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**CHASING AFTER THE NONCONCEPTUAL:  
ON ADORNO'S ESSAYISM AS A PHILOSOPHICAL METHOD**

Dissertation thesis

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## **Statement**

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In Prague

Alžběta Dyčková

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation thesis thematizes the background, main features and potential of Theodor Adorno's philosophical method marked as essayism. It outlines Adorno's core philosophical inspiration and convictions which triggered its formation, attempts to identify the main maxims of its composition and poses Adorno's conception several questions. First, I ask what the relationship between the author and object of the essay is, once Adorno calls for 'preponderance of the object' and 'limitation of the subject'. Second, I inquire about the connection of essayistic thinking with Adorno's call for philosophical affectivity and emotionality, providing an interpretation of his understanding of fantasy. Third, I raise the question of how the essayistic method is supposed to help protect intellectual freedom in the late capitalistic world which, according to Adorno, suppresses it and generally numbs desirable intellectual faculties of individuals. Through that, I hope to provide a plastic image of essayism which would, first, help Adorno's readers to get through his opaque texts and, second, suggest its exceptional intellectual value.

## **Keywords**

Theodor Adorno; essay; critique; philosophical method; language; somatic impulses; fantasy; intellectual freedom

# CONTENT

<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	2
<b>1. CORE CONCEPTS UNDERLYING ESSAYISM</b> .....	8
1.1 Speculative account of language in <i>Dialectic of Enlightenment</i> .....	9
1.2 Language in relation to the problem of givenness .....	13
1.3 Inspiration by and deviation from Benjamin's insights .....	18
<b>2. THE ESSAY AS A CRITICAL FORM</b> .....	26
2.1 Essay as an experimental and critical form .....	27
2.2 Main maxims of essayistic composition .....	30
Refusal of reduction of observation to the principle and attention to the detail .....	31
Ever-changing meaning of the concept .....	34
Rejection of argumentative structure and general density of the text .....	37
<b>3. BECOMING THE ARENA OF INTELLECTUAL EXPERIENCE: THE SUBJECT-OBJECT RELATIONSHIP IN AN ESSAY</b> .....	41
3.1 On the subject-object relation .....	42
3.2 Limitation of the subject .....	47
Limitation by means of <i>métier</i> : Adorno on Valéry .....	48
Limitation through immersion in the object: Adorno on Proust .....	50
3.3 Preponderance of the object and limitation of the subject in an essay .....	53
<b>4. IMPULSIVITY: FANTASY AS ESSAYIST'S CRUCIAL INTELLECTUAL FACULTY</b> .....	60
4.1 Somatic impulses and emotionality .....	61
4.2 Philosophical fantasy .....	65
4.3 Limiting subject's emotionality .....	70
<b>5. INTELLECTUAL'S GUIDE TO LATE CAPITALISM: ON POSSIBILITIES OF FREEDOM AND RESISTANCE</b> .....	75
5.1 Freedom, resistance and essayism as a liberation of language .....	76
5.2 Freedom, impulses and lack of fantasy .....	80
<b>CONCLUSION</b> .....	87
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b> .....	95

## INTRODUCTION

Life has no imminent, metaphysically granted meaning. Society, which is the alfa and omega of our lives, is irrational and does not progress towards peace and prosperity for all as the prevailing narratives used to proclaim throughout the preceding centuries. Grand philosophical projects which arose from the tradition of Enlightenment have failed to grasp the totality of reality. What used to serve to protect us from the fear of nature is shattered.

These statements broadly summarize the general view of the state of the (Western) philosophy after WW2 according to Theodor Adorno, the most eminent representative of the first generation of the Frankfurt School of Social Research whose philosophical narrative became widely known as critical theory. Adorno's philosophical vision of the world – whether actually dim or not – in its rough outline corresponds with the realization made by many other modern thinkers before and after him, starting from Friedrich Nietzsche, followed by intellectuals as Jean-Paul Sartre up to notable figures such as Jean-François Lyotard or Michel Foucault. Despite coming from different philosophical movements and generations – whether it is irrationalism, existentialism, postmodernism or critical theory – all these philosophers faced a common fundamental issue: once philosophy gives up on the attempts to create wholesome ontological structures and theories of everything, it has to start looking for new ways of interpretation of the world which will have to claim some degree of independence from “old” philosophy based on the premise of possibility of creating an overarching ontological system. The realization of actual resignation at attempts to find the “meaning of it all” leaves philosophy facing inevitable difficulties. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, philosophy becomes definitively separated from exact sciences and it turns out to be more and more clear that such a situation will require philosophy which would rethink or at the very least modify its purpose and also its method, unless philosophy is to evaporate and become an outdated discipline.

With a certain portion of generalization, this dissertation's starting point is the realization that Theodor Adorno brings to the table a very original – even if to some degree partial – proposal for facing such issues. Highly concerned with the need for re-evaluation of the task and methodology of philosophy, he still maintains that even though “philosophy is good for nothing, it is not yet obsolete.”<sup>1</sup> Instead of giving up on philosophy, as it had been understood for

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<sup>1</sup> Adorno: ‘Why Still Philosophy?’. In: *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*. New York: Columbia University Press 2005, p. 15.

centuries, he comes up with remarkable innovative suggestions of what philosophy should do in such a historical situation and that the very way it had been written up to the point should be changed; the latter idea he takes over from his role model Walter Benjamin. Adorno's suggestion of a possible new way of thinking, I will argue, is represented by an experimental philosophical method which he marks as 'essayism'. Essayistic philosophy in Adornian sense abandons a number of traditional views on how philosophers should conduct their thoughts and attempts to see what new kinds of insights philosophy may reach once it finally admits and fully internalizes the fact that it is not facing a world which would be systematic and heading towards a general social abundance but broken and possibly deteriorating due to hidden pathologies which the general way of thinking carries within itself. On top of being proposed as a new way how to do philosophy, essayism then also has the potential to protect intellectual – and maybe even actual – freedom.

Many notable monographies about Adorno recognize the importance of his conception of essayism.<sup>2</sup> Yet, while introducing Adorno's thought, either in a more general sense or engaging with some of his concepts on a deeper level, they generally choose to lay out Adorno's philosophical vision differently than through direct interpretation of his method of textual composition and views on language. The multilayeredness of Adorno's thought indeed allows a very wide array of perspectives through which it can be penetrated and admittedly, the problem of language, which Adorno never clearly elaborated within a separate larger text, does not present an easily accessible way in. This work will nevertheless make this attempt and will engage with the perspective of the method of Adorno's philosophical thinking and his textual composition, foremostly to elaborate it as such and suggest its remarkable intellectual value.

I will do so by covering four research objectives of this work. (1) I will lay out Adorno's essayism and its philosophical background which I consider useful even at cost of a certain degree of simplification. Afterwards, I will interrogate it and link it to several other Adorno's insights, showing that there are indeed notable connections to be pointed out by which I will realize the remaining three objectives. (2) I will ask what kind of relationship is supposed to be established between the author of an essay and his object once Adorno calls for so-called

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<sup>2</sup> To list at least a few: Buck-Morss: *Origin of Negative Dialectics*. New York: The Free Press 1977. Bernstein: *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*. New York: Cambridge University Press 2001. Foster: *Adorno: Recovery of Experience*. New York: State University of New York Press 2007. Hulatt: *Adorno's Theory of Philosophical and Aesthetic Truth*. New York: Columbia University Press 2016.

‘preponderance of the object’ and ‘limitation of subjectivity’. (3) I will also ponder how deep is the desired change of the way of thinking meant to go according to Adorno and connect essayism with Adorno’s notion of somaticity and emotionality of thinking. (4) And finally, I will also ask what kind of practical potential essayism carries and connect it with Adorno’s conception of freedom and resistance.

The proposed interpretation of these research questions follows two more general main aims. First, I hope that a more or less schematic explanation of Adorno’s essayistic method and related philosophical issues could help readers to better understand the reasons why Adorno’s texts are so dense and difficult to grasp. There is a philosophical ground of Adorno’s writings being so “heavy” and it is not because he would have simply lacked the talent or willingness to express difficult matters concisely. Also, mainly through the explanation of its main features, I hope to help Adorno’s readers with a better orientation within his dense texts by specifying the objectives of his writing and explicating which traditional rules he consciously omits and provides alternatives to. Second, I want to add to the voice of many prior philosophical scholars and show that Adorno is not a helplessly negativistic author who only criticizes his predecessors and contemporaries and does not bring anything positive to the table. This I want to do, as I already mentioned, through showing the essayistic method as an innovative suggestion of how to still philosophize after WW2 which can in the end have even somewhat practical impact on the spiritual, or, if you will, intellectual life of individuals in the western society, suggesting that this happens especially thanks to his innovative proposition that philosophical affectivity ought to take active part in composition of philosophical texts.<sup>3</sup> In other words, I will attempt to explicate how is Adorno’s conception philosophically valuable in a wider sense.

The theses of this work are foremostly based on Adorno’s *Notes to Literature*, mainly then on its opening text “The Essay as Form”. Apart from that, it reaches to various other works to find answers to questions that “The Essay as Form” cannot answer on its own. The speculative origin of some of Adorno’s ideas which on their own rightfully may strike as claims “coming out of nowhere” is repeatedly tracked down in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* which Adorno wrote with Max Horkheimer during WW2. Through this tracking, I hope to articulate the consistency

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that Adorno’s perspective is Eurocentric or, at least, western-centric and very far from taking in consideration the global situation and multitude of other cultural narratives from around the world. This matter is beyond dispute in this work as well as that Adorno’s conception is fairly intellectually elitist, designed to serve foremostly to people of certain education and cultural background. The latter issue will be discussed in section 5.2.

of Adorno's thought and show that many of his central ideas have been planted already in this relatively early work. I also set forth several connections with his *Minima Moralia* where we can, as I will try to demonstrate, discover more than a few major complements to Adorno's understanding of concepts which underlie his thoughts on philosophical textuality and methodology. In other words, *Minima Moralia* is considered because it contains several crucial keys to "The Essay as Form". I also frequently reach to Adorno's center piece *Negative Dialectics* (and by extension, his lectures on negative dialectics, history and freedom) to underly individual points he makes, as it is a text where we can find clear articulation of several philosophical positions closely connected to essayism. *Notes to Literature*, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, *Minima Moralia* and *Negative Dialectics* hence represent the backbone of this inquiry. Where I deem it apt, I also mention the connection to his last unfinished work, *Aesthetic Theory*. The dissertation also reflects Adorno's inaugural lecture at the Frankfurt University called "Actuality of Philosophy" in which Adorno formulated his philosophical programme. Occasionally, I reach out for insights scattered around his essays on mass culture, late capitalistic society and the purpose of philosophy.<sup>4</sup>

The dissertation is divided into five chapters followed by a conclusion. Its outline is the following:

The first, introductory chapter will list core philosophical convictions that led Adorno to the introduction of essayism. It will explain his motivations grounded in the speculative account of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* written with Max Horkheimer, as essayism is meant as an experimental form which provides an alternative to the prevailing systematizing tendency of enlightenment rationality. Enlightenment, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, tends to dominate nature and amputate everything 'incommensurable'. This 'incommensurable' nonetheless becomes the centre of Adorno's philosophical attention. His essays strive to represent (*darstellen*) it and show it as something that was – incorrectly – omitted by rationalistic thought. Adorno understands this so-called 'incommensurable' as that which falls out of the identity of thinking, reality and language as laid out by Kant and Hegel. As it is notoriously known, Adorno opposes their identity conception and introduces his nonidentity

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<sup>4</sup> Listed, they are: Adorno: 'Why still Philosophy', 'Notes on Philosophical Thinking', 'Critique' and 'On Subject and Object'. In: *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* New York: Columbia University Press 2005. 'Free time' and 'Scheme of Mass culture'. In: *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*. London and New York: Routledge 1991. 'Thesis against Occultism'. In: *The Stars down to Earth and Other Essays on the Irrational in Culture*. London and New York: Routledge 2002. Adorno & Richter: 'Who's Afraid of the Ivory Tower? A Conversation with Theodor W. Adorno'. In: *Monatshefte* 94:1 (2002).

thesis. This also introduces what is the aforementioned ‘incommensurable’ that he wants to represent in his essays: it is the nonconceptual, nonidentical. Adorno’s chase after the nonconceptual was sparked by the ideas of Walter Benjamin whose program of rethinking the philosophical representation (*Darstellung*) became also Adorno’s program. Benjamin’s constellations aiming at representing what Benjamin marks as ‘ideas’ turn into Adorno’s essays attempting to represent what he marks as intellectual experience (*geistige Erfahrung*) of the nonconceptual.

The second chapter will take a look directly at essayism as such and present its main features. Adorno’s essayism is an experimental philosophical form whose features are established critically in order to see whether it is possible to represent something that has eluded the up-to-date philosophy by turning traditional rules of conducting philosophical thoughts upside down. Adorno rejects the “traditional” maxims of thinking as unnecessary intellectual prejudices and attempts to compose essays which do not reduce their observation to general principles, give attention to particularities and details, do not define the concepts they operate with, dismiss traditional argumentative structure and move away from subjectivistic tendencies of up-to-date philosophy which, praising the possibilities of reason, tended to look for philosophically significant insights foremostly through reason’s introspection.

The last-mentioned feature of essayistic thought, the limitation of subjectivity, implied by the ‘preponderance of object’, is a philosophical move characteristic for materialism. It will be considered in a separate, third chapter, as it opens a larger number of considerations. Adorno notes that the limitation of the subjectivity of the essay’s author is a necessary part of the goal of essayism – the representation of intellectual experience. I will attempt to zoom in on *how* the author is supposed to limit his subjectivity examining examples of such limitation which Adorno sees in the works of Paul Valéry and Marcel Proust. This will expound closer to what is supposed to happen between the author of an essay, how unique each limitation of subjectivity shall be and give a better idea of how the essay relates to art in this regard.

The fourth chapter will zoom in on the question of what change of thinking Adorno more precisely calls for in his chase after the nonconceptual on top of omitting the rules of traditional thinking. He brings to the table the idea of philosophical affectivity as a way to get closer to the nonconceptual side of the interpreted object. I will thus dive into the elaboration of impulsivity which Adorno proposes as a valid component of philosophical thought. Adorno speaks of several worthy philosophical impulses that ought to be present within philosophical conduct.

Most interestingly for our inquiry, he mentions fantasy, which I will present as an emotional intellectual faculty that takes part in the composition of constellations, i.e. essays, both as a desire motivating the author to go beyond concepts and intellectual faculty which is responsible for the arrangement of the concepts in the essayistic configuration.

The last chapter will stay at the matter of the desired affectivity of philosophizing, inquiring about a fundamental question that Adorno's essayistic method brings forth: how can be essayism useful apart from being a highly intellectual – and admittedly abstract – matter of representation of the intellectual experience? The essayistic mode of thinking, I will claim, is not only an alternative to the rationalistic tendency of enlightenment; it is also meant as a possibility for resistance to enlightenment rationality and social coercion produced by it. Hence it is useful for exercising freedom, as Adorno understands it. The affectivity of philosophical conduct plays a key role in this; essayistic thought, especially then its affective aspect, has the potential to maintain the possibilities of resistance and intellectual freedom.

In the conclusion, I will make a final account of the performed interpretation, highlighting how the thesis achieved its four designated research objectives explicated above. Apart from that, I will list several possible further directions of this interpretation which may be fruitful for potential follow-up research and did not receive closer attention in this text. Together with that, I will shortly consider the problematic of essay's liability to error due to the lack of clear criteria which could assess a quality essay arriving at the goal of mediating the desired nonconceptual Adorno is chasing after.

# 1. CORE CONCEPTS UNDERLYING ESSAYISM

Inquiry concerning Adorno's essayism and its potential needs to be initiated by laying out core convictions which underlie his philosophy as they indicate his view on the philosophical role of language and gave the impulse to come up with the essayistic method. As the introduction of this dissertation suggested, Adorno's philosophy is a reaction to a particular historical situation which, according to him, necessitates philosophy to radically change. Before turning to the description of essayism – which is a suggestion of a possible new philosophical form and therefore embodiment of this change – as such and pondering about questions which it brings up, I will lay out three mutually complementing accounts of Adorno's philosophical ideas which will prepare the ground for introducing Adorno's essayism as such.

In the first section of this chapter, I will outline Adorno's famous speculative account of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* written with Max Horkheimer which assesses the negative impacts of the enlightenment rationality that has been prevalent in the Western hemisphere ever since ancient Greece. Enlightenment rationality, according to the authors, must not be considered the only right way of thinking. Calling the necessity of its superiority in question then implies pondering the possibilities of philosophizing once we step out of its influence. This has strong implications for Adorno's understanding of philosophical language and textual method. Laying out the speculative account of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* will be also a useful tool for the latter parts of this thesis as many of Adorno's ideas regarding essayism circle back to it.

Adorno's introduction of essayism spreads out from his notoriously known conviction about the nonidentity between thinking, reality and, by extension, language which is philosophy's medium of expression of our thoughts about this reality. In the second section, I will thus introduce Adorno's core philosophical theses in this regard based on his understanding and rethinking of the problem of the givenness of the world. Laying out this account will help us to identify Adorno's fundamental philosophical belief which is of utter importance for understanding essayism: namely that concepts can somehow refer to nonconceptualities. This will provide a certain philosophical justification for his decision to chase after what he marks as the nonconceptual. This 'nonconceptual' will be also set forth as related to Adorno's core concept of 'intellectual experience' (*geistige Erfahrung*).

How can concepts refer to nonconceptualities? How to mediate the experience of nonconceptual? In order to answer these questions, I will show that Adorno takes over two

major insights from Walter Benjamin, despite diverging from many other ideas which underlie his theory of language. The convergences and divergences of Adorno and Benjamin will be thus introduced in the third section of this chapter. The first similarity would be that the major changes within the *form* of philosophical reflection must be conducted in order to get beyond the horizon sketched by enlightenment thought. Second then, that this change ought to happen by means of so-called constellations, which indeed later become known in Adorno's philosophy as essays.

### **1.1 Speculative account of language in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*<sup>5</sup>**

Adorno's understanding of language is closely bound to his criticism of enlightenment which he presented in the text *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, written during WW2 with Max Horkheimer. The book presents a speculative historical narrative which does not aspire to provide a wholesome image of the development of European thought, but through presenting a simplifying vision, highlights one specific aspect of this development which the authors find potentially dangerous. It follows a concrete tendency of thinking, in order to explicate what was years later aptly described by Michel Foucault as "the suspicion that there was something in rationalization, and perhaps even in reason itself, that was responsible for the excesses of power" which "had less to do with the recent development of a wonderful, brand new, and rational state in Germany than with the very old affiliation of the universities and *Wissenschaft* with administrative and state structures."<sup>6</sup> In other words, Adorno and Horkheimer observed the influence of the traditional Western way of thinking on pathologies of modern era, rather than looking for their causes purely in the modern form of political establishment itself.

Traditional Western way of thinking is subsumed under the central concept of the book: 'enlightenment'. This term does not refer to the specific historical epoch of European intellectual development which is known to have taken place foremostly in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in France and Germany.<sup>7</sup> It is rather presented as a tendency of human thinking which only found its most explicit expression within the intellectual movements of this period, nonetheless, it can be hardly reduced to this epoch. Enlightenment rationality has been shaping European thought

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<sup>5</sup> Most passages from this section come from the paper on Adorno and Foucault written with Maura Ceci presented at the conference Foucault and Frankfurt School at DePaul University in Chicago on 21<sup>st</sup> September 2024.

<sup>6</sup> Foucault: *'What is Critique?' And 'The Culture of The Self'*. Chicago and London: The Chicago University Press 2024, p. 32.

<sup>7</sup> Comp. Allen: *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press 2016, p. 167.

at least since ancient Greece; Adorno and Horkheimer identify its features already in the *Odyssey* and consider its main character the embodiment of bourgeois thinking. The main goal of enlightenment, they claim, is the disenchantment of the world: enlightenment aims to shed light on every last aspect of life and nature which spooks people by its opaqueness and hence liberate humanity from fear of nature. It intends to dispel myths and install men as masters over nature. In other words, enlightenment represents a tendency to rationalize, systematize, dominate and within that then “amputate everything incommensurable.”<sup>8</sup> Hence, enlightenment in Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s conception equals in broad terms what the Adornian scholarship usually refers to as ‘instrumental rationality’.<sup>9</sup>

In order to identify crucial circumstances and relations accompanying instrumental rationality, Adorno and Horkheimer present the following account. People have always dealt with the fear of the unknown, i.e. nature whose processes were out of their control. This fear has been present already in the core of mythology which attempted to dilute it by creating images of divinities which resembled nature and rituals which resembled these divinities. The “old” divinities, nonetheless, still represented nature as a universal power and therefore did not annihilate the feared aspect of life completely; myth was rather an attempt to mitigate the fear by creating a rough conceptual shape of the dreaded unknown. The relation to divinities in the “old way” nonetheless still contained a relation to what Adorno and Horkheimer mark as *mana*: something “primal and undifferentiated, ... everything unknown and alien; it is that which transcends the bounds of experience, the part of things which is more than their immediately perceived existence.”<sup>10</sup> Human ability to experience relation to this *mana*, however, withers within the prevalence of instrumental rationality.

The mythological tendency to diffuse the fear of the unknown threads its way into enlightenment as it is driven and imbued by the same fear that rules the mythological thinking which systematic thought promises to overthrow. It is a tendency to conceptualize that which is unknown and opaque. While mythology does so through imagining natural powers as divine, enlightenment systematizes, or, in case it proves impossible to explain the unknown aspects of life, simply forces them out. Nevertheless, Adorno and Horkheimer point out that modern

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> For an elaboration of this term see Bernstein: ‘The Idea of Instrumental Reason’. In: Gordon, Hammer, Honneth: *The Routledge Companion to Frankfurt School*. New York: Taylor and Francis 2019, pp. 3-18.

<sup>10</sup> Adorno & Horkheimer: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press 2002, p. 10.

scientific thought is still unconsciously driven by fear of nature as the unknown with the addition of an attempt to dominate it instead of relating to it:

“Humans believe themselves free of fear when there is no longer anything unknown. This has determined the path of demythologization, of enlightenment, which equates the living with the nonliving as myth had equated the nonliving with the living. Enlightenment is mythical fear radicalized. ... Nothing is allowed to remain outside, since the mere idea of the ‘outside’ is the real source of fear.”<sup>11</sup>

Since enlightenment sinks into mythology, the logical reason, intended to be the triumph of subjective rationality, submits itself to nature while being convinced of the precise opposite. Through that “the seeds of the new barbarism are germinating”<sup>12</sup> while not being entirely visible. This hidden setback implies that the promise of modern rationality – abundance, freedom and welfare – cannot be in the end facilitated by enlightenment rationality. Enlightenment is condemned to develop a multitude of pathologies, which in the end “exceed in horror anything men ever had to fear from nature.”<sup>13</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer identify two main pathologies which the Enlightenment brought upon Western society. First is the domination of nature, which as we see these days, is leading towards an environmental catastrophe.<sup>14</sup> Second, Adorno and Horkheimer make an account of identifying the features of systematic thinking within the culture industry production and its psychological effects on the individual. The deepening social coercion of capitalistic society intensifies the disconnection from nature, enhances conformism within society and reduces the possibilities of intellectual and aesthetic experiences.<sup>15</sup>

The connection to the mythological “old” world, operating with the concept of *mana*, presents an important speculative concept which also entails a certain idea of language. Language nevertheless seems to play a rather negative role, as “the world of magic still contained

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>13</sup> Adorno: ‘Theses against Occultism’. In: *Stars down the Earth and Other Essays on Irrational Culture*. London and New York: Routledge 2002, p. 128.

<sup>14</sup> See e.g. Nelson: ‘Revisiting the Dialectic of Environment: Nature as Ideology and Ethics in Adorno and the Frankfurt School’. In: *Telos* 155 (Summer 2011), pp. 105-126.

<sup>15</sup> See e.g. Prusik: *Adorno and Neoliberalism: The Critique of Exchange Society*. New York, Bloomsbury Academic 2020, or Witkin: *Adorno on Popular Culture*. New York, Routledge 2014, or Bernstein: *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*.

differences whose traces disappear in linguistic forms.”<sup>16</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer even claim that “no terms are available which do not tend towards complicity with the prevailing intellectual trends, and what threadbare language cannot achieve on its own is precisely made good by the social machinery.”<sup>17</sup> Enlightenment created the idea of a concept as “unity of the features of what it subsumes” and as such it “was rather, from the first, a product of dialectical thinking, in which each thing is what it is only by becoming what it is not.”<sup>18</sup> As Philip Hogg assesses, Adorno understands language as a “historical (*geschichtlich*) practice in which the real life of human beings is sedimented. It is not understood as an autonomous form untouched by life.”<sup>19</sup> Put more simply, for Adorno, language is a human creation. It is, as Philip Hogg observed, a ‘second nature’, as this term has been coined by György Lukács: in its most general meaning, it is something which is – at least initially – considered to be autonomous and of natural origins, not man-made, while it, in fact, has been produced subjectively. Indeed, as Hogg also acknowledges, Adorno’s position is, of course, not so original, as in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the acknowledgement that language is not isolated from the rest of reality and human society generally became a valid philosophical position.

Laid out as governed by instrumental rationality’s tendency, language is introduced rather negatively as a phenomenon whose development towards general conceptual unity thickens the barrier between *mana* and human beings. The “old” animistic way of relating to nature in which the connection to *mana* was still possible nevertheless also already used language and therefore Adorno and Horkheimer can offer a way out. According to their speculative account, language gradually broke down into a language of scientific discourse that widens the gap between language and nature, and language of art that preserves some space for its expression as it still attempts to represent the incommensurable aspects of existence. The language of science deprived “what was powerless of the strength to make itself heard and merely provided the existing order with a neutral sign for itself.”<sup>20</sup> The language of art, on the other hand, strives to give it the nonidentical voice. As Adorno and Horkheimer remark, a genuine work of art “constantly re-enacts the duplication by which the thing appeared as something spiritual, a

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<sup>16</sup> Adorno & Horkheimer: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 7. Translation modified. Orig.: “Die Welt der Magie enthielt noch Unterschiede, deren Spuren selbst in der Sprachform verschwunden sind.“ Adorno & Horkheimer: *Dialektik der Aufklärung*. Berlin: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag 2006, p. 23.

<sup>17</sup> Adorno & Horkheimer: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. xv.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>19</sup> Hogg: *Communication and Expression: Adorno’s Philosophy of Language*. London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield International 2016, p. 16-17.

<sup>20</sup> Adorno & Horkheimer: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 17.

manifestation of *mana*. That constitutes its aura.”<sup>21</sup> That means that within genuine art, the *mana* can still make its way into the present society even though it is deeply organized and influenced by instrumental rationality.<sup>22</sup> It can – and when it comes to philosophy, it ought to – do so even through language, but the way to do so, considering the clutter caused by instrumental rationality, becomes tricky in the modern era. How is such a thing possible, we will discover more deeply in the following chapter.

## 1.2 Language in relation to the problem of givenness

What is the aforementioned *mana* to which Adorno wishes to recover the relation? On top of *mana* being something incommensurable and eluding the enlightenment rationality, Adorno and Horkheimer write:

“If the tree is addressed no longer as simply a tree but as evidence of something else, a location of *mana*, language expresses the contradiction that it is at the same time itself and something other than itself, identical and not identical. Through the deity, speech is transformed from tautology into language.”<sup>23</sup>

Mythological thinking conceptualized the connection to *mana* as an animistic connection to deity, nevertheless, Adorno does not call for the re-establishment of any kind of pagan religious attitude. He is rather interested in the connection to nature which has been, speculatively, still present in it. As the quotation suggests, once we talk about *mana*, Adorno’s concept of nonidentity comes up, as *mana* indeed appears as that which falls out of German idealism’s notion of identity of thinking and reality.

Adorno is notoriously known as a philosopher of nonidentity. To understand why he is convinced that connection to the nonconceptual is possible despite the nonidentity of human thought and reality, it will be needed to dig deep into his refusal of the identity thesis. I will do so by introducing Adorno’s understanding of the problem of givenness, one of the basic problems of classical ontology, which also well illustrates how he resolves the tension within

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 14. ‘Aura’ here refers to the Benjaminian concept of aura. For its explanation see e.g. Kramer: *Walter Benjamin zur Einführung*. Junius Verlag, Hamburg 2003, p. 73-76.

<sup>22</sup> That relation to *mana* and other kinds of thinking than strictly systematic are desirable is implied, nevertheless, the authors remain with the assertion that resistance to systematic thought can bring desirable possibilities for human thought, however, despite the sharp tone of the book, they do not condemn enlightenment rationality as purely evil. For this point also see also: Allen: *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, p. 167.

<sup>23</sup> Adorno & Horkheimer: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 11.

the core mission of his philosophy: rescuing the possibility of philosophizing based in human reason in the face of nonidentity between the reality and thought.

Adorno agrees with the central idealist premise, outlined in Kant's transcendental aesthetics, that the way the world is given to us is determined by our consciousness.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, according to him, the individual contents of our experience are composed of human consciousness, which we are able to trace in them. It cannot be otherwise, once they are mediated through it. This must not be the end of the matter according to Adorno though. He argues that the idealist idea without further consideration results in an infinite sameness.

“By interpreting even heterogeneity as their own self and finally as the spirit, they [idealist philosophers] already reconverted it into sameness, into the identity in which they would repeat themselves as in a vast analytical judgment, leaving no room for the qualitatively new.”<sup>25</sup>

Adorno, as it is generally known, does not favour the idea of the complete depletion of reason into the given. First, because the idea of pure reason does not make justice to human individuality; shortly put, if the core of being human dwelled in the ability to use pure reason, which is universal, the individual beings would be essentially interchangeable.<sup>26</sup> Second, for Adorno, the problem does not end with tracing our own reason in what is given to us. The matter is more complex. The material we experience can be reduced neither to empirical nor to rational given. It encompasses a wide variety of socially determined perceptions that are products of socio-historical circumstances. And there is even more: in experience, there is also something that eludes conceptual grasping.<sup>27</sup> Thus Adorno adds that the contents of our experience cannot be reduced to concepts. Leaning to an explanation purely in scientific terms that would strictly abide with the material reality is also out of question for Adorno. When experience the world we discover that in our experience there is a certain epistemic relation to something nonconceptual that idealists leave aside.

“A philosophy that lets us know this, that extinguishes the autarky of the concept, strips the blindfold from our eyes. That the concept is a concept even when dealing with things in being does not change the fact that on its part it is entwined with a nonconceptual whole. Its only

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<sup>24</sup> O'Connor: 'Adorno and the Problem of Givenness'. In: *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 227:1 (2004), p. 85.

<sup>25</sup> Adorno: *Negative Dialectic*. London and New York: Routledge 2004, p. 155.

<sup>26</sup> Comp. Buck-Morss: *Origins of Negative Dialectics*, p. 82-85.

<sup>27</sup> “In truth, all concepts, even the philosophical ones, refer to nonconceptualities.” Adorno: *Negative Dialectics*, p. 11. Comp. O'Connor: 'Adorno and the Problem of Givenness', p. 88.

insulation from that whole is its reification (*Verdinglichung*) – that which establishes it as a concept. ... *To refer to nonconceptualities ... is characteristic of the concept ... To change this direction of conceptuality, to give it a turn toward nonidentity, is the hinge of negative dialectics.*”<sup>28</sup>

According to Adorno, there is something in every experience that cannot be reduced to a concept that we would assign to that experience. “The separation of sign and image is inescapable.”<sup>29</sup> Simply put, naming an object does not fully do justice to the object. There is always something nonconceptual in what is given to us – something that is not constructed by human consciousness but by the world itself.

In this, we can outline Adorno’s main divergence from Kant’s conception of givenness. Where Kant tries to establish the limits of our reason and presents the problem of the thing-in-itself, Adorno disagrees from the ground up and establishes a nonidentity philosophy that reflects nonidentity between reason and reality. In the case of the givenness of the world, then, it can be reduced to the fact that there is nonidentity between the concept and the given thing. The experience of the given contains, on the one hand, its concept, in which we are then able to trace human consciousness, not necessarily our own, and something nonconceptual.

Two core tasks of nonidentity philosophy stem from this conception of reality. First, philosophy ought to identify the sociohistorical sediments in the concept and through that contribute to escaping the bias that we unreflectively include in our understanding of reality when operating with it. The second task is then introduced by the first. As Adorno puts it: “Philosophical thinking begins as soon as it ceases to content itself with cognitions that are predictable and from which nothing more emerges than what had been placed there beforehand.”<sup>30</sup> Once the bias is set aside, philosophy may be able to focus on the subject matter itself: the nonconceptual, nonidentical, which falls out of the overlays of reality, thought and language.

In summary, Adorno's nonidentity philosophy can thus be understood as stemming from a rejection of pure givenness and the idealistic notion of the total conceptualizability of the world. The nonconceptual aspect of the thing that is given to us represents its otherness and shows that within the given there is no exhaustive overlap between reason and reality; thus we are assured of the existence of nonidentity that underlies all of Adorno's thought. We experience traces of

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<sup>28</sup> Adorno: *Negative Dialectics*, p. 12. Italics added.

<sup>29</sup> Adorno & Horkheimer: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 13.

<sup>30</sup> Adorno: ‘Notes on Philosophical Thinking’. In: *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, p. 128

our own consciousness in the conceptualizability of the given and we can discern its consciousness-created characteristics. Nonetheless, since there is also something extra, the nonconceptual, in how we experience the thing, we also assure ourselves that the world cannot be reduced to our consciousness alone.

The described problematic of givenness implies the following consideration: reality seems to be impenetrable for systematic philosophical analysis. In Adorno's understanding, language, thinking and philosophizing do not fully overlap, which puts us in a difficult situation. Their ontological status, if there is any, remains necessarily obscure: we know that their bounds necessarily remain tight and while reflecting on one we necessarily reflect on the others, however, it seems that we cannot exhaustively express and schematize their interrelationships and nature of each of them. On top of that, not only language cannot capture the totality of reality, but it also seems to be insufficient to capture the particular as well.

Adorno says that “we should begin with the concept, not with the mere given”<sup>31</sup> as the way to the nonconceptual, for philosophy, leads through concepts. He refuses to react to the imperfection of language by “mirage of a philosophy without concepts” pointing out that “there can be no construction of details in the absence of the emphatic concept.”<sup>32</sup> Philosophy for Adorno ought to remain strictly textual, conducted by means of conceptual language. According to him, “necessity compels philosophy to operate with concepts, but this necessity must not be turned into the virtue of their priority— no more than, conversely, criticism of that virtue can be turned into a summary verdict against philosophy.”<sup>33</sup> Hence, language is not condemned to be unusable for philosophy, as it may have been seen from the introductory remarks on the topic in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in the previous section.

Philosophy, according to Adorno, “consists essentially in reflecting on one's own intellectual experiences.”<sup>34</sup> These experiences, however, avoid direct conceptual grasping and hardly overlap with the conceptual framework of our thinking. Yet, concepts carry something nonconceptual about the object they denote in themselves. In other words, we can experience the nonconceptual within the concept, or, in other words we are to relate to the nonconceptual *by the means of experience* which takes place within expression by means of concepts.

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<sup>31</sup> Adorno: *Negative Dialectics*, p. 153.

<sup>32</sup> Adorno: ‘Towards the Theory of Intellectual Experience’. In: *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*. Cambridge: Polity Press 2008, p. 192.

<sup>33</sup> Adorno: *Negative Dialectics*, p. 11.

<sup>34</sup> Adorno: *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, p. 6.

Philosophical language whose constitutive elements are concepts should be therefore able to point beyond itself in a similar way in which conceptual addressing of the tree, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, contained a connection to *mana* as to what is identical and not identical with language at the same time. Philosophical reflection therefore ought to attempt to “reach beyond concept by means of the concept”<sup>35</sup> or, in other words, “to hit the nonconceptual (*Nichtbegriffliche*) with the concept (*Begriff*), to say what cannot be said by means of language.”<sup>36</sup> Adorno’s philosophical language attempts to capture at least some of the individual moments of reality in their true form although they seem to escape exhaustive linguistical representation. Such is the central aim of his metaphysical endeavours and theory of language: attempt to say the unsayable. In his own words, this is what becomes the task of philosophy:

“The task of philosophy ... would be to say what cannot be said. ... Everything else is signification, *post hoc* rationalization, pre-philosophical activity, now as it was in Hegel’s day. A vestige of confidence in the belief, however dubious, that philosophy can succeed after all, that the concept (*Begriff*) can transcend itself, can go beyond mere preliminaries and arbitrary conclusions, and can thus comprehend the nonconceptual – this confidence is indispensable to philosophy. Otherwise, it would be forced to capitulate and the human mind with it.”<sup>37</sup>

The relation to *mana* described in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* contained according to Adorno (and Horkheimer) relation to this nonconceptual, even though we should not confuse *mana* with this nonconceptual as such – the term rather serves to explicate the understanding of the nonconceptual by the people of the archaic times who conceptualized the nonconceptual as various divinities and natural powers, which is also most probably the reason why Adorno did not use it in his later works; as it was mentioned, he was in no way interested in promoting religious attitudes. The nonconceptual is, as we can see from the account of the givenness, also related to the nonidentical – it does fall out of the identity of reality and conceptual thought. Roger Foster then summarizes very elegantly what should philosophy do according to Adorno: “The goal of philosophical writing ... is to arrange words around a concept, so that the experiential substance of that concept becomes visible in it. When this process succeeds, the result is what Adorno calls spiritual experience.”<sup>38</sup> In other words, philosophy ought to be

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>36</sup> Adorno: *Philosophische Terminologie: Zur Einleitung. Band 1*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1973, p. 88.

<sup>37</sup> Adorno: ‘Towards the Theory of Intellectual Experience’. In: *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, p. 185-6.

<sup>38</sup> Foster: *Adorno: The Recovery of Experience*, p. 5.

written in a form which mediates the experience of that which is unsayable: the intellectual experience.<sup>39</sup> As Raymond Geuss promptly points out, Adorno's metaphysics took on board Nietzsche's criticisms of the existence of a systematic *Hinterwelt*, in which the principles constating a schematic underpinning of the invisible coherence of the reality would be rooted, however, unlike Nietzsche refused to resort to thorough scepticism and retained space for metaphysical experiences;<sup>40</sup> and together with that also a space for their mediation, as a supreme task of philosophy. Susan Buck-Morss summarizes this very well in her formulation "in an era when metaphysics had lost all legitimacy, Adorno kept asking the metaphysical question" and calls him a "metaphysician without faith in metaphysics".<sup>41</sup> What remains crucial to Adorno is indeed the task of philosophy to represent (*darstellen*) the metaphysical, or if you will, intellectual experience – and this is to be done within linguistical expression.

### 1.3 Inspiration by and deviation from Benjamin's insights<sup>42</sup>

Adorno's focus on and insights about language are strongly inspired by selected aspects of Walter Benjamin's philosophy. While it is quite clear that this is the case, tracking exactly to what extent Adorno takes over Benjamin's ideas – and vice versa, where the authors diverge – is a much more difficult task. Benjamin's influence shines through Adorno's insights at numerous places, nonetheless, each of these spots would deserve a discussion of how much it is either Adornian or Benjaminian; also, due to both authors' tendency not to express themselves plainly, at each of these places we could also discuss, how deep each of the given connection goes. The difficulty of summarizing Benjamin's influence on Adorno's understanding of language also gets complicated due to numerous interpretations of Benjamin's

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<sup>39</sup> Foster chose to translate the aforementioned '*geistige Erfahrung*' more literally as 'spiritual experience'. Generally, English translations resort to the term 'intellectual experience' which highlights that the experience is indeed supposed to be accessible intellectually. This contains certain amount of intellectual elitism connected to the concept; almost undeniably, whatever exactly intellectual experience is, for Adorno it is something reachable only for a very limited number of intellectuals capable of activating certain intellectual senses. This elitism is practically undeniable while we deal with the task of saying the unsayable, especially in connection to core points of Adorno's critique of popular art under whose influence the intellectual experience withers. The problem of intellectual elitism will be briefly discussed in the section 4.2. This work generally operates with the standard translation 'intellectual experience'.

<sup>40</sup> Geuss: 'Adorno's Gaps'. In: *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 12:2 (Fall 2004), p. 174.

<sup>41</sup> Buck-Morss: *Origins of Negative Dialectics*, p. 67.

<sup>42</sup> For fuller comparisons of Adorno and Benjamin see e.g. Ross: *The Aesthetic Ground of Critical Theory: New Readings of Benjamin and Adorno*. London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers 2015, esp. chapters 1-5, or Jay: 'Lamenting the Crises of Experience: Benjamin and Adorno'. In: *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press 2005, pp. 312-366. Nicholson: *Exact imagination, Late Work on Adorno's Aesthetics*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press 1997.

essays on language; each interpretation covers and emphasizes different aspects of Benjamin's conception, and they differ among themselves significantly. In light of these difficulties, making a final and comprehensive account of the connection of both authors' thoughts regarding the language of philosophy borders with impossibility, unless only a few individual insights into the connection of the two are to be made. That would be my aim here. I will try to show that even their rather superficial comparison can highlight several important aspects of Adorno's understanding of language.

Language is a crucial topic for Benjamin; for reasons that we will see further, he explicates this matter more explicitly than Adorno even though we cannot claim that Benjamin explicated a whole elaborate philosophy of language in the sense prevalent within the general history of philosophy.<sup>43</sup> Benjamin, unlike Adorno, nevertheless dedicated several of his texts explicitly and solely to language; among them, probably most importantly, a short essay *On Language as such and on the Language of a Man* written in 1916. In this text, Benjamin lays out weighty and far-reaching theses about the nature and purpose of language that will be shown as crucial for Adorno's later theory.

For Benjamin, language is an intrinsic part of the widest area of phenomena imaginable. Everything that exists manifests itself and this process of self-representation can be understood as a language of every particular being. Language encompasses not only every expression of human mental life but also every expression of every existing thing, as "there is no event or thing in either animate or inanimate nature that does not in some way partake of language, for it is in the nature of each one to communicate its mental contents."<sup>44</sup> Due to that, Benjamin talks not only about 'language of men', which we can preliminarily understand as acoustic and based on naming, but also about 'language of things', which is rather wordless and material. Everything in the world communicates and represents itself, which means that everything not only expresses itself but also addresses everything around it. According to Benjamin, "language communicates the linguistic being of things"<sup>45</sup> as what is communicable about a thing is its language itself. Hence, Benjamin goes as far as stating that "all language communicates itself."<sup>46</sup> This then establishes the magic of the language: its ability to transcend its own

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<sup>43</sup> Comp. Steiner: 'Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen', in: Lindner, *Benjamin Handbuch: Leben, Werk, Wirkung*. Stuttgart und Weimar: Springer Verlag 2011, p. 594.

<sup>44</sup> Benjamin: 'On Language as such and on the Language of a Man'. In: *Selected Writings, 1: 1913-1926*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2002, p. 62.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

communicable content, which can be at its clearest encountered in poetry.<sup>47</sup> The wide term of language that Benjamin uses can be therefore understood as a selfrepresentation of every individual thing in the world. Here we can already see the first tension with Adorno, as he considers language to be second nature and therefore, he would not understand, even if this Benjamin's conception can be – and by many of his interpreters it indeed is – considered highly speculative. As Shierry Weber Nichol森 aptly summarizes, for Adorno, language is a “human, mediated phenomenon rather than something natural and cannot be restored to a state of natural purity or integrity; and that any divine language of names in which words and their objects are not alienated from one another is inaccessible to human beings, whether because it is hidden or because it was lost or because it never existed.”<sup>48</sup>

The whole of the conception is then underpinned by Benjamin's conception of Adamic language as the human ability to name things, which elevates man, as a spiritual being, above nature.<sup>49</sup> This human ability is enabled by the Word by which the world has been created according to Genesis. Benjamin's idea is visibly influenced by Jewish mysticism.<sup>50</sup> For Benjamin, the Adamic language is a perfectly cognitive (*vollkommen erkennend*) language that is able to communicate truth since “the adamic name-giving ... confirmed the paradisiacal state as such, a state that did not yet have to grapple with the communicative significance of words. Just as ideas manifest themselves without intention in the act of naming, so they have to renew themselves in philosophic contemplation. In this renewal, the originary hearing of words is restored.”<sup>51</sup> In other words, Adamic name-giving translates the language of things into a pure language of man. Human languages as we know them now do not possess the pure naming ability of the Adamic language, however, according to Benjamin, philosophical contemplation's goal should be to cleanse them in order to restore the possibility – or at least hope – of real naming of Adamic language. To put it with a certain amount of simplification,

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<sup>47</sup> Comp. Busch: ‘The Language of Things and the Magic of Language: On Walter Benjamin's Concept of Latent Potency’. Available online: <https://transversal.at/transversal/0107/busch/en>.

<sup>48</sup> Nichol森: *Exact imagination, Late Work on Adorno's Aesthetics*, p. 68.

<sup>49</sup> Benjamin: ‘On Language as such and on the Language of a Man’. In: *Selected Writings, 1: 1913-1926*, p. 67-68.

<sup>50</sup> Within the scope of this short comparison between Benjamin and Adorno we do not need to take sides within the discussion of how “literally” and how religiously Benjamin means the conception of Adamic language though. Brief overview of this discussion among scholars of this dimension of Benjamin's text can be found in Steiner: ‘Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen’. In: Lindner: *Benjamin Handbuch: Leben, Werk, Wirkung*, p. 596.

<sup>51</sup> Benjamin: *The Origin of the German Trauerspiel*. Harvard University Press 2019, p. 14.

Adamic language for Benjamin presents a theoretical bridge between the material wordless language of things and current acoustic languages that we know and use.

Adorno dispatches from the idea of perfectly cognitive Adamic language and abandons Benjamin's suppositions, as he in no way wishes to ground his theory – even if only speculatively – in the biblical word; as we have seen in the previous sections, he leans towards grounding his own understanding of language in taking a stance against traditional philosophical notions of singularity of enlightenment rationality and identity theses. Nonetheless, he follows Benjamin's direction of thoughts in what to him appears to be more important than their default framework and embraces Benjamin's intrinsic philosophical motivations: the task of rethinking the philosophical composition of texts in order to represent what appears to be the unsayable in common human language. He embraces Benjamin's thesis: "If philosophy is to preserve the law of its form not as a mediating guide to knowledge but as presentation of truth, then it is necessary to emphasize the practice of this form – not, however, its anticipation within the system."<sup>52</sup> Both Benjamin and Adorno hope to rethink the linguistic representation of philosophy and through that enable different, uncluttered, or at least less cluttered, experience of the world.

Benjamin hopes to represent (*darstellen*) what he marks as 'ideas'. There is no easy explanation of what ideas are for Benjamin. He marks them as objects of philosophical investigation saying that "if presentation is to remain the authentic method of the philosophic tractatus, then it must be presentation of ideas."<sup>53</sup> Philosophical truth Benjamin strives for emerges according to him "actualized in the round dance of represented ideas."<sup>54</sup> Ideas are by no means identifiable with concepts or logical propositions. They elude the imperfect language of men. Concepts, however, serve to their representation and therefore, as mentioned, Benjamin calls for a fresh confrontation of the question of representation. Adorno brings this highly abstract and admittedly opaque vision to a little less abstract – but still majorly abstract – level by saying the following:

"The task of philosophy ... would be to say what cannot be said. ... Everything else is signification, *post hoc* rationalization, pre-philosophical activity, now as it was in Hegel's day. A vestige of confidence in the belief, however dubious, that philosophy can succeed after all,

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

that the concept (*Begriff*) can transcend itself, can go beyond mere preliminaries and arbitrary conclusions, and can thus comprehend the nonconceptual – this confidence is indispensable to philosophy. Otherwise, it would be forced to capitulate and the human mind with it.”<sup>55</sup>

This explicates what we need to know at this point, even though the whole problematic is way wider. Adorno, same as Benjamin, strives to say something unsayable, express the nonconceptual *by means of concepts*. This would be, same as in Benjamin’s case, achieved by a radical rethinking of philosophical textual representation. As the famous first sentence of the foreword to the *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* states, it is necessary to “confront anew, with every radical turn in thought, the question of *Darstellung*.”<sup>56</sup> The solution to the insufficiency of language requires rethinking of the way of representation.

How to achieve something that seems so unattainable though? Both in Benjamin’s and Adorno’s conception the gap between the object and language remains wide, as the language we use is imperfect – whether due to being a mere ‘language of men’ in Benjamin’s case or language limited by instrumental rationality in Adorno’s. This directly brings us to the second question that connects Adorno to Benjamin: how should philosophers make up for the insufficiency of language when it comes to the representation of objects? The main convergence of Adorno and Benjamin significant for our inquiry appears in this question, as Benjamin’s answer to this becomes also Adorno’s programme. Benjamin suggests as a key the concept of a constellation, which Adorno later adopts as well. Ideas are to be expressed by the composition of constellations, configuration of concepts (*Begriffe*) which ought to serve as a representation of a specific side of phenomena or objects of inquiry. Benjamin says that “the set of concepts operating in the presentation makes that idea manifest as a configuration of concepts” and that “ideas are to things as constellations to stars.”<sup>57</sup> In that way, the constellations represent the linguistic side of the philosophical objects. Benjamin turns his back on an ideal of possible knowledge while deploying a nominalist attitude to language, suggesting that his well-known thesis of truth is located in the cracks of reality. Adorno expands this Benjamin’s thought in “The Essay as Form”:

“[Essay] finds its unity in and through the caesuras and not by glossing them over. An unequivocal logical order deceives us about the antagonistic nature of what that order is imposed upon. Discontinuity is essential to the essay; its subject matter is always a conflict brought to a

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<sup>55</sup> Adorno: ‘Towards the Theory of Intellectual Experience’. In: *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, p. 185-6.

<sup>56</sup> Benjamin: *The Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, p. 1.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

standstill. While the essay coordinates concepts with one another by means of their function in the parallelogram of forces in its objects, it turns away from any overarching concept to which they could all be subordinated.”<sup>58</sup>

Adorno, following Benjamin, suggests that instead of elevating a concept as an implicit and subsuming ideal, as traditional philosophy has a tendency to, we should attempt to “assemble concepts in such a way that their constellation might shed light on the nonconceptual.”<sup>59</sup> These concepts then are not to be considered as “fixed  $\chi\omega\rho\acute{\iota}\varsigma$ , in isolation from objects but thrown in with them, abandoning the delusion that concepts that had been created for themselves also existed intrinsically in themselves.”<sup>60</sup> As, according to Adorno, the “direct expression of the inexpressible is void”,<sup>61</sup> he instead suggests considering the imperfection of the conceptual tools that philosophy is compelled to use and trying to overcome it by employing more concepts. That is the way how the “concepts alone can achieve what the concept prevents.”<sup>62</sup> He sketches the desired procedure of the philosophy in the following way:

“The concept has definable flaws. That leads to correction through other concepts. The hope of naming lies in the constellation of concepts that each gathers around itself for the purpose of that correction.”<sup>63</sup>

Language is inadequate and imperfect, however, it remains the only tool available and it yet carries the possibility to express what directly eludes it. Adorno believes that the composition of a constellation can mediate a “specific side of the object, the side which to a classifying procedure is either a matter of indifference or a burden.”<sup>64</sup>

“Language offers no mere system of signs for cognitive functions. Where it appears essentially as a language, where it becomes a form of representation, it will not define its concepts. It lends objectivity to them by the relation into which it puts the concepts, centred about a thing. Language thus serves the intention of the concept to express completely what it means. By

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<sup>58</sup> Adorno: ‘The Essay as Form’. In: *Notes to Literature*, p. 41. Translation modified. Orig. “[Essay] findet seine Einheit durch die Brüche hindurch, nicht indem er sie glättet. Einstimmigkeit der logischen Ordnung täuscht über das antagonistische Wesen dessen, dem sie aufgestülpt ward. Diskontinuität ist dem Essay wesentlich, seine Sache stets ein stillgestellter Konflikt. Während er die Begriffe aufeinander abstimmt vermöge ihrer Funktion im Kräfteparallelogramm der Sachen, scheut er zurück vor dem Obergriff, dem sie gemeinsam unterzuordnen wären.” ‘Der Essay als Form’. In: *Noten zur Literatur*, p. 19-20.

<sup>59</sup> Adorno: ‘Towards the Theory of Intellectual Experience’. In: *Lectures to Negative Dialectics*, p. 192.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Adorno: *Negative Dialectics*, p. 110.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>63</sup> Adorno: *Lectures to Negative Dialectics*, p. 178.

<sup>64</sup> Adorno: *Negative Dialectics*, p. 162.

themselves, constellations represent from without what the concept has cut away within: the ‘more’ which the concept is equally desirous and incapable of being.”<sup>65</sup>

Due to the fact that language mirrors thinking and vice versa, the constellations resemble the way the “theoretical thought circles the concept it would like to unseal, hoping that it may fly open like the lock of a well-guarded safe-deposit box: in response, not to a single key or a single number, but to a combination of numbers.”<sup>66</sup>

In conclusion, the connection between these thinkers in regard to this dissertation’s inquiry can be summarized followingly: Adorno does not follow Benjamin’s conception of language in its religious and speculative foundations. In the case of the religious aspects, we can say that they are simply put aside, while the speculative foundations get replaced, as we will see in the following section, by Adorno’s own account. Nevertheless, Adorno follows and later by his essayistic method broadens two crucial aspects of Benjamin’s thought. First, the need to rethink philosophical representation (*Darstellung*) in the face of the failure of the promise of a functional theory of everything hoped for by traditional thought, represented foremostly by German Idealism, and second, coming up with a new way of philosophical representation, composition of so-called ‘constellations’ which are meant to represent (*darstellen*) a specific experiential philosophical content we encounter once we stop seeing the world as systematic and observe it as broken as it actually is.

The question remains what do the concepts of the constellation relate to? Where to look for this nonconceptual, nonidentical within relation to which the intellectual experience happens? This question is undoubtedly crucial and very wide, nevertheless, at this point, it would be good to lay a rough indication. According to Susan Buck-Morss it is foremostly in cultural “objects” such as texts, documents and works of art.<sup>67</sup> This stems from one of the key features of Adorno’s thought: turning philosophy’s attention to specific, historically particular phenomena which contains certain spiritual (*geistig*) quality. His essays always interpret something already existing. Instead of looking for any kind of ‘totality of real’ and overarching theories of everything, the essayist’s thought ought to reflect its own time and particularities within it. Only then it can indeed be ‘actual’. That intellectual experience happens within the interpretation of cultural objects is also suggested in Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*, published postmortem, where

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 163.

<sup>67</sup> Comp. *ibid.*, p. 78.

he says that “art requires philosophy, which interprets it in order to say what it is unable to say, whereas art is only able to say it by not saying it.”<sup>68</sup>

The notion that philosophy and philosophical essays as Adorno rethinks them should turn solely to interpretation of works of art seems nevertheless rather narrow. That Adorno does not insist solely that philosophy has to only interpret works of art can be at best suggested by bringing forth another formulation of the task of philosophy, which will help to keep the area of interest of philosophy wider. In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, he and Horkheimer write that “philosophy is not a synthesis, a basic science, or an overarching science but an effort to resist suggestion, a determination to protect intellectual and actual freedom.”<sup>69</sup> The topic of intellectual experience indeed brings to the table the topics of freedom and resistance. This happens even on more than a single level: as much as we can bestow upon philosophy the task to resist ideology and protect the freedom of thought, we can also, in a narrower sense, talk about the liberation of language. Adorno identified many problems of up-to-date philosophy as an improper use of language and treatment of concepts. Proper or responsible use of language, according to him, requires identification and getting rid of intellectual prejudices that suffocate the nonconceptual in the concept. Intellectual experience also withers under the rule of instrumental reason and therefore resistance to its general discourse – all in all, in the sense which Michel Foucault bestowed upon this term – opens wider possibilities of experiences, including the intellectual ones. The quest of protecting actual and intellectual or, if you will, spiritual freedom, then seems to leave wider possibilities as to what philosophy ought to do on the top of interpretation of works of art and seeking intellectual experience. Of course, we could claim that protection of intellectual freedom is needed precisely to ensure the possibility of reaching the intellectual experience, which it undoubtedly is. Nonetheless, in wider terms, it simply serves as a guideline of philosophy as *praxis* as the critical theory understands it – especially when it comes to actual i.e. political freedom. It is also pertinent to note that we are discussing what tasks Adorno imposes rather on his own philosophy, not philosophy in general. These can be so far summarized followingly: philosophy, which ought to be actual – in the sense of posited and reacting to a specific historical situation – is supposed to aim at recovery of intellectual experience together with maintaining the widest area of possible experience in general by protecting both intellectual and actual freedom.

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<sup>68</sup> Adorno: *Aesthetic Theory*. London, New York: Continuum 1997, p. 72.

<sup>69</sup> Adorno & Horkheimer: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 202.

## 2. THE ESSAY AS A CRITICAL FORM

At this point, the core philosophical theses of Adorno's philosophy which underlie his essayism as such have been elaborated. To briefly summarize them: Together with Max Horkheimer, Adorno confronted the nature of enlightenment rationality suggesting that not only it does not represent the only valid way of relating to reality but that it is also responsible for the development of a multitude of pathologies on up-to-date society. The influence of enlightenment rationality, according to them, designated also both philosophical understanding and general use of language and thickened the barrier between people and nature, which in the speculative archaic world contained relation to so-called *mana* which is desirable to be – in a modern way, not in any kind of returning to animism or other pagan religious ways – recovered as we should give up modern tendency to dominate nature before the pathologies of enlightenment rationality bring about another historical tragedy of the scale of WW2. Rejecting the fundamental ideas of Western philosophical thought, Adorno does not believe in the possibility of establishing any kind of firm and possibly final ontology of language and states that the connection between language, thinking and reality, that had been understood as identical by German Idealism, is the very opposite: it is nonidentical and hence it is not fully explicable and penetrable by philosophy. Nevertheless, Adorno believes that in our experience of the world, we still can use concepts and philosophical expression through concepts to get beyond concepts and represent and mediate our experience of that which is nonconceptual. Philosophy ought to attempt to say the unsayable. In other words, we do not have to give up on the philosophical language and we can attempt to represent that which is nonidentical – falling out of the identity of thinking, reality and language – and hence nonconceptual, that which has been by mythical thinking relied on as *mana*, by the means of conceptual representation. Nevertheless, in order to represent this, we need to rethink *how* are philosophical texts to be composed. Adorno's proposition of a new way of putting together philosophical texts is inspired by Walter Benjamin's idea of the composition of 'constellations' which go beyond concepts by putting them in a specific configuration with other concepts. Adorno expands Benjamin's rather abstract insights about *how* to compose constellations further and introduces his essayism. This chapter will attempt to describe how in two steps.

In the first part of this chapter, I will make a more general introduction to the essayistic method, foremostly highlighting two of its crucial aspects. First, essayism, fully in accordance with the general idea of essayism before Adorno, should be understood as a textual method which is experimental. Second, these philosophical mechanisms consist of opposing the traditional

philosophical rules of conducting one's thoughts and therefore they make essayistic form thoroughly critical.

In the second part of this chapter then, I will list individual maxims of essayism which we can identify by reading "The Essay as Form" and show their interconnections as well as foundations in other places of Adorno's philosophical oeuvre. I categorise six main features of essayism: five of them I will present and interconnect in the three subsections of the second part and the last one, which I consider most problematic and wide, will be considered separately in Chapter 3.

## 2.1 Essay as an experimental and critical form

The initial text of *Notes to Literature*, "The Essay as Form" has been identified by Adorno himself – alongside the introduction to his *Three Studies on Husserl* – as his programmatic work.<sup>70</sup> It provides a hint of the ambition of all the other essays in this collection and outlines the methodology and premises of Adorno's philosophizing in general. "The Essay as Form" is an attempt at rethinking philosophizing as such, in which Adorno recasts the critique of traditional philosophy into an experimental form of composing philosophical texts. His thought is essentially simple: by critiquing traditional systematic thought identify its essential features and the intellectual biases caused by it, and then omit these from the new – essayistic – mode of philosophizing. Put differently, what Adorno does in the face of the actual state of philosophy, in the face of failure of big rationalistic theories, is carrying out an experiment, fully in accordance with the French meaning of the word *essayeur* which means "to try" or "to attempt": taking in consideration the state of nonidentity on the one hand and the possibility of relation to the nonconceptual on the other, together with the supreme philosophical tool of critique, he suggests a new philosophical method which would attempt to represent the intellectual experience and the nonconceptual side of the objects through moving counter to the rules of instrumental rationality and afterwards see whether it could come across something which eludes the traditional thinking. In other words, Adorno's essayism is experimental because it attempts to see what happens once certain philosophical mechanisms are put into operation.

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<sup>70</sup> Comp. Plass, *Language and History in T.W. Adorno's Notes to Literature*. New York and London: Routledge 2007, p. 24. On top of these two we can also mark as programmatic his lecture "Actuality of Philosophy" and previously mentioned intended preface to *Negative Dialectics*, "Towards the Theory of Intellectual Experience".

Essayistic experiment then, put in the most simplistic formulation, consists in implementing critique into the very method of composition of essays. In other words, the individual rules of conducting essayist's thoughts, and hence expressing them, go against the traditional methodological maxims of philosophical textual composition. As Adorno himself puts it:

“The essay gently challenges the ideal of *clara et distincta perceptio* and indubitable certainty. Altogether, it might be interpreted as a protest against the four rules established by Descartes’ *Discourse on Method* at the beginning of modern Western science and its theory.”<sup>71</sup>

How the essay goes against specifically Descartes’ rules of conducting rationalistic thought will be explicated in the following section. Here it should be foremostly noted that the critique of traditional systematic thinking is a necessary consequence of both the denial of systematic philosophy and the recognition that one cannot instantly break free from it by simply rejecting it. Adorno does not stop at the mere rejection of traditional thought though. He believes that a critique of traditional philosophical enterprises can bring new, positive possibilities to philosophy. That is, it is through the critique of traditional philosophy that tools can be created to engage with current philosophical issues. From this idea grows his negative dialectics, which reflects broadly on the historical situation and possibilities of philosophy after WW2, turning against idealistic dialectics through its own means.

In a more specific way, critique is then used when establishing the essay as a philosophical form. Critique is a necessary ingredient in the recipe of the “construction of the key before which reality springs open” which Adorno suggests as philosophy’s contemporary task in his inaugural lecture “Actuality of Philosophy” at the Frankfurt University in 1931.<sup>72</sup> The need for bringing the critical attitude into the centre of philosophy is implied by the speculative account of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in the sense of realization of the impossibility of progress, promised by Enlightenment rationality, which became painfully obvious due to the events of WW2.<sup>73</sup> The catastrophe of Oswiecim for Adorno makes “all talk of progress towards freedom seem ludicrous.”<sup>74</sup> Face to face with the tragedy of the Holocaust, whose organization was on top of everything terrifyingly rational, we cannot possibly consider history a linear process moving forward towards a better future, as Hegel understood it. If the use of instrumental

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>72</sup> Adorno: ‘Actuality of Philosophy’, p. 130.

<sup>73</sup> See also Allen: *The End of Progress. Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, p. 163.

<sup>74</sup> Adorno: *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964-1965*. Cambridge: Polity Press 2006, p. 7.

rationality can be employed within catastrophes such as Shoah, it needs to be critically examined, and attention has to be called to its possible alternatives.

Critique, according to Adorno, has been present in philosophy ever since the pre-Socratics. Major philosophies throughout history criticized their predecessors: Aristotle criticized Plato, Descartes criticized Aristotle, Kant criticized empiricism; the list goes all the way to Marx, at least. In the contemporary situation, critique, for Adorno, is what remains of the “philosophical tradition that today lies in ruins”<sup>75</sup> and presents the primary task of philosophy which should aim at reflecting the current state of affairs, which was generally considered the supreme guideline of the Frankfurt institute. In his *Negative Dialectics* he then specifies his own direction within this task, being true to his metaphysical ambitions: “Having broken its pledge to be one with the reality or at the point of realization, philosophy is obliged to ruthlessly criticize itself.”<sup>76</sup> Adorno was convinced, that, at least in the historical moment after WW2, the social contradictions appear in philosophy itself and the way it is being exercised, as philosophy has designated the way how we think. Philosophy should instead of creating big theories not only take a critical stance towards issues of its current time but also reflect tradition that shaped its means to do so. In other words, the current task of philosophy is an immanent critique of itself and of the way how we think. Besides that, Adorno, as we know, also criticizes capitalism, ideology and mass culture.

As Adorno says: “If philosophy is still necessary, it is so only in the way it has been from time immemorial: as critique, as resistance to the expanding heteronomy, even if only as thought’s powerless attempt to remain its own master and to convict of untruth, by their own criteria, both a fabricated mythology and a conniving, resigned acquiescence on the other of untruth.”<sup>77</sup> As mentioned, it implies a self-critique of philosophy, as well as a critique of the prevailing way of thinking in order to resist potential pathologies imposed by it. Hence, critique presents – apart from its political function<sup>78</sup> – a possibility to connect to intellectual experiences which wither under the rule of instrumental rationality.

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<sup>75</sup> Adorno: ‘Why Still Philosophy’. In: *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, p. 7.

<sup>76</sup> Adorno: *Negative Dialectics*, p. 3.

<sup>77</sup> Adorno: ‘Why Still Philosophy’. In: *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, p. 10.

<sup>78</sup> The previously mentioned protection of ‘actual freedom’ of course in more general terms implies critique in the service of protection of democracy, as “critique is essential to all democracy. Not only does democracy require the freedom to criticize and need critical impulses. Democracy is nothing less than defined by critique.” Adorno: ‘Critique’. In: *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, p. 281.

Change not only of *what* philosophy talks about but also of *how* it talks about it is necessary, because traditional thought has its claws deep in the way how we think. Our thought is, after centuries of development of enlightenment rationality, carried by a number of intellectual prejudices regarding what are the allegedly sole forms of how to conduct philosophical thoughts. Adorno's essays attempt to break this view and experiment with the ways we think, turning selected deep traditional philosophical convictions upside down, in other words by implementing critique directly into the way we conduct our thoughts. Adorno's essayism is hence thoroughly critical: it applies critical tools not only against individual philosophical ideas of the past, but it also experiments by integrating their dismissal into its own textual method.

## 2.2 Main maxims of essayistic composition

Certain quality which arises in Adorno's essayism eludes being exhaustively mapped down. Listing essay's critical features cannot do essay full justice and exhaustively explicate the nature of Adorno's textual method. Adorno's philosophical essay is not *only* an experiment of denying traditional philosophical methodology step by step;<sup>79</sup> as we will see later, also other circumstances than methodological omitting of traditional rules of conducting one's thoughts come to play. Tracing down individual critical steps which are applied throughout its composition nevertheless represents the best help in orientation in Adorno's essays for their readers, although it does aspire to provide a full map regarding how to move through his texts. I list them followingly:

- a. Essay does not reduce its observations about its object to a principle applicable on similar phenomenons.
- b. Essay focuses on details and particularities, not wholes.
- c. Essay does not define the concepts it uses.
- d. Even if it can pose arguments in a wider sense, essay does not proceed strictly argumentatively and does not create an argumentative structure.
- e. Essay refuses the 'terror of clarity' of the traditional academic writing according to which the thoughts in the text shall be straightforwardly traceable, comprehensible and summarizable.
- f. Essay gives preponderance to its object and refrains from being an aggregate of subjective inputs of its author.

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<sup>79</sup> Comp. Plass: *Language and History in Adorno's Notes to Literature*, p. 38.

Maxims (a) and (b) will be elaborated in the first subsection, maxim (c) will be expounded in the second subsection and maxims (d) and (e) will be considered in the third, and last subsection of this chapter. The last maxim of the preponderance of the essay's object will be examined in Chapter 3.

### **Refusal of reduction of observation to the principle and attention to the detail**

The nonidentity of reality, thought and language implies further methodological realizations. To use Adorno's own words "the essay allows for the consciousness of nonidentity, without expressing it directly; it is radical in its non-radicalism, *in refraining from any reduction to a principle.*"<sup>80</sup> For Adorno "the attempt to deduce the world in words from principle is the behaviour of someone who would like to usurp power instead of resisting it."<sup>81</sup> In other words, it represents the aforementioned tendency of enlightenment rationality to subsume every phenomenon and object under a general principle or binding natural law which will on one hand abolish the fear of the unknown future behaviour of the phenomenon or object – as this behaviour will become predictable – and through that, on the other hand, ensure the control over the phenomenon or object. The tendency to reduce an observation to a principle Adorno understands as a clear result of thought's "worst temptation, that of apologetics, of rationalization, of the justification of blindly professed convictions and opinions."<sup>82</sup>

Adorno turns this tendency upside down. While interpreting works of art or cultural artefacts, he does not make general observations which would be automatically transferable elsewhere. This particular point then implies the very nature of Adorno's philosophic insights: instead of representing "how the world works" his philosophy aims at the representation of "what is a certain aspect of a specific phenomenon like" without the goal of shedding light on a principle that guides its qualities or behaviour. Simply put, once Adorno makes an observation, he does not automatically reduce it to a general principle of its existence applicable to similar cases. Essay rather aims at revealing a unique aspect of a unique object and points out the value of the particularity of its observation, not its applicability elsewhere. That does not mean that the particular observation of an essay cannot give us more general information – a work of art about art in general, a social phenomenon about the society in which it occurs –, nevertheless, it is not explicated in order to be *reduced* to this general insight. Essay may generalize to a certain level,

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<sup>80</sup> Adorno: 'The Essay as Form'. In: *Notes to Literature*, p. 35. Italics added.

<sup>81</sup> Adorno: *Minima Moralia*. London: Verso 2005, p. 88-89.

<sup>82</sup> Adorno: 'Notes on Philosophical Thinking'. In: *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, p. 132-3.

however, its insights are not meant to be reduced to generalizations and are not originally intended as general insights. Essays aim to talk primarily about their object rather than about general patterns this object is situated in or which is implied by its features. The chase is declared after the nonconceptual side of concrete objects; if the essay succeeds at making an insight about a general matter or even provides some kind of aperture to universality – as universality is, according to Adorno beyond our direct conceptual grasp – it happens incidentally, not directly within any kind of intended inductive or deductive structure. This methodological feature is at its core fairly plain; however, it carries major structural implications and also designates the subject matter of Adorno's textual compositions.

The method of disintegration of the traditional method also requires a shift of philosophical focus: once principles and wholes prove philosophically impenetrable, it is necessary to look for another path to be taken. Hence, Adorno adds to the aforementioned “refraining from any reduction to a principle” and also the need for “accentuation of the partial against the total.”<sup>83</sup> He says: “The mind is indeed not capable of producing or grasping the totality of the real, but it may be possible to penetrate the detail, to explode in miniature the mass of merely existing reality.”<sup>84</sup>

The idea of shifting the attention from principles and wholes to details comes from Walter Benjamin, who Adorno has admired for his “the capacity for ‚interpolation in the smallest’” commenting that “for him one cell of reality contemplated outweighs ... the rest of the whole world.”<sup>85</sup> Susan Buck-Morss aptly described that Benjamin's focus as a tool of philosophical cognition “provided a means for making the very particularity of the object release a significance which dissolved its reified appearance and revealed it to be more than a mere tautology, more than simply identical with itself. At the same time, the knowledge it released remained bound to the particular, instead of sacrificing material specificity by moving to a level of abstract, ahistorical generalization.”<sup>86</sup> According to Buck-Morss, Benjamin's attention to detail managed to retrieve the meaning of phenomena which surpass the immediately given without generalizing them.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Adorno: ‘The Essay as Form’. In: *Notes to Literature*, p. 35.

<sup>84</sup> Adorno: ‘Actuality of Philosophy’, p. 133.

<sup>85</sup> Adorno: ‘Introduction to Benjamin's *Schriften*’. In: *Notes to Literature*, p. 476.

<sup>86</sup> Buck-Morss: *Origin of Negative Dialectics*, p. 74.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

This then applies to Adorno as well. Turn to the particularity is needed also because

“philosophy must learn to renounce the question of totality, ... learn to do without the symbolic function, in which for a long time, at least in idealism, the particular appeared to represent the general. It must give up the great problems ... Today between the wide meshes of big questions, interpretation slips away. If true interpretation succeeds only through a juxtaposition of the smallest elements, then it no longer has a role in the great problems in the traditional sense. Construction out of small and unintentional elements thus counts among the basic assumptions of philosophic interpretation.”<sup>88</sup>

This can also help us better understand what is the “size” of the observation that the essay is supposed to make. As we know, Adorno makes statements which can be considered general: in his essays, interpretations of concrete cultural artefacts (jazz, Hollywood movies and others) enable insights about the bourgeois society which produced them, interpretation of the approach of certain philosophical schools of thought often shows its general insufficiency etc. When Adorno introduces the aforementioned construction of “keys, before which reality springs open”, he is indeed immediately concerned with the size of philosophical inquiry, or in other words, with the question of how general the statements of philosophical interpretation can be. On the one hand, he denounces the categories of “old idealism” as too large. Philosophy cannot be actual anymore asking the big questions. On the other hand, he sees philosophical sociology as too small, saying that “a great number of sociologists carry nominalism so far that the concepts become too small to align the others with themselves, to enter with them into a constellation.”<sup>89</sup> His attention to detail then chooses a middle path between the two extremes: interpretation of concrete (cultural) artefacts and phenomena within a concrete historical period within a concrete society. The exact size is not narrowed down and specified by Adorno explicitly neither in “The Essay as Form”, nor in his other earlier or later texts, but we can observe its rough contours in Adorno’s individual essays. Those, nevertheless, as experimental forms should have it, play with the size of generality or particularity of their objects and insights. In literature, for example, Adorno experiments with multiple levels. Sometimes he interprets a concrete text, sometimes he makes observations about a whole *œuvre* and sometimes he briefly considers a whole genre.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Adorno: ‘Actuality of Philosophy’, p. 127-128.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 130.

<sup>90</sup> Good example of the first case is Adorno: ‘Trying to understand the *Endgame*’. In: *Notes to Literature*, pp. 237-267. Good example of the second is then Adorno: ‘Notes on Kafka’. In: *Prisms*. Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT

The turn to the detail also represents a rejection of Descartes' fourth rule from the *Discourse on method*, namely that the philosopher should "in every case to make enumeration so complete and reviews so general, that I might be assured that nothing was omitted."<sup>91</sup> Once we renounce the possibility of representing reality within rational concepts and admit that it does not reduce itself to these concepts, we face the world broken, shattered into countless individual phenomena which seem to be impenetrable and confusing. Adorno is aware of this. According to him "every object, and certainly an intellectual one, encompasses an infinite number of aspects, and only the intention of the cognitive subject decides among them."<sup>92</sup>

While summarizing this, Adorno unravels also wider consequences of such a shift:

"Because the unbroken order of concepts is not equivalent to what exists, the essay does not aim at a closed deductive or inductive structure. In particular, it rebels against the doctrine, deeply rooted since Plato, that what is transient, and ephemeral is unworthy of philosophy - that old injustice done to the transitory, whereby it is condemned again in the concept."<sup>93</sup>

The shift of focus carries a number of consequences for philosophical language. Not only should philosophy focus on detail, but it should also refrain from the illusion that the details could represent anything stable; therefore the ephemerality of the object must be taken into account. What the detail represents, the truth of the object, therefore also has to be radically rethought; it implies that no stable insights can be made. This also underlies the fact that Adorno's texts do not strive to provide definitive timeless answers to problems. Instead, he makes individual autonomous claims whose truth in the end dwells in their particularity. What Adorno offers us for example in his commentaries of individual works of art, phenomena and ideas are therefore timely insights that require a constant re-evaluation of their potential actuality.

### **Ever-changing meaning of the concept**

Another crucial feature of essay is that it does not define the concepts and terms it uses. Concepts for Adorno are not "fixed  $\chi\omega\rho\acute{\iota}\varsigma$ , in isolation from the object, but thrown in with them, abandoning the delusion that concepts that had been created for themselves also existed

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Press 1988, pp. 243-271. As an example of the last we can mention Adorno: 'Looking back on Surrealism'. In: *Notes to Literature*, pp. 102-105. In case of music, not literature, it is noteworthy mentioning his well-discussed essay 'On Jazz'. In: *Discourse* 12:1 (Fall-Winter 1989-90), pp. 45-69.

<sup>91</sup> Descartes: *A Discourse on Method*. London: Everyman 1912, p. 15.

<sup>92</sup> Adorno: 'The Essay as Form'. In: *Notes to Literature*, p. 40.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

intrinsically in themselves.”<sup>94</sup> That implies, simply put, that no concept has an eternal fixed meaning and philosophical language should therefore not define it and pretend that the connection between sign and its image is stable.

“The essay recoils from the violence in the dogma according to which the result of the process of abstraction, the concept, which, in contrast to the individual it grasps, is temporally invariant, should be granted ontological dignity. The fallacy that the *ordo idearum*, the order of ideas, is the *ordo rerum*, the order of things, is founded on the imputation of immediacy to something mediated.”<sup>95</sup>

Disrupting the notion of the ontological dignity of the word is one of the programmatic points of Adorno's philosophy. In “Theses on the Language of Philosopher”, he explicates one of the fundamental challenges that arise from the timely nature of words lacking stable meaning.

“Through language history wins a share of truth. Words are never merely signs of what is thought under them, but rather history erupts into words, establishing their truth-character. The share of history in the word unfailingly determines the choice of every word because history and truth meet in the word. ... The words are to bear the intention the philosopher wants to articulate and cannot otherwise articulate than by hitting upon the word in which such truth dwells at the historical hour.”<sup>96</sup>

Even though “Theses” are a very early text, this claim foresees and corresponds with “The Essay as Form”, drawing consequences from the disintegration of the identity schema. In a world which constantly develops in time and where there are no eternal ideas encompassing everything, words cannot be expected to have stable meanings. Historical conditioning of truth is inevitably intimately bound to the language since language is necessarily part of its discovery and expression. In fact, in Adorno’s understanding history penetrates the language which then attempts to break through the falseness of an ontologically grounded worldview at the deepest level.

Practically, however, this naturally presents one of the main difficulties while reading Adorno’s works. Concepts appear and re-appear throughout his texts without fixed definitions as Adorno’s meaning of concepts always arises from the context in which they are used.

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<sup>94</sup> Adorno: ‘Towards the Theory of Intellectual Experience’. In: *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, p. 192.

<sup>95</sup> Adorno: ‘The Essay as Form’. *Notes to Literature I*, p. 35.

<sup>96</sup> Adorno: ‘Theses on the Language of the Philosopher’. In: *Adorno and the Need in Thinking*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press 2016, p. 35-36.

Interpretations that attempt to explain the meaning of any of the fundamental problems Adorno deals with have to proceed contextually rather than analytically and see through the timely conditioning of various claims related to the selected theme.

The problem of contextually arising meaning of concepts is one of few that Adorno introduces through a parable:

“The way the essay appropriates concepts can best be compared to the behavior of someone in a foreign country who is forced to speak its language instead of piecing it together out of its elements according to rules learned in school. Such a person will read without a dictionary. If he sees the same word thirty times in continually changing contexts, he will have ascertained its meaning better than if he had looked up all the meanings listed, which are usually too narrow in relation to the changes that occur with changing contexts and too vague in relation to the unmistakable nuances that the context gives rise to in every individual case.”<sup>97</sup>

The ever-changing nature of a concept is a necessary consequence of socio-historical sediments in individual concepts; for example, terms such as democracy or justice had different content in ancient Athens than they have in the current European context, the term marriage implies different associations and social expectations in Islamic and Judaeo-Christian context and alike. Each of the concepts also carries a different contextual meaning for each individual person based on their personal experiences with the term. For Adorno, specifically, we can for example observe significant shifts in the meaning of concepts such as authenticity or intuition throughout his body of work depending on the text where he deals with them. Philosophical language cannot guarantee any stability of the concept – and if it did, if the essay defined the concepts it works with, it would, according to Adorno, promise the unfeasible and in the end lie. All essay’s concepts therefore “are to be presented in such a way that they support one another, that each becomes articulated through its configuration with the others.”<sup>98</sup> If the concepts’ meaning arises from the context in which they are used, it implies that what guarantees and creates their meaning is their position in the constellation.

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<sup>97</sup> Adorno: ‘The Essay as Form’. In: *Notes to Literature*, p. 38.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

## Rejection of argumentative structure and general density of the text

According to Adorno, “one should not allow oneself to be terrorized by the demand of clarity that every step be verifiable.”<sup>99</sup> His texts refuse to reduce philosophical representation to a description of a train of thought and consistent arguments. Hence, Adorno’s essays lack argumentative structure and most of the time avoid explaining why they reached certain conclusions rather than another. Once his method aims at capturing something that former approaches failed to capture it follows that the traditional way of thinking cannot be imposed on the process of expressing it. The essay attempts to approach “the new in its newness, not as something that can be translated back into the old existing forms.”<sup>100</sup>

It also leads to conclusions such as “no philosophical thinking of quality allows of concise summary”<sup>101</sup> which has undoubtedly baffled already several generations of philosophy students who tried to summarize Adorno’s texts. Every Adorno’s reader eventually makes an observation that his works do not proceed continuously or argumentatively. In the case of the latter, it is noteworthy that Adorno still does present philosophical arguments, especially once he is being critical. These arguments nevertheless, as we come to observe are often open-ended and their supporting claims often seem to come out of nowhere as Adorno does not even bother to connect his statements with referencing e.g. their speculative origins in his earlier works. Neglect of argumentative standards as we know them from the analytic tradition then of course comes without saying. Essays actually, according to Adorno do not “aim at a closed deductive or inductive structure.”<sup>102</sup> The constellations aim to represent – or we could even say make happen – the nonconceptual, not explain or defend it.

This does not happen in a way which would be marked by many as elegant. Adorno’s texts in a way struggle with the reader. As Ulrich Plass promptly points out, his prose is not beautiful. “It seems to both attract and repel readers for its density, strangeness and hermeticism.”<sup>103</sup> Adorno’s texts resist comprehensive summaries moving from premises to conclusions, they resist simplifications and present difficulties for the reader’s attentive faculties due to their patulous – and not always strictly logical – sentence structure and frequent lack of clear flow

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<sup>99</sup> Adorno: ‘Der Begriff der Philosophie: Vorlesung Wintersemester 1951/52: Mitschrift von Kraft Bretschneider’. In: *Frankfurter Adorno Blätter* 2 (1993), p. 34.

<sup>100</sup> Adorno: ‘The Essay as Form’. In: *Notes to Literature*, p. 45.

<sup>101</sup> Adorno: ‘Notes on Philosophical Thinking’. In: *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, p. 131.

<sup>102</sup> Adorno: ‘The Essay as Form’. In: *Notes to Literature*, p. 35.

<sup>103</sup> Plass: *Language and History in Adorno’s Notes to Literature*, p. 1.

from one idea to another. They are rather paratactical, as Jay Bernstein aptly describes it. They involve “placing concepts or propositions or larger trains of thought one after the other without indicating relations of coordination or subordination between them. Paratactic orderings are subversive of the force of logical syntax: the lack of a guiding connective forces the reader to establish the linkage between propositions, or larger blocks of text, substantively rather than relying on the familiar connects to do the work for her.”<sup>104</sup>

Adorno’s enigmatic style also makes translation of his texts from German to another language above-averagely difficult; Adorno’s sentence structures are flamboyantly branched and filled with untraditional, almost poignant use of figures of speech and philosophical metaphors and metonyms.<sup>105</sup> This especially applies to Adorno’s later texts in which we can indeed observe increasing obscurity over the course of time. An important milestone of this development is most likely “The Essay as Form” written between 1954 and 1958, in which the antisystematic impulse found its linguistical realization. Around the time of its publication in the first volume of his *Notes to Literature* Adorno indeed turned foremostly to writing essays, even though they did not become his sole means of philosophical expression, as he also worked on his *Negative Dialectic* and *Aesthetic Theory*; the latter nevertheless retains multiple essayistic qualities.

With his inscrutable writing, Adorno resists the ongoing decline of language that he observed within the German culture and that he considered to be one of the symptoms of the disintegration of the intellectual potential of society. Adorno observed this decay, in accordance with his method, in the smallest particular details: for example, in the fact that in modern German literature, the semicolon is dying out as a result of the fear of page-long paragraphs, a literary tool so masterfully used by Adorno’s favourite Marcel Proust. Adorno claims that this fear has been in the end created by the marketplace, “by the consumer who does not want to tax himself and to whom first editors and then writers accommodated for the sake of their incomes, until finally, they invented ideologies for their own accommodation, like lucidity, objectivity

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<sup>104</sup> Bernstein: *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*, p. 356.

<sup>105</sup> This, as Fredric Jameson pertinently commented, is not always preserved in Adorno’s English translations, which are, also due to the size of English-speaking academia, very uneven. Jameson’s description of Adorno’s language is strikingly apt: “In particular, Adorno’s sentences try to recover the intricately bound spatial freedom of Latinate declension, objects that grandly precede subjects, and a play of gendered nouns that the mind scans by means of the appropriately modified relative. Chiasmus here becomes the structural echo by one part of the sentence of another, distant in time and space; and the result of these internal operations is the closure of the aphorism itself; definitive, yet a forthright act that passes on, not into silence, but into other acts and gestures. Adorno should then be the occasion of forging a powerful new Germanic sentence structure in English.” Jameson: *Late Marxism: Adorno or The Persistence of Dialectics*. London and New York: Verso 1990, p. ix.

and concise precision.”<sup>106</sup> Short sentences, which Adorno in general rather avoids, raise the tendency to create strict logical structures and, Adorno waspishly concludes, ratify “the imbecility by a reasonableness purged of all admixtures” while leaving “the idea short of breath.”<sup>107</sup>

In his struggle against the decay of the German language, Adorno also takes as his ally foreign words, noting that they can serve as a “beneficial interruption of the conformist moment of language, the muddy stream in which the specific expressive drowns”<sup>108</sup> and extensively uses them in his texts; however, he notes that they require being used not arbitrarily and only in places where they express the stream of thought more precisely than their informal equivalent. Adorno’s consideration of foreign words – as well as to a lesser extent his consideration of the use of interpunction – however, opens an important question regarding his texts: which insights in this regard are related purely to his considerations of the German situation of the second half of 20<sup>th</sup> century and which transcend this specific national situation and therefore can be considered as matters of his general textual composition which we could perceive as more universal? In his essay “Words from Abroad”, Adorno considers that reflective and informed use of foreign words serve as interruptions of the conformist moments of the German language, that “bring out what is intended but obscured by the bad generality of language use” and as such even “serve the expression of truth.”<sup>109</sup> However, he points out that this is not the situation of English or French that went through different historical developments. His essay “Punctuation Marks” where he revises the improper use of interpunction is also primarily tied to his domestic literary scene. His stylistic considerations therefore cannot be applied to every European language and cannot be considered to be an integral part of Adorno’s theory of language in general. Although we can consider the possibility that there are languages in which Adorno’s stylistic considerations can serve a similar, if not the same, purpose as in German – especially those that either grew up with or were significantly influenced by German culture – their general applicability is not granted and they cannot be considered as an integral part of his language theory in general.

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<sup>106</sup> Adorno: ‘Punctuation Marks’. In: *Notes to Literature*, p. 110.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Adorno: ‘Words from Abroad’. In: *Notes to Literature*, p. 191.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p. 191.

The density of texts is undoubtedly an inevitable consequence of the previously listed features of his essayistic method: his refusal of the “cliché of comprehensibility”,<sup>110</sup> refusal of cartesian rules of reasoning, the fact that the meaning of concepts he uses is determined contextually instead of being firmly established, lack of conventional argumentative structure; all of these aspects necessarily imply unorthodox structure the text avoiding what we ordinarily perceive as well-structured form. Perpetuity of Adorno’s expression is nevertheless more than a consequence of his maxims; his texts resist their readers in order to provoke and activate intellectual faculties that are specifically needed to think in the way Adorno presents. Valéry’s sentence about great art which “demands the employment of all of man’s faculties, to produce works which invoke and bring into play all of another man’s faculties for their comprehension”<sup>111</sup> could be easily reformulated to speak about Adorno’s idea of philosophy. His texts demand nothing less from their readers than to change their way of thinking, and this is precisely what they try to achieve with their structure because the rejection of philosophical principles is not only formal in Adorno’s work; it is directly incorporated into the way in which his texts are formulated. This demandingness of Adorno’s texts is a protest against the serving of ready-made and digestible ideas. As Roger Foster points out, the very fact that Adorno is such a demanding reader and his texts so significantly depart from conventional ways of philosophizing creates an urgent reason for those who want to fully understand the possibilities of what can be philosophically experienced to continue reading Adorno; and this in spite of – or even because of – that nowadays they may be is even less readable than fifty years ago.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Adorno, ‘The Essay as Form’. In: *Notes to Literature*, p. 39.

<sup>111</sup> Valéry: *Dance, Drawing, Degas*. New York: Lear Publishers 1948, p. 78.

<sup>112</sup> Comp. Foster: *Adorno and Philosophical Modernism*. Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Lexington Books 2016, p. 2.

### 3. BECOMING THE ARENA OF INTELLECTUAL EXPERIENCE: THE SUBJECT-OBJECT RELATIONSHIP IN AN ESSAY

In “The Essay as Form”, Adorno states that while composing the essay “the thinker does not actually think, but rather makes himself into an arena for intellectual experience, without unravelling it.”<sup>113</sup> He does not, though, provide an explicit account of how this happens and how is the author of the essay supposed to achieve this. This chapter will take a closer look at this matter and will deal with the following question: what should according to Adorno happen between the author and object within essayistic composition? How does a thinker become an arena of intellectual experience encapsulated in the subject matter that he writes about and arrive at its successful representation?

Before we move to the issue of the relationship between the author and the object of the essay, we will have to first quickly introduce Adorno’s position regarding the subject-object relationship in general, as the essayistic method is permeated by the fact that Adorno’s philosophy announces turn to the object. This turn from the primacy of subjectivity to what Adorno marks as the ‘preponderance of the object’ (*Vorrang des Objekts*) is composed of two important moments. First, it is a critical move, connected to Frankfurt School’s turn to materialism. Adorno himself reconsidered the subject-object in opposition to idealistic and rationalistic philosophy, which is according to him “subjectivistic even when it denies being so.”<sup>114</sup> In this sense, the preponderance of the object appears as a consequence of the critique of the subjectivistic philosophy of rationalism, idealism and phenomenology, following the same principle as the individual maxims of the essay. In this regard, especially Adorno’s response to Kant’s ideas is interesting, I will pay it special attention. Second, it is important to note, also for the inquiry in the fourth chapter, that the turn to the object is not an attempt to eliminate subjectivity completely. Adorno’s conception strives to merely limit the subject, being aware that the subject’s complete suspension is impossible and nonsensical. Both of these moments of subject-object relationship will be briefly discussed in section 3.1.

As mentioned, the preponderance of the object in Adorno’s thought puts forward the task of limiting the subject; this is a crucial moment of ‘becoming an arena of intellectual experience’. What form this limitation should take is nevertheless unclear. Therefore, in section 3.2, we will follow interspersed commentaries on two of Adorno’s favourite literary authors who can serve

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<sup>113</sup> Adorno: ‘The Essay as Form’. In: *Notes to Literature*, p. 38.

<sup>114</sup> Adorno: *Negative Dialectics*, p. 183.

as examples of the subject's limitation according to him and attempt to get a hint of its possible forms. Namely, we will take a look at Paul Valéry's theoretic insights about the relationship between an artist and his material and Adorno's interpretation of Marcel Proust who, according to Adorno, managed to immerse himself into the object of his *À la recherche du temps perdu*, the French aristocracy of his time, and by that make compelling insights about it.

The chapter will conclude by taking a closer look at what Adorno says about the preponderance of the object when it comes to the composition of the essay. He points out that the essay "gives the object more of what belongs to it than if it were mercilessly incorporated into the order of ideas"<sup>115</sup> and reveals a few methodological hints of what preponderance of the object means specifically for the essay and the essayist in relation to essay's subject matter. In summary, section 3.3 will attempt to reflect on Adorno's mentions of the subject-object problem in "The Essay as Form" and attempt to connect these insights with previous findings of this chapter.

### **3.1 On the subject-object relation**

It will not come as a surprise that Adorno is critical to traditional attempts to establish a full philosophical understanding of the subject-object relationship. Similarly, as in the case of intertwinement between language, thinking and reality, Adorno points out the impossibility of resolving the philosophical problem of subject and object; both in terms of philosophizing about where one ends and the other begins and how much our subjectivity determines the way we perceive whatever object, either abstract or physical. On top of that, he criticizes the tendency to resolve this philosophical problem by attempting to establish precise boundaries between subjectivity and objectivity, saying that "the difference between subject and object slices through subject as well as through object. It can no more be absolutized than it can be removed from thought."<sup>116</sup> Nevertheless, again similarly as in the case of the problem of language-thought-reality relationship, as described in the first chapter, Adorno does not completely give up on addressing this topic. Even though he does not present us with a set of hypotheses that would be sufficient to create a philosophical theory of subject-object relationship, we should be able to extract at least several particular insights regarding it. These will be helpful in making further specifications about the relationship between the subject as the author of an essay and the object as a subject matter of his essay.

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<sup>115</sup> Adorno: 'The Essay as Form'. In: *Notes to Literature*, p. 44.

<sup>116</sup> Adorno: 'On Subject and Object'. In: *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, p. 256.

The reason for the turn to the object at the expense of philosophically introspective inquiries about the subject is clearly explicated by Adorno as a necessary implication of critical thought posing the thesis of nonidentity:

“Carried through, the critique of identity is a groping for the preponderance of the object. Identitarian thinking is subjectivistic even when it denies being so. To revise that kind of thinking, to debit identity with untruth, does not bring subject and object into a balance, nor does it raise the concept of function to an exclusively dominant role in cognition; *even when we merely limit the subject, we put an end to its power.*”<sup>117</sup>

This passage introduces two questions. A smaller one is what philosophy does Adorno oppose precisely? A major one then is what does the proposed limitation of the subject entail?

So, who is Adorno setting himself against when he introduces the preponderance of the object? As we can see, Adorno’s turn to the object is similar to individual maxims of the essayistic method based on the critique of traditional thought. It is connected to the Frankfurt School’s turn to materialism and turn away from the philosophical past which was overly preoccupied by the way how language has been built by human subjects.<sup>118</sup> Adorno’s criticism is oriented against a number of philosophical authors, not only identitarian thinkers of Hegelian tradition which due to its foundation in the idea of absolute consciousness, supposed to encompass everything in reality, neglects the philosophical significance of the material, objective and somatic. Hand in hand with that goes turning away from cartesian subjectivism, as Descartes’ foundation of philosophy in *cogito ergo sum* speaks for itself.

The problem of subject-object relation also underlies Adorno’s discontent with early phenomenology.<sup>119</sup> His general refusal of Heidegger’s philosophy dwells, among other things, in the fact that, according to Adorno, in Heidegger’s philosophy “the question of objective ideas and objective being has been replaced by the subjective. The challenge of material ontology is reduced to the realm of subjectivity, within the depths of which it searches for what it was not

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<sup>117</sup> Adorno: *Negative Dialectics*, p. 183. Italics added.

<sup>118</sup> Comp. Morgan: ‘A Preponderance of Objects: Critical Theory and Turn to the Object’. *Adorno Studies* 1:1 (2016), p. 15. Also, as Susan Buck-Morss points out, this materialism is rather than the traditional Marxist materialism a pre-Kantian materialism. Comp. Buck-Morss: *Origin of Negative Dialectics*, p. 78.

<sup>119</sup> As I will mention in a footnote in the next chapter, Adorno seems to have been unfamiliar with e.g. work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, so his criticism of phenomenology focuses solely on Husserl and Heidegger’s work.

able to locate in the open fullness of reality.”<sup>120</sup> Husserl, even though generally respected by Adorno significantly more than Heidegger, faces, in the end, similar line of criticism. Adorno says that Husserl attempts “to break through the walls of idealism with purely idealist instruments, namely, by an exclusive analysis of the structure of thought and consciousness”<sup>121</sup> and therefore remains hopelessly subjectivistic, tied to both Cartesianism and idealism.

When it comes to Kant, we can perceive two lines of thought. Kant’s conception of the individual spontaneously cognizing subject is taken on board, nevertheless, it is radically remade by Adorno. The subject Kant brings on the scene is too formal and abstract for him. As this subject gets to know reality by means of universal forms and categories of pure reason, it ignores historical particularity and therefore implies the interchangeability of the individual subjects that recognize the world.<sup>122</sup> As Susan Buck-Morss formulates it: “Kant’s subject ... molded the objects in accord with the a priori forms and categories of rational understanding: the mind had a preformed, permanent structure to which the objects of experience conformed. But Adorno, in giving Kant’s Copernican revolution a turn, argued that the object, not the subject, was preeminent.”<sup>123</sup>

Adorno’s thoughts on Kant nevertheless do not end at this rather critical attitude to him. According to Adorno, Kant gives also a positive impulse to the philosophical inquiry regarding the subject-object relationship because he “still refused to be talked out of the moment of objective preponderance. He used an objective intention to direct the subjective analysis of the cognitive faculty in his *Critique of Pure Reason* and stubbornly defended the transcendent thing-in-itself.”<sup>124</sup> Adorno’s striving to approach the nonconceptual side of the object and mediate the intellectual experience of course differs from the Kantian idea of thing-in-itself on many crucial levels, nonetheless, it seems that in *Negative Dialectics*’ passages on the preponderance of object, Adorno recognizes and respects Kant’s general line of thought. Apparently, according to Adorno, Kant’s philosophy carries something that we could loosely mark as a right philosophical intuition in regard to the subject-object relation, even though it is

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<sup>120</sup> Adorno: ‘Actuality of Philosophy’, p. 123. For fuller elaboration of Adorno’s criticism of Heidegger’s subjectivism see e.g. O’Connor, B., ‘Adorno, Heidegger and the Critique of Epistemology’. *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 24:6 (1998), pp. 43-62.

<sup>121</sup> Adorno: ‘Husserl and the Problem of Idealism’. In: *The Journal of Philosophy*, 37:1 (1940), p. 17. For fuller elaboration of Adorno’s criticism of Husserl’s subjectivism see Miranda: ‘Adorno Contra Transcendental Idealism: A Critique of Husserl’s Notion of Objectivity’. In: *Scientia* 9:2 (2020), p. 66-75.

<sup>122</sup> Buck-Morss: *Origin of Negative Dialectics*, p. 82-83.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>124</sup> Adorno: *Negative Dialectics*, p. 184.

wrong when it comes to his understanding of the subject. Simply put, Kant appears to attach importance to the existence of an object out of reason's reach as the thing-in-itself represents objective content impenetrable by idealistic thinking.<sup>125</sup> We may go as far as saying that it seems as if Kant's thinking retained something of what Adorno would understand as an intuition of the existence of the nonidentical.

As it is visible from the choice of the criticized philosophers, especially then from Adorno's take on Kant's dealing with the subject-object problem, the preponderance of the object is a result of opposing the idea that philosophical understanding can be built from within the subject and through introspection of the subject within itself. Simply put, desirable philosophical insights come from the object, not from inquiry about the mind that attempts to reach the truth by any kind of introspection: hence, the preponderance of the object. This preponderance is not anti-subjectivistic though. Rather, it is supposed to create a new space for the emancipation of subjects. As Adorno puts it in his *Negative Dialectics*:

“What transmits the facts is not so much the subjective mechanism of their pre-formation and comprehension as it is the objectivity heteronomous to the subject, the objectivity behind that which the subject can experience. This objectivity is denied to the primary realm of subjective experience. .... To give the object its due instead of being content with the false copy, the subject would have to resist the average value of such objectivity and to free itself as a subject. It is on this emancipation, not on the subject's insatiable repression, that objectivity depends today. The superiority of objectification in the subjects not only keeps them from becoming subjects; it equally prevents a cognition of objectivity.”<sup>126</sup>

This quotation then introduces our second question, which will be gradually disentangled in the rest of this section and throughout the following section. Emancipation from the false building of the world from within the subject requires not “subject's insatiable repression” but rather, as mentioned earlier, its “limitation”. What does it mean then to “merely limit the subject”? What we can see immediately is that Adorno does not intend to attempt to suspend the subject completely. Within the declaration of impossibility to make the connection between subject and object fully transparent, e.g. clearly define where one ends and the other one begins, such effort would be indeed contradictory. Instead, Adorno says the following:

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<sup>125</sup> See also Gordon: *Adorno and Existence*. Harvard University Press 2016, p. 128.

<sup>126</sup> Adorno: *Negative Dialectics*, p. 170-171. Comp. also w. Jameson: *Late Marxism: Adorno or The Persistence of Dialectics*, p. 36.

“Truth is not the residue that remains after the subject has been eradicated. Rather, it must incorporate all innervation and experience into the contemplation of the subject matter in order, according to its ideal, to vanish within it.”<sup>127</sup>

Leaving aside the analysis of Adorno’s notion of truth,<sup>128</sup> we come here to the notion of limiting the subject through something which seems as a kind of dissolution of the subject into its subject matter. Adorno is preoccupied with the preponderance of objects because of a simple and obvious reason which is apparent in connection to his essayistic project: even though concepts – which carry within themselves relations to the nonconceptual – are constructed by subject, the nonconceptual is still located within the object; hence, philosophy should turn its attention to it. Simply put, we cannot look for the nonconceptual purely within ourselves. To understand *how* it may be possible to reach the nonidentical, before we dive into the limitation of the subject in art, another player must be brought on the stage in order to answer the question of how to span over the gap between us and the nonidentical. This player is the notion of experience, as, even though we are talking about representation of the nonconceptual within concepts, it can be still *experienced*. This aspect can be cracked by the following Adorno’s claim:

“The objective contents of individual experience are produced not through the method of comparative generalization, but rather through the dissolution of what prevents that experience – as itself biased – from giving itself to the object without reservation ... The key position of the subject in cognition is experience, not form ... Knowledge of the object is brought closer by the act of the subject rending the veil it weaves about the object. It can do this only when, passive, without anxiety, it entrusts itself to its own experience. In the places where subjective reason senses subjective contingency, the primacy of the object shimmers through: that in the object which is not a subjective addition. Subject is the agent, not the constituent, of object ...”<sup>129</sup>

The task of ‘dissolution of what prevents the experience’ then corresponds with the main idea of the essayistic method: what essayistic maxims aim at is disposing of the bias of systematic rationality which prevents the author from entrusting himself to the essay’s object. This circles

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<sup>127</sup> Adorno: ‘Notes on Philosophical Thinking’. In: *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, p. 130.

<sup>128</sup> For its account see e.g. Hulatt: *Adorno’s Theory of Philosophical and Aesthetic Truth*. New York, Colombia University Press 2016.

<sup>129</sup> Adorno: ‘On Subject and Object’. In: *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, p. 253-254. Mentioned experienced contingency as a key to overcoming the subject-object gap will be elaborated in the subsection on Proust.

back to the introduction of the preponderance of the object through critique whose main task is the dissolution of bias.

### **3.2 Limitation of the subject<sup>130</sup>**

How does it happen that the author's subjectivity vanishes within the object? This question does not have an explicit answer in Adorno's work. Hints are nevertheless dropped. In order to make at least partial sense of them, it will be helpful to track down successful cases of limitation of subjectivity which Adorno observes in the works of other authors. We will therefore bring on the scene two Frenchmen Adorno admired and repeatedly wrote about: Paul Valéry and Marcel Proust. Apart from dedicating each of them to several of his essays, both of their names are scattered also throughout numerous other Adorno's texts where he uses them mostly to highlight various of his own philosophical positions.

Before we show the two concrete examples of successful limitation of the subjectivity of an author, a small stop is necessary in order to shortly meditate on the following issue: Adorno's insights regarding the relationship between the author and his work seem to be analogical, even interchangeable in case of the relation between the philosopher and his essay and artist and his work of art. Such an issue cannot be merely stated though. We have to reflect whether the insights Adorno gains from art, or in the case of Valéry, reflections about art, can be really transferred to Adorno's essayism. For an essay, as Adorno introduces it, is not art: he is very clear in this aspect. The whole first part of "The Essay as Form" is dedicated to sketching a line between essay and art.

Essayistic form comes into play after the acknowledgement of complete break-up between science and art which Adorno announces in "The Essay as Form". However, it cannot be reduced to either: an essay is not art, as it does not "artistically create something"<sup>131</sup> and it, obviously, does not follow the rules of organized science, as it breaks up with the method of traditional philosophy which has close bounds with them. Essay possesses "something like an aesthetic autonomy that is easily accused of being simply derived from art, although it is distinguished from art by its medium, concepts, and by its claim to a truth devoid of aesthetic

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<sup>130</sup> This and part 3.3 operate with and expands ideas from my article 'Liberation of Language and Suspension of Subject in T.W. Adorno's *Notes to Literature*'. In: *Humanities Bulletin*, 5:2 (2022), pp. 26-39.

<sup>131</sup> "Instead of accomplishing something scientifically or creating something artistically, its efforts reflect the leisure of a childlike person who has no qualms about taking his inspiration from what others have done before him." Adorno: 'The Essay as Form'. In: *Notes to Literature*, p. 30.

semblance.”<sup>132</sup> Essay, therefore, has more in common with art than science. According to Adorno, “one can hardly speak of aesthetic matters unaesthetically, devoid of resemblance to the subject matter.”<sup>133</sup> As mentioned in section 1.3, essay shares its object with art: essay interprets art “in order to say what it is unable to say, whereas art is only able to say it by not saying it.”<sup>134</sup> Both the essayist and the artist attempt to represent the same thing – or mediate an experience relating to this thing: the nonconceptual. This hints towards the option that Adorno’s vision of the process of creation of work of art and philosophical text seems to be in this aspect closely related. In the final part of this chapter, we will nonetheless return to this issue to assess the applicability of the insights gained from Valéry and Proust on the issue of limitation of subjectivity within the essayistic composition in detail.

### **Limitation by means of *métier*: Adorno on Valéry**

According to Adorno, “great insights into art come about either in utter detachment, deduced from a concept undisturbed by so-called *connoisseurship*, as in Kant or Hegel, or in absolute proximity, the attitude of the person behind the scenes, who is not an audience but rather follows the work of art from the point of view of how it is made, of technique.”<sup>135</sup> Valéry, as an excellent poet, who is known to have spent several hours every day writing down his reflections on art, is one of the best possible examples of the latter case. From Adorno’s remarks, it becomes apparent that Valéry’s reflective skills are one of the main reasons why he is regarded so highly by him. According to him, Valéry is trying “to carry out the spiritual process that is strictly immanent in the work of art itself”<sup>136</sup> which is for Adorno actually one of the main tasks of philosophy. Valéry’s “ability to see works of art from the inside ... is probably the only form in which aesthetics is still possible.”<sup>137</sup> Valéry is due to his immediate closeness to the artistic production in combination with his highly developed reflective skills able to explicate the finest aesthetic insights. In light of this, Adorno deeply respects Valéry’s conclusions even though he marks him as a “man of order”<sup>138</sup> and an utterly rational thinker which may be otherwise, considering it was expressed by a thinker who promoted antisystematic thinking for most of his

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Adorno: *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 72.

<sup>135</sup> Adorno: ‘Artist as Deputy’. In: *Notes to Literature*, p. 114.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Adorno: ‘Valéry’s Deviations’. In: *Notes to Literature*, p. 148.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

life, taken as a hint towards potential hostility to his work. With Valéry this is nevertheless not the case and Adorno repeatedly voices his deep respect for him.

In respect to the matter of subjectivity, Valéry repeatedly stumbles upon the topic of how the artist relates to the objective content he represents in his work of art. According to Adorno, Valéry's thinking "is primed by surrendering to the object without reservations and not playing with itself."<sup>139</sup> Adorno provided the most wholesome account of Valéry's insights regarding this matter in his essay *Artist as Deputy*, in which he comments on Valéry's short prose *Degas Dance Drawing*. The Frenchman wrote this book shortly after Edgar Degas' death as a tribute to his good friend. This remarkable text presents a line of loose associations of Valéry's thoughts about this painter and meaning of his work. While interpreting this text, Adorno abstains from sharing his own thoughts on Degas' work and focuses solely on Valéry's insights.

Valéry generally weaves his thoughts around Degas in the spirit of respect for his technical abilities and life driven by the necessity of training his artistic craftsmanship. Degas was anything but a lazy bohemian artist. Valéry describes him as a man who tirelessly attempted to keep up with the newest insights regarding painting and worked very hard. Each of his paintings was preceded by dozens of sketches. He studied his objects – mainly racing horses and ballet dancers – long and intensively and combined his instant insights with continuous toil in the atelier.<sup>140</sup> Valéry describes Degas followingly:

“Work, drawing, had become with him a passion, a discipline, a mystical and aesthetic entity, with a completely self-sufficient purpose. It was a sovereign occupation, doing away with all other considerations; a punctual precise occasion for problems, which freed him from all other curiosity. He was and wanted to a kind of specialist in a genre which might attain a certain universality.”<sup>141</sup>

Extraordinary works of art require, according to both Adorno and Valéry, all artistic faculties constantly trained and developed. No great art ever comes into existence without its authors' years of training in artistic craftsmanship. This dedication of an artist to his own work goes so far that the subject of the artist has to be, in a way, put aside. His feelings and personality are not the subject matter of his artistic creation – great art is not at all meant to be an expression of the self of its author. According to Adorno, Valéry “knows better than anyone that it is only

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid., p. 148.

<sup>140</sup> Valéry: *Dance, Degas, Drawing*, p. 48.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

the least part of his work that ‚belongs‘ to the artist; that in actuality the process of artistic production, and with it, the unfolding of the truth contained in the work of art, has the strict form of lawfulness wrested from the subject matter itself.”<sup>142</sup> Adorno points out that Hegel prophetically plagiarized Valéry when he pointed out that the worse is an artist, the more himself, his particularity and arbitrariness are visible in his work.<sup>143</sup> If something universal is to be revealed in the work of art, the work of art has to stand for far more than an expression of artist’s individual feelings or experiences. Adorno then adds that what Valéry “demands of the artist, technical self-restriction, subjection to the subject matter, is aimed not at limitation but at expansion. The artist who is the bearer of the work of art is not the individual who produces it; rather, through his work (...) he becomes the representative of the total social subject (*Gesamtsubjekt*).”<sup>144</sup>

This thought goes beyond the idea of an artist as a servant to society. Adorno, interpreting Valéry, says that “by submitting to the requirements of the work of art, [artist] eliminates from it everything that could be due simply to the contingency of his individuation.”<sup>145</sup> According to Adorno, it is derived rather from Valéry’s reflection on the process of creation of the work of art and the experience of unfolding the meaning that can be revealed in the course of the creation of the work of art itself and which transcends the artist himself. If something objective, something more than the artist himself is supposed to appear in his work of art, the artist has to renounce his own self to his work. So, in summary, in the case of Valéry’s reflection of Degas, we are presented with an image of objectivity mediated through the *métier* of the artist to which the artist gives himself to. The subjectivity of the artist vanishes within the artistic process required by the work of art itself and lets the craft, the training to which his whole life has been dedicated, speak on its own.

### **Limitation through immersion in the object: Adorno on Proust**

Proust presents a fairly different case than Valéry. One may expect that Adorno, publishing the essay about Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu* five years after his essay on Valéry’s *Dance Degas Drawing* would connect his previous insights regarding the importance of *métier* directly to Proust. Given that Proust presents one of the greatest writers of all time, it would be at hand that Adorno could have commented on how Proust’s craft creates the unrepeatability of

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<sup>142</sup> Adorno: ‘Artist as Deputy’. In: *Notes to Literature*, p. 118.

<sup>143</sup> Adorno: ‘Valéry’s Deviations’. In: *Notes to Literature*, p. 151.

<sup>144</sup> Adorno: ‘Artist as Deputy’. In: *Notes to Literature*, p. 120.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

*Recherche*'s insights. This is nevertheless not the case. Even though obviously Adorno recognizes Proust's writing mastery, he does not identify it as a main key to Proust's success in artistic representation and does not reflect it thoroughly; Proust's *métier* as we will see, is merely one piece of the puzzle. Previously described the incorporation of "all innervation and experience into the contemplation of the subject matter in order ... to vanish within it"<sup>146</sup> and "giving itself to the object without reservation" in which "the key position of the subject in cognition is experience,"<sup>147</sup> happens for Proust differently than described Degas' suspension of subjectivity through submission of his whole life to his *métier*. After all, even though Proust possessed incredible literary talent, biographies about him reveal that he lacked self-discipline and was able to fully dedicate himself to his work of art (only) in the last three years of his life. Until then he was very far from working hard and giving complete priority to training himself and conscientiously creating his novels. Adorno does not hesitate to mark Proust as a snob and "spoilt narcissist"; exactly because it is what was according to Adorno necessary to enable him to capture snobbery and its social implications with unmatched genuineness.

"Snobbery, as the concept dominates Proust's novel, is the erotic cathexis of social matters. Hence it violates a social taboo, which is revenged on the person who broaches the delicate issue. The snob demonstrates something ... universal, the deflection of love from the immediacy of the person to social relationships."<sup>148</sup>

Proust approaches the snobbery of the French aristocracy around the *fin de siècle* from the inside which implies an unrepeatable quality of his aesthetic approach. He obviously adores the characters he depicts, which we can clearly see in his panegyric descriptions of various influential Princesses and Barons. The absence of direct critical distance throughout Proust's representation of French aristocracy at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been often panned by literary critics. However, Adorno marks it as one of Proust's major strengths, saying that "only someone who has succumbed to social relationships in his own way instead of denying them with the resentment of one who has been excluded can reflect them back."<sup>149</sup> Proust lacks any critical distance and fully immerses in his subject matter. The limitation of subjectivity comes into play here as we can see that Proust apparently loses his own self in what he depicts. Through the fact that he "adds his voice to the old chorus about social hypocrisy and insincerity,

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<sup>146</sup> Adorno: 'Notes on Philosophical Thinking'. In: *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, p. 130.

<sup>147</sup> Adorno: 'On Subject and Object'. In: *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* p. 253-254.

<sup>148</sup> Adorno: 'Short Commentaries on Proust'. In: *Notes to Literature*, p. 184.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

but like that chorus never expressly criticizes their social bases” he also manages to become “a critic of society, against his will and hence all the more authentically.”<sup>150</sup> According to Adorno, the “Proustian snobbery disenchant what the instincts of homogenized middle-class society secretly rubbed his nose in: that the Archangels and Powers he adores no longer have swords and became defenceless pseudo-images of their liquidated past.”<sup>151</sup> Simply put: it is exactly Proust’s snobbism and his being a part of the French aristocracy which allows him to depict the emptiness and meaninglessness of the lives of its members.

The *Recherche* then obviously represents more than aesthetically valuable social critique. When Proust depicts superfluous and luxurious lives “bereft of meaning” of the aristocracy which “the subject can no longer shape into a cosmos,”<sup>152</sup> he manages, according to Adorno, to capture certain ‘negative universality’. This negative universality then arises from Proust’s engagement with the notion of contingency.

“[Proust’s description of contingency] carries with it a semblance of necessity, as though some reference to meaning had been interspersed throughout existence, chaotic, mocking, haunting in its dissociated fragments. This constellation of a necessity in something that is wholly contingent, a necessity that can be perceived only negatively ... carries Proust’s fanatically individuated work far beyond his own individuation: at its center he reveals the universality through which it is mediated.”<sup>153</sup>

This universality is irrational and negative. The meaninglessness of life that Proust lives and reflects carries within itself a necessity within the contingency: a necessity of absence of any kind of firm meaning. This phenomenon from its nature eludes all coherent systematic thought.

Proust’s mastery of representation is then a necessary ingredient in the recipe for his success; however, it would not suffice on its own to achieve this. His immediate closeness to his subject matter is another essential necessary component; his subjective force is then so powerful that it turns his deeply subjective insights into objective content. In summary, Proust has to lose himself in the society that he depicts, in order to capture it as an object and reveal a more

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid., p. 180.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., p. 184. Translation modified. Original: „Den Proustschen Snobismus entschönt, was ihm die Instinkte der nivellierten Mittelstandsgesellschaft insgeheim vorwerfen: daß die angebeteten Erzengel und Mächte kein Schwert mehr haben, selbst schutzlose Nachbilder ihrer liquidierten Vergangenheit wurden.“ Adorno, *Noten zur Literatur*, p. 192-193.

<sup>152</sup> Adorno: ‘Short Commentaries on Proust’. In: *Notes to Literature*, p. 185.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid. Italics added.

universal truth which resides in his individual aestheticized observations. He suspends his subjectivity by succumbing to vices which he then, against his own will, criticizes. The irritation that his adoring descriptions of his rich superfluous characters seem to have caused for example to one of his earliest critics, André Gide, is a mark of the success of his representation,<sup>154</sup> as they enable all the more authentic representation of the given reality.

### 3.3 Preponderance of the object and limitation of the subject in an essay

Before turning to what emerged from the examples of limitation of subjectivity in Valéry's and Proust's works, I will show another layer of thought regarding author-object relationship is introduced specifically in "The Essay as Form" in order to connect them directly with it. Here is the notion of preponderance of object approached through the refusal of Descartes' third rule as it is to be found in his *Discourse on method*: "to conduct my thoughts in such order that, by commencing with objects the simplest and easiest to know, I might ascend by little and little, and, as it were, step by step, to the knowledge of the more complex; assigning in thought a certain order even to those objects which in their own nature do not stand in a relation of antecedence and sequence."<sup>155</sup> Adorno's alternative for essayistic writing is, oppositely, respect to the object of interpretation that dwells in following its structure. In his own words:

"In opposition to the cliché of 'comprehensibility', the notion of truth as a causal relationship, *the essay requires that one's thought about the matter be from the outset as complex as the object itself*; it serves as a corrective to the stubborn primitiveness that always accompanies the prevailing form of reason."<sup>156</sup>

In other words, essay follows the structure of what it contemplates instead of imposing the author's subjective input – in the case of traditional philosophy the systematic structure of the thought construction used – on it, whether in the form of his subjective motives or ideas gained elsewhere. The essay's task is to give the object "more of what belongs to it than if it were mercilessly incorporated into the order of ideas."<sup>157</sup> Adorno criticizes both first mentioned imposing of subjectivity, saying that essays ought not to tell "stories about people instead of elucidating the matter at hand"<sup>158</sup> and the second, criticizing the application of "ready-made

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<sup>154</sup> Comp. *ibid.*, p. 184.

<sup>155</sup> Descartes: *Discourse on Method*, p. 15.

<sup>156</sup> Adorno: 'The Essay as Form'. In: *Notes to Literature*, p. 39. Italics added.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

popular philosophical ideas” onto the interpreted matter,<sup>159</sup> marking both approaches as responsible for bad essays. To underpin this methodological step, Adorno offers a rather puzzling comparison.

“The essay form maintains the attitude of someone who is beginning to study philosophy and somehow already has its idea in his mind. He will hardly begin by reading the most simpleminded writers, whose common sense for the most part simply babbles on past the points where one should linger; instead, he reaches for those who are allegedly the most difficult and who then cast their light backwards onto the simple things and illuminate them as an ‘attitude of thought toward objectivity.’ The naiveté of the student who finds difficult and formidable things good enough for him has more wisdom in it than a grown-up pedantry that shakes its finger at thought, warning it that it should understand the simple things before it tackles the complex ones, which, however, are the only ones that tempt it. Postponing knowledge in this way only obstructs it.”<sup>160</sup>

This passage would undoubtedly raise eyebrows of many philosophy teachers; however, it does not primarily mean to comment on the proper conduct of teaching philosophy, even though, in other places, Adorno does not shy away from wagering on what he finds inadequate about such an approach. Nonetheless, here Adorno rather works with an assumption, that the non-conceptual contents of our experience somehow press on expression through the medium of thought.<sup>161</sup> Potential student of philosophy who is motivated to pursue this field is motivated to it precisely on the basis of this insistence of this experience, which he discovers to be not reducible to an empirical sphere, would not, or rather should not, find more easily accessible philosophy satisfactory as it does not penetrate its object properly and does not mirror the experience that originally enticed him to study philosophy. According to Adorno, the insistence of the nonconceptual rather draws us towards philosophy whose difficulty corresponds with the dense structure of reality.

The main new thought that Adorno’s insights in “The Essay as Form” bring to the table is thus the idea of following the structure of the object. It follows then, that philosophy which attempts to fully respect the structure of the object reaches knowledge “through a network of prejudices, opinions, innervations, self-corrections, presuppositions and exaggerations, in short through the

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>161</sup> This insistence will be introduced in the next chapter as ‘anticipatory desire’.

dense, firmly-founded but by no means uniformly transparent medium of experience.”<sup>162</sup> As it was pointed out previously, experience is the medium of the nonconceptual. Language attempting to represent this experience then ought to follow its structure instead of trying to simplify and transfer it into a series of comprehensible steps. The explicit description of all the steps that lead to a conclusion that would enable “every reader to follow the process through and, where possible – in the academic industry – to duplicate it” is false. According to Adorno “this demand not only invokes the liberal fiction of the universal communicability of each and every thought and so inhibits their objectively appropriate expression but is also wrong in itself as a principle of representation. For the value of a thought is measured by its distance from the continuity of the familiar.”<sup>163</sup> In short, the depth of a thought depends on how deeply it penetrates its object, not on how much it reduces this object to something else.<sup>164</sup> In this sense, essayism also represents a reaction to the issue raised by Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, namely the tendency to dominate the object. Essayism is an attempt at reconciliation with objects: instead of imposing the mechanisms derived from the subject, the author renounces his domination and instead of philosophizing *about* concrete things “we are to philosophize, rather, *out* of these things.”<sup>165</sup>

Following the structure of the object is then indeed something we can observe in Adorno’s own essays on literature. His style for example changes according to the subject matter interpreted. A few examples: Insights about interpunctuation in his “Punctuation Marks” take fragmentary form. The essay on Beckett’s *Endgame* mediates the force of absurdity which Adorno finds in there through quotations of the play, followed by short commenting sentences; those are otherwise hard to find in Adorno’s works. Every essay on Paul Valéry proceeds through a large amount of direct quotations followed by short comments connecting them to Adorno’s own philosophical findings and/or comments which lead the way to another quotation. Big German poets such as Joseph von Eichendorff and Friedrich Hölderlin are approached through the elaboration of one specific aspect of their poetry – *Rauschen*, parataxis – while Adorno lets their language devices talk to the reader through quotations of their poetry. Essays on Benjamin then without reservations immerse into Benjaminian terminology and tend to fall into his enigmatic style.

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<sup>162</sup> Adorno: *Minima Moralia*, p. 80.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Adorno: ‘The Essay as Form’. In: *Notes to Literature*, p. 36.

<sup>165</sup> Adorno: *Negative Dialectics*, p. 33. Italics added.

This change of style is also observable when Adorno speaks about Proust. The Frenchman is approached through short commentaries in order to shed light on a particular quality which resides in the *Recherche*. Such an approach also respects the methodological maxims of focusing on details and refraining from a reduction of observations gained on a principle as presented in the previous chapter. Adorno defends this form in the introduction of his essay on Proust, claiming that only in this way he can “hope through immersion in fragments to illuminate something of the work’s substance, which derives its unforgettable quality solely from the colouring of the here and now.”<sup>166</sup> Both Adorno’s and Proust’s insights and observations emerge and vanish in multiple places, drawing themselves near to the way it occurs in Proust’s novel itself where “the whole, resistant to abstract outlines, crystallizes out of intertwined individual presentations.”<sup>167</sup> Adorno thus tries to recreate the multi-layered nature of Proust’s work in order to indirectly mediate the experience represented in it. When he writes about Proust though, he does not completely abandon his own style in order to resemble the Proustian language. Remaining faithful to his own method in this manner while approaching Proust’s work might be the path to creating a constellation of concepts in order to represent the nonconceptual experiential content hidden beyond his words. Through that the form of short commentaries also serves to accentuate the partial at the expense of the total – Adorno explicitly renounces the creation of a grand survey because he wants to show the same experience emerging throughout Proust’s oeuvre in a multitude of different contexts. After all, the “Short Commentaries on Proust”, published in 1958, were written around the same time as “The Essay as a Form”, which was written between the years 1954 and 1958. It is reasonable to believe that reading Proust and his way of mediating the experience of irrational universality found in the middle of decaying French aristocracy inspired Adorno’s method – and it can also serve as an excellent example of weaving the thoughts of the interpreted work of art with essayist’s.

Nevertheless, the preponderance of the object embodied in following the structure of the object seems to require from the essayist more than a mere – and only partial – adaptation of the style to the subject matter. Adaptation of style does not guarantee limitation of authors’ subjective input. Generally implied propositions such as that essay should not insert its author’s emotions and mental processes in its interpretation of the works of art – in the style of expressing ‘what does this work mean to me’ – or merely apply already existing philosophical conceptions are at hand, however, “The Essay as Form” does not show us how to make one the aforementioned

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<sup>166</sup> Adorno: ‘Short Commentaries on Proust’. In: *Notes to Literature*, p. 180.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179.

“arena of intellectual experience”. Adorno’s interpretations of Valéry and Proust nevertheless provide better hints.

With the essay on Valéry, we see a description limitation through giving oneself to his work which also entails dedicating one’s self to the training of *métier* through which then something objective can be mediated, as Adorno finds it in Valéry. In the essay on Proust, we see the author’s immersion in the object which implies surrendering one’s self to the object depicted as Proust did with the French aristocratic society of *fin de siècle*. Valéry and Proust arrive at the same point, however, they do so from different – even though not entirely opposite – directions. The two authors have according to Adorno also more in common than Valéry, the younger of the two, stated when he marked Proust as his antithesis. This Valéry’s position does not come as a surprise; Proust, known for being a person of low self-discipline is indeed far from what Valéry valued in Edgar Degas and to what he dedicated his own life. Adorno was nevertheless convinced that both Valéry and Proust experienced “the obviousness of things that come involuntarily, the temporal core of truth as that which always new, the truth that manifests itself suddenly all – all that has an aspect of illusoriness and fragility.”<sup>168</sup> Experiencing this according to Adorno caused both authors similar kind of pain. Proust’s *métier*, even though it was not trained and developed with the thoroughness and single-mindedness of Edgar Degas or Paul Valéry himself, is then indubitable and therefore in the end does not contradict Valéry’s vision.

Proust has to lose his critical distance while being part of the society which he depicts in order to almost unconsciously reach and then textually represent the irrational truth hidden in it. He loses himself in his subject matter; and he does it in a way which may not seem similar to Degas’ or Valéry’s approaches because instead of leaving his subjectivity aside and fully submitting his life to training his craftsmanship, he drowns it in what he depicts without taking a position of critical distance. He exercises a paradox of gradating the individuation of his representation so much that it gains a strange kind of objectivity. Therefore he seems to be an ideal example of the previously mentioned ‘vanishing within the object’ which Adorno states in his “Notes on Philosophical Thinking”.

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<sup>168</sup> Adorno: ‘Valéry’s Deviations’. In: *Notes to Literature*, p. 153.

In the famous last paragraph of *Minima Moralia* Adorno says that responsible philosophical perspectives have to be gained “entirely from felt contact with their objects.”<sup>169</sup> Both Proust and Valéry – and by extension Degas – succeed in it, nevertheless, they set off from different starting points. While Proust gains a unique perspective from being an integral part of the very society that he depicts and adores, Valéry understands art through being an artist himself. Valéry reflects the creation of a work of art from immediate closeness and therefore can experience and later mediate the necessity of loss of the subject of the artist; however, he does not lose himself in the same way as Adorno describes Proust’s loss of his own self. Adorno sets himself the task of creating a space in which they can meet, and he manages to reinforce his point by connecting Proust’s representations with Valéry’s seemingly diverging insights into the nature of the relationship between the artist and work of art. This attempt by Adorno leads to a mutual reinforcement of his, Valéry’s, and Proust’s ideas and arrives at a depiction of a strong thesis regarding the desired form of genuine artistic creation.

Important question remains then. Can the insights gained from the interpretation of Valéry and Proust be transferred to essayism and therefore somehow complement what we learnt about the preponderance of the object in “The Essay as Form”? Positive answer to this would be desirable as Adorno’s account in “The Essay as Form” seems to be vague on its own, even though it implies more than a mere change of style implied by confrontation with the object of the essay. Once e.g. a work of art is a representation of the nonconceptual and the essay interprets it in order to mediate it, it follows that also the essayist has to give up expressing his pure subjectivity in order to make himself an arena of intellectual experience. The essayist uses “concepts to pry open the aspect of its objects that cannot be accommodated by concepts, the aspect that reveals, through the contradictions in which concepts become entangled, that the net of their objectivity is merely subjective arrangement.”<sup>170</sup> The mediated content transcends the thinker as much as it transcends the artist who created its representation. The task of the essayist is to recognize the unsayable that is encapsulated in the work of art and represent it through the constellation of his concepts.

What we mostly gain from taking a look at examples of limiting the subjectivity in Valéry and Proust shows us that Adorno probably did not wish to provide any clear answer to our initial question. Especially the Proustian form of suspension of subjectivity through extreme

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<sup>169</sup> Adorno: *Minima Moralia*, p. 146. The matter of this contact being “felt” will be elaborated in the following chapter.

<sup>170</sup> Adorno: ‘The Essay as Form’. In: *Notes to Literature*, p. 46.

individuation is marked by unrepeatability. It is also disputable whether the modern era allows craftsman dedication in Degas' and Valéry's fashion to create great works of art or whether it demands a different, new approach from the artist. The forms of the limitation of subjectivity seem to differ depending on their historical context. The announcement of the importance of the preponderance of the object also within the essayistic form therefore seems to be rather simply reminding us to stay away from cheap subjectivation of essayistic insights and follow the nonidentical within the object.

#### 4. IMPULSIVITY: FANTASY AS ESSAYIST'S CRUCIAL INTELLECTUAL FACULTY<sup>171</sup>

In “The Essay as Form”, Adorno does not explicitly elaborate on all the conditions under which successful essays come into existence. As Susan Buck-Morss rightly assesses, Adorno’s entire concept of constellation is not formal and its principles are impossible to be schematically explicated.<sup>172</sup> He does not specify which other aspects than rejection and rethinking of selected methodological aspects of traditional philosophy come into play during an essay’s creation, even though we can clearly sense that the so far listed methodical omitting of traditional rules of thinking, limiting subjectivity and following the object may still not be enough. Nevertheless, as it was pointed out in Chapter 2, essayism cannot be reduced to a form following the listed six maxims of essayistic composition.

Another important feature which will help to deal with this issue is that an essay is carried by thinking which possesses a certain new quality. I will argue that this quality arises from allowing somaticity and emotionality enter one’s conduct of thoughts. What Adorno wants to achieve by his essayism is nothing less than a change of thinking. He proposes that this new way of thinking shall comprise not only a rational moment, as to which the traditional thought aimed but also a physical moment; the turn to philosophical materialism does not only promote the aforementioned preponderance of the object but also the incorporation of somaticity in thinking. Hence, Adorno introduces the notion of somatic impulses (*Körperimpulse*). In Adornian literature, although the matter of impulses represents a very attractive key to the constructive moments of Adorno’s philosophy, the question of the somatic is generally omitted, especially when it comes to introductory monographies on Adorno; his thought is usually introduced rather through the notions of negativity and critique, or through his understanding of history and subject-object relationship. The question of the body nonetheless received a certain portion of attention in the last two decades,<sup>173</sup> rightly with the emphasis on the ethical and/or political dimension of Adorno’s thinking, as he also presents it as a necessary ingredient of moral behaviour.<sup>174</sup> I will attempt to widen this account by showing the possibilities of

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<sup>171</sup> This chapter presents an elaborated and updated account which was published already in my article ‘Adorno’s Insights in the Light of *Exakte Phantasie*’. In: *Berlin Journal of Critical Theory* 7:2 (2023), pp. 65-78.

<sup>172</sup> Buck-Morss: *Origins of Negative Dialectics*, p. 96.

<sup>173</sup> See Bernstein: *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*. Cambridge University Press 2001. Freyenhagen: *Adorno’s Practical Philosophy: Living Less Wrongly*. Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 255-270. Hulatt: ‘Normative Impulsivity: Adorno on Ethics and the Body’. In: *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 22:5 (2015).

<sup>174</sup> This issue will be discussed in the following chapter.

spreading Adorno's concept into the dimension of textual composition and indicate what might be a role for the impulses to play within the composition of the constellations, i.e. essays, as there is at least one category of somatic impulse which Adorno explicitly connects with their composition.

I will disentangle the role of the impulses in Adorno's understanding within three steps, also preparing the ground for the final chapter concerning the connection between essayism and (intellectual) freedom. In the first part of this chapter, I will elaborate on the notion of impulses in Adorno's thought more generally and argue for their tight connection to his idea of philosophizing and show that their reestablishment in philosophical thought means that philosophical reflection – and hence, by extension, essayism – ought to be, according to him, emotional and non-transparent. In the second part, I will introduce and reconstruct Adorno's notion of fantasy and present it as the intellectual faculty which can be identified as one of the kinds of somatic impulses which he is interested in. According to Adorno, fantasy as he understands it is responsible for the creation of constellations and the desire to go beyond the concepts. Afterwards, in part three, I will briefly consider the danger of philosophical thinking becoming sentimental once it takes emotionality on board and Adorno's possible solution to avoid this.

#### **4.1 Somatic impulses and emotionality**

According to Adorno, it is apparent that the somatic elements are necessary constituents of thought.<sup>175</sup> In his *Negative Dialectics*, he introduced this notion followingly:

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<sup>175</sup> It may be interesting to point out that Adorno never engaged with philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, one of the most notable philosophers of somaticity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Adorno's promotion of somaticity in philosophy is nevertheless an earlier materialistic move, unaffected by Merleau-Ponty's work. As it was mentioned, Adorno's critique of phenomenology is limited to Husserl's and Heidegger's work. Even though at least Merleau-Ponty knew about Adorno's existence as he attended his lectures at Collège de France in 1960 – 1961 in which Adorno thoroughly criticized Martin Heidegger's work – and he did not like them much –, there is no mention of Merleau-Ponty in Adorno's work, and we can assume he did not become familiar with it at all. It should be also mentioned that at the beginnings of Adorno's intellectual career, e.g. when he generally rejected phenomenology as a possible future of materialistic philosophy in 1931 in his lecture "Actuality of Philosophy", Merleau-Ponty still had more than a decade until publishing his *Phenomenology of Perception*. Adorno's engagement with the issue of somaticity is most notable in his *Negative Dialectics* and his lectures on history and freedom from 1964 and 1965, nevertheless, even here no intellectual enrichment by Merleau-Ponty took place. Some works, however, aptly argue for compatibility of Adorno's and Merleau-Ponty's philosophical conceptions despite their unfamiliarity with each other. See e.g. Neofetou: 'The Flesh of Negation: Adorno and Merleau-Ponty contra Heidegger'. In: *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 49:7 (2022), pp. 798-813.

“There is no sensation (*Empfindung*) without a somatic moment. To this extent the concept of sensation, in comparison with that which it allegedly subsumes, is twisted as to satisfy the demand for an autarkic connection of all cognitive steps. While sensation is a part of consciousness, according to the cognitive principle of styling, its phenomenology ... would have to describe it equally as that which consciousness does not exhaust. Every sensation is a physical feeling (*Körpergefühl*) also.”<sup>176</sup>

As such, as Owen Hulatt aptly points out, is the somatic element’s participation within cognition beyond the question of justification.<sup>177</sup> Even though we cannot justify it, we can nevertheless at least trace this idea’s speculative origin down to the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where the somatic affectivity and impulses are already briefly mentioned, even though not thoroughly elaborated. The relation to *mana*, as introduced in section 1.2, contained a somatic aspect according to Adorno and Horkheimer. For its introduction, a lengthier quotation is needed:

“As reason posits no substantial goals, all affects are equally remote to it. They are merely natural. The principle according to which reason is simply opposed to everything unreasonable underlies the true opposition between enlightenment and mythology. The latter recognizes spirit only as something immersed in nature, a natural power. For it, inward impulses, like outward forces, are living powers of divine or demonic origin. Enlightenment, by contrast, relocates context, meaning, and life entirely within a subjectivity which is actually constituted only by this relocation. ... In order to escape the superstitious fear of nature, enlightenment has presented effective objective entities and forms without exception as mere veils of chaotic matter and condemned matter’s influence on the human agent as enslavement, until the subject, according to its own concept, had been turned into a single, unrestricted, empty authority.”<sup>178</sup>

In simpler words, the archaic, mythical thinking was driven by impulses. The fact that inward impulses are represented in the frame of mythical explanations of divine or demonic powers is then to be understood as a mere attempt to explain their origins. For Adorno, the whole semi-religious mystic is not to be taken over. What matters for Adorno (and Horkheimer) is that impulsivity is – or at least should be – contained in our thinking and as such it has the potential to confront us with reality as it actually is. Instrumental rationality is then accused of being responsible for impulses’ ousting of thought and hence responsible for the growing detachment from nature. As Owen Hulatt points out “Adorno understands thought’s increasingly

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<sup>176</sup> Adorno: *Negative Dialectic*, p. 193.

<sup>177</sup> Hulatt: ‘Normative Impulsivity: Adorno on Ethics and the Body’, p. 681.

<sup>178</sup> Adorno & Horkheimer: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 70.

instrumentalized nature to be a process in which rationality, itself an impulsive abstraction away from particularity, begins to abstract itself away from any connection with the impulses which sustain it.”<sup>179</sup> According to Adorno, indeed,

“the objective meaning of knowledge has, with the objectification of the world, become progressively detached from the underlying impulses; it is equally true that knowledge breaks down where its effort of objectification remains under the sway of desire. But if the impulses are not at once preserved and surpassed in the thought which has escaped their sway, then there will be no knowledge at all, and the thought that murders the wish that fathered it will be overtaken by the revenge of stupidity.”<sup>180</sup>

It is at hand that impulses have a role to play when it comes to the representation of that which is itself incommensurable and opaque, i.e. the nonidentical and nonconceptual. Thus, Adorno calls for re-establishment of impulsivity in thinking and openly announces this vision in his lectures on history and freedom from 1964/1965:

“... it seems to be the case ... that a certain archaic element is required for there to be such things as free impulses, or spontaneous modes of behaviour that are not triggered by reasons. This stands in contrast to the entire philosophical tradition, especially since Spinoza, Leibniz and Kant ... This archaic element is a much older phenomenon, one that I should like to call an *impulse*.”<sup>181</sup>

We can clearly observe the link to the speculative account of mythical relating to the world from the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* here: the impulses represent the natural, by instrumental rationality ousted, constituent of thought. Two questions must be posed at this place. (1) *What* are the somatic impulses within philosophical thinking? (2) What new qualities have a (philosophical) thought that re-establishes physical impulses as their valid constituents?

(ad 1) Based on reading of *Minima Moralia* we can conclude that impulses are to be identified with emotions. Throughout this text, we come across formulations such as that “once the last trace of emotion has been eradicated, nothing remains of thought but absolute tautology”<sup>182</sup> or that “the separation of feeling and understanding ... hypostasizes the dismemberment of man

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<sup>179</sup> Hulatt: ‘Normative Impulsivity: Adorno on Ethics and the Body’, p. 679.

<sup>180</sup> Adorno: *Minima Moralia*, p. 197.

<sup>181</sup> Adorno: *History and Freedom. Lectures 1964-1965*, p. 213.

<sup>182</sup> Adorno: *Minima Moralia*, p. 123.

into functions.”<sup>183</sup> Claiming that even “remotest objectifications are nourished by impulses” and “simplest perception [are] shaped by fear of the thing perceived, or desire for it”<sup>184</sup> Adorno calls for the emotionality of philosophical reflection.

This emotionality is connected to the preponderance of the object. As Annika Thiem rightly brought forth, the transformation of thinking that Adorno calls for “not only implies philosophy’s loss of control and mastery over its objects and itself but also attunes philosophy to the epistemic violence it itself exerts on the objects of its inquiries. ... In the face of violence, thinking develops a fervent desire for repair and reconciliation.”<sup>185</sup> Thiem understands Adorno’s longing for reconciliation as a condition for the possibility of critique, connecting the notion of reconciliation with the famous passage from *Minima Moralia*’s final aphorism which calls for responsible thinking in the face of despair that ought to gain perspectives from *felt* contact with objects.<sup>186</sup> According to her then, this contact “reveals the emotional investment of philosophy’s aspirations, insofar as philosophy turns to affective thinking through its yearning, desire, hope, despair and sadness in the face of the broken world.”<sup>187</sup>

(ad 2) What happens once philosophical reflection takes emotions on board? Adorno claims that “when we act on impulse, we regress to a phase in which the separation between outer and inner is not as clear-cut, not as definitive as it is today. (...)”<sup>188</sup> Philosophical reflection which is fostered by impulses/emotions apparently rather blurs our understanding of thinking as such. Within the kind of philosophizing Adorno calls for, the thought processes are not completely transparent to the thinker. They cannot be. Once emotions participate in thinking, transparency becomes ultimately impossible as “the human subject has no knowledge of the internal causes of its own impulses.”<sup>189</sup> Adorno tells us that not only can we not completely understand how our mind works, but we should not even attempt. Complete transparency of thinking itself seems to be not only impossible but also not desirable. Identity thinking grasps only that which is identical with it. Thought driven by impulses which are beyond our understanding are proposed as that which has the potential to grasp that which is nonidentical, nonconceptual, and nontransparent. Therefore, the call for nontransparency of thought is another variation of the

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid., p. 197.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Thiem: ‘Adorno’s Tears: Textures of Philosophical Emotionality’. In: *MLN* 124:3 (April 2009), p. 596.

<sup>186</sup> Adorno: *Minima Moralia*, p. 247.

<sup>187</sup> Thiem: ‘Adorno’s Tears: Textures of Philosophical Emotionality’, p. 597.

<sup>188</sup> Adorno: *History and Freedom. Lectures 1964/1965*, p. 235.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., p. 219.

call for nonidentical thinking: Enlightenment thinkers' obsession with schematic philosophical psychology attempting to explain exactly every movement of human thought and all its possibilities is to be given up upon if we are to reach the sphere that eluded the rational thought. It is no coincidence, that "The Essay as Form" opens with reference to Goethe's *Pandora*, as essay is indeed "destined to see what is illuminated, not the light." The essayist shifts from introspection on his own ways of thinking – the "light" of the enlightenment reason – towards the object – "what is illuminated".

In summary, while introducing impulses, Adorno leaves us with two important notions. First, philosophical thinking ought to contain an emotional impulse. To what extent and by which is a matter of further clarification, as we have to avoid philosophy being simply sentimental.<sup>190</sup> Second, the somatic element cannot be made transparent by reason. Hence, its employment in thinking necessarily implies that we accept – and potentially, even embrace – the nontransparency of the essayist's thoughts to himself.

## 4.2 Philosophical fantasy

The somatic impulse which will interest us in connection to essayistic composition is marked as fantasy by Adorno; it also contains what he calls an 'anticipatory desire'.<sup>191</sup> Same as others, the notion of fantasy did not receive thorough clarification and its mentions rather emerge and vanish throughout Adorno's oeuvre without explicit clarification of its meaning and connection to his general theory. Nevertheless, I will try to show that fantasy, namely exact fantasy (*exakte Phantasie*), plays a crucial role in his ideas about philosophical textuality. The scarcity of Adorno's remarks also allows us to extract his insights on the topic altogether and through that to glimpse the notion of exact fantasy in the various facets that Adorno lends it throughout his work and therefore – at least partially – reconstruct its function and nature.

Fantasy is tightly connected to essayism in two crucial aspects. First, the 'anticipatory desire' inherent to it represents a yearning to go beyond concepts by means of concepts and second, it is what is responsible for the creation of constellations. In the sense of anticipatory desire,

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<sup>190</sup> This matter will be considered in section 4.3.

<sup>191</sup> Adorno connects the notion of anticipatory desire with philosophical fantasy in his *Minima Moralia*. He states that „each stirring of fantasy [is] engendered by desire which, in displacing the elements of what exists, transcends it without betrayal.” Adorno: *Minima Moralia*, p. 122. He also adds in a critical context that “should fantasy be driven out, judgement too, the real act of knowledge, is exorcised. But the castration of perception by a court of control that denies it any anticipatory desire, forces it thereby into a pattern of helplessly reiterating what is already known.” Ibid., p. 123. Both of these quotations will be more thoroughly engaged with on the following pages.

fantasy is the impulse which motivates the chase after the nonconceptual, as cogently described Owen Hulatt.<sup>192</sup> Second, Adorno introduces fantasy as what takes a crucial part in the re-arrangement of the concepts into a constellation which then sheds light on the nonconceptual.

Adorno's understanding of fantasy seems to be influenced by Benjamin, thus it is useful to circle back to him again. Benjamin engaged with pondering about fantasy within his early texts attempting to show the possibilities of experience which would not be necessarily reduced and restricted by the horizon of the enlightenment rationality. His idea of fantasy is intertwined with the notion of learning from experience. This learning lies primarily in our ability to work with our experiences and gain the truth from discontinuity that transcends the unity of a medium without disrupting it.<sup>193</sup> Put less abstractly, fantasy would be our ability to give rise to images of the world which are not reduced to rational forms imposed by enlightenment. Truth, for Benjamin, is not indifferent to various possible ways of perceiving reality. In such a framework, fantasy then plays a crucial role in our understanding of reality, even though it does not necessarily find its ultimate expression in conceptual language. It rather plays the role of a means that, once applied to how we approach the world, gets us closer to truth through the nature of the perspective it provides. Benjamin describes it as a de-formative capacity that

“plays a game of dissolution with its forms. The world of new manifestations that thus comes into being as the result of this dissolution of what has been formed has its own laws, which are those of the fantasy. Its supreme law is that, while the imagination de-forms, it never destroys.”<sup>194</sup>

Benjamin sees the possibility of perceiving the truth by glimpsing it in the fissures of reality. The de-forming power of fantasy and its deployment in our experience of the world then may provide a key to encountering these fissures. In other words, we learn how to experience the fissures in reality by employing the de-formative power of fantasy in our approach to the world. As we will see further, Adorno's vision does not overlap with some crucial aspects of this idea, nevertheless, he seems to be inspired by Benjamin's understanding of fantasy as something that allows us to go beyond the horizon of enlightenment thought and is rather *felt* than rationally approached through linguistic means.

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<sup>192</sup> See Hulatt: 'Normative Impulsivity: Adorno on Ethics and the Body', p. 680-681.

<sup>193</sup> Ritter: 'What Does the Rainbow Tell?' In: *Svět literatury* 54 (2016), p. 28.

<sup>194</sup> Benjamin: 'Imagination'. In: *Selected Writings, 1: 1913-1926*, p. 280.

According to Benjamin, human beings learn from fantasy in a way that is similar to children's specific perception of colours, namely through gaining a perception that is "single, not as a lifeless thing and a rigid individuality but ... a winged creature that flits from one form to the next one."<sup>195</sup> Adorno praises Benjamin for bringing this to life in his philosophy, saying that "for him, philosophical fantasy is the capacity for 'interpolation in the smallest', and for him, one cell of reality contemplated outweighs ... the rest of the whole world."<sup>196</sup> Paying attention to detail, instead of attempting to create a philosophical construction that would explain the whole and instead of reducing the insight gained from the observation of a particular object to a principle is what we recall to be one of the fundamental features of Adorno's essayistic form elaborated in the second chapter. Focus on the detail is a necessary implication of another main feature of the essay, namely its focus on what is transient and ephemeral that is to be sought precisely in individual details, not in a whole. This second feature also comes from Benjamin's understanding of fantasy, as according to him, fantasy mediates what is transient and ephemeral. Fantasy's "de-formation shows further ... the world caught up in the process of unending dissolution; and this means eternal ephemerality."<sup>197</sup>

Both Benjamin's and Adorno's ideas of fantasy arise from delineation from Kant's idea of imagination (*Einbildungskraft*). Neither of them advocates any of the classifications of fantasy or imagination coming from the philosophical tradition, especially when it comes to how it has been considered by the philosophical psychology of medieval and Enlightenment philosophers. Benjamin builds his understanding of fantasy through a rejection of Kant's idea of learning.<sup>198</sup> Adorno, whether thoroughly acquainted with Benjamin's conception or not, provides his own criticism of Kantian understanding of the imaginative faculty of our thinking.

"In the most profound concept of transcendental epistemology, the concept of productive imagination, the trace of the will invades the pure intellectual function. Once that has happened, spontaneity is curiously skipped in the will. (...) This explains the distortion as well as its [idealism's] proximity to the true facts."<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> Benjamin: 'A Child's View of Color'. In: *Selected Writings, 1: 1913-1926*, p. 50.

<sup>196</sup> Adorno: 'Introduction to Benjamin's *Schriften*'. In: *Notes to Literature*, p. 476.

<sup>197</sup> Benjamin: 'Imagination'. In: *Selected Writings, 1: 1913-1926*, p. 281. Comp. also with Adorno: 'The Essay as Form'. In: *Notes to Literature I*, p. 10.

<sup>198</sup> I will not widely describe this issue here, as it has been already thoroughly and clearly described. See Friedlander: 'Learning from the Colors of Fantasy.' In: *boundary* 45:2 (2018), p. 115-116.

<sup>199</sup> Adorno: *Negative Dialectics*, p. 230.

Spontaneity is here understood as an impulsive element of fantasy which we could even understand as a sort of instinctive momentum. Idealism tries to avoid admitting fantasy unpredictability, unreliability, and irrationality which, according to Adorno, is inseparable from it. Thinking which is too afraid of aspects that prevent it from the desired self-transparency then, according to Adorno, results in a reason that is “reduced to an instrument and assimilated to its functionaries, whose power of thought serves only the purpose of preventing the thought.”<sup>200</sup>

Both Adorno and Benjamin reject attempts to situate fantasy within the hierarchical framework of philosophical psychology, as we know them from Aristotle, Hume, or Kant. According to both of them, such constructions do not describe or define fantasy in a meaningful way that would approach its complex functions that elude any exhausting explanation. Instead of these attempts to create a system describing individual potencies of the human mind and schematically explaining how their cooperation results with insight, they both re-problematize the notion of fantasy, claiming that it is to be non-transparent if it is to be anyhow useful within philosophical contemplation; at least when it comes to the task Adorno imposes on it, which is the mediation of the nonconceptual by the means of concepts.

The role of fantasy for Adorno nevertheless extends beyond what Benjamin claimed. Fantasy plays a crucial role in the basis of his philosophical programme.

“Fantasy ... can establish that relation between objects which is irrevocable source of all judgement: should fantasy be driven out, judgement too, the real act of knowledge, is exorcised. But the castration of perception by a court of control that denies it any anticipatory desire, forces it thereby into a pattern of helplessly reiterating what is already known.”<sup>201</sup>

To understand this peculiar mention from *Minima Moralia*, we will have to shortly return to the crucial passages of one of his earlier methodological texts, namely his inaugural lecture at the Frankfurt University in 1931.

“One may see here an attempt to re-establish that old concept of philosophy ... that of the *ars inveniendi*. ... The *organon* of this *ars inveniendi* is fantasy. An exact fantasy [*exakte Phantasie*]; fantasy which abides strictly within the material which the sciences present to it and

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<sup>200</sup> Adorno: *Minima Moralia*, p. 123.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122-3.

reaches beyond them only in the smallest aspects of their arrangement: aspects, granted, which fantasy itself must originally generate.”<sup>202</sup>

*Exakte Phantasie* is here presented as a crucial element of our thinking which enables the creation of constellations: configurations of concepts in whose texture we can glimpse important moments of the object, maybe even intellectual non-conceptual experience hidden in it. Here we get to the main role that fantasy plays in Adorno’s thinking. That is how the aforementioned “relations between objects” declared in *Minima Moralia* are established. Exact fantasy’s function is to take an active part in the creation of constellations as an organon of our thinking “which rearranges the elements of the question without going beyond the circumference of the elements.”<sup>203</sup> That is then the main role of exact fantasy: it is a non-transparent emotionally charged element of our thinking that allows us to compose constellations in order to reveal the nonconceptual experiential content of the object under study, which are in Adorno’s case mostly literary and musical works of art.

Essays are the constellations of concepts that Adorno seeks. It will therefore not come as a surprise that in “The Essay as Form”, the role of fantasy remains central. Adorno stresses here that “the objective wealth of meanings encapsulated in every intellectual phenomenon demands of the recipient the same spontaneity of subjective fantasy that is castigated in the name of objective discipline”,<sup>204</sup> however, he does not directly reveal more about how fantasy concretely works with the given material and selects and rearranges its elements into a constellation that would express the desired insights; such explication in the light of the essayistic method does not even seem to be possible or desired. This is where Adorno leaves us when it comes to the function of fantasy within philosophical contemplation aiming at the representation (*Darstellung*) of intellectual experience. It is impossible to proceed further in clarifying the precise function of *exakte Phantasie* because, as was mentioned, transparency of our thinking is not desirable according to Adorno.

As it was introduced in section 1.3, Adorno’s idea of constellations is directly derived from Benjamin; it is an extension of his concept of the idea as a configuration from the introduction to *The Origin of the German Trauerspiel*. His essays are the articulations of Benjamin’s “ideas” as constellations of elements in whose texture the truth, ephemeral and timely, is to become

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<sup>202</sup> Adorno: ‘The Actuality of Philosophy’, p. 131.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., p. 131.

<sup>204</sup> Adorno: ‘The Essay as Form’. In: *Notes to Literature*, p. 30.

visible. Their views of the role of fantasy within philosophical thinking are different though. When it comes to the function and power of fantasy, for Benjamin, genuine fantasy is not an active element of our thinking that would actively take part in the creation of constellations. Fantasy is a purely receptive, uncreative faculty for him.<sup>205</sup> According to him, fantasy is a de-forming passive power that is a genuine feature of our relating to reality. For Adorno, however, it is rather an active feature of our thought *about* reality that takes part in the creation of its representation within a constellation. Also Adorno's understanding of fantasy as containing 'anticipatory desire' suggests that fantasy cannot remain passive while confronted with an object of thinking. His introduction of *exakte Phantasie* as an organon of philosophical thinking attributes to it an active role in the generation of the constellations. As he states in the "Actuality of Philosophy", fantasy *originally generates* constellation's individual aspects. Hence, although Adorno purposely uses Benjamin's terminology, as far as the problem of fantasy is concerned, he significantly develops it and goes beyond Benjamin's original intention and his final idea differs from Benjamin's.

### 4.3 Limiting subject's emotionality

Call for impulsivity in thinking does not imply that according to Adorno philosophy ought to simply become sentimental and driven by subjective emotional inputs; such an idea would be in direct opposition to the idea of limiting subjectivity as presented in the previous chapter. Essay avoids becoming an arbitrary blend of subjective inputs of its author by giving priority to its object. As it was mentioned in the context of instrumental reason's ousting of emotions, the impulses are supposed to be "at once preserved and surpassed."<sup>206</sup> Adorno does not specify how exactly are philosophically worthy emotions supposed to be recognized and tamed. Rather, over the course of time, he chooses and promotes several kinds of emotional impulses he deems worthy.

Annika Thiem aptly argues that Adorno avoids – or attempts to avoid – sentimentality by having emotionality belong rather to the text than to the author or the audience.<sup>207</sup> This does not, nevertheless, as she also recognizes, completely avert the danger of Adorno's philosophy possibly becoming kitschy, as all philosophy, same as all art, is in such danger. Adorno is aware of this risk also when it comes to essayism, which is, as we have seen, driven by emotional

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<sup>205</sup> Benjamin: 'Aphorisms on Imagination and Colour'. In *Selected Writings, 1: 1913-1926*, p. 48.

<sup>206</sup> Adorno: *Minima Moralia*, p. 197. Quoted on p. 63.

<sup>207</sup> Thiem: 'Adorno's Tears: Textures of Philosophical Emotionality', p. 593.

impulses. Keeping the danger of becoming sentimental kitsch at bay, Thiem argues, can be accomplished by avoiding reassuring the “subjective emotional depth of our thinking,”<sup>208</sup> which in this sense can be understood as closely related to the limitation of the subjectivity of the author of philosophical text or artwork as it was elaborated in the previous chapter. In other words, philosophy can and should be driven by longing for reconciliation and other philosophical emotions, however, whatever feelings are part of philosophizing, they should not be individualized. Philosophical writing ought neither aim at arousing emotions in its reader nor make the thinker at home in being emotional. Rather, emotionality ought to be understood as a texture or quality of thinking. Thiem recognizes the emotional momentum of Adorno’s philosophy through his famous final aphorism of *Minima Moralia*, where he calls for philosophy which could be “practised responsibly in the face of despair.”<sup>209</sup> The emotionality of philosophical reflection as such then consists in its longing for reconciliation and renouncing traditional philosophy’s claim for mastery over nature, hence giving up the suffering and violence that it imposes on its objects.

On top of Thiem’s point, I would add two points, as the emotionality of philosophical reflection does not consist solely in denouncing the violence inherent to instrumental rationality. (1) If we read through his œuvre, we will see that Adorno distinguishes more than one kind of somatic impulse, even though he never provided a summarizing scheme or mentioned a possible list of them. This suggests that he does not call for general emotionality of thought but rather chooses specific emotional impulses which are to be deployed in philosophizing. (2) For Adorno emotions are not purely subjective. They rather seem to wash away the line between the subjective and objective. Essays, of course, are not to be descriptions of e.g. how the author was moved by a certain work of art, but the emotionality of reflection as such carries a certain quality which enables connection to the nonconceptual.

(ad 1) There is more than one category<sup>210</sup> of somatic impulse for Adorno. From his mentions of impulses, we can see that he apparently did not have any precise list of philosophically fruitful emotions or impulses in mind; rather, he unravelled the potential of a selected few as they came to his attention over the course of time. There are several kinds of impulses with

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid., p. 601.

<sup>209</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 247.

<sup>210</sup> I dare to use the term ‘category’ only because Adorno uses it himself while explaining that concretely resistance “is in the first instance a category of impulse.” Adorno: *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, p. 102. The term ‘category’ is nevertheless to be understood in broad terms rather as a kind or epitome of many various impulses we may come across. The issue of resistance as an impulse will be also elaborated in the following chapter.

various potentials which resonate throughout Adorno's body of work and it is apparent that longing for reconciliation or redemption is only one of them; undoubtedly it is connected e.g. to certain kinds of philosophical pain which is contemplated by Hulatt<sup>211</sup> and by extension, to fantasy and its anticipatory desire, nevertheless, it cannot be fully identified with either of them. Also, on top of these three, we encounter other impulses which cannot be identified with longing for reconciliation at all: e.g. the impulse of self-preservation. Adorno would not claim, in my opinion, that there is only one emotional impulse that ought to appear either as a motivation or as a component of philosophical reflection, taking on different names and forms. Rather, he talks of multiple kinds of impulses potentially participating in philosophical reflection. Nevertheless, he does so without explicitly identifying all of them, without drawing their exact relations and without fully distinguishing one from the other. His mentions of these different 'categories' impulses nonetheless suggest that among the myriad of human emotions we encounter throughout our lives, he chooses *certain specific* impulses as those desirable for participation in philosophical reflection. Adorno does not call for a general emotionality of philosophizing, but for specific emotions or impulses which move our thinking: that suggests that there is a certain quality of emotions which are worthy to partake in philosophical contemplation and that helps to avoid the trap of the philosophical work turning into emotional junk. The more exact specification of which are the worthy philosophical emotions however remains fairly difficult, also due to the previously mentioned non-transparency of thought which they cause. The emotionality of thinking as an ingredient in the recipe of the composition of an essay thus remains rather obscure. It seems then, that the instructions to avoid philosophy turning into kitsch in the end are: follow the object and make sure you do not individualize the impulses that lead the essayistic composition.

(ad 2) As I have mentioned in section 3.1, Adorno claims that "the difference between subject and object slices through subject as well as through object."<sup>212</sup> For the purposes of conceptualizing it of course makes sense to differentiate between the subject – author – of an essay and its object – for example, a work of art –, nonetheless, for Adorno the line between the subjective and objective is not clear-cut. This idea is already established by the fact that for Adorno, as we have seen in section 1.2, concepts refer to nonconceptualities which in the end enables the connection between the subjectively coined concepts and nonconceptual side of the

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<sup>211</sup> Hulatt: 'Normative Impulsivity: Adorno on Ethics and the Body', p. 684-687. I also elaborate this account on in section 5.2.

<sup>212</sup> Adorno: 'On Subject and Object'. In: *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, p. 256.

object. We can therefore theorize – even though we would go slightly beyond Adorno’s own claims – that for the subject, what refers to the nonconceptuality of a concept, can be the emotion this concept carries for the author. Fantasy, for example, is the thinker’s intellectual faculty, the impulse that drives his composition (same as all other emotions which play various roles in philosophizing) and actively rearranges concepts into constellations. The spontaneity of subjective fantasy is needed, as previously quoted to unravel the “objective wealth of meanings encapsulated in every intellectual (*geistig*) phenomenon.”<sup>213</sup> We also encounter the notion of ‘subjective fantasy’ in Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* where this account widened:

“Subjectivity disappears into artworks as the instrument of their objectivation. The subjective imagination (*subjektive Einbildungskraft*), of which artworks as ever stand in need, becomes recognizable as the turning back of the objective onto the subject and of the necessity of guarding the line of demarcation around the artwork. Imagination (*Einbildungskraft*) is the capacity to do this. It shapes what reposes in itself rather than arbitrarily concocting forms, details, fables, or whatever. Indeed, the truth of artworks cannot be otherwise conceived than in that what is transsubjective becomes readable in the subjectively imagined in-itself. The mediation of the transsubjective is the artwork.”<sup>214</sup>

Again, we are dealing with the issue of Adorno talking about subject-object relationship within art, not philosophical composition, hence whatever conclusions we draw from this remarkable passage, they dwell on the possibility of their transmission to essay based on essayistic composition’s proximity to artistic creation. Fantasy here appears to be a sort of bridge between the subjective and objective. That the ‘transsubjective’ mediated through a constellation which is imagined by the subject then seems to be possible to be the case both for art and philosophy, as long as they strive for representation of the same thing. We would only have to add that the mediation of the transsubjective would be in the case of philosophy the essay, mediating by means of concepts what the artwork cannot say. Let’s also recall that fantasy ought to reach beyond its material “only in the smallest aspects of their arrangement: aspects, granted, which fantasy *itself must originally generate*.”<sup>215</sup> What seems to be that what fantasy originally generates is the arrangement of the concepts within a constellation: through these rearrangements of aspects, fantasy is able to turn “the back of the objective onto the subject.” Subjective fantasy – or rather its product, the imagined constellation – as a medium of objective

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<sup>213</sup> Adorno: ‘The Essay as Form’. In: *Notes to Literature*, p. 30.

<sup>214</sup> Adorno: *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 283.

<sup>215</sup> Adorno: ‘The Actuality of Philosophy’, p. 131. Italics added.

content seems to be embedded in a paradox which resonates with the paradox of subjectivity of Proust: subjectivity, in this case in the form of emotionality, which is beyond any doubt a subjective input of the author, which he himself does not even fully control and understands, appears as something which is overcome – and I would dare to even use the word sublated (*aufgehoben*) – through philosophical confrontation with its object, as described in the previous chapter.

## **5. INTELLECTUAL'S GUIDE TO LATE CAPITALISM: ON POSSIBILITIES OF FREEDOM AND RESISTANCE**

It has been repeatedly underlined in this work that something of a vanishing point of Adorno's thinking, in my understanding of his body of work as a whole, is the intellectual experience. This claim, nevertheless, does not mean that Adorno's only ambition was the rescue of validity of philosophy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by presenting the existence of *geistige Erfahrung* as an important metaphysical aspect of our lives. As it was already precluded in the section 1.3, Adorno's ambitions go further than dealing with the question of the crises of metaphysics on a purely philosophical level by representing the nonconceptual side of objects as the sole thing philosophy should chase. Adorno wants not only to rescue the possibility of metaphysical questioning by philosophers but also the possibility of spiritual engagement with the world as such for an individual. Deborah Cook rightly points out that what is Adorno very much interested in while criticizing enlightenment rationality, is its negative psychological impacts on the intellectual freedom of individuals.<sup>216</sup> Hence, I propose that essayistic textuality as a philosophical method is also Adorno's suggestion of a way to resist prevailing rationality and strive for freedom in a slightly more practical sense.<sup>217</sup> According to my interpretation, his and Horkheimer's insistence on philosophy's task of protecting intellectual and actual freedom became an integral part of essayism, introduced more than a decade later. Put differently, Adorno's essayism as a way of thinking is meant also as a liberated way of philosophical expression and as such has the ambition to be more practical than a "mere" new way of interpreting cultural objects.

In order to suggest such an account, several explanations are in order. This chapter will thus proceed followingly: in its first section, I will shortly introduce Adorno's understanding of freedom and resistance and connect it with essayism as an experiment which – among other things – aims at the liberation of philosophical language. In the second section, I will show its connection to somaticity and briefly review the ethical aspect of Adorno's thinking connected to the issue of including the somatic aspect in our philosophical engagement with the world. The third section will show an example of Adorno's sketching the possibilities of resistance by

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<sup>216</sup> Cook: 'Adorno, Foucault and Critique'. In: *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 39:10 (2013), p. 970.

<sup>217</sup> As he says himself, "the essay reminds us about the freedom of spirit, which ... has not until today even under the present-day conditions of formal freedom quite developed." Adorno: 'The Essay as Form'. In: *Notes to Literature*, p. 30. Translation modified. Orig.: "... der Essay ... an die Freiheit des Geistes mahnt, die ... bis heute, auch unter den Bedingungen formaler Freiheit, nicht recht sich entfaltetete." Adorno: 'Der Essay als Form'. In: *Noten zur Literatur*, p. 5.

pointing out that he connects the intellectual faculty of fantasy with the issue of practical resistance to the negative impacts of the modern Western way of life; together with that, I will also discuss the issue of intellectual elitism which is intrinsic to the account of the liberating potential of fantasy.

### **5.1 Freedom, resistance and essayism as a liberation of language<sup>218</sup>**

In the final notes in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Adorno and Horkheimer talk about philosophy as “not a synthesis, a basic science, or an overarching science but an effort to resist suggestion, a determination to protect intellectual and actual freedom,”<sup>219</sup> putting the problematics of freedom at the centre of philosophy’s attention. Adorno later, especially at the turn of the 50s and 60s, introduced an actualized account of what he understood under the concept of freedom and autonomy.

Adorno’s concept of freedom grows mostly from the critique of Kant’s understanding of autonomy and freedom. In a nutshell, Kant’s conception promotes the idea of autonomy or exercising freedom based on acting in accordance with pure reason. Not coincidentally, Kant presents the enlightenment as a so-called *Ausgang*, a “way out” of the immaturity of mankind which dwells in modification of the relationship between will, authority and use of reason, leading us towards exercising pure reason. According to Kant’s famous formulation,

“enlightenment is man’s release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man’s inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another. Self-incurred is this tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. *Sapere aude!* ‘Have courage to use your own reason!’ – that is the motto of enlightenment.”<sup>220</sup>

For this enlightenment there is nothing else needed but freedom to use one’s reason. This exercising of reason, as it is pure reason, according to Adorno and Horkheimer then implies a “process of establishing a unified, scientific order and of deriving factual knowledge from principles.”<sup>221</sup> Enlightenment in this conception aims at “the form of knowledge which most

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<sup>218</sup> This section presents an elaborated account of the first part of my article ‘Liberation of Language and Suspension of Subject in T.W. Adorno’s *Notes to Literature*’. In: *Humanities Bulletin* 5:2 (2022), pp. 26-39.

<sup>219</sup> Adorno & Horkheimer: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 202.

<sup>220</sup> Kant: ‘What is Enlightenment?’. In: Kant: *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Indianapolis, New York: The Library of Liberal Arts 1959, p. 85.

<sup>221</sup> Adorno & Horkheimer: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 63.

ably deals with the facts, most effectively assists the subject in mastering nature.”<sup>222</sup> Put plainly, according to Adorno, Kant’s understanding of freedom as the use of one’s own pure reason and enlightenment as a process where this is enabled narrowed what the exercise of freedom could be by creating an opposition between reason and freedom on one side and nature on the other. Hence, it detached reason from its natural basis. As Brian O’Connor aptly summarizes it, critical theory’s goal is to break through this division and provide a way of thinking about human experience which would explain our capacity to reflect our experience *without* stripping it of this natural basis as Kant did.<sup>223</sup> As it becomes obvious, Adorno’s speculative account of enlightenment comes back into play here as opposed to Kant’s idea: Kant’s *Ausgang* and emphasis on reason detached from all natural bias presents one of the supreme moments of strengthening of the position of instrumental rationality which in the situation of 20<sup>th</sup> century, according to Adorno, turns out to be the intellectual convention which ends up suppressing individual autonomy and detaches us from the very desired connection to *mana*.

Adorno, together with Horkheimer, nevertheless acknowledges that “freedom in society is inseparable from enlightenment thinking.”<sup>224</sup> In line of principle, Kant’s advocacy of public use of reason in opposition to proclamations “do not argue!” is with no doubt prime aspect of nascent democracy. However, in the current situation, freedom becomes endangered precisely by the thinking it was born in.<sup>225</sup> Enlightenment as understood by Kant presents a very narrow meaning of rationality and, according to Adorno, the power to determine one’s own action ends up being compromised once we are supposed to use only one specific form of rationality.<sup>226</sup> Hence, freedom has to be rethought from how it was understood by Kant. As with any other concept, its meaning has developed and the term itself ought to stand after WW2 for something else. We cannot deduce freedom from rationality and suppose that human beings have the potential for freedom solely due to being *res cogitans* anymore.

Adorno’s actualized account of freedom and autonomy can be then summarized as followingly: philosophy ought to forget thinking about freedom and unfreedom in absolute terms and grounding freedom purely in human reason. Statements such as “either there is a will or there

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>223</sup> O’Connor: ‘Freedom within Nature: Adorno on the Idea of Reason’s Autonomy’. In: *The Impact of Idealism: The Legacy of Post-Kantian German Thought. Volume 2: Historical, Social and Political Thought*. Cambridge University Press 2013, p. 210.

<sup>224</sup> Adorno & Horkheimer: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. xvi.

<sup>225</sup> “What produced freedom will recoil into unfreedom.” Adorno: *Negative Dialectics*, p. 262.

<sup>226</sup> O’Connor: *Adorno*. London and New York: Routledge 2013, p. 115.

is not; either the will is free, or it is not free” are the results of us being “trained to equate philosophical thinking with logical thinking.”<sup>227</sup> We have to realize that the will can never be absolutely free or unfree: “Freedom itself and unfreedom are so entangled that unfreedom is not just an impediment to freedom but a premise of its concept.”<sup>228</sup> Freedom and unfreedom cannot be thought of as mutually exclusive opposites, especially after recognizing that both concepts lack any kind of firm ontological grounding as sketched by identity thinking. Adorno points out that “in ourselves, by introspection, we discover neither positive freedom nor a positive unfreedom. We conceive both in their relation to extramental things: freedom as a polemical counter-image to the suffering brought on by social coercion; unfreedom as that coercion’s image.”<sup>229</sup> In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is the phenomenon of social coercion and domination which creates the meaning of freedom. In other words, freedom can and should be thought of solely in terms of the liberation of the individual from coercion imposed on him, as “detached from the object, autonomy is fictitious.”<sup>230</sup>

The late-capitalist ideology, according to Adorno, poses new challenges as it introduces new forms of social domination which are largely unprecedented and unique to the up-to-date society.<sup>231</sup> According to Adorno,

“because of their integration into society, the masses have no more control of their social destiny today than they possessed 120 years ago. In consequence, they not only have lost any sense of class solidarity but also fail to grasp fully that they are the objects and not the subjects of the social process that as subjects they nevertheless sustain.”<sup>232</sup>

Life in the late capitalistic society exhorts individuals to pay all of their attention and direct all their energy into the management of their life within the institutionalized frames of society in which they live. Philosophy’s actual task, put plainly, can be understood as to help people liberate themselves from the idea that this is the only right way of thinking, acting and living. That is, for Adorno, the meaning of freedom which was granted to it by the situation of the

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<sup>227</sup> Adorno: *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964-1965*, p. 190.

<sup>228</sup> Adorno: *Negative Dialectics*, p. 285.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 223.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>231</sup> See also Frumer: ‘Negative Freedom or Integrated Domination? Adorno versus Honneth’. In: *European Journal of Philosophy* 28:1 (2019), p. 13.

<sup>232</sup> Adorno: *Can one live after Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press 2013, p. 115.

post-war western world of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: liberation from the prevailing rationality and resistance of pathologies of our society.

Henry W. Pickford sets forth two main modes of resistance which he marks as ‘cognitive’ and ‘non-cognitive’. The cognitive mode consists of critical reflection on society which identifies the conceptual and social antagonisms present in late capitalist society and reveals that the promised progress towards a better world of human flourishing is not happening.<sup>233</sup> As he notes, the production of experience of this through theory is “one element of Adorno’s praxis of resistance, and his attempts to achieve that production – be they his university lecture courses, his public talks before a wide variety of audiences, his radio broadcasts, his published essays, and so on – should be understood ... as various manifestations of his general activity as a public intellectual.”<sup>234</sup> Theory is for Adorno indeed the best weapon to fight ideological mechanisms and point out the natural irrevocability of the capitalist totality.<sup>235</sup> The cognitive mode includes concrete recommendations in the field of education – cultivating cultural background and critical abilities which would increase our capacity to see through the false immediacy of society – and also “self-conscious analysis of and intervention into habits and practices at the micro level”<sup>236</sup> which dwells for instance in small practical acts of not engaging with mass culture products and their critique. The non-cognitive mode then, according to Pickford, consists in cultivating philosophical emotions, especially in recognizing the potential of fantasy. Pickford rightfully notes that “the crucial role that non-cognitive elements play in Adorno’s general epistemology has not yet been sufficiently recognized.”<sup>237</sup> Further in this chapter, I will return to this issue.

The matter of resistance to instrumental rationality and mass culture then naturally cuts down all the way down to the matters of language and way of thinking. The link between freedom and language is, the same as philosophy’s task of protecting individuals’ freedom, also sketched already in the foreword to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* from 1944 where Adorno and Horkheimer express the concern that “no [language] expression is available which would not tend to comply with the prevailing intellectual trends, and what worn-down language cannot

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<sup>233</sup> Pickford: ‘Adorno and Categories of Resistance’. In: *Constellations* 31:2 (2024), p. 137.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>235</sup> Comp. Mascaretti: ‘Brothers in Arms: Adorno and Foucault on Resistance’. In: *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 0:0 (2023), p. 3.

<sup>236</sup> Pickford: ‘Adorno and Categories of Resistance’, p. 138.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid., p. 139-140.

achieve on its own is precisely made good by the social machinery.”<sup>238</sup> Adorno’s essayism, introduced 14 years later in his “Essay as Form” represents an answer to this challenge, an attempt to create a language expression resisting general intellectual trends and instrumental rationality which would liberate our use of concepts from established ways of thinking which block the alternative display of reality. When it comes concretely to the unfreedom of language, the concern of philosophers is to recognize premises and rules of thinking that they might be taking for granted while there is no necessity to do so – their recognition then, in Adorno’s case, implies the maxims resulting from immanent critique as described in the second chapter of this dissertation. Essayism hence represents an experimental method of liberation of thinking; as such it ought to carry the potential to connect to the nonconceptual, ousted by, among others, Kant’s emphasis on pure reason as opposed to nature. In his interview for *Spiegel* in 1969 Adorno indeed says: “I think that for once the question should be asked whether it is not also a form of resistance when a human being thinks and writes things the way I write them.”<sup>239</sup> This means: essayism’s exercising of critique represents a functional tool of resistance to prevailing intellectual trends and as such serves to protect of autonomy of thinking.

## 5.2 Freedom, impulses and lack of fantasy

Kant’s conception of autonomy and freedom, based purely on reason which according to Adorno ousts connection to nature as *mana*, encompasses also ousting of the aspect of thought which Adorno, as we have seen in the previous chapter, considers highly important and presents it as an aspect which was still included in the speculative mythical engagement with the world: the somaticity. On top of that, the physical impulses for Adorno are also tightly connected to the issue of freedom directly in connection to our ability to take an action – and no less, take the right action. According to Adorno, “will without physical impulses ... would not be a will.”<sup>240</sup> He specifies this will as “lawful unity of all impulses that prove to be determined

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<sup>238</sup> Adorno & Horkheimer: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. xv. The translation has been modified. Orig: „Kein Ausdruck bietet sich mehr an, der nicht zum Einverständnis mit herrschenden Denkrichtungen hinstrebte, und was die abgegriffene Sprache nicht selbsttätig leistet, wird von den gesellschaftlichen Maschinerien präzise nachgeholt.“ Adorno & Horkheimer: *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, p. 9.

<sup>239</sup> Adorno & Richter: ‘Who’s Afraid of the Ivory Tower? A Conversation with Theodor W. Adorno’. In: *Monatshefte* 94:1 (2002), p. 19.

<sup>240</sup> Adorno: *Negative Dialectics*, p. 241.

spontaneously and rationally at the same time ... Freedom would be the word for the possibility of such impulses.”<sup>241</sup>

We have seen in the previous chapter that Adorno suggests that our way of thinking ought to be led by impulses, even if we do not fully understand them and are unable to make the way they work fully transparent. On top of that, it is suggested that we ought to also practically *act* motivated by these impulses instead of behaviour which would be solely in accordance with reason as Kant imagined it. Acting on impulses then generally conditions the possibility of resistance. We ought to act on impulse as the alternative of ousting this archaic aspect of the will by planning and rationality “paradoxically provokes a regressive reaction on the part of human beings. It means that they are no longer capable of will, impulse or spontaneity, but that they increasingly behave like guinea pigs about to be subjected to vivisection.”<sup>242</sup>

In other words, practical behaviour ought to consist of two – potentially antagonistic – aspects. The first one is reason, on which Enlightenment put all the emphasis, and the second is what Adorno marks as a “bodily impulse that cannot be reduced to reason.”<sup>243</sup> These two moments merged in action represent “something like a reconciliation of spirit, the union of reason and nature.”<sup>244</sup> As he then explains:

“With ... impulsiveness, freedom extends into the realm of experience. If we behave spontaneously ... we feel that we are ourselves. But at the same time we feel we have been released from the spiritual prison of mere consciousness and this impulse enables us to enter, to take a leap – call it what you will – into the realm of objects that is normally barred to us by our own rationality. It is extremely hard for us to find the right expressions with which to describe these very profound matters without instantly reifying them.”<sup>245</sup>

An act which is based on the merge of the rational/spiritual and somatic/natural moments then creates also space for moral content. As Adorno points out in his *Minima Moralia*, philosophy ought to seek “in the opposition of feeling and understanding, their – precisely moral – unity.”<sup>246</sup> The physical moment conditions our ability to initiate action. It “tells our knowledge

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<sup>241</sup> Ibid., p. 212. Translation modified. Orig.: “ ... wäre der Wille die gesetzmäßige Einheit aller Impulse, die als zugleich spontan und vernunftbestimmt sich erweisen ... Freiheit wäre das Wort für die Möglichkeit jener Impulse.“ Adorno: *Negative Dialektik*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag 1966, p. 210.

<sup>242</sup> Adorno: *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964-1965*, p. 235.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid., p. 239.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid., p. 238.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid., p. 237.

<sup>246</sup> Adorno: *Minima Moralia*, p. 197-198.

that suffering ought not to be, that things should be different. ... Hence, the convergence of specific materialism with criticism, with social change in practise.”<sup>247</sup>

As an example of moral behaviour based on impulse, Adorno mentions Fabian von Schlabrendorff who,<sup>248</sup> when Adorno asked him after the war where he found the courage to actively oppose Nazis and risk things inconceivably more horrific than death, answered that he “just couldn’t put up with things the way they were any longer. And I didn’t spend much time brooding about the possible consequences. I just followed the idea that anything would be better than for things to go on as they were.”<sup>249</sup> According to Adorno, this was the supreme example of moral behaviour in which the “element of impulse joins forces with the element of consciousness to bring about a spontaneous act.”<sup>250</sup>

Owen Hulatt explains the somatic moment of resistance in particular as a certain kind of pain which calls for being opposed. Pain, according to him, is a moving force of dialectical thinking which discloses that things should be different, a physical impulse telling us that change is needed. Experience of pain – not just any, but fairly specific, even though by Adorno himself not very closely specified, kind of pain – “is not merely a motivating discomfort, but is rather epistemically germane, and contributes to our knowledge of what should and should not be.”<sup>251</sup> We can, nevertheless, based on the example of Schlabrendorff and a certain level of inconsistency which is present in Adorno’s promotion of impulsivity, assume that he generally calls for admittance of the nontransparent somatic moment into both our thinking and acting.

Reference to Schlabrendorff’s course of action represents an attractive account of the connection between somaticity and ethical behaviour. Nonetheless, when it comes to the ethical commitments and challenges imposed by the late capitalistic society in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the matter of resistance to the prevailing order in the conditions of democracy and formal freedom becomes different and more abstract. Its connection to somaticity nevertheless prevails, albeit it takes on a more intellectual form.

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<sup>247</sup> Adorno: *Negative Dialectics*, p. 203.

<sup>248</sup> Fabian von Schlabrendorff was one of the tops of German resistance that prepared the 20<sup>th</sup> July plot. After the coup d’état failed, he was arrested, tortured and went through several different concentration camps. He survived, participated in Nuremberg trials as an advisor the American intelligence officer William J. Donovan and later became the judge of the Federal Constitutional Court.

<sup>249</sup> Adorno: *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964-1965*, p. 240.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid.

<sup>251</sup> Hulatt: ‘Normative Impulsivity: Adorno on Ethics and the Body’, p. 685.

An example of the desired resistance to the actual prevailing order can be represented by explicating Adorno's account of the lack of fantasy. In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Adorno and Horkheimer note that the enlightenment thinking's goal is to "dispel the myth, to overthrow fantasy with knowledge."<sup>252</sup> Some pages later the authors add that "the technical facilitation of existence, the continuance of domination demands the fixation of instincts by greater repression" and that the fantasy then "withers."<sup>253</sup> These remarks – even if at the time of their formulation in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* undoubtedly not thought out so thoroughly – can serve as a basis for another circumstance of the notion of fantasy which we can observe in Adorno's later texts, namely the issue of consequences of its ousting from thinking.

Adorno marks the lack of fantasy as a symptom of intellectually undesired practices of modern society in his essays about mass culture. Fantasy as an organon of gathering together "the discrete elements of the real into its truth" gets in the modern situation "repudiated as an improper presumption."<sup>254</sup> Products of mass culture do not require the deployment of fantasy or any intellectually strenuous performance from its consumers and through their ubiquity, they even actively choke these faculties of the individuals. We encounter this for example in filmmaking:

"Far more strongly than the theatre of illusion, film denies its audience any dimension in which they might roam freely in imagination (*Phantasie*)... without losing the thread; thus it trains those exposed to it to identify film directly with reality. The withering of fantasy (*Vorstellungskraft*) and spontaneity in the consumer of culture today need not be traced back to psychological mechanisms. The products themselves, especially the most characteristic, the sound film, cripple those faculties through their objective makeup."<sup>255</sup>

Adorno famously complained that every visit to the cinema left him feeling more stupid.<sup>256</sup> He indeed suggested as a part of educational practice to show commercially produced movies to students and teach them to identify their voidness: "I could imagine, for example, that the senior classes of secondary schools could be taken as a group to commercially produced films, and

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<sup>252</sup> Adorno & Horkheimer: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 1.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid., p. 27-28.

<sup>254</sup> Adorno: 'Scheme of Mass Culture'. In: *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, p. 64-65.

<sup>255</sup> Adorno & Horkheimer: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 99-100.

<sup>256</sup> Adorno: *Minima Moralia*, p. 25.

that the students could quite simply be shown what a con is being presented, how hypocritical it all is.”<sup>257</sup>

Adorno marks the lack of fantasy as a source of the “neurotic feeling of powerlessness” that is “intimately bound up with boredom.”<sup>258</sup> Fantasy, according to him,

“is suspected of being only sexual curiosity and longing for forbidden by the spirit of a science which is no longer spirit. Those who want to adapt must learn increasingly to curb their fantasy. ... The lack of fantasy which is cultivated and inculcated by society renders people helpless in their free time. The impertinent question of what people should do with the vast amount of free time now at their disposal ... is based upon this very lack of fantasy.”<sup>259</sup>

Adorno’s criticism here aims at the previously introduced observation that the modern way of life of Western society, despite being filled with prosperity, carries within itself this germ of regression, or rather allows it to come into existence. He even marks it as the “reason why people have remained chained to their work, and to system which trains them for work, long after that system has ceased to require their labour.”<sup>260</sup> We can put these passages in direct connection with one of earlier Adorno’s observations in his *Minima Moralia*:

“Few things separate more profoundly the mode of life befitting an intellectual from that of the bourgeois than the fact that the former acknowledges no alternative between work and recreation. ... Its freedom is the same as that which bourgeois society reserves exclusively for relaxation and, by this regimentation, at once revokes. Conversely, anyone who knows freedom finds all the amusements tolerated by this society unbearable, and apart from his work, which admittedly includes what the bourgeois relegate to non-working hours as ‘culture’, has no taste for substitute pleasures.”<sup>261</sup>

This point together with the former passages from the essays on mass culture implies that genuine intellectual life should be able to, according to Adorno, resist the “neurotic feeling of

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<sup>257</sup> Adorno: ‘Education for Maturity and Responsibility.’ In: *History of the Human Sciences* 12:3 (1999), p. 30.

<sup>258</sup> Adorno: ‘Free Time’. In: *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, p. 192.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid. The translation has been modified. Orig: “Phantasie wird ebenso als sexuelle Neugier und Verlangen nach Verbotenem beargwöhnt wie vom Geist einer Wissenschaft, die kein Geist mehr ist. Wer sich anpassen will, muss in steigendem Maß auf Phantasie verzichten. ... Die gesellschaftlich eingepflanzte und anbefohlene Phantasielosigkeit macht die Menschen in ihrer Freizeit hilflos. ... Die unverschämte Frage, was denn das Volk mit der vielen Freizeit anfangen sollte, die es nun habe ... beruht darauf.” Adorno: *Gesammelte Schriften. Band 10: Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag 1977, p. 647.

<sup>260</sup> Adorno: ‘Free Time’. In: *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, p. 192.

<sup>261</sup> Adorno: *Minima Moralia*, p. 130.

powerlessness” concealed in boredom. Genuine intellectuals, according to Adorno, do not succumb to the way of life that leads to this masked feeling of desperation and we can assume that they simply should not experience a sense of boredom. They exercise the freedom understood as “that of a man pursuing his own ends, ends that are not directly and totally exhausted by social ends.”<sup>262</sup> Through that intellectuals can resist the numbing social order. The liberation from social coercion realizes itself both as an external feature of the way of leading one’s life – e.g. making no difference between work and leisure – and his way of thinking and dealing with experiential material – embracing somaticity, or if you will, philosophical affectivity in the engagement with the world. Adorno illustrates these reflections by claiming that one could hardly imagine “Nietzsche in an office, with a secretary minding the telephone in the anteroom, at his desk until 5 o’clock” and later “playing golf after the day’s work was done.”<sup>263</sup> He also complains in one of his lectures about freedom that he has to “perform too many administrative duties and these keep me from what I regard as my most important tasks, tasks I can find time for only by stealing time from unavoidable chores” marking it as “the concrete form in which we experience the question of freedom and unfreedom today.”<sup>264</sup> Both of these images present examples of external unfreedom that according to Adorno genuine intellectuals should be able to resist better than others.

This resistance seems to be tightly connected to somatic impulses in general. The anticipatory desire seems to be an impulse which “drives the consciousness to imaginatively manipulate and anticipate the object it is immediately confronted with” as Owen Hulatt aptly points out.<sup>265</sup> The consciousness, according to him, is pressed by the “desire to outstrip the immediately presented aspect of the object. In this sense, impulses have a positive aspect, pushing the consciousness onwards to more abstract and complex epistemic relations to the object.”<sup>266</sup> Such description seems to be reminiscent of what we encounter as ‘intellectual drive’ or ‘intellectual curiosity’ – generally defined as a tendency to seek knowledge just for the sake of knowledge – which would admittedly present a suitable counterpart of idleness which Adorno considers to be a consequence of consumption of mass culture products. Resistance then seems to be enabled by

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<sup>262</sup> Adorno: *Negative Dialectics*, p. 261.

<sup>263</sup> Adorno: *Minima Moralia*, p. 130.

<sup>264</sup> Adorno: *History and Freedom. Lectures 1964-1965*, p. 205.

<sup>265</sup> Hulatt: ‘Normative Impulsivity: Adorno on Ethics and Body’, p. 280.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 285.

such impulses as they tend to go beyond generally established ways of thinking and genuinely reach their objects.

Such description circles back to Adorno's intellectual elitism, as he presents the lives of intellectuals as those resistant to the social coercion of late capitalism. Adorno openly marks the ability to use fantasy as "bound up with educational privilege and leisure" belonging rather to the "philosophical concept of art."<sup>267</sup> The picture Adorno sketches in this regard is undoubtedly one of the reasons why he is often accused of being a strong intellectual elitist. Admittedly, it is hard to deny that. The environment in which Adorno lived as well as the lives of intellectuals he admired probably explain the picture that he sketches as well as the impressions from which it emerged.<sup>268</sup> Even though we may ponder whether the possibilities of resistance would not be available also to people with a certain type of sensitivity and rich inner life in a more general sense, in the end, we can summarize that Adorno's vision in a strict sense implies the possibility of resistance foremostly for *hommes de lettres* – even if we can assume that it is in a wider sense of well-read thoughtful individuals – suggesting them embracing in a specific kind of philosophical reflection which is carried by specific philosophical affectivity, strives to be stripped of intellectual prejudices imposed by strong rationalistic tradition and makes use of critical tools which philosophy still has at disposal. His idea of intellectual freedom that exercises genuine fantasy openly implies that it shall be a privilege of only a small group of individuals who possess certain intellectual backgrounds and education as well as means to exercise them.

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<sup>267</sup> Adorno: 'Scheme of Mass Culture'. In: *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, p. 65.

<sup>268</sup> It is also noteworthy that Adorno's intellectual heroes did not succumb to "ordinary" academic lifestyle which, as it has been mentioned, bothered him. Many of them did not hold a professorship at a university. For example, Adorno's role model Walter Benjamin has written most of his works outside of academia without a stable job, predominantly financially supported by friends and staying at various locations around Western and Southern Europe. Franz Kafka, another Adorno's favourite, worked as an office worker in an insurance company and spent last years of his life in sanatoriums due to his poor health. Friedrich Nietzsche left the Basel university where he held position to spend around half of his intellectual career as an independent scholar, travelling around Europe. It is reasonable to assume that this inspired Adorno, even though he himself never decided to leave his university position.

## CONCLUSION

In the introduction of this thesis, I outlined four research objectives of this inquiry: (1) to introduce Adorno's essayistic method in a comprehensible manner, (2) to point out its connections to Adorno's notion of the preponderance of the object and by that inquire how is the author supposed to relate to the object of his essay, (3) to explain wider connotations of essayistic thinking by connecting essayism to Adorno's promotion of philosophical affectivity, i.e. to describe what kind of change of the way of thinking is supposed to take place while composing an essay and (4) to inquire about a more practical potential of essayism by connecting it with Adorno's account of resistance to the numbing effects of the late capitalistic society. In this conclusion, I will foremostly attempt to elucidate how I achieved these research objectives. Also, in the latter part, I will sketch possible directions for further philosophical research on Adorno's essayism which have not been elaborately thematized here. And finally, I will at least briefly consider one of the most pressing potential objections to essayism, namely its precariousness due to lack of clear criteria that could be employed to measure essay's success within the chase after the nonconceptual.

(1) My first objective was to introduce Adorno's essayism in a comprehensible manner, as it is admittedly quite an enigmatic philosophical method. I attempted to do this foremostly in the first two chapters by, first, introducing the philosophical background and main ideas which inspired Adorno to introduce essayism and, second, explicating some of the focal mechanisms at work in an Adornian essay. There are four main ideas or, if you will, philosophical statements which underlie the introduction of essayism. First, that philosophy after WW2 calls for rethinking of the form of its presentation. As such essayism represents a timely answer to a specific situation of one of the "breaking points" that philosophical discipline has faced throughout the history of western thought. Second, that Adorno's essayism is meant as an alternative to enlightenment rationality – which he, together with Max Horkheimer understands in a wider sense as a tendency of human thinking to systematize, dominate and rationalize – and as such connect to aspects which have been ousted by the western way of thinking throughout the course of time. Third, that the object of philosophical inquiry which interests Adorno dwells in the sphere of nonconceptual – as he says, philosophy's task is to "reach beyond concept by means of the concept"<sup>269</sup> – and it is accessible (and afterwards mediatable) in a form of experience of the nonidentical: that which falls out the idealistic identity of thinking

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<sup>269</sup> Adorno: *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, p. 88.

and reality – or as it became known among Adornian scholars, the intellectual experience (*geistige Erfahrung*). And fourth, that the possibility of reachability of the nonconceptual by the means of concepts is based on the assumption that concepts carry a reference to something nonconceptual within themselves. Next to explaining these four philosophical convictions underlying Adorno's introduction of essayism, I have attempted to show Adorno's essayistic form as a philosophical method which experiments by critically turning selected conventional methodological mechanisms of philosophy upside down. Essay aims at representing (*darstellen*) the nonconceptual by creating a certain philosophical texture through which the intellectual experience of it gets mediated; succeeding at creating this texture is conditioned – among other things, as essayism cannot be reduced to purely applying a set of such rules – by abandoning selected maxims of traditional thinking. I have listed six features of essayistic composition which I identified as crucial for the success of such an endeavour. First, rejection of reduction of philosophical observation to a principle, second, shift of focus from wholes to details or particularities, third, essay's refusal to define its own concepts, fourth, lack of necessity of argumentative structure, fifth, rejection of the need of writing in a comprehensible and summarizable manner and sixth, giving preponderance to essay's object and, hence, limitation of author's subjectivity.

(2) After laying out main methodological features of essayism, I inquired what is supposed to happen between the author and his object during essay's composition. Adorno's philosophy calls for so-called 'preponderance of the object' and 'limitation of subjectivity' which, once deployed in an essay, ought to result in the author becoming an 'arena of the intellectual experience'. While composing an essay, putting the 'preponderance of the object' and 'limitation of subjectivity' at work is necessary for the author's success in representing or mediating the intellectual experience of his object. The author, it seems, rather lets the insights leading to the nonconceptual *happen* instead of developing them through a "traditional deductive or inductive structure."<sup>270</sup> 'Becoming an arena of the intellectual experience' ought to happen, again, by means of turning against traditional philosophy, which according to Adorno, has been overly subjectivistic and attempted to interpret the world by putting at work mechanisms found within the subjects instead of fully engaging with the interpreted objects. In order to grasp more deeply what shape this may take, I introduced two accounts of a successful 'limitation of subjectivity' as Adorno suggests in the works of his favourite authors. First, Adorno supports Paul Valéry's claim that an artist ought to mediate the objective by training

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<sup>270</sup> Adorno: 'The Essay as Form'. In: *Notes to Literature*, p. 35.

and submitting himself to his artistic *métier*. Second, Adorno interprets Marcel Proust's own loss of subjectivity through extreme subjectification which is typical for his *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Proust's getting completely lost in the society he adores and the strange aesthetics of life within it is, according to Adorno, capable of reaching the highest peaks of both critique of the French aristocratic society of his time, as well as a strange kind of nonconceptual irrationality which accompanies human life. Both of these examples of successful limitation of subjectivity then suggest hints for essayistic composition: essayist ought to be fully dedicated to his object, possess the ability to follow its structure instead of merely applying ready-made philosophical ideas and thought mechanisms on it and has to vanish within his object in order to successfully mediate the intellectual experience contained in it.

(3) I also pondered what kind of change of thinking Adorno more generally calls for and for that purpose I interpreted his promotion of affectivity of philosophical thinking, which I consider to be a slightly underestimated aspect of Adorno's philosophy. Adorno's call for philosophical affectivity nonetheless represents a key for understanding more deeply what kind of conduct of thought is supposed to take place within his essayism. He points out that (philosophical) thinking ought to include two moments: reason, on which enlightenment, as he understands it, puts all the emphasis, and the second, somatic impulse that brings emotionality and affectivity to work in thinking and which cannot be reduced purely to reason. Adorno introduces several 'categories' of worthy philosophical impulses or emotions which carry the potential to realize the intellectual experience and are possibly at work within its representation. For essayism as such, the most interesting philosophical impulse is represented by Adorno's notion of philosophical fantasy which he interprets both as an 'anticipatory desire' which motivates the author to go beyond the concepts and 'exact fantasy' as an intellectual faculty which guides the rearrangements of concepts within the composition of essayistic constellation. The call for (re)establishment of philosophical affectivity, foremostly then specifically philosophical fantasy, thus represents an answer to the initial question of what kind of change of thinking Adorno endorses when it comes to essayism.

(4) Finally, I wanted to also assess how Adorno himself understands the practical potential of his essayism. In other words, I inquired how is essayism supposed to be useful apart from its metaphysical aspirations to represent of the nonconceptual side of the objects. Adorno indeed does not reduce the purpose of essayism to the representation of intellectual experiences which would have solely philosophical value. The chase after nonconceptual is also meant to have a positive effect on the practical life of individuals since it, as an alternative to the prevailing way

of thinking, reminds us of the usefulness of the critical attitude and as such it promotes resistance to the numbing effects of the administrated life typical for late capitalistic societies. As such essayism represents an attempt at liberation from the prevailing rationality and resistance of pathologies of our society. On the one hand, it liberates our use of concepts by means of critique, on the other hand, it promotes and maintains the aspect of philosophical affectivity, which is for Adorno a necessary component of moral behaviour and the ability to resist the pressure of late capitalistic society. As such, essayism transcends the rather theoretical aspiration of the chase after the nonconceptual and is supposed to prove worthy also in a more practical sense.

These four main axes of my inquiry were led by two more general intentions. (i) I hoped that by introducing the speculative background and critical mechanisms of essayism, I would help Adorno's readers with orientation through his heavy texts. This was supposed to be the product of the first two chapters, especially Chapter 2 which introduced essayism as based in philosophical critique and named the main maxims of essayistic composition. As such it hoped to explain the reasons of the strange and dense texture of Adorno's writing. While reading Adorno, I consider it highly useful to recognize which, otherwise common, philosophical mechanisms are dismissed, what kind of philosophical methodology is at work and what kind of philosophical insights are meant to be reached by his writing. Recognition of these three moments can, in my opinion, help to reduce the general confusion which his texts may cause. Also, their elaboration hopes to support the idea that omitting the mechanisms which we otherwise find to be a matter of course in philosophical writing can functionally lead to interesting philosophical insights. This first general aim then expands into the second (ii): suggesting the intellectual value of such – admittedly fairly specific and unorthodox – philosophical attitude. This second general research aim extends beyond the fourth research objective of my investigation which queried about usefulness of Adorno's essayism in the sphere of resistance and intellectual freedom of individuals, as I also intended to propose the philosophical value of essayism for philosophical discipline itself. Adorno's essayism represents a remarkable example of how wide the possibilities of philosophy are in the sense that it functionally transcends numerous philosophical conventions in order to express the aforementioned *geistige Erfahrungen* which are meant to be accessible intellectually and remain located at the edge of human understanding. As such essayism serves as a reminder that it is fruitful if philosophy remains playful and experimental, that philosophy does not always have to attempt to fully understand its own mechanisms at every cost and that it can remain

prolific even if it would not fully succumb to conventional logic. For this suggestion, foremostly Chapter 4 and its general promotion of affectivity of philosophical conduct serves as a reminder that possibilities of how philosophy can be done remain and ought to remain rather wide than closed.

When we interpret Adorno, something always falls out. It is therefore needed to explicitly acknowledge that a thesis concerned with an interpretation of his essayism does not pretend to be an all-encompassing overview, but rather a series of insights aiming at developing a better understanding of how to read Adorno and how his linguistic method can potentially be deployed in our own way of thinking. With such an objective in mind, many considerations which would be philosophically interesting did not receive much attention. I would like to therefore at least briefly mention some of the directions that potential inquiries about Adorno's essayism could take which were not considered here at length.

Without a doubt, a proper assessment of the impact of Benjamin's philosophy on Adorno's essayism would take up more than one extensive monography. Many questions come forth solely based in the interpretation provided here: In what way does Adorno take over the idea of a broken world and of looking for philosophical truth in cracks and joints of reality? And what does it imply for the essay? Does Adorno fully depart from Benjamin's obscure concept of ideas or do they actually have something important in common with the intellectual experience of the nonconceptual? What valuable insights about textuality would bring in this regard Benjamin's and Adorno's insights about translation? In what way is *mimésis*, another philosophical concept coined by Benjamin and taken over by Adorno, at work in an essay? Research of such questions nevertheless extends beyond the aspirations of my thesis.<sup>271</sup>

Apart from Benjamin, also influence of many other notable Adorno's predecessors and inspirational sources did not come up. I will mention only two which I find most important. There is a number of links between him and Friedrich Nietzsche, who was one of the pioneers of promoting a tight connection between textual style of philosophy and its content. As Adorno famously proclaimed: "Of all the so-called great philosophers I owe [Nietzsche] by far the greatest debt – more even than Hegel."<sup>272</sup> Georg W. F. Hegel nevertheless also plays an

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<sup>271</sup> To refer to a few comparisons of Benjamin and Adorno which at least partially thematize these issues: Ross et al.: *Aesthetic Ground of Critical Theory: New Readings of Benjamin and Adorno*. London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers 2015. Feldman: 'Not Dialectical Enough: On Benjamin, Adorno, and Autonomous Critique'. In: *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 44:4 (2011), pp. 336-362.

<sup>272</sup> Adorno: *Problems of Moral Philosophy*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press 2000, p. 172.

immensely important role. Adorno proclaimed him also as one of the biggest essayists of all times at numerous occasions.<sup>273</sup> Despite the fact that Adorno refused the core of Hegel's philosophy – the identity thesis –, Hegel's dialectical thinking also determined Adorno's conduct of thoughts and, by extension, his textual method. Interpretation of both Nietzsche's and Hegel's influence on Adorno's essayism would undoubtedly unlock numerous, here only hinted on, aspects of it.

Another omitted area is the connection of essayistic method and ideas of interpretation of art to Adorno's insights regarding music; it is undoubtedly possible to draw powerful parallels between Adorno's textuality and his thoughts on composition of music as well as between the issues of deterioration of impulsivity and popular music.

Despite working with his *Notes on Literature*, the same could be said about more thorough connection of Adorno's textuality to literature and individual authors he admired. Foremost, I skipped connections of Adorno's essayistic method to his understanding of Hölderlin's parataxis and Eichendorff's *Rauschen* to which he attached utter importance in connection to philosophical textuality.<sup>274</sup>

What also comes up is the recurring question of the object of Adorno's philosophical representation: the intellectual experience. Even though I attempted to provide its rough description in the first chapter – as a sort of metaphysical aspiration of Adorno's, let me say, post-metaphysical philosophy, i.e. possible philosophical experience stemming from the concept of nonidentity of Adorno's negative dialectics and nature of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* –, this notion yet beseeches attention and further inquiry as to how it is to be understood.<sup>275</sup> It would be also interesting to take a deeper dive into *Aesthetic Theory* and the idea of so-called 'aesthetic experience' and its possible connection to both intellectual experience and essayism.

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<sup>273</sup> Comp. Plass: *Language and History in Adorno's Notes to Literature*, p. 38.

<sup>274</sup> I nonetheless did not elaborate these aspects also because their interpretations already exist in Adornian literature. On parataxis, see: Wildanger: 'Inheriting Hölderlin: Adorno, Parataxis'. In: *MLN* 133:3 (April 2018), pp. 585-603. Helmling: 'Constellation and Critique: Adorno's Constellation, Benjamin's Dialectical Image.' In: *Postmodern Culture* 14:1 (September 2003). On *Rauschen*, see mainly Nicholzen: *Exact Imagination, Late Work, on Adorno's Aesthetics*, p. 79-84. Plass: *Language and History in Adorno's Notes to Literature*, chapter 2.

<sup>275</sup> The so far best specification of its utter importance for Adorno's thought has been written by the aforementioned Roger Foster: *Adorno: Recovery of Experience*. New York: State University of New York Press 2007.

Last but not least then comes up the issue of the problematicity of essayism – namely the question of its limits and possible liability to error, or if you will, failure to represent the nonconceptual. Without engaging in any in-depth criticism or evaluation of Adorno’s conception, I would like to at least briefly consider this issue here, as it undoubtedly represents one of the most vigorous arguments against his philosophy.

Adornian essay is a precarious philosophical form. It lacks clear criteria on the basis of which it would be possible to evaluate whether the texts produced in the way Adorno suggests achieve convincing philosophical insights and accomplish the goals he sets out for them. As such, it can undoubtedly be accused of being highly prone to error. Attempts at exercising Adorno’s essayism could easily turn into a completely vague accretions of arbitrary insights covering their own sloppiness and lack of a point by making excuses that it is simply a consequence of their method. Adorno was aware of essayism’s susceptibility to error, nevertheless, he was convinced that in the up-to-date situation of philosophical discipline, without opening oneself to the immediate possibility of error there is no chance of representing philosophically valuable insights; or at least not the kind he wanted to express. According to him “the individual who thinks must take a risk ... – that is the fundamental experience of the doctrine of autonomy. Without risk, without the imminent possibility of error, there is objectively no truth.”<sup>276</sup> In other words, philosophy chasing the nonconceptual after the failure of systematic philosophy is forced to embrace this risk and there is no point in denying it. The liability of an essay to error is necessary as “the separation of science and scholarship from art is irreversible” in Adorno’s times.<sup>277</sup> Essayism, as it was mentioned in the introduction of the section 3.2, stands outside of both science and art while, nonetheless, being connected to both; critically turning upside down the scientific criteria of systematic philosophy and resembling art, as Ulrich Plass puts it, “in the sense that it seeks to provide the experience of something different or new by breaking up the patterns of habit and stereotype characteristic of colloquial language.”<sup>278</sup> As such, essay can neither have measurable criteria, nor can it be considered as purely artistic form.

Although the quality of an essay cannot be strictly evaluated, Adorno is in the end fairly specific if not about criteria, then about necessary features that a quality essay has to have. Essays as he sketches them are not arbitrary piles of subjective insights of their author, have carefully chosen

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<sup>276</sup> Adorno: ‘Notes on Philosophical Thinking’. In: *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, p. 132.

<sup>277</sup> Adorno: ‘The Essay as Form’. In: *Notes to Literature*, p. 32.

<sup>278</sup> Plass: *History and Language in Adorno’s Notes to Literature*, p. 5.

objects of their either criticism or interpretation<sup>279</sup> and avoid specific set of intellectual prejudices (listed negatively in section 2.2 of this thesis).

It is also relevant to point out that Adorno's method – due to its difficulty and specificity – has never become popular among philosophers and therefore its liability to error does not have to concern us that much. As a very specific proposition of philosophical method, it does not threaten to practically deepen the issue of imbalanced quality of works produced by humanities; due to its tendency to highlight qualities of complicated works of art and its general emphasis on *métier* it could be actually rather useful in this regard. Adorno's essayism as such should be perceived as merely one of many insights of post-systematic philosophy which does not seem to have in comparison to others – such as Derrida's method of deconstruction or Gadamer's hermeneutic method – very significant impact on contemporary philosophical forms outside of the standards of the contemporary analytic branch of philosophy. This thesis also in connection to this fact did not intend the reconstruction of essayistic method as a proposition of a desirable form of *academic* philosophical writing. Rather, it introduced essayism as a fairly specific but remarkable and enriching intellectual exercise which has the potential to encourage intellectual autonomy, abilities to possibly identify certain pathological sides of late capitalistic society and fight against the atrophy of intellectual experiences. Adorno's philosophy's usefulness for contemporary world all in all dwells precisely in the fact that it reminds us of value of philosophical thought which, while remaining unscientific and antisystematic, refuses to make things simple and transparent and promotes intellectual engagement with matters on the edge of possible understanding. In this regard, Adorno's essayistic philosophy represents a genuine and conscientious philosophical endeavour, despite – or maybe exactly thanks to – turning thoroughly against conventional philosophical projects.

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<sup>279</sup> As Adorno points out “bad essay tells stories about people instead of elucidating the matter at hand.” (Adorno: ‘The Essay as Form’. In: *Notes to Literature*, p. 32.) Instead of degrading itself to “mere psychology of the cognitive subjects” (Ibid., p. 40), essays ought to critically and interpretatively engage with cultural objects and that what transcends their author's psychology in them or attempting to reconstruct what did their author personally mean – what is interesting is what happened in the works of art or cultural objects which goes beyond their author's personal motivations.

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