distant.[81] The manifestation of this loss is visible in works of art, and it is through an aesthetic analysis that Adorno seeks to unravel the mentality that prolongs the loss of lightheartedness.

In this essay, Adorno argues that there is a dialectic consisting of lightheartedness and seriousness in aesthetic works. In his study of Adorno, Ross Wilson explains how Adorno perceives art as contemporaneously serious and lighthearted:

> On the one hand, art has escaped the deadening rule of seriousness that prevails in reality – the seriousness which constantly exhorts that it's a hard life in the real world – because art cannot be thought of as a part of reality in any straightforward way. To this extent, art is lighthearted. On the other hand, and again for the reason that it has escaped reality, art suggests a change in consciousness, which is to say that it contains the suggestion that it might be possible for a different kind of reality to exist. In this way, art is serious.[82]

Adorno argues that this dialectic is ruptured and perpetuated in the twentieth century through the failure of members of capitalist society to think critically and reflexively about the function of art in society. The unity of lightheartedness and seriousness in aesthetics is broken and each facet of the dialectic is inverted. Lighthearted art is severed from its dialectical complement and, as a result, has become serious as a form of market advertising or incorporated into the dominant system of production as organized leisure because contemporary society is unable to understand the capacity of lightheartedness to criticize the modern world. Furthermore, serious art is also no longer serious; instead

[81] Plass, *Language and History*, 175-176.
[82] Ross Wilson, *Theodor Adorno* (London: Routledge, 2007), 43-44.

serious art is now lighthearted. Any serious content or message can only reach the public by emphasizing the irrationality and incongruity of modern society in a humorous way. This situation is one reason why "the Tramp," Charlie Chaplin, became such a popular form of social commentary in the early twentieth century and why Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert are so popular today. The main argument for Adorno is that lighthearted art is no longer possible because capitalism has made lighthearted art into art that is no longer lighthearted. Instead, all art is incorporated into the predominant system of production to become cultural products for a consumer-based society. The new functions of art are to merely fulfill temporary desires as "entertainment" or "amusement" and to reaffirm the existing social and economic mode of dominance rather than challenging or critiquing the status quo.

The purpose of the essay "Is Art Lighthearted?" is to refute the modern formulation of aesthetics and to present an alternative for the role works of art should maintain in society. In order to do so, Adorno refers back to classical antiquity and reexamines the function of art in ancient Rome and Greece. Consequently, by doing so Adorno reveals that his recourse to the Roman poet Ovid and the Greek comedian Aristophanes informs his perspective on how it is that aesthetics should function in society. For Adorno, Ovid represents the dialectic of lightheartedness as a function of critical aesthetics in social praxis, whereas the comedies of Aristophanes provide models for recovering the dialectic of lightheartedness.

"Is Art Lighthearted?" begins by presenting an interpretation of Schiller's famous aphorism from *Wallenstein* (1800). At the conclusion of *Wallenstein*, Schiller inserts his own observations on life and aesthetics when he declares, "Ernst ist das Leben, heiter ist

die Kunst" – life is serious, art is lighthearted.[83] Schiller, in the first generation of German Idealists, produced many literary works as commentaries to the political fragmentation of eighteenth century German society as the fall of civilization from its Edenic classical past, according to Suzanne Marchand.[84] By the eighteenth century, art was the last bastion where the "ancients" still had any influence over the "moderns."[85] To remedy what Schiller believed was a decline in European culture, the poet frequently asserted the usefulness of classical ideas, namely beauty, self-cultivation, and freedom, and he included many of these ideas into works like *Wallenstein*. Ulrich Plass suggests that the statement at the end of *Wallenstein* is Schiller's version of the Hippocratic saying "*Ars longa, vita brevis*."[86]

But for Adorno, Schiller's statement is a linguistic example of domination. The statement from *Wallenstein* ends up ironic and opposed to the original intent of the classical adage. Schiller's statement isolates and formalizes aspects of life. By defining what "life," "art," "serious," and "lighthearted" are for him, Schiller limits how these notions may be interpreted, effectively controlling how others may understand these notions. By breaking apart and defining each facet of the dialectic, Schiller formalizes the content of the dialectic and, as Adorno and Horkheimer argue in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the process of formalization "[offers] Enlightenment thinkers a schema for making the world calculable"[87] leading to rational organization, manipulation, and control. Schiller, then, (probably unintentionally) dissolves the dialectic of

[83] Ibid., 247.
[84] Marchand, *Down from Olympus*, 26.
[85] Ibid., xix.
[86] Plass, *Language and History*, 175. This Latin translation of Hippocrates' aphorism is usually translated as "Art is long, life is short."
[87] Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 4.

lightheartedness. A crucial aspect of dialectical aesthetics for Adorno is that authentic art cannot be reduced to a conceptual form,[88] so Schiller is making a mistake in the form of limitation through definition, thereby repressing what aesthetics, and even further, life, are capable of being.

Although Schiller differentiates between seriousness and lightheartedness, the distinction he makes between life as serious and art as lighthearted does not ease the confusion between what life or what art consists of as two distinct aspects of life. Rather, despite its ambiguity and the brevity of his dictum, Schiller manages to anticipate and reinforce the capitalistic ideology and workplace methodology of the bourgeoisie that likely make up his audience.[89] For Adorno, the distinction Schiller puts forward:

> Becomes totally ideological and is incorporated into the household stock of the bourgeoisie, ready for citation on the appropriate occasion. For it affirms the established and popular distinction between work and leisure. Something that has its roots in the torments of prosaic and unfree labor and the well-justified aversion to it is declared to be an eternal law of two cleanly separated spheres. Neither is to mingle with the other.[90]

Schiller's statement in *Wallenstein* differentiates art as an element of life that seemingly lacks cogency and has no logical association with the serious conduct of production in organized labor that supplants authentic human life in the modern era.[91] If the two notions are kept in unison, then the only clear result is that the lightheartedness of art and

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[88] Ross Wilson, "Dialectical Aesthetics and the Kantian *Rettung*: On Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*," *New German Critique* 104 (2008): 60.
[89] Adorno, "Is Art Lighthearted?" 247.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 103-04.

leisure will stymie the efficiency of the work life and reduce productive capacities. Even when laborers are already laboring, they must orient themselves according to the unity of production. Art has no place in the events of serious, economically-oriented thought – certainly not on the assembly line and definitely not in the office. As such a vile and unproductive device, it must be controlled. Lightheartedness becomes incorporated and subordinated to the bourgeoisie as its antagonistic complement, according to Adorno.[92]

Arranging seriousness and lightheartedness into systematically differentiated notions leads to a hierarchy between the two instead of equal, dialectical counterparts. The dictum that "life is serious, art is lighthearted," suggests that the lightheartedness in art and leisure projects unproductive playfulness. According to Adorno, this presumption weakens the intellectual content and critical capacities of art.[93] In preference to art and leisure as the negative, unproductive compliment to the seriousness of productive labor, the reasoning that disassociates and gradates these two notions makes use of the lightheartedness of art and incorporates it.[94] Any extended periods of recreation, like cigarette breaks or vacation time, are examples of this. They are just instances of the seriousness of working life subsuming the seemingly inferior aspects of art *qua* leisure. This arrangement represents the organization of leisure time and the descent of lightheartedness into seriousness.

Rendering lightheartedness and seriousness as opposites enervates the critical capacities of the dialectic. These two aspects are intentionally contradictory and, according to Adorno, the significance of the contradictory movement between

[92] Adorno, "Is Art Lighthearted?" 247.
[93] Ibid., 248-49.
[94] Ibid., 247.

lightheartedness and seriousness in art can be clarified through recourse to Ovid.[95] By referring back to classical Rome, Adorno is able to advance his aesthetic theory in which there is a complex, critical relationship between art and society.[96]

Adorno argues that the line from *Wallenstein* is likely modeled on a similar line from Liber II of Ovid's *Tristia*: "Vita verecunda est, Musa jocosa mihi."[97] In translation this expression reads, "My life is modest and sober, my Muse is merry." Adorno speculates that the resemblance between the two statements is in the identification each makes between two aspects of life.[98] For Schiller, this is between "life" and "art," and for Ovid, it is between "life" and "Muse." Muse in this case is referring not to the goddesses of music, literature, and the arts, but to artistic inspiration. The second parallel is how each poet distinguishes these notions; Schiller says life is serious, whereas Ovid claims it is modest and sober, thereby focused and concerned with the serious conduct of life. "Lighthearted" and "merry" are synonymous. If Schiller's statement is indeed modeled on Ovid as Adorno claims, there is a critical misunderstanding of the Roman poet by the German Idealist. Schiller gets a false impression of Ovid. By no means does Ovid seek to isolate seriousness and lightheartedness; quite the contrary. Ovid seeks to employ the dialectic. Seriousness and lightheartedness are not isolated in Ovid. Instead, through the lightheartedness of his works, Ovid is able to expose the "other," serious qualities and conditions of life as the mutual opposite of the merry content.

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[95] Ibid.
[96] Andrew Edgar, "An Introduction to Adorno's Aesthetics," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 30 (1990): 54-55.
[97] Adorno, "Is Art Lighthearted?" 247.
[98] Ibid.

Adorno could hardly imagine a more convivial classical figure than Ovid to stimulate his aesthetic analysis of Schiller's dictum and its ideological impact. Judging the content of his work, Adorno suggests that Ovid is a "charming and artful classical writer"[99] who sets out to teach the public about the art of seduction and love as an intrinsic aspect of life. Adorno is not only familiar with Ovid through his poetic works, but he is also cognizant of the social history and behavior of this particular Roman:

> He, whose life was so lighthearted that the Augustinian establishment could not tolerate it, was winking at his patrons, composing his lightheartedness back into the literary gaiety of the *Ars amandi* and repentantly letting it be seen that he personally was concerned with the serious conduct of life.[100]

For Adorno, the seriousness Ovid displays is not simply confined to his elegies or other works, but it is also expressed by his actions, in his expressing himself, humorously recognizing the harsh realities of authoritarian rule in a lighthearted manner throughout Rome. Ovid *embodies* the dialectic of lightheartedness. Serious art, then, is not exactly what one might expect it to be at first; it is not just identifying the misconduct of regimes or exposing the immoralities of the individuals in charge, but Adorno suggests that it is the *demeanor* with which one goes about exposing these circumstances.[101] For Ovid, this was in a playful form. Instead of reaffirming serious actions or circumstances with an equally serious response, Ovid challenges its autonomy and dominance by disavowing

[99] Ibid.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Ibid., 247-248.

the serious response those actions or circumstances desire and replaces it with its provocative opposite.

Just as Ovid's lighthearted actions are serious revelations about society, by incorporating this same lightheartedness into his art, it becomes, "a critique of brute seriousness that reality imposes upon human beings. Art imagines that by naming this fateful state of affairs it is loosening its hold."[102] Adorno returns to this theme much later on in *Aesthetic Theory* where the artwork, "is not only the echo of suffering, it diminishes it; form, the organon of its seriousness, is at the same time the organon of the neutralization of suffering."[103] This is the dalliance of lightheartedness and seriousness Adorno sees in Ovid; his humorous texts were critiques of the serious life, and those criticisms are its seriousness. "That is what is lighthearted in [art]," Adorno begins, "as a change in the existing mode of consciousness, that is also, to be sure, its seriousness."[104] The lightheartedness of art changes consciousness by commenting on more than the lightheartedness it is; humor is not just humor, but a serious critique of the serious life. By winking at the Augustinian establishment, Ovid not only recognizes the seriousness of authority, but also steals away this seriousness and renders Augustus merely an innocuous kiss, wink, and joke. For now, "humor has turned into polemical parody."[105]

With Ovid, Adorno expressed what he believed dialectical aesthetics should be as well as how it should function as a provocative and critical essence in society. It is the tension between lightheartedness and seriousness that constitutes critical art – as something that can excite and criticize everything within the confines of social reality

[102] Ibid. 248.
[103] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 39.
[104] Adorno, "Is Art Lighthearted?" 248.
[105] Ibid., 251.

while contemporaneously being a part of it. Schiller, on the other hand, wants nothing to do with a synthesis between the two; instead his maxim is concerned with solidifying the two ideas as completely separate. This is the pitfall Adorno finds in Schiller. In Ovid, Adorno finds an example of how lightheartedness and seriousness are critically complementary; the same cannot be said about the popular dictum in *Wallenstein*. Rather, the fragmentation that Schiller asserts is characteristic of modern life and is an axiomatic example of the historical forces that produce the horrific inherent nature of a social structure that seeks to subjugate whatever opposes it.[106] He anticipates the same circumstances art has under the culture industry in which lightheartedness is incorporated into seriousness and rendered as a consequential effect of the serious life.

Under these circumstances, lighthearted art is no longer a possibility. Severing and subordinating the lightheartedness in art, "degenerates [lightheartedness] into cynicism, no matter how much it relies on kindness and understanding."[107] It loses its capacity to expose the neurosis of society and engender any reflection about it. As such, all art is no longer reflective – it is affirmative. Art is now a tool for further solidifying the predominant social situation. After "art has been taken in hand by the culture industry,"[108] the only option Adorno sees possible for lightheartedness to maintain any semblance of its past critical content is to go against itself; art must, "renounce lightheartedness of its own accord."[109]

The reference to Aristophanes is brief in "Is Art Lighthearted?," but the inclusion of the Hellenic comedian suggests how Adorno perceived the works of Aristophanes in

[106] Ibid., 252.
[107] Ibid., 251.
[108] Ibid.
[109] Ibid.

the context of lightheartedness and seriousness as aesthetics that renounce lightheartedness in order to reclaim lightheartedness. For Adorno, the dialectical tension between seriousness and lightheartedness in art is part of a historical dynamic. The contradictory significance these two aspects have for social and political expression is present even in the earliest periods of primordial religious aesthetics, but it secures more thorough integration during the classical period in the early works of ancient Greece.[110] The presence of this dialectical tension distinguishes Greek aesthetics as comparatively different from archaic or theological works, according to Adorno. Whereas Ovid represents the dialectic of lightheartedness in praxis, Adorno refers to Aristophanes as a classical imitation of the desperate struggle for critical art when the dissolution of the dialectic of lightheartedness threatens critical aesthetics.

The comedic dramas of Aristophanes are models for how humor may salvage the dialectic of lightheartedness in order to restore a critical capacity to the work of art so that it may challenge current modes of social and economic predominance. The crude jokes, farcical anti-climaxes, and irreverence towards the gods, "infects the spectator with laughter about the absurdity of laughter and laughter about despair."[111] For Adorno, Aristophanes represents the resistance to dissolution of the dialectic of lightheartedness that Schiller anticipates two millennia later. But why does Adorno choose Aristophanes and not another Hellenic comedian that he is familiar with for his aesthetic critique of society? Why not Menander? Aristophanes' plays are from the tradition of Old Comedy, a tradition that is more overtly political than its successor, New Comedy. The dominant

[110] Theodor W. Adorno, "Theses Upon Art and Religion Today," in *Notes to Literature: Volume Two*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 293.
[111] Adorno, "Is Art Lighthearted?" 253.

style of comedic drama in the fifth century B.C.E. was Old Comedy and this thematic form was weighted towards critique in the form of satire. The most striking feature of Old Comedy is its invective political satire directed against governing politicians like Pericles and Cleon, philosophers like Socrates, or promoters of the serious life like Euripides.[112] Unfortunately, the only surviving comedies that represent Old Comedy are eleven plays by Aristophanes, a significant loss, but by no means detrimental to Adorno's central argument. Underlying the phallic humor and loosely constructed plots in Aristophanes' plays are thematic devices designed to reveal to the audience the abuses of power, corruption, fraud, and chicanery of contemporary politicians, self-important aristocrats, and non-democratic operations of Athens. Greek aristocrats generally perceived this style of comedy as crude and a significant threat to their established autonomy. To prevent any encouragement to change the system of power, the character/situation-centric form of New Comedy rose to prominence among Athenian aristocrats as a measure to preserve the prevailing social arrangement.[113]

For Adorno, New Comedy and Menander are insufficient for identifying the process of recovering lightheartedness in art. Instead of focusing on challenging the audience to be critical of their societies and politics through its lightheartedness, the humor of New Comedy reinforces the seriousness of life. New Comedy chooses to emphasize personalities like the indolent laborer and the diligent businessman, which are just thematic examples for the strictly serious actions, events, and personalities in bourgeois life. For Adorno, the characters and situation-based content of New Comedy appealed to sophisticated aristocratic audiences and recalls the narrative structure of the

[112] Mark Griffith, *Aristophanes' Frogs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 14.
[113] Ibid.

bourgeois novel.[114] For Adorno, Menander's comedies are inadequate for assessing the retrieval of critical content in lighthearted art because his comedies analogously support the norms and formalism of the bourgeois world. Menander and his comedies support the same deleterious effect that Schiller's dictum has for aesthetics in society. By attributing specific qualities to certain characters or situations, Menander formalizes aspects of social life such that businessmen are always industrious and laborers are always indolent, just like Schiller and his statement that renders life as serious and art as lighthearted. Through his comedies, Menander perpetuates the fragmentation of art and social life instead of seeking reconciliation between these aspects.

Unlike in Menander, the moment of lightheartedness or humor is not simply expelled and subjugated in Aristophanes; rather, his comedies, "survive in their self-critique, as humor about humor."[115] The self-criticism that resides in Aristophanes' works allows it to retain a critical aspect as lightheartedness directed towards the serious realization of the enervation of lightheartedness. It is Ovid all over again. Aristophanes denies the satisfaction of affirming the domination of seriousness over lightheartedness. The apparent meaninglessness and vulgar comedy is not a denigration of the quality of the work. Instead, Adorno believes that this aspect of Aristophanes' comedies preserves a critical aesthetic quality after lightheartedness is disenchanted. The artistic reduction to simple and minimal techniques is an intrinsic attempt of lightheartedness to survive its incorporation into seriousness through mocking its own lightheartedness *qua* seriousness. What Aristophanes' comedies symbolize for Adorno's aesthetic theory is how art may

[114] Sarah Miles, "Staging and Constructing the Divine in Menander," in *Menander in Contexts*, ed. Alan H. Sommerstein (London: Routledge, 2014), 82.
[115] Adorno, "Is Art Lighthearted?" 248.

interfere with its subjugation through reflexive criticism of itself when society – classical or modern – becomes unable to criticize itself.[116] The minimalist features of Aristophanes' comedies discount the seriousness that attempts to incorporate it. The phallic humor Aristophanes incorporates into his comedies is not so much the regression of the lightheartedness of art into an infantile state, but rather, it becomes a "humorous judgment on humor."[117]

"Is Art Lighthearted?" is a relatively short essay, and while Adorno does not provide any examples of Aristophanes self-critical humor, reference to a correlative excerpt may clarify how Adorno perceived the critical content of Aristophanes. In one of Aristophanes' most popular comedies, *The Frogs* (*Βάτραχοι*), Aristophanes passes judgment on the affirmative character of art that Adorno argues results from separating lightheartedness from seriousness. This repartee begins the play:

[Xanthias]

Shall I give them any of the usual jokes, master?

You know, the ones that are always good for a laugh?

[Dionysos]

Go ahead. *Any* of them. Except "what a day!"

Don't give them that one. It's gone awfully sour.

[Xanthias]

But something witty like…

[Dionysos]

*Any*thing. Except "my poor back."

[116] Susan Hahn, "Authenticity and Impersonality in Adorno's Aesthetics," *Telos* 117 (1999): 75.
[117] Adorno, "Is Art Lighthearted?" 252.

[Xanthias]

Well, can I tell the really funny one?

[Dionysos]

Yes, do,

go right ahead. Only don't say *this* one. [118]

Aristophanes makes a joke out of how humor is no longer humorous. It is reflexively criticizing the state of comedy when what was previously lighthearted has been internalized by seriousness instead of being a complementary contradiction to it. Xanthias wants to reproduce lightheartedness as if it were organic, authentic, and true. His attempt at humor is not authentically lighthearted, but an economic facsimile of lightheartedness. This situation is similar to when Adorno and Horkheimer explain how modern society can only experience lightheartedness or amusement in the form of facsimile.[119] Just like Xanthias and his attempt to appease Dionysos by recalling various jokes *ad nauseam*, lightheartedness is only experienced in modern society "by repeating [lightheartedness/amusement] in an even more stereotyped form than the advertising slogans."[120] Xanthias' attempt at lightheartedness is synthetic and it does not serve any critical function as social critique nor as pure aesthetic expression. When the dialectic of lightheartedness is dissolved, for Adorno as it is for Dionysos, "what was once humor becomes irretrievably dull; the later variety degenerates into the hearty contentment of

[118] Aristophanes, *The Frogs*, trans. Richmond Lattimore, (New York: The New American Library, 1962), 15. Emphasis in the original.
[119] Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 114.
[120] Ibid., 115.

complicity. In the end it becomes intolerable."[121] Instead of the progressive contradiction between lightheartedness and seriousness as a mode facilitating critical thought and reflection upon the source and meaning of the social and political forces of reality, it merely become a momentary distraction that intentionally dissolves critical introspection and potentially reformatory thought.

In the works of Aristophanes like *The Frogs*, Adorno discerned a method of attenuating a disenchanted aesthetic whereby lightheartedness may remain lighthearted through self-criticism and thereby maintain a semblance of its critical potential. This is what makes Aristophanes funny; his comedies resist the subordination that accompanies the estrangement of lightheartedness from seriousness. Nonetheless, despite Aristophanes' effort, subsequent aesthetics falls victim to the ideology in Schiller's proclamation no matter how hard Cervantes, Rabelais, or Beckett sadistically mock its bourgeois principles.[122] The serio-comical content of aesthetics is lost in the era of enlightenment predominance such that, "What is supposed to be funny about the comedies of Aristophanes – which are as brilliant today as they were then – has become a mystery."[123]

The critical, lighthearted potential of artworks has become unattainable in modernity, a reality that Adorno describes as unavoidable in contemporary culture under capitalism. Instead of authentic art, art is debilitated and rendered as "entertainment," or as Adorno and Horkehimer put it in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, "the prolongation of

[121] Adorno, "Is Art Lighthearted?" 250.
[122] Ibid., 252.
[123] Ibid., 250-51.

work under late capitalism."[124] At this stage, art is stripped of its political properties and it becomes an illusory affirmation of the current system of social and economic predominance: "['art'] is sought by those who want to escape the mechanized labor process so that they can cope with it again."[125]

Adorno believes that it can be no other way: "I have no hobby…I take [everything], without exception, very *seriously*."[126] In his attempt to explain and form an aesthetic critique of society under these conditions, Adorno refers to Ovid and Aristophanes as models of the dialectic of lightheartedness. The dialectic is evident in the works of Ovid, and Adorno used the poet to make a socio-political statement that lightheartedness is an invaluable component to identifying and admonishing the serious aspects of life. The brief reference to Aristophanes indicates how Adorno interpreted the works of the ancient comedian and his dramas as models for how the dialectic of lightheartedness may be salvaged. Each of the two classical thinkers Adorno used to augment his argument in "Is Art Lighthearted?" informs his aesthetic theory, shaping it into a criticism that is concerned not only with the standard aesthetic preoccupations of lightheartedness and seriousness in art, but also how this dialectical quality of artworks critically functions in society as well. Adorno's recourse to classical antiquity suggests that he thought that the actions, events, and thought processes of antiquity are surprisingly perceptive and considerable for analyzing modernity. But as long as classical insight remains relegated to the past, "the more profoundly society fails to deliver the

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[124] Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 109.
[125] Ibid.
[126] Theodor W. Adorno, "Free Time, " in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J. M. Bernstein, trans. Gordon Finlayson and Nicholas Walker (London: Routledge, 2001), 188. Emphasis added.

reconciliation that the bourgeois spirit promised as the enlightenment of myth [and] the more irresistibly humor is pulled down into the netherworld…laughter, once the image of humanness, becomes a regression to inhumanity."[127]

III.ii - On Epic Naiveté

One of the earliest pieces in the *Notes to Literature* collection is "On Epic Naiveté," an essay that was written in 1943 as a complimentary composition for *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Before final preparations, additions, and deletions for the 1944 version of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (published first as *Philosophische Fragmente*) this section of the analysis of epic and myth remained relegated to Adorno's notes to be included later in the first volume of *Notes to Literature*. In this essay, Adorno anticipates the section in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* by investigating the aesthetic and linguistic structures found in epic and the contradictory aspects of using myth in epic discourse.[128] Just as he and Horkheimer did in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno chose to use the *Odyssey* to illustrate the obstructing aspects of myth and language in epic. This analysis of epic contributed to Adorno's later aesthetic theory and political analyses of mass culture as he investigated the content of epic in order to identify the autonomous character of artworks. Through the *Odyssey* Adorno was able to develop a theory in which authentic art is determined by its own internal, dialectical quality that separates itself from the dominant mode of artistic representation so that it may disclose an alternative reality. It appears that very early on in his work Adorno was already forming a

[127] Adorno, "Is Art Lighthearted?" 251.
[128] Jameson, *Late Marxism*, 18-19.

theory of art in which, as Schweppenhäuser suggests, the truth-content of aesthetic works is only plausible in individual works and only identifiable through negation.[129]

He begins with a simile from Book XXIII that compares the happiness of the reunited spouses, Odysseus and Penelope, to sailors who see land after Poseidon has smashed their ships on open water.[130] But the form and content of the *Odyssey* indicates that the work reports on more than just "the beating of the sea on rocky coasts."[131] For Adorno, on the one hand, the mythic return of Odysseus in the *Odyssey* is eternally invariant, or objectively determined, through the fixed form of the *nostos* as a text. The sequence of the narrative does not change, despite the limitless possibility of experiencing it; Odysseus will always be sailing home from Troy, always encounter the Lotus-eaters, Polyphemous, and Circe, always kill the 108 suitors tormenting Ithaca, and will always be reunited with Penelope. On the other hand, the *telos* of the epic is subjectively differentiated because even though the story is determined, it may be interpreted in a variety of ways, at various times, for various purposes.

In *The Return of Ulysses* (2008), Edith Hall explores the enormity of the *Odyssey*'s cultural presences, arguing that the *Odyssey* is interpreted in a variety of ways, from numerous different perspectives and this quality is present in works like *The Columbiad* (1807), *Black Ulysses* (1982), *Patient Penelope* (1862), and *Bijlmer Odyssee* (2004), to name a few examples.[132] The *Odyssey*, therefore, "takes into itself the

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[129] Schweppenhäuser, *Theodor W. Adorno*, 128-29.
[130] Theodor W. Adorno, "On Epic Naiveté," in *Notes to Literature: Volume One*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 24.
[131] Ibid.
[132] Edith Hall, *The Return of Ulysses: A Cultural History of Homer's Odyssey* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008).

impossibility of the identity of the one and the many as an element of its unity."[133] The strict, mythic identity of the *Odyssey* distinguishes the epic as differentiated and non-identical within the stable reproduction of sameness and a repetition often associated with primordial nature. In other words, the epic reveals an emancipatory potential in this dualistic unity; the work of art exists as a novel form, different from the dominant one and it is able to radically influence its audience by suggesting this different order. The integration of myth and epic affords Homer the capacity to "report on something worth reporting on,"[134] precisely because the *Odyssey* is no longer the same as everything else.

However, the two concepts of myth and epic conflict.[135] By turning to the world of myth for its subject matter, the project, form, and content of the *Odyssey* become internally contradictory. Epic, as the rational ordering of myth, is so preoccupied with myth as its subject matter that it resists interchangeability and restores the eternal sameness that it sought to discard. In its desire to be independent and escape the repetitive cycle of nature, epic supplants nature with myth. But through fixating on myth, the mythic world reproduces the same limitations as those imposed by nature. The same sequence occurs in modernity under late capitalism whereby art and its production are no longer unique and free, but become "cultural goods" and thereby determined by the culture of social and economic labor, preventing any distance from or contradiction to the predominant organization of society. The subject that experiences the artwork must orient

[133] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 187.
[134] Adorno, "On Epic Naiveté," 24.
[135] Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 35.

itself accordingly to the unity of the predominant system of power, either nature or mass society. This characterizes all art according to Adorno.[136]

Nonetheless, epic poetry retains an element of interchangeability. Even though any understanding of the *Odyssey* is effectively mediated through the specific, mythical content of the story, it still retains a variable element in the subjective experience of interpretation. This is similar to when Adorno and Horkheimer comment on the homogenizing force of the culture industry in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that "the details become interchangeable."[137] For the time being, the interchangeable quality of epic is not limited geographically, historically or socially, given its solidification as a document. This leads Adorno to conclude that "there is an anachronistic element in all epic poetry."[138]

For the *Odyssey*, the conflict emerges from the desire to resist interchangeability, but retaining interchangeable elements.[139] This contradiction comes to characterize, not just Homer, but epic poetry in general. Adorno suggests that "as long as great epic poetry has existed, this contradiction has informed the narrator's modus operandi; it is the element in all epic poetry commonly referred to as objectivity or material concreteness."[140] This ostensible objective quality of the *Odyssey* is what leads many later scholars, like Friedrich Kittler, to perceive any subsequent content – which is to say all of Western tradition – with some sort of Odyssean aspect.[141] Unlike narrative

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[136] Adorno, "On Epic Naiveté," 25.
[137] Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 98.
[138] Adorno, "On Epic Naiveté," 25.
[139] Ibid.
[140] Ibid.
[141] Friedrich Kittler, "In the Wake of the *Odyssey*," *Cultural Politics* 8 (2012): 413-427.

discourse, which Adorno believes achieves a higher state of consciousness,[142] the objective element of epic always seems to be one of ignorance and a lack of comprehension because of its rigid fixation on myth. This ignorance is epic naiveté.

By appropriating and organizing myth, the *Odyssey*, "destroys the very mythical order on which it is based."[143] Unreflective introspection fails to notice that myth still determines the outcome. The same can be said of modern art, or "entertainment." Even though "entertainment" appropriates and organizes its material from the content of the social world, the artwork can never be anything beyond the conditions of its original source material and thus, unable to critically affect the dominant system. Consequently, epic naiveté is hostile to unfettered consciousness.

By focusing on the mythic foundation of the *Odyssey*, epic naiveté is necessarily a mythological effort, but as an anti-mythological enterprise, epic naiveté has a corresponding, dialectical presence that does not intend to keep general reflection at a distance.[144] Unlike the enlightenment-oriented effort of epic naiveté with its myopic fixation on systematization and myth, the anti-mythological element of epic naiveté intends for the *Odyssey* to fixate on remembering the homecoming of Odysseus and nothing else. While focusing on a single event appears as inhibiting as the fixation on myth, Adorno posits that there is a transcendent and authentic aspect to this remembrance. Adorno writes:

> Hence in restricting itself to what occurred once and only once [the *Odyssey*] retains an aspect that transcends limitation. For what occurred

[142] Adorno, "On Epic Naiveté," 25.
[143] Plass, *Language and History*, 137.
[144] Adorno, "On Epic Naiveté," 25-26.

> once and only once is not merely a defiant residue opposing the encompassing universality of thought; it is also thought's innermost yearning.[145]

Similar to Walter Benjamin's remark that "the presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity,"[146] Adorno insists that by focusing on the original adventure of Odysseus as something that "occurred once and only once,"[147] the *Odyssey* becomes more authentic. Furthermore, by restricting itself to the original source material and identifying the *nostos* of Odysseus as its only content, the *Odyssey* is no longer susceptible to domination in the form of classificatory thought.[148] It is unique and incapable of placement or categorization. While the enlightenment-oriented facet of epic naiveté fetters contemplative thought, this kind of naiveté permits one to tell the original story of the voyage of Odysseus in order to appropriate them for recollection and reflexive critical thought. For Adorno, it is the *Odyssey*'s, "restrictedness in the representation of its one subject [that] is the corrective to the restrictedness that befalls all thought when it forgets its unique subject in its conceptual operations and covers the subject up instead of coming to know it."[149]

The conflict between the contemporaneously interchangeable and non-interchangeable content is not the only contradictory element in the *Odyssey*. Contradiction vibrates throughout the epic, even in its language. Adorno begins his analysis of the linguistic friction in the *Odyssey* as a feature of epic naiveté:

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[145] Ibid.
[146] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 220.
[147] Adorno, "On Epic Naiveté," 26.
[148] Ibid.
[149] Ibid.

> Through epic naiveté, narrative language, whose attitude toward the past always contains an apologetic element, justifying what has occurred as being worthy of attention, acts as its own corrective. The precision of descriptive language seeks to compensate for the falseness of all discourse.[150]

In other words, the linguistic structure of the epic seeks to "correct" its own project of arranging the natural world into a form of organized discourse by accurately giving an account in words of the event (or any object) it attempts to imitate. Again, Adorno refers to Homer to make this notion more tangible. Even though there are numerous examples of extensive descriptive imagery throughout Homer, like the account of Calypso's island or the catalog of ships in Book II of the *Iliad*, Adorno has a specific scene in mind in a rare occasion where he refers to the *Iliad* over the *Odyssey*. In its own language, it is the corrective impulse of epic, "that drives Homer to describe a shield as though it were a landscape and to elaborate a metaphor until it becomes action, until it becomes autonomous and ultimately destroys the fabric of the narrative."[151] While Adorno is working with a literary form of aesthetics, this corrective impulse is not limited to language. The desperate attempts of Praxiteles, Phidias, and the *Contrapposto* style in antiquity, as well as the aesthetic realist and hyperrealist movements in modern art, are examples of the same apologetic element Adorno locates in Homer. To put it simply, language or visual arts attempt to describe or depict something (in the case of the *Iliad* this is Achilles' shield) so accurately and in such profound detail that it reemerges from its conceptual state *back to* something real and natural, or as Plato might say, to the Ideal.

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[150] Ibid.
[151] Ibid.

But just as Brian Swann poetically expresses in "The Shield of Achilles," that Hephaestus' attempt to replicate the natural scene on the shield is an impossible effort,[152] the attempt of language to reconcile word and thing is likewise an unachievable endeavor. For Adorno's study of the *Odyssey*, language is inherently incapable of recovering the natural world once it has been codified into a system of conceptual instrumentation.[153] The attempt to reconcile word and thing through language is impossible because the sole intention of conceptual language is the subordination and manipulation of the objects it designates – "Homeric prudence is no exception to this."[154]

Not only is language unable to recover from its "negative intentionality," it is just structurally incapable of expressing and replicating the object in its pure form.[155] To clarify, Adorno emphasizes a particular grammatical function: the particle. To display the incompatibility of the particle function, Adorno provides an example from the second *nekuia* (descent to the Underworld) in Book XXIV of the *Odyssey*: "These two, / after compacting their plot of a foul death for the suitors, / made their way to the glorious town. In fact Odysseus / came afterwards; Telemachos led the way…"[156] What Adorno draws attention to is the use of "in fact" ["*nämlich*" in the German version] as an explanatory word that desperately attempts to unite all of the material in the scene. Instead of coordinating the unification between syntax and material, the particle denies

[152] Brian Swann, "The Shield of Achilles," *The Yale Review* 93 (2005): 106.
[153] Adorno, "On Epic Naiveté," 27.
[154] Ibid.
[155] Ibid.
[156] Ibid. The original German version of "On Epic Naiveté," uses the Johann Heinrich Voss German translation of the *Odyssey* from 1781. The English translation of the essay uses Richmond Lattimore's English translation of the *Odyssey* from Richmond Lattimore, trans., *The Odyssey of Homer* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965). This substitution does not affect the argument Adorno is making regarding the use of the particle.

the continuity of the moment at the same time it attempts to demonstrate it.[157] The detail of Odysseus and Telemachos heading into town after having made a plot to kill the suitors is distinct from the description of which Ithacan led the way during the journey. "In fact" attempts to continue the flow of the former clause with a seemingly related clause, but the particle "in fact" disfigures the material as well as reflection on the material. The cancellation of continuity nullifies not just the recitation of the scene, but its contents as well.[158]

Within the *Odyssey*, the dialectic of form and content – the conflict between resisting interchangeability and being interchangeable, as well as the contradictory tendency between language and subject matter – manifests its struggle in the experiencing subject. This quality is what makes the *Odyssey* such a crucial object of analysis for Adorno; not only does the *Odyssey* inform Adorno's theory of aesthetic content and linguistic structures in literature and art, but it also augments his understanding of the social and historical origins of dialectical processes. Through Homer, not only is Adorno able to identify the dialectical quality of art, but he is also able to understand that at the earliest period in Western tradition this type of thinking was already emerging and not a novel development of the modern world. For Adorno, the *Odyssey* is not just the legend conjured up by Ionian seafarers and traders, but a work that reflects the earliest origins in the history of reason itself. The history of reason and the individual subject informs much of Adorno's insight into the formation and operations of Western culture and will be explained in further detail in Chapter IV. For now, how it is

[157] Jameson, *Late Marxism*, 18-19.
[158] Adorno, "On Epic Naiveté," 28-29.

that epic and Homer influenced the way Adorno perceived aesthetics is evident in "On Epic Naiveté."

Adorno seemed dissatisfied with all existing art in modernity. Robert Hullot-Kentor has suggested that this is because Adorno strived to find the *one* right work that is *the* artwork.[159] To suggest that Adorno thought the *Odyssey* was *the one right work* could only be speculation, but it is obvious that Homeric epic contributed to and influenced much of the way Adorno perceived aesthetics, language, and the history of reason. It is not just that the *Odyssey* reports on "the beating of the sea on rocky coasts" that intrigued Adorno, but that it embodies this fluctuating movement as the first historical representation of the dialectical entwinement between enlightenment and myth where, "what is solid and unequivocal comes together with what is ambiguous and flowing, only to immediately part from it again."[160]

[159] Robert Hullot-Kentor, "Right Listening and a New Type of Human Being," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 44 (2003): 191.
[160] Adorno, "On Epic Naiveté," 24.

Chapter IV - Homeric Recursion in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

The essay "On Epic Naiveté" was written by Adorno as part of the work in conjunction with Horkheimer during the period they were in exile in California.[161] This collaboration coincides with notes and details from the section that would ultimately be included as a chapter in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*; one not just on the style of epic, but elaborating on their theory of modern culture through epic. The concentration of Adorno's insight on epic throughout "On Epic Naiveté" is also resonant with the intensity of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, since both were written during the same calamitous moment for human civilization. Adorno and Horkheimer interpreted modern mass society in order to explain how and why seemingly rational systems produced irrational cultures. The *émigrés* were compelled to understand, "why critical thought in the broadest sense – as the entire movement of enlightenment – had capitulated to the status quo and on this basis to find a possibility for continuing to think."[162] The second essay in the text, "Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment," relies on the Homeric epic poem *Odyssey* to situate the dialectic of enlightenment in the history of Western culture. Keeping with Adorno's comprehensive theoretical method, the analysis of Odysseus focuses predominantly on the emancipation of the subject in history, but the literary analysis of the *Odyssey* has implications for aesthetics and politics as well. The period Adorno worked on both *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as well as "On Epic Naiveté," suggests that for a substantial length of time, during some of his most prolific collaborations and

[161] Rolf Tiedemann, "Editorial Remarks from the German Version," in Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature: Volume One*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), xiii.
[162] Robert Hullot-Kentor, "Notes on *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: Translating the Odysseus Essay," *New German Critique* 56 (1992): 102.

reflective observations of society, Adorno referred to Greek thought and Homeric epic in order to inform some of his most intuitive and enduring interpretations and analyses.

VI.i - Epic Poetry and the Rational Ordering of Myth

Odysseus is the hero of the *Odyssey* and Adorno and Horkheimer focused their analysis on the actions and choices of the hero. The second chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* interprets Odysseus' voyage back to Ithaca as being allegorically representative of the origin of modern, capitalist culture. Through Odysseus, Adorno and Horkheimer modeled the emergence of rationalism from nature and the subsequent domination of nature that they argued characterizes Western civilization. In an interesting response to Odysseus and the dialectic of enlightenment, Samir Gandesha argues that the tragedy of Oedipus metaphorically represents the immediate stage after Odysseus. "Oedipus is the prototypical *Aufklärer*," Gandesha begins:

> No one can rival him in his courageous attempt to employ his own autonomous reason "without direction from another," and yet self-knowledge paradoxically remains beyond his grasp. Indeed, Oedipus' obsessive drive to bring truth to the light ultimately leads him to put out his own eyes because he is unable to bear the sight of catastrophe that such a drive engenders.[163]

Even though Odysseus initiates the sequence of the dialectic of enlightenment, he is not *a priori* exposed to the totality of its effects. Oedipus, on the other hand, exists *a priori* as a conscious subject that is already aware of his condition, yet he is unable to exist in any

[163] Samir Gandesha, "Enlightenment as Tragedy: Reflections on Adorno's Ethics," *Thesis Eleven* 65 (2001): 110.

other mode of being which leads to his demise.[164] In short, Oedipus is a model for the modern subject *after* Odysseus.

The choice of Oedipus to analyze the dialectic of enlightenment is not entirely surprising. In their discussions on how to develop a "historico-philosophical theory of the individual,"[165] Adorno and Horkheimer originally considered the myth of Oedipus as a figure that could be representative of subjective identity.[166] As Hullot-Kentor has indicated, Adorno and Horkheimer considered basing their discussion of the dialectic of enlightenment on Oedipus rather than Odysseus.[167] Like Odysseus, Oedipus has qualities that enable him to identify as the subject. Specifically, it is his answer to the riddle of the Sphinx – "That being is man"[168] – that embodies the enlightenment schema as a response to a piece of objective meaning, rationalized thought, the fear of natural and mythic powers, and the answer is a hope for salvation.[169] Ultimately, the Frankfurt theorists referred to Odysseus because enlightenment thinking "stretches back to the beginning of recorded history."[170] Homer and the *Odyssey* are "on the border of Western civilization between history and prehistory in a way that Sophocles [is] not."[171]

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[164] Ibid., 114.
[165] James Schmidt, "Language, Mythology, and Enlightenment: Historical Notes on Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*," *Social Research* 65 (1998): 827
[166] Ibid., 827-28.
[167] Robert Hullot-Kentor, "Back to Adorno," *Telos* 81 (1989): 18.
[168] The riddle of Sphinx is usually some version of one ancient riddle: "What is the creature that walks on four legs in the morning, two legs at noon, and three in the evening?" to which Oedipus responds, "*Man* (for as a babe he is four-footed, going on four limbs, as an adult he is two-footed, and as an old man he gets besides a third support in a staff)."
[169] Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 4.
[170] Adorno and Horkheimer, "Odysseus," 110.
[171] Hullot-Kentor, "Back to Adorno," 18.

"The *Odyssey* as a whole bears witness to the dialectic of enlightenment,"[172] and represents an emerging stage of humanity through its epic form. James Porter describes the *Odyssey* as the original source of Mediterranean myth that uses epic poetry to "mirror the projections of modernity."[173] This quality pervades throughout the *Odyssey*:

> The layers of this struggle are visible in the sedimented strata of Homer's texts themselves, both in their philological surfaces as texts, when viewed as rhapsodic stitchings put together by editors, albeit never seamlessly, and as deposits of older and more recent historical layers of consciousness, for instance, in the traces of solar and Underworld mythology they contain, which point to older strata, while facets of the individual heroes such as Odysseus point to more recent accretions.[174]

In its epic form, the mythic world of ancient Greece anticipates the emergence of rational thought as enlightenment, but it also resists assimilation into enlightenment.[175] The *Odyssey* is dialectically both myth and enlightenment in its form and content. Adorno develops this thesis in "On Epic Naiveté," in which the struggle between resisting interchangeability and being interchangeable on the one hand, and the contradictory tendency between language and subject matter on the other, give insight for understanding the history of reason through structure of the *Odyssey* for the Odysseus essay. The epic exhibits the movement of the self-conscious subject as it overcomes nature and reduces it to human logic. In short, the *Odyssey* does not just "bear witness to

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[172] Ibid., 109.
[173] James I. Porter, " Odysseus and the Wandering Jew: The Dialectic of Jewish Enlightenment in Adorno and Horkheimer," *Cultural Critique* 74 (2010), 200-01.
[174] Ibid., 200.
[175] Martin Donougho, "The Cunning of Odysseus: Hegel, Lukács, and Adorno," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 8 (1981): 30.

the dialectic of enlightenment,"[176] but because of its form, it *is* the dialectic of enlightenment.

In its innovative form, the *Odyssey* documents the step out of nature into enlightenment through myth. Both myth and enlightenment are integral to the *Odyssey* because the epic would not be possible without being preceded by myth.[177] Plass describes how the epic is dependent on the mythic base of its content to tell its story, but by reciting that story it submits, organizes, and destroys the very mythical order on which it is based. Without the *Odyssey*, there would be no such thing as myth, yet at the same time, as Plass details, "the epic is proof of the loss of myth."[178]

Adorno and Horkheimer contrast epic with myth in their interpretation of Homer such that the epic may only describe the mythic world by negating it through its form. The epic poem itself does not just report the dialectic, but by the form of its presentation as epic poetry, it takes the mythic world and dissolves its power by reducing it to allegory. Epic cancels the power of myth at the moment of its recitation as an organized narrative.[179] Any *reading* of the *Odyssey* becomes an historical remembrance of myth as well as the emergence of subjectivity through myth – it conveys nostalgia through retelling that particular moment.

> To sing of Achilles' rage and the wanderings of Odysseus is already the nostalgic stylization of what may no longer be sung. And the hero of the adventure proves to be the prototype of the bourgeois individual, whose

[176] Adorno and Horkheimer, "Odysseus," 109.
[177] Plass, *Language and History*, 137.
[178] Ibid.
[179] Michael Clark, "Adorno, Derrida, and the *Odyssey*: A Critique of Center and Periphery," *boundary 2* 16 (1989): 115.

> concept originates in that coherent self-assertion the primordial model of which is rendered by the beleaguered hero.[180]

Plass points out in this passage how *already* and *no longer* underscore that the *Odyssey* represents the advent of subjectivity as a structure of social and political transition.[181] The experience of emergent subjectivity may *no longer* be a possibility in modernity *ex post facto*, but it must have been possible and occurred at some time *before* because historical transition suggests movement through time. The temporal structure of the *Odyssey* led Adorno and Horkheimer to interpret the epic as a work that conveys nostalgia both literally (for the return of Odysseus) and figuratively (allegory of the rise of the individual subject). The heroic past of Odysseus is long gone as well as what his voyage symbolizes. "Constitutive of the possibility of bourgeois subjectivity is the impossibility of regaining that which preceded it."[182] It is impossible to go back to that moment in history, so any recitation of the *Odyssey* is a remembrance of that event in the course of human civilization. How Adorno and Horkheimer analyze the form and content of the *Odyssey* reminds the audience that individuality is not part of a purely historical timeline, but is instead part of an historical sequence characterized by the entwinement of enlightenment and myth, history and prehistory.

The decision to base this theory of subjectivity and to explain the dialectic of enlightenment with classical ideas only further suggests how influential even the earliest forms of Hellenic thought were for Adorno during his collaboration with Horkheimer.

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[180] Adorno and Horkheimer, "Odysseus," 109.
[181] Plass, *Language and History*, 136-137.
[182] Ibid.

This is evident in the emphasis Adorno and Horkheimer place on the unique ability of the *Odyssey* to report on the dialectic of enlightenment:

> No work…gives more eloquent testimony to the entwinement of enlightenment and myth than the *Odyssey*, the fundamental text of European civilization. In Homer, epic and myth, form and subject matter do not so much diverge from each other as rather, confront and define one another.[183]

Adorno and Horkheimer used epic and antiquity to examine the historical origins of science, subjectivity, and the domination of nature in order to locate the genesis of the politically repressive rationality in modernity. Through the narrative structure centered on a single hero, the contradictory duplicity of prehistory and history in the *Odyssey* informed Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis of modern culture and society.[184] By focusing on Homer and the structure of epic, Adorno and Horkheimer were able to reveal the process of historical subjectivity as the emergence of the rational, enlightened subject as already present in early antiquity. Through the hero of the *Odyssey*, Adorno and Horkheimer were able to describe how, "the self does not constitute the rigid antithesis to adventure; rather the self develops its rigidness in the first place through this antithesis: its unity is exclusively in the multiplicity of what this unity denies."[185] How and why Adorno and Horkheimer use Odysseus in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is explained in more detail below.

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[183] Adorno and Horkheimer, "Odysseus," 111.
[184] Massimo Fusillo, "Epic, Novel," in *The Novel: Volume 2 - Forms and Themes*, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 38.
[185] Adorno and Horkheimer, "Odysseus," 113.

IV.ii - Odysseus

As Adorno and Horkheimer describe it, the *Odyssey* is the preeminent European text and as such many Western thinkers have turned to its titular character, Odysseus, in order to examine or model different theories about society. One such thinker is Ernst Bloch whose analysis of Odysseus led him to conclude that he is one of a few utopian figures in Western literary history, alongside Don Juan and Faust.[186] Likewise, Adorno and Horkheimer pick up from their analysis of epic and use Odysseus to personify the movement of reason and the emergence of self-consciousness. James Schmidt explains how "the story of Odysseus traces, on the level of the individual, the same trajectory that Horkheimer and Adorno found in Western civilization,"[187] that the disenchantment of myth reanimates myth in its negation. This recalls why Adorno believed lighthearted art is no longer lighthearted; the escape from mythic violence does not remove the possibility of violence, it merely transforms it. While the *Odyssey* is an example of the dialectic of enlightenment, Odysseus – as the principle character in the *Odyssey* – is the dialectical projection of the movement.[188] According to David Held, both the narrative structure of the epic and the hero of the *Odyssey* were perfect for Adorno and Horkheimer to allegorize their theory of the dialectic of enlightenment and historically attach it to contemporary Western society because the *nostos* of Odysseus is at the

[186] Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. Paul Knight, Neville Plaice, and Stephen Plaice (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1986).
[187] Schmidt, "Language, Mythology," 833.
[188] Porter, "Odysseus and the Wandering Jew," 202.

earliest turning point in civilization – the movement from prehistory to history – and is an example of how rationality can be used to overcome powerful obstacles. [189]

The project of "Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment" is to use the *Odyssey* as the earliest document to historically recount the transition of humanity *qua* nature and the emergence of consciousness from nature. Some scholars argue that some of Homer's characters were based on actual historical figures. G. S. Kirk makes this argument in *The Nature of Greek Myths* (1974) where he writes that Odysseus' actions are very specific and realistic, and likely allusions to a provincial chieftain from northwestern Greece.[190] If this is the case than Homer's decision to use this figure in his narrative is indeed an attempt to stylize the past in a form where it he may be best remembered. And to name him "Odysseus" imputes some intent to Homer on what that figure is recalling and his role in the epic. "To odysseus" (*ὀδύσσομαι/odyssomai* in Greek) implies the notions of "to be wroth against," "hate," and it has linguistic similarities with other words denoting "methodic," "journey," and "lament."[191] In his interpretation of the name "Odysseus," G. E. Dimock posits that Homer had difficulties defining who Odysseus would be because of the flexibility of this name.[192] This differs from how Adorno and Horkheimer interpreted the name and the character. The name "Odysseus" is part of the poetic purpose of the *Odyssey* to form the central figure into an intentional, formulaic signifier for what Odysseus allegorically represents, which is the violent process of acquiring self-consciousness from the state of nature. As the epitome of cunning rationality, Odysseus is

[189] David Held, *Introduction to Critical Theory: Horkheimer to Habermas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 149.
[190] G. S. Kirk, *The Nature of Greek Myths* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 1975), 169.
[191] G. E. Dimock Jr., "The Name of Odysseus," *The Hudson Review* 9 (1956): 52.
[192] Ibid.

a perfect model for an allegory of the enlightened subject as it progresses towards autonomy from nature.

The rationality that Odysseus displays leads many scholars to interpret Odysseus' actions as reflexively deliberative. One such scholar is Don Herzog who suggests that Odysseus is like an economist that is looking to maximize his utility by any means necessary.[193] Similarly to Adorno and Horkheimer, James Redfield construes Odysseus as *homo oeconomicus* and the *Odyssey* as the document that recounts calculative economic thought in ancient Greece.

> The economic ethic [in Odysseus] is…not an ethic of ultimate commitments, but of managerial rationality…where the trade-offs between various options are rather coolly assessed.[194]

Redfield, Herzog, and the Frankfurt theorists have similar views on how Odysseus represents an economic subject, but for the Frankfurt theorists Odysseus is the incarnation of the Enlightenment itself. This allows the authors to recall their theory of the dialectic of enlightenment, with specific attention to how the self-conscious subject emerges from that process.[195] Porter discusses how the movement of enlightenment and myth encompasses the role of the individual: "Odysseus is not the agent so much as the plaything of this dialectic; his cunning is in ways like the cunning of reason."[196] This is the process between epic and myth that makes the *Odyssey* so historically unique. The content of the epic does not contradict its form; rather, both the form and content

[193] Don Herzog, *Cunning* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 35.
[194] James M. Redfield, "The Economic Man," in *Approaches to Homer*, eds. Carl A. Rubino and Cynthia W. Shelmerdine (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1983), 224-26.
[195] Schmidt, "Language, Mythology," 831-32.
[196] Porter, "Odysseus and the Wandering Jew," 202.

establish the identity of each other. Adorno and Horkheimer write how "the self does not constitute the rigid antithesis to adventure; rather the self develops in its rigidness in the first place through this antithesis: its unity is exclusively in the multiplicity of what this unity denies."[197]

Through Odysseus' adventures, Adorno and Horkheimer recount the flight of the individual from the mythic world that it struggles to remain distinct from. Each episode of the *Odyssey* recalls a motif in the human endeavor to survive and press on.[198] Odysseus must always resist and hold out against the forces of nature that threaten to dissolve the identity he recently took from nature. Throughout *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Odysseus is the dialectical model for the modern subject and is the Homeric projection of the realization of rationality in its most supreme form.[199]

Moreover, the rationality of Odysseus takes on the schema of exchange.[200] In this mode of exchange, something is given in order to receive something in return. What Odysseus exchanges is his self, which constitutes a means of estrangement from nature through abandonment to nature.

> Like the heroes of all true novels after him, Odysseus loses himself in order to find himself; the estrangement from nature that he undertakes is completed in his self-abandonment to that nature on which he measures himself in every adventure.[201]

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[197] Adorno and Horkheimer, "Odysseus," 112-13.
[198] Ibid., 110.
[199] Clark, "Adorno, Derrida, and the *Odyssey*," 112-13.
[200] Held, *Introduction to Critical Theory*, 402-03.
[201] Adorno and Horkheimer, "Odysseus," 113-14.

This is crucial to Adorno and Horkheimer's central thesis that the *Odyssey* is representative of the emancipation of the subject and the rationality that anticipates the dialectic of enlightenment. It also suggests that the figure of the self – constituted by this repression – has its origin in early Greek antiquity. The dialectic of enlightenment has illustrations in other, more recent sources like *Robinson Crusoe* (1719),[202] but in order to suggest that the entwinement of myth and the Enlightenment originated with estrangement from nature at the inception of rational thought, Adorno and Horkheimer referred to the earliest instances of Greek thought in Homer.[203]

The Lotus-eaters, Circe, Polyphemos, and the Sirens are all included in the excursus, but the fundamental motif of self-preservation through self-sacrifice is not limited to these episodes. Rather it is also applicable to almost every portion of Odysseus' journey in the *Odyssey*. As Porter points out, Adorno and Horkheimer's characterization of Odysseus is present throughout the entire epic.[204] To illustrate this, Porter uses an example from Book V in which Odysseus is drowning as he attempts to escape from Calypso's island. The ancient sea goddess, Ino, approaches Odysseus and tells him to discard the cloak Calypso gave him as well as the fragments of his raft he is clinging on. Ino further instructs Odysseus to entrust himself to the sea. By shedding his cloak, his raft, and his fear of death, Odysseus effectively abandons himself to nature and in doing so he eventually floats safely to the island of Scheria to continue existing.

[202] Ibid., 125-26.
[203] Hullot-Kentor, "Back to Adorno," 18.
[204] Porter, "Odysseus and the Wandering Jew," 203.

Odysseus is only able to free himself from the control of nature through the practice of self-negation or in other words, the sacrifice of himself.[205]

Odysseus' act of self-negation to acquire his subjectivity is his cunning. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, "the instrument by which the self survives adventure, casts itself away in order to preserve itself, is cunning."[206] In each episode of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus displays his cunning in order to survive, so it is no wonder that scholars tend to describe the epic seems as a celebration of cunning.[207] In both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, his scheming, deceiving, and lying are all rational, calculative acts as means to help him survive and persevere in the existing system of power in the form of the forces of nature. Odysseus' realization of this power in the *Odyssey* is the earliest and principal example of self-constitution in the Western tradition.[208] For Adorno and Horkheimer, and still into the twenty-first century, Homer is the earliest extant figure of European civilization, with the endlessly resourceful, rationally manipulative cunning of Odysseus as his central message.[209]

Through his cunning, deception, and trickery, Odysseus never needs to directly confront any mythic forces. David Held posits that this is because Odysseus' tact has its basis in exchange.[210] Odysseus recognizes the autonomy of nature and, like a sacrifice, gives himself up to the will of the gods. At the same time, the sacrificial ritual affords Odysseus the ability to establish a rudimentary economy in which the principle of equivalence in exchange allows him to impart a requisite reciprocal favor. For Adorno

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[205] Ibid. 202-03.
[206] Adorno and Horkheimer, "Odysseus," 114.
[207] Herzog, *Cunning*, 17.
[208] Adorno and Horkheimer, "Odysseus," 109-10.
[209] Herzog, *Cunning*, 15.
[210] Held, *Introduction to Critical Theory*, 402-03.

and Horkheimer, the rationalization of sacrificial rituals in the form of an economy is a system for controlling the gods by making their actions wholly dependent on the sacrifice itself, thereby overthrowing the gods "precisely by the system that honors them."[211] Each mythic attempt to overcome Odysseus – Circe's magic, Polyphemos' strength, the Lotus' intoxication, the Sirens' song – is countered by an act of self-sacrifice in the form of denial that allows Odysseus to deceive his enemies and subordinate them to his own subjective purpose.

Sacrificing the self seems irrational because the act immediately negates the subject, but by calculating the extended exchange of the sacrifice – in which Odysseus is to receive something in return for his tribute – he learns that he may recover his forfeited life as the party that is due some recompense. The self-sacrifice for selfhood represents the deliberative spirit of Odysseus throughout his voyage as he goes about outwitting his enemies. It also displays his cunning triumph over nature. Odysseus gets something from nothing, enlightenment at the cost of his unenlightened self.[212] Through his adventures and cunning he uses to escape danger and survive, Odysseus represents the course of enlightenment acting against the violent forces of nature at the cost of violence in the form of self-sacrifice. In his rational calculation and deception of the gods, Odysseus demonstrates the most heightened form of cunning.

The movement of Odysseus' cunning is perhaps best represented by his encounter with Polyphemos. Adorno and Horkheimer used this episode of the epic to illustrate the movement of Odysseus' sacrifice in the form of his identity and name. The encounter with the mythical Cyclops challenges Odysseus to the very limits of his subjectivity. In

[211] Adorno and Horkheimer, "Odysseus," 115.
[212] Held, *Introduction to Critical Theory*, 405-06.

order to protect his life and the lives of his men, Odysseus tells the Cyclops that his name is *Outis*, a homonym transforming "Odysseus" into "Nobody."[213] Odysseus effaces his identity by renaming himself "Nobody." "In myth," Held explains, "the word must have direct power over fact, expression and intention penetrate one another,"[214] but Odysseus challenges this problematic of nature to the breaking point. "Odysseus," should correspondingly represent the physical object that is the hero, but Odysseus' self-effacement by renaming himself "Nobody" de-centers Odysseus as an identifiable subject.[215] In doing so, Odysseus cunningly removes himself from the conditions of natural power. In order to survive, Odysseus must exist outside of his own self.[216]

The conscious manipulation of his name amounts to the rational instrumentalization of language. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, Odysseus intentionally inserts artificial content into language thereby rendering it susceptible to influence or control.[217] It is because of these actions that the authors believe Odysseus is an appropriate model for the prototypical enlightenment subject.

In *The Order of Things* (1966), Foucault comes to a similar conclusion when he analyzes the historical subject. Foucault focuses on the major change in consciousness for modern humanity that seemingly renders mankind an emergent subject like Odysseus and subsequently the measure of all things. Foucault describes rational thought as "general grammar and economics,"[218] but also discourse and communication, and explains how

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[213] Adorno and Horkheimer, "Odysseus," 130.
[214] Held, *Introduction to Critical Theory*, 406.
[215] Clark, "Adorno, Derrida, and the *Odyssey*," 122-23.
[216] Ibid., 123.
[217] Adorno and Horkheimer, "Odysseus," 130-31.
[218] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 308.

these are tools that humanity has developed and uses to overcome its natural inclinations. Just as Odysseus manipulates word and thing in order to overcome nature, Foucault describes how rational thought provides the subject with more agency to comprehend and control external reality: "The modem themes of an individual who lives, speaks, and works in accordance with the laws of an economics, a philology, and a biology, but who also, by a sort of internal torsion and over-lapping, has acquired the right, through the interplay of those very laws, to know them and to subject them to total clarification."[219] For Foucault, humanity is no longer required to exist among other things in the natural relation. The subject becomes more than just an object among other objects, but rather it emerges as a new kind of object – a *subject* among objects – because of its acquired self-consciousness. This individuality affords the subject the capacity to understand itself as different than other the other objects. But it is not only itself that it may now understand, but also the other objects of the world through differentiation. As a result, humanity becomes the subject and object of all rational contemplation.[220]

The similarities are abundant between Adorno and Horkheimer with their analysis of Odysseus and Foucault's analysis of the historical subject. Specifically, in *The Order of Things*, Foucault is describing this situation as the emergence of modern humanity out of the "Classical Age," whereas Adorno and Horkheimer found that this emergent subjectivity was already present in the earliest stage of Western culture. Foucault admits in an interview with Gérard Raulet that he "would have avoided many of the detours"[221]

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[219] Ibid., 309.
[220] Ibid., 307-317.
[221] Gérard Raulet, "Structuralism and Post-structuralism: An Interview with Michel Foucault," *Telos* 20 (1983): 199-201.

in his writings from an earlier reading of Critical Theory and the Frankfurt School.[222] This could have been one of them.

Nonetheless, Adorno and Horkheimer also explain ancillary qualities of the subject through Odysseus. In addition to achieving a state of self-consciousness, the appropriation of subjectivity is the mastery of nature. In this sense, what grounds Odysseus' selfhood is the domination of his self through negation. Although this affirms the subject, it also leads to the destruction of the subject; that which is dominated and suppressed for the sake of self-preservation – for an identity – is none other than the life it seeks to protect.[223]

For all of his rationality, Odysseus is unable to secure his superiority over nature.[224] The *ratio*, or reason, that initially wins Odysseus his selfhood also leads to his downfall. Odysseus realizes that by being "Nobody" he is alienating himself from the rest of his world. In fear, Odysseus attempts to mitigate the harm by consciously choosing to return to the natural condition. The emphasis is between being "Odysseus," and having an identity, or remaining "Nobody," a nonentity. To Adorno and Horkheimer:

> It is as if he who has always just escaped were still so under the power of the primeval world that, having once been named "Nobody," [Odysseus] fears that he will once again become "Nobody" if he does not re-establish his own identity by means of the magic word, which has only just been separated off from rational identity…Odysseus is objectively determined

[222] Ibid., 199-201.
[223] Jeffrey Barnouw, *Odysseus, Hero of Practical Intelligence: Deliberation and Signs in Homer's* Odyssey (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2004), 212.
[224] Adorno and Horkheimer, "Odysseus," 131-32.

> by the anxiety that, if he does not ceaselessly affirm the fragile superiority of word against force, this force will dissolve his superiority.[225]

Odysseus ends up re-enchanting the very forces of nature he has just disenchanted. Odysseus must reclaim his identity as "Odysseus," or else he will remain the void denoted by "Nobody."[226] Polyphemos will not remember that the man that cunningly outwitted him was "Odysseus," the great king of Ithaca, so who will receive all his recognition and affirmation? "Nobody" will. So Odysseus reinvests his name with its content, doing violence to his identity as *Outis* ("Nobody") to reunite name and being – word and thing – as "Odysseus" once again.

This is the cycle of the dialectic of enlightenment. Through Odysseus' encounter with Polyphemos, Adorno and Horkheimer retraced the first instances of this form of reason as a means to explain how "myths entail enlightenment [and] with every step enlightenment entangles itself more deeply in mythology."[227] This is the central theme of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and it is included in every stage of humanity from antiquity to modernity. When Adorno and Horkheimer describe the culture industry in the twentieth century later in the text, the Odyssean problematic is revisited:

> The demythologisation of language, as an element of the total process of enlightenment, reverts magic. In magic word and content were at once different from one another and indissolubly linked. Concepts like melancholy, history, indeed life, were apprehended in the word which both set them apart and preserved them. Its particular form constituted and

[225] Ibid., 131.
[226] Porter, "Odysseus and the Wandering Jew," 204-05.
[227] Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 8.

> reflected them at the same time. The trenchant distinction which declares the word itself fortuitous and its allocation to its object arbitrary does away with the superstitious commingling of word and thing. Anything in a given sequence of letters which goes beyond the correlation to the event designated is banished as unclear and as verbal metaphysics. As a result, the word, which henceforth is allowed only to designate something and not to mean it, becomes so fixated on the object that it hardens to a formula.[228]

The first excursus, "Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment," structures the rest of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* by situating the notion of the dialectic of enlightenment in history and is therefore one of the most critically important essays of the book. Adorno and Horkheimer used the *Odyssey* to display the intertwining of myth and enlightenment through its form as epic, and they chose the central figure of the epic, Odysseus, to trace the trajectory of the Western civilization on the level of the individual.[229] In Homer, myth and enlightenment converge in Odysseus and this analysis situates the dialectic in history, prefiguring the rest of the text in its entirety.

The analysis of Homer and Odysseus is a joint effort, but Horkheimer's posthumous papers and subsequent works have no material that relates back to this chapter. Adorno's notes, on the other hand, contain a typescript with his handwritten annotations for corrections.[230] This does not necessarily suggest that Adorno was the sole author of the Odysseus essay, but it does indicate that Adorno thought that reviewing and

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[228] Ibid., 133.
[229] Schmidt, "Language, Mythology," 833.
[230] Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 221.

explaining the phenomena through the classical sources, specifically the Homeric world, was indispensable to the argument of the book in its entirety. The piece was collaborative, but the emphasis Adorno put on using ancient thought, focusing on either Oedipus or Odysseus, demonstrates how he perceived a modern significance in reinterpreting ancient thought. Adorno's insight into Homer repurposes and reinterprets a classic text so that he may challenge the conventional opinions over the purpose of the narrative and reestablish its critical potential in order to reveal the emancipation of the instrumental spirit and the origins of modern irrational, political ideologies.

Adorno and Horkheimer wanted *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to be a work that exposed the movement of enlightenment as an effect that applies to all societies at all times.[231] By doing so through the *Odyssey*, Adorno and Horkheimer inquired into the psychological and cultural origins of Western tradition that led to the modern subject. In the *Odyssey*, the authors perceived the most rigorous and complete examples of the tendency toward self-destruction in enlightenment reason and described how that tendency was inherent throughout rational thought from the beginning of Western society in Homer. With this background of the prehistory of subjectivity, Adorno and Horkheimer explained why and how the violence of the modern era is not an anomaly of modern history, but is rooted in the fundamental principles and characteristics of Western civilization. Ultimately, the Frankfurt thinkers politicized the *Odyssey* and turned it into a piece of modern cultural critique in an era that believes it has nothing to learn from the past.[232]

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[231] Schmidt, "Language, Mythology," 812.
[232] Porter, "Odysseus and the Wandering Jew," 207.

Chapter V – Conclusion

What is there left to learn from and about Adorno? After all, Adorno's vast theoretical enterprise already warrants plenty secondary literature that tries to make sense of his philosophy. For the most part though, much of this secondary literature fixates on the subject of Adorno's critiques and not on the equally important process, demeanor, and experience of his writing. The previous chapters analyzed Adorno's deeply insightful writing process through the particularly recurrent appearance of classical contributions in his theories. In each example there is an appeal to some of the earliest works of in the Western intellectual tradition as a means of historically investigating the genesis of the irrational and often dominating principles of contemporary rationality.

One of the most pressing irrational and dominating principles in contemporary society is the categorization and standardization of knowledge and thought to affirm existing systems of power. The organization and formalization of ideas in academic journals, governmental institutes, or any group that has the authority to determine if something is "valid" or "invalid," leads to the control of the content the public is able to experience. For Adorno, thought is unable to progress under the limitations prescribed by modern rationality. There is no such limitation on thinking that is proscribed by rationally formulaic concepts like "aesthetics" or "philosophy," according to Adorno.[233] Rather, just like the classical thinkers that preceded him, Adorno approached thinking in an unorthodox way by fusing the literary with the social and the philosophical with the political. This style of thinking and writing makes Adorno particularly difficult to study, but this comprehensive style was essential to his theoretical enterprise of advocating for

[233] Plass, *Language and History*, 23.

self-critical reflection. As such, this study has attempted to examine exactly how classical thought contributed to Adorno's theories, particularly in aesthetics and philosophy, but also the process and purpose of his theories. The influence of the classical tradition on Adorno was not limited to aesthetic or philosophical considerations, but rather, through his insights into the experience and purpose of ancient writings and figures, Adorno invested his classically-inspired aesthetic and philosophical theories with political relevance for modern society.

Like many of his intellectual predecessors, Adorno was not merely describing modern society; he was investigating the social and economic origins that historically produced the culture of the twentieth century. Just as Locke and Marx, as well as many others, concluded that capitalistic material conditions determined social reality, Adorno was also interested in capitalism. But whereas Locke could only examine the seventeenth century, early form of capitalism and Marx could only examine the nineteenth century, maturing style of capitalism, Adorno observed the historical form of capitalism available to him in his own modern time – late capitalism. Adorno argued that late capitalism removes the politically and intellectually critical elements of works of art and other objects, rejecting everything as worthless and unproductive that does not bear its stamp in an effort to remove any ideas and content that may pose a challenge to its authority.[234] Adorno referred to the Platonic perspective on art as an example to show how this rationality was already present in early Western history:

> Plato banished poetry with the same severity with which positivism dismissed the doctrine of Forms. Homer, Plato argued, had procured

[234] Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 101.

> neither public nor private reforms through his much-vaunted art, had neither won a war nor made an invention. We did not know, he said, of any numerous followers who had honored or loved him. Art had to demonstrate its usefulness […] Even in its resigned detachment from existence, as art, it remains dishonorable; those who practice it become vagrants, latter-day nomads, who find no domicile among the settled.[235]

Just as the *Odyssey* allegorically represents how principles of modernity like economically-oriented rationality were present way back in ancient history, Adorno and Horkheimer recalled that very same theme only with another classical example. The notion Adorno and Horkheimer attempted to convey here was that every consumable cultural good and service in modern society must be useful and productive. This standard for objects – that they must have a preapproved, socially affirmative use-value – limits the diversity of human experience rather than encouraging, diversifying, and enriching it.

The homogenization of objects under late capitalism is not only limited to physical products, like works of art, televisions, clothes, or couches, but it also subordinates, organizes, and undermines ideas, thoughts, and knowledge. This arrangement is a violent limitation on critical thought, even thinking in general, such that any ideas or potentially reformatory interpretations are labeled as inaccurate and inadequate. This decision is largely left up to so-called "experts" whose own intellectual products are considered valid precisely because they do not conflict with the status quo: "The fact that in every career, and especially in the liberal professions, specialist

[235] Ibid., 13.

knowledge as a rule goes hand in hand with a prescribed set of attitudes easily gives the misleading impression that expert knowledge is all that counts."[236]

Material reality and the immaterial mind are precoordinated and predetermined in order to prevent any realization or recognition of the inhuman and irrational qualities in modern society, effectively mitigating any change to the current system of power. In order to salvage and reinstate self-critical thought, Adorno suggested that thought must diverge from the normative order and consider that there is a possibility that all is not as it seems. As Adorno said in *Minima Moralia* (1951), such self-reflection is "the last hope for thought" because it is "not yet encompassed by the general pattern."[237]

Adorno particularly emphasized this contradiction in contemporary knowledge as it pertained to classical thought. By referring to the classical past, Adorno was reappropriating and repurposing materials in order to inform "the development of a critique of modernity from *outside* modernity."[238] Adorno's frequent use of materials from the ancient Greeks and Romans in his critical social theories indicates that he thought that the classical tradition "could serve as a critique of reality or a protest against the given in lieu of an active critique by real forces of opposition."[239] Reinterpretation has the potential to reveal the contradictions in modern rationality, and in the essay "Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment," Adorno and Horkheimer explained how the debilitating rationality in modernity – the dialectic of enlightenment – was already present in the *Odyssey*:

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[236] Ibid., 120.
[237] Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections From Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2007), 67-68.
[238] Gross, "Rescuing the Past," 31.
[239] Ibid., 26.

> In that this dual character of enlightenment is manifest as a fundamental motif in history, the concept of enlightenment – the concept of progressive thought – stretches back to the beginning of recorded history. Whereas Nietzsche's relation to enlightenment, and thus to Homer, remained ambivalent; whereas he recognized in enlightenment just as much the universal movement of the sovereign spirit – of which he considered himself the consummation – as a "nihilistic" power antagonistic to life, his pre-fascist epigones retained only the second aspect and perverted it into ideology. This ideology becomes blind praise of a blind life, subscribed to by the same praxis that suppresses everything that lives. This becomes clear in the attitude of fascist intellectuals to Homer. They sense something democratic in Homer's presentation of feudal relations and stamp it the work of seafarers and traders; they spurn the Ionian epic as an all-too rational account, as common communication.[240]

Only interpretations of Homer and other classical works or figures that have been approved by the appropriate experts – the present-day archaists of the preapproved academic guilds – are valid and everything else is rejected as incorrect or useless.[241] Radical reinterpretations of classical works, or any pre-capitalist work in general, is denounced and marginalized – as Nietzsche and his *Zukunftsphilologie* ("philology of the future") learned first hand.[242]

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[240] Adorno and Horkheimer, "Odysseus," 110.
[241] Adorno, "The Essay as Form," 3. Adorno and Horkheimer express a similar idea in Adorno and Horkheimer, "Odysseus," 110-11.
[242] Marchand, *Down From Olympus*, 124-133.

Thus, not only did Adorno use the classical tradition to develop his thoughts on aesthetics and social history, but as the previous chapters have emphasized, it was also intertwined into his writings as a political rejection of contemporary limitations on modern knowledge and critical thought. Adorno's reinterpretation of ancient works was an affront to the dominating tendencies of contemporary discursive organization, one that sought to dismiss standardized conceptions of ideas and speculate beyond the approved parameters.

In modernity, the *Odyssey* is not capable of revealing any insight into the human psyche because it is simply the work of ancient Ionian seafarers and traders. Likewise, Aristophanes cannot expose the domination of art because his writings are simply comedies, or at most his works are some historically-limited political satire and nothing more. In *Minima Moralia*, though, Adorno posits how "knowledge comes to us through a network of prejudices, intuitions and opinions, innervations, self-corrections, presuppositions and exaggerations, in short through the dense, firmly-founded but by no means uniformly transparent *medium of experience*."[243] Through the process of incorporating classical thought and his reinterpretations of its contents into his essays, Adorno was politicizing his writing, transforming it into the experience of protesting the organization of thinking that characterizes contemporary society.

This discursive method of political protest seems to anticipate contemporary post-structural theory, but instead of speculating about the purpose or potential of language and writing, Adorno deliberately suffused political gestures into his essays, thereby transcending the pitfall of cyclical and uncritical thought while also resisting the

[243] Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 80. Emphasis added.

domination of knowledge through reinterpretation. This act of reinterpretation, emphasized throughout this study as the radical repurposing and recursions to classical thought, was a form of political provocation. In modern mass society, the consumers of standardized products are coordinated and pacified, while the benefactors of the status quo take every measure to ensure its sustainability.[244] The suppliers of cultural goods predetermine what is available for consumer, thereby controlling what is available to them in the capitalistic system of economic domination. As it pertains to "knowledge," any reinterpretations of works that already support the current system of power will conflict if they seek to challenge the prevailing structure. The ideas resulting from these "other" interpretations are enervated through quarantine and they are effectively marginalized as inadequate. Using diction that recalls the persecution of the Jews during World War II, Adorno described how reinterpretation is inherently a political act against formalized knowledge in "The Essay as Form," when he stated how:

> The person who interprets instead of accepting what is given and classifying it is marked with a yellow star of one who squanders his intelligence in impotent speculation, reading things in where there is nothing to interpret. A man with his feet on the ground or his head in the clouds – those are the alternatives. But letting oneself be terrorized by the prohibition against saying more than was meant right then and there means complying with the false conceptions that people and things harbor concerning themselves.[245]

[244] Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 106-07.
[245] Adorno, "The Essay as Form," 4.

The moments of opposition, even in abstract thinking, are not as minute and transient as they may appear. Plass contends that Adorno's vocabulary suggests that interpretative writing is not just a form of disseminating ideas and developing theory; rather, it has attained political relevance in its opposition to normative thought.[246] As there must always be, according to Adorno, this opposition does not exist in stasis, but there is tension even in this form of political resistance. The downside of this resistance is that it must also rely on the normative structure, or in other words, reinterpretative practice is contingent on expressing ideas with standardized concepts. But as Plass indicates, the positive value in reinterpretation is that it may still challenge the system by using those very same concepts against the existing system, despite having to use formal concepts and ideas.[247] Like Odysseus and his cunning manipulation of word and thing, Adorno sought to use the same fixed concepts in modernity, not to present something that merely affirmed the existing systems of power, but sought to challenge them.

> In an intellectual hierarchy which constantly makes everyone answerable, unananswerability alone can call the hierarchy directly by its name. The circulation sphere, whose stigmata are borne by intellectual outsiders, opens a last refuge to the mind that it barters away, at the very same moment when refuge really no longer exists. He who offers for sale something unique that no-one wants to buy, represents, even against his will, freedom from exchange.[248]

[246] Plass, *Language and History*, 27.
[247] Ibid., 24.
[248] Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 68.

In this passage, Adorno was emphasizing what appears to be the only available option for political resistance in a fully administered world, and that the only possibility of freedom comes in the form of free expression, which necessarily entails acknowledging alternative interpretations of past and present thought. By reinterpreting classical sources, not only interpreting them differently, but also insinuating that reinterpretation as a move away from the dominant system, Adorno was enacting the very same motif each classical figure emphasizes throughout the works examined in his writings above. Aristotelian aesthetic theory contributes to how Adorno perceived the *process* of imitation in authentic art, while Aristophanes and Ovid recall the *demeanor* of socially critical works of art. Likewise, Adorno interpreted the stylization of the *Odyssey* as a work recalling the *experience* of primordial subjectivity. Each of these reinterpretations of classical works emphasizes the significance Adorno placed, not only on developing substantive theories, but also on developing theory as political practice and as a form of resistance to formalized thought.

What this project has sought to make clear is how Adorno was influenced by the classical tradition. Classical philosophy and literature not only provided source material for his theories, but it should be clear by now that there is more to learn about the multiple functions of Adorno's writings and his process of writing them. By looking at how classical thought assisted Adorno, the purpose of his writings becomes clearer. His frequent use of classical literature and philosophy was a political gesture to the standardization and domination of thought in modernity. Of course, this is by no means the only instance of Adorno's incorporation of intellectual traditions into his writings, and similar studies may investigate if Adorno's use of French poetry or German drama

had a similar aesthetic, philosophical, and political effect. Nonetheless, the emphasis on the classical tradition and Adorno in this study is a revealing example of how the ancient Greeks and Romans informed his contemporary observations. Adorno was intrigued by the unfettered, substantive content and thought processes of classical thinkers and by referring back to them for insight, Adorno sought to "shatter culture's claims by confronting texts with their own emphatic concept, with the truth that each one intends even if it does not want to intend it, and to move culture to become mindful of its own untruth."[249] In other words, as Gross put it, Adorno wanted to "look backward in a satisfactory way…to reach out and make use of valuable material from the past."[250] Fascinated by the potential that works from antiquity could contribute to analyzing modern conditions, Adorno sought to incorporate aspects of classical aesthetic theory, literature, and political philosophy into his writings in order to show how the thinking of the past cannot and should not be understood as primitive and irrational, but instead how the classical tradition can contribute to a more thorough understanding the present.

[249] Adorno, "The Essay as Form," 20.
[250] Gross, "Rescuing the Past," 25.

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