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Philological Modernity

Mimesis and Materiality in Auerbach and Adorno

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Philology

In 2004, a posthumous collection of essays and lectures by Edward Said was published under the title *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*. Anyone who is in the least familiar with Said's work will most likely agree that this title quite accurately names (two or three of) the commitments that persisted throughout Said's career. That the book reprints Said's introduction to the fiftieth-anniversary edition of Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* is then a powerful reminder that the example of Auerbach's philological method often served as an important model for Said's critical practice. This affiliation is strengthened by the chapter that immediately precedes the one on *Mimesis*, which is entitled "The Return to Philology", and which even more explicitly promotes "philology" as the form that a continued dedication to humanism and to democracy should adopt, or – as Said is promoting a "return" – learn to adopt again.

Still, such a seemingly straightforward affirmation of a humanist critical tradition is immediately complicated by the deliberate reference that the title "The Return to Philology" makes to a short text of the same title that was written by Paul de Man in 1982. In the light of the all too familiar associations of the name of de Man with the alleged inhumanity of the language machine and with the memory of totalitarianism, one would expect to encounter de Man in Said's essay as the unambiguous marker of a *failure* to dedicate criticism to "humanism" and to "democracy". One would expect de Man's name to activate the memory of the critical hegemony of deconstruction that precisely *interrupted* the continued practice of philology in, roughly, the 1970s and 80s, which is the very continuity that Said is attempting to restore. If Said's reference to de Man's 1982 title then underlines the associa-

tion of such an anti-humanist suspension of democratic criticism with, precisely, philology, his title thus puts into question the self-evident alignment of humanism and philology.

Nor is the proximity between Said and de Man restricted to the title of their respective texts. Indeed, a major part of Said's argument for a return to philology is remarkably close to de Man's. For de Man, philology consists in an attention to textual material that refuses to take for granted the historical, ethical, or theological meanings that are generally imposed on this material; philology is thus first of all "a principle of disbelief" that asks students "to begin by reading texts closely as texts and not to move at once into the general context of human experience or history".¹ The philological renunciation of established meanings, in other words, resists the all too common ideological deformation of textual material. For Said, similarly, philology becomes a critical practice by resisting the almost automatic transition from "quick, superficial reading" to "general or even concrete statements about vast structures of power or into vaguely therapeutic structures of salutary redemption".² Philology works against the inflation of textual material into abstract generalities by recalling these generalities to their material basis, in order to demonstrate that this material, when confronted in a more than superficial way, never quite carries the meanings that these generalities want it to deliver.

By their emphasis on concrete textual material and by their resistance to hasty abstraction, both Said's and de Man's critical invocations of philology revert to central components of philology's traditional disciplinary self-presentation. Indeed, philology has always "cultivated its self-image as patient craft whose key values are sobriety, objectivity, and rationality".³ In contrast to hermeneutics and interpretation (and the whole domain of the *Geisteswissenschaften* founded on these methods), which tend to abandon the constraints of textual material and to leap prematurely to unchecked speculation, "philology is an attitude of respect for the *datum*, for the facts of the text and its contexts".⁴ Philology, in other words, renounces the liberties of aesthetic judgment, and as such it "bestow[s] on criticism the rigor and stringency of

the natural sciences".⁵ The philological principle of disbelief thus recalls criticism to the limits beyond which it threatens to turn into unwarranted speculation. In this sense, Said's and de Man's turns to philology are entirely (and perhaps surprisingly) continuous with this tradition.

At the same time, there is no denying that the fact that de Man and Said can both invoke this tradition of rigorous textual empiricism *in spite of* their ostensibly very different critical agendas points to a certain oscillation that is inherent in philology's programmatic stringency. Indeed, we can refer to Said's own analysis in *Orientalism* in order to recall that (in this case, oriental philology's allegedly disinterested attention to undistorted facts has more often than not served a particular ideological agenda, which was itself more often than not that of the imperialist Western nation-state. As much critical scholarship has shown, philology originated "under the impulse of political nationalism and scientific positivism",⁶ and this strained context explains why the rigorous renunciation of imposed meaning itself often operated in the service of another ideological formation. Traditional philology can, in this sense, be characterised as the betrayal of its own promise, as a compulsion to free itself from its own promise of rigour. As Sean Gurd has recently remarked,

[i]f, indeed, philology is to be associated at some level with a kind of rigorous materiality and careful technique, it is also true that, at almost every turn, philology seems to abandon itself, to deliver itself over to modes of exposition that would elide its material bases.⁷

It is this constitutive self-betrayal that helps to explain that the term "philology" can, on the one hand, be invoked by Said and de Man in order to characterise a critical *practice*, while it, on the other hand, also names a cultural *formation* that becomes an object of critique. Philology can then be thought of as the simultaneous *confrontation* and *evasion* of materiality; it is a complex movement in which criticism actively sets out to confront material reality only to ultimately avoid that confrontation.

In the rest of this article, I want to observe this movement of the confrontation and evasion of materiality in two privileged oeuvres. The first of these

5 Helmut Müller-Sievers, "Reading-Evidence. Textual Criticism as Science in the Nineteenth Century", in: *The Germanic Review*, 76.2, 2001, pp. 162-71, here p. 162.

6 Stephen Nichols, "Introduction. Philology in a Manuscript Culture", in: *Speculum*, 65.1, 1990, pp. 1-10, here p. 1.

7 Sean Alexander Gurd, "Recovering Philology", faculty.concordia.ca/gurd/recoveringphilology.pdf.

1 Paul de Man, "The Return to Philology", in: *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1986), pp. 21-26, here pp. 23 and 26.

2 Edward Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 61.

3 Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *The Powers of Philology. Dynamics of Textual Scholarship* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), pp. 3-4.

4 Siegfried Wenzel, "Reflections on (New) Philology", in: *Speculum*, 65.1, 1990, pp. 11-18, here p. 18.

is the very example that was nominated by Said, Erich Auerbach's book *Mimesis: dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur*, published in 1946. The very title of this book already points up one version of this movement by indicating a displacement from "reality" to the realm of "western literature". This title also indicates that the term "mimesis" is, among other things, a name for this complex movement of confrontation and evasion. I will strengthen this suggestion by focussing on the relation between mimesis and materiality in the work of Theodor W. Adorno. The notion of "mimesis" is a crucial one in the *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, written together by Adorno and Max Horkheimer and first published in 1947, and in the posthumous *Ästhetische Theorie*. For Adorno, mimesis names the persistence of the sensual and the natural over against the drive toward the abstraction of particularity in the process of conceptualisation. I will show how the moment of mimesis in Adorno, as is the case in Auerbach, constitutes both a thoroughly material moment *and* an evasion of the materiality that critical practice sets out to encounter.

While it may at first seem that Adorno's avowedly ideology-critical perspective is diametrically opposed to the "ideological" confrontation-and-evasion of nineteenth-century philology, I will nevertheless argue that both orthodox philology and its critique share the movement of a confrontation and evasion of materiality. The main difference between the two is that while, in the case of orthodox philology, this evasion generally takes the shape of an ideological imposition of meaning, in Adorno (as in Auerbach), it takes the form of an insistence on literature's and art's *own* capacity to surmount mere materiality, a capacity that they call "mimesis". The confrontation with materiality is, for Adorno and Auerbach, the very operation that allows them to avoid an ideological imposition of meaning, and that allows literature and art to resist their ideological deformation. By sketching the logic of Adorno's and Auerbach's philological critiques of philology, I want to locate Said's and de Man's returns to philology as continuations of this self-evasive dynamics – a continuity that underlies their many differences. The implications of this continuity (from nineteenth-century philology, over Adorno and Auerbach, to de Man and Said) for contemporary critical practice seem at least double: it shows that criticism's persistent occupation with materiality is not to be understood as an abandonment of a modern tradition and its ideological deformations, but rather as inextricably implicated in it; also, it reminds us that the mere attention to materiality can not of itself claim to be ideology-criti-

cal, but that criticism should engage with this materiality in a way that allows it to actively resist its ideological deformation. It is as two exemplary instances of such resistance that I now turn to Adorno and Auerbach.

Mimesis

There is, to be sure, more than enough circumstantial evidence to suggest the possible affinity between Erich Auerbach and Theodor W. Adorno: Auerbach, a German Jew, wrote his *Mimesis* in exile in Istanbul during the Second World War; Adorno, a German Jew, wrote on mimesis, together with Max Horkheimer, in American exile in the same period. The main reason that this rather facile symmetry of anecdotal fact has as yet not added up to a proper comparison of what are arguably the two most prominent twentieth-century mobilisations of the concept of mimesis is that both Auerbach's and Adorno's deployments of the term even independently still await a proper explanation, albeit for very different reasons. In the case of Auerbach, this lack of a proper conceptual understanding follows his own assertion, in the epilogue to his book, that he has "not seen fit to analyze [his categories] theoretically and to describe [them] systematically".⁸ It is more often than not assumed that mimesis, for Auerbach, is by default perfectly synonymous with "imitation" (*Nachahmung* [M, 554]), and that it therefore points to Auerbach's dedication to a traditional realism that we have learned to dismiss as naive and unsophisticated.⁹ According to this prominent understanding of Auerbach, his avowed emphasis on the history of realism seems to oppose Adorno's equally evident reliance on a modernist canon to the point, it appears, of forbidding a comparison of their respective notions of mimesis.

⁸ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in European Literature*, trans. Willard Trask, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 556. Further abbreviated as M. For this point, see Tom Huhn, *Imitation and Society. The Persistence of Mimesis in Hogarth, Burke, and Kant* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), p. 1; Stephen Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis. Ancient Texts and Modern Problems* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. vii; Luiz Costa Lima, "Zwischen Realismus und Figuration. Auerbachs dezentrierter Realismus", in: Kathrin Barck and Martin Tremml, eds., *Erich Auerbach. Geschichte und Aktualität eines europäischen Philologen* (Berlin: Kadmos, 2007), pp. 255–67, here pp. 256–58.

⁹ See especially David Carroll and Thomas Docherty for this line of critique. These authors ascribe a dumbed-down notion of mimesis as imitation to Auerbach, which serves merely as the starting duck for the authors' own poststructuralist complication of these notions. David Carroll, "Mimesis Reconsidered. Literature, History, Ideology", in: *Diacritics*, 5.2, 1975, pp. 5–12, and Thomas Docherty, "Anti-Mimesis. The Historicity of Interpretation", in: *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 26.3, 1990, pp. 272–81.

Adorno's notion of mimesis resists conceptual elucidation in a way that initially looks very different from the resistance put up by Auerbach's book. Whereas Auerbach's mimesis is understood to fall below the threshold of theoretical sophistication, Adorno's deployment, which *has* spawned a respectable library of attempts to offer a conceptual understanding of his notion of "mimesis", resists these efforts of understanding on the level of conceptualisation itself. In the *Dialektik*, Adorno and Horkheimer oppose "mimesis" to "false projection", the difference being that between an assimilation to the environment – *anschnigen* is the German word¹⁰ – and an assimilation of the environment to the subject that projects its inside onto its outside in its project to subject nature to its own domination.¹¹ The first problem that besets the translation of this opposition into a lucid conceptualisation of mimesis is, as has often been observed, that this notion of mimesis is overdetermined by a context that is at once anthropological, language-philosophical, aesthetic, and epistemological.¹² Second, Adorno's mimesis confronts epistemology, and therefore the very effort of conceptualisation, with a radical aporia: the (so-called "false") projection opposing mimesis is the motor of conceptualisation that propels the dialectic of enlightenment, a dialectic in which the subject increasingly comes to master the environment it identifies as its object, and thus increasingly overcomes the mimetic impulse (which is banned as a "mimetic taboo"); but while the process of enlightenment consists in the progressive overcoming of mimesis, it at the same time depends on the "correlative" "assimilative" move of mimesis in order to be able to remain in touch with the environment that it purports to master.¹³ In other words, if the process of overcoming our mimetic attachment to nature managed to become totally non-mimetic (which it does not) it would lose all contact with nature, and the project of instrumental reason to subject nature to human domination would fail to progress even to the point of its dialectical reversal.

¹⁰ See Martin Jay, "Mimesis and Mimetology: Adorno and Lacoue-Labarthe", in: David Rasmussen and James Swindal, eds., *Critical Theory* vol. 4 (London: Sage, 2004), pp. 265-83, here p. 270, and Christopher Craig Brittain, "Miming the Crucifixion: Mimesis and the Affirmation of the 'Other' in Irigaray and Adorno", <http://www.gradnet.de/papers/pomo98/papers/cbr/iriga98.htm>.

¹¹ See Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1969), p. 167.

¹² See Joseph Früchtel, *Mimesis. Konstellation eines Zentralbegriffs bei Adorno* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1986), p. 4, and Jay, "Mimesis and Mimetology", p. 266.

¹³ See Michael Cahn, "Subversive Mimesis: T.W. Adorno and the Modern Impasse of Critique", in: Michael Spatorio, ed., *Mimesis in Contemporary Theory. An Interdisciplinary Approach, Volume 1. The Literary and Philosophical Debate* (Philadelphia and Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1984), pp. 27-64, here p. 36.

It is thus because the operation of a triumphant instrumental reason depends on both the *exclusion* and the *operation* of mimesis that "mimesis" cannot really be articulated as a transparent concept and must be accepted as what Joseph Früchtel has called a "limit of theorisability".¹⁴

What we get, then, is, in the case of Auerbach, the absence of a full-fledged conceptual articulation of mimesis, and in the case of Adorno, a resistance to the concept in the name of mimesis. So instead of situating the affinity between these two notions of mimesis on a conceptual level, it is more fruitful to look for a connection on the level of critical practice, by taking into account the way in which Adorno and Auerbach conscribe the notion of mimesis for their respective critical projects. As I will show, for both Adorno and Auerbach, mimesis names a certain relation to materiality – what I have called the philological confrontation-and-evasion of materiality.

Materiality

In order to demonstrate the relation between philology, materiality, and mimesis in Adorno, we can zoom in on a particular moment in the 1957 "Rede über Lyrik und Gesellschaft". On this peculiar moment, the logical development of the text's argument makes way for a rather undetermined intervention, for a wilful interpretive twist that, because it does not seem to be called for by the logic of the argument, allows us to infer Adorno's basic ambitions in this text. Robert Kaufman has shown that "Lyrik und Gesellschaft", one of Adorno's most programmatic texts on poetry, has traditionally been understood rather one-sidedly as Adorno's plea to replace the then prevalent formalist analysis of poems with a sociological program that attempts to establish the social determinants that go into the production of poetry.¹⁵ While it would be worth pointing out the many obvious problems with this understanding of Adorno's text – most fundamentally but not only, the assumption that the formal and the social can be decisively separated, even if only for methodological purposes – I want to restrict myself to those moments in the text when the question of "the social" is ostensibly shifted to the background. These moments make clear that the traditional reception of

¹⁴ Früchtel, *Mimesis*, p. 5.

¹⁵ Robert Kaufman, "Adorno's Social Lyric, and Literary Criticism Today: Poetics, Aesthetics, Modernity", in: Tom Huhn, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 354-75.

“Lyrik und Gesellschaft” has downplayed one of its central claims: the emphatic contention that the “greatness of works of art” consists in their capacity to “transcend false consciousness”. The achievement of this transcendence has, we read, no relation – and is thus irreducible – to the artist’s intention: if successful, the work of art achieves this greatness “whether intended or not”.¹⁶

In the particular case of lyric poetry with which Adorno’s text is concerned, this moment of artistic greatness, of the transcendence of false consciousness, is explicitly said to take place *within* the element of language. Adorno states that “the specific paradox belonging to the lyric poem [...] is bound to that specific importance which poetry gives to linguistic form” (LP, 218). Language, then, is not only the medium for the spontaneous expression of subjective feeling, it is also “the medium of concepts and ideas, and establishes our indispensable relation to generalities and hence to social reality” (LP, 218). Even when it lends itself to the expression of subjective feelings, language, for Adorno, is also always characterised by its relation to the conceptual, and therefore also to the objective and to the social. The greatness of lyric poetry, its capacity to transcend false consciousness, will then be situated *within* the bounds of the relations between the subjective and the objective and between the expressive and the conceptual that hold within the medium of language. This is indeed what Adorno explicitly writes:

The most sublime lyric works [*die höchsten lyrischen Gebilde*], therefore, are those in which the subject, without a trace of his material being [*von bloßem Stoff*], intones in language until the voice of language itself is heard. The *subject’s* forgetting himself, his abandoning himself to language as to an object [*als einem Objektivem*] – this and the direct intimacy and spontaneity of his *expression* are the same. (LP, 218)

Within the realm of language, then, lyrical greatness means that the subject abandons itself, or finds itself abandoned, to a certain objectivity, only to discover that this self-loss paradoxically reconnects it to its “direct intimacy and spontaneity”.

¹⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, “Rede über Lyrik und Gesellschaft”, in: *Noten zur Literatur, Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 11, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1970-), pp. 49-68. English translation Theodor W. Adorno, “Lyric Poetry and Society”, in: *The Adorno Reader*, ed. Brian O’Connor, trans. Bruce Mayo (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 211-29. Further abbreviated as LP. Page references are to the translation.

It is remarkable that in Adorno’s phrasing the subject’s confrontation with language almost seems to be staged with the precise goal of enabling this ultimate request of the self; Bruce Mayo’s English translation underlines this by translating “als einem Objektivem sich anheimgibt” as “as if devoting himself completely to an object”. This two-step scenario in which the self is elevated through the mock-experience of self-loss resembles nothing so much as the traditional recuperative scheme of the sublime, in which whatever does not kill me makes me – or, in this case, the lyric – stronger. This ploy also resembles “the means by which the adventuring self loses itself in order to preserve itself” in the story of Odysseus that is the prototype of Honkheimer and Adorno’s analysis of the relation between myth and enlightenment, which only goes to show how central Adorno’s concerns in “Lyrik und Gesellschaft” are to his critique of modernity, in spite of the undeniable peculiarity of much of Adorno’s phrasing here. For Adorno, it is when the subject cedes its voice to language and surrenders its own intention that the transcendence and the greatness of the lyrical work of art can be affirmed. The poet “must, so to speak, make of himself a vessel for the ideal of a pure language [*reiner Sprache*]” (LP, 226). Only by radicalizing its individuality to the point of “self-annihilation” can “the lyric Word do the bidding of language’s deepest being [*das An-sich-Sein der Sprache*] and oppose its enforced service in the realm of economically organized purposes and goals” (LP, 227).

Near the end of his text, Adorno finds an example of such a successful act of self-annihilation, of an experience in which the subject’s intention is dissolved by pure language, in a sentence from a poem by Stefan George, which reads “Nun muß ich *gar* / Um dein aug und haar / Alle tage / In sehnen leben” (italics mine). Adorno halts at the word *gar*, which ostensibly does not add anything to the meaning of the sentence, and writes that “in the way the word has been shoved into the verse, it has no proper meaning [*keinen rechten Sinn*] at all” (LP, 226). Yet it is precisely its “lucky” escape from the constraints of meaning that singles out this word, because it is in this meaningless word that, Adorno writes, the “linguistic melody reaches out beyond mere signifying” and that language manages to “flee the subjective intention which called up the word” (LP, 226). Thanks to this transcendence of subjective intention, the lines of the poem escape their determination by their historical moment and sound as if they “had been present from the dawn of ages and would always be as they are” (LP, 226). This, for Adorno, is what the most sublime lyric works can achieve.

What makes this moment so remarkable is that Adorno's momentous claim for lyric poetry depends on nothing more than the meaningless word *gar*. A sound without a proper meaning is here rather wilfully interpreted as an indication of transcendence, rather than as, for instance, and put most bluntly, mere nonsense. In order to appreciate how non-self-evident this move is, we can look at the interpretations that Adorno does not put forward for the occurrence of *gar* in George's poem: it is *not* interpreted as the quasi-automatically generated phoneme that the poem needs in order for the line to rhyme with the "haar" that closes the line following it; it is *not* interpreted as the guttural throatle in which a voice disappears, or fails to appear from the guttural "ich" preceding it; *nor* is it interpreted as the moment where language, as it were, swallows its own tongue, or as the sign of the victory of the inhuman automatism of linguistic matter over human intention. This should make clear that the decision to read this *gar* *not* as a sign for "the disappearance of the human and the ethical in the mechanico-grammatical machinations of language",¹⁷ but rather as an index of lyrical transcendence is far from obvious. Indeed, I think Adorno's decision here betrays his ambition to find a moment of transcendence *within* the linguistic medium, an ambition that asserts itself at the precise moment when Adorno's argument confronts the meaningless, non-human materiality of language. Adorno, that is, actively seeks out the encounter with an instance of linguistic materiality that escapes every human intention only to *evade* the verdict of meaninglessness and assert lyric's transcendent greatness. Adorno's (philological) movement of confrontation-and-evasion, it seems, can only assert lyric's capacity to escape full social determination by seeking out a confrontation with materiality.

So what do we make of the fact that lyric's greatness is asserted through a movement consisting in the near-confrontation with a materiality that can be considered as the limit of the human? And how do we understand the privileged role that literature plays here? I showed how Adorno explicitly related lyric's radical privilege to its location within language's persistent dynamic between the expressive and the conceptual. It is because lyric's confrontation and evasion of linguistic materiality operates within the tension between expression and concept, between subject and object, that language can become the place where humanity is affirmed. Adorno's (philological) attachment to materiality is then also a way of guaranteeing that the subject's abandoning

itself to the object does not lead to a wholesale transcendence of the tension between expression and conceptuality that is inherent in language, but instead leads to a capable act of transcendence *within* this tension. Adorno's confrontation and evasion then not only wards off the threat of senselessness, but also the danger of completely abandoning the tension that allows lyric's local evasions. Adorno's (and philology's) philological move, I want to argue, occurs in the face of a double threat: first, a form of language that would be completely disengaged from the conceptual, and that would thus be mere senseless noise; and second, an equally fatal transparent conceptuality in which the material remainders of linguistic duplicity have been restlessly co-opted by the fullness of immediate understanding. In this latter scenario, linguistic multiplicity and non-identity have fallen prey to, in Tom Huhn's words, "both the sweep of conceptual thought as well as its impulse towards completion".¹⁸ One name that this state of transparent conceptuality has received – and not least in the curricula of Auerbach and Adorno – is "absolute knowledge", most famously conceptualised by Hegel. Here we can recall that "mimesis", as I noted in my previous section, for both Adorno and Auerbach named a certain resistance to conceptuality. In the rest of this article, I will try to argue that we can understand their respective notions of mimesis together by situating them as a complex movement of a simultaneous resistance to the concept (through the confrontation with materiality) and an evasion of the material. It is this peculiar movement, which takes place within the realm of language that connects the material with the conceptual, that qualifies Adorno's and Auerbach's movements as philological affirmations of the human in the face of the non-human. In order to show how "absolute knowledge" conjures up the threat of the non-human, I now briefly turn to Hegel before addressing Auerbach and Adorno.

Representation¹⁹

The place to look for the relation between linguistic materiality and the human in Hegel is, first and foremost, the *Phänomenologie des Geistes*. To recall the structure of the *Phänomenologie's* narrative: once consciousness has be-

¹⁸ Huhn, *Mimesis*, p. 6.

¹⁹ An earlier version of the comparison between Auerbach and Adorno in this and the next section will be published as part of my "Mimesis and the Perpetuation of Modernity", in: Ian Cooper, Ekkehard Knöber, and Bernhard Malkmus, eds., *Third Agents. Secret Protagonists of the Modern Imagination* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, forthcoming in 2008).

¹⁷ Leland Delanduranyay, "Agamben's Potential", in: *Diacritics*, 30.2, 2000, pp. 3-24, here pp. 7-8.

come consciousness of itself, it moves from the stage of reason over those of spirit and religion (of which art forms a part) to that of absolute knowledge. This last transition, from religion to absolute knowledge, is also, in the words of Jean Hyppolite, one of the book's master interpreters, the "passage from history to absolute knowledge".²⁰ In Hyppolite's seminal 1952 book *Logique et existence*, which focuses on this transition, the progression to absolute knowledge is indeed understood as a progression out of historical, and therefore human, time. Absolute knowledge, on Hyppolite's reading, is no longer *human* knowledge, rather, "it comprehends itself and comprehends also [...] nature and [...] history. This self-comprehension is not a plan similar to a human plan. Hegelian logic sublates every human and *mortal view of the world*".²¹ It is this fatal self-comprehension that has to be postponed. One way of perpetuating this postponement is by conceiving of the invocation of critical practice as the continuation of the moment in the *Phänomenologie* preceding the sublation into fatal knowledge, i.e., the moment proper to religion, the moment of representation (*Vorstellung*). It is by defining critical practice as essentially tied to the distinguishing features of this penultimate moment that criticism can be seen to involve the affirmation of the human.

This stage of *Vorstellung* is the only one in which the temporality that is inherent in the *Phänomenologie's* narrative of the becoming of spirit "for itself what it is in itself" actually *appears* as history.²² It is here that spirit, arrived at a consciousness of itself, "looks for an expression adequate to itself"²³ – the point being, of course, that only the recognition of this expression *as* (part of) itself will be adequate to it. It is this perfection, this adequate expression, that has to be postponed, because if it were achieved, it would mean the end of a human history propelled by the struggle for (self-)recognition; it would, in marked contrast to Adorno's scenario of lyric self-annihilation *in the service of* expression, mean that expression is fully subsumed by conceptuality. What a critical practice in the service of the human must insist on, then, is the imperfection, the incompleteness of the objects in which self-consciousness will want to express itself. These objects inhabit the perpetually penultimate stage in the development of spirit, the last moment before the fatal collapse of their

multiplicity into transparent conceptual understanding. The stage of *Vorstellung*, in which spirit finds itself imperfectly mirrored, postpones absolute knowledge by leaving "the determinations of thought side-by-side in a relation of contiguity".²⁴ It is by an emphasis on multiplicity, on the empirical, experiential, and historical content of the work of art that we remain tied to a *human* moment that refuses to give way to a stage of *non-human* domination.²⁵ Critical practice thus needs to be tied to a materiality that resists conceptual recuperation.

Let us now see how this relation between materiality and the affirmation of the human operates in Auerbach's philological performance in *Mimesis*. As I noted, Erich Auerbach wrote his *Mimesis* between 1942 and 1945 while he lived in Istanbul in exile from the Nazis. The book consists of twenty chapters, ordered more or less chronologically, in which Auerbach deals with crucial chapters from the history of "the representation of reality in western literature", ranging from the *Odyssey* to Virginia Woolf. As such, it somehow manages to affirm a tradition that it sees falling apart all around Europe. As Geoffrey Hartman has written,

Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*, written in exile and published after World War II, foresaw the end of western history as we know it – of history as a rich, part-colored succession of events [...]. Auerbach looked at this canvas of history, on which he saw consciousness strive with consciousness in the Hegelian manner, with something of Virgilian regret. [...] He surmised that we were moving toward a *nivelllement* which would [...] gradually eliminate both local and national traditions; and for him this beginning of conformity augured the end of history.²⁶

In terms that are remarkably close to those suggested by Hegel's fateful trade-off between history and the concept, the end of history is the lethal collapse of diversity into, in words from the last paragraphs of Auerbach's book, "the approaching unification and simplification" that threatens to collapse human history with "its abundance of life [*Lebensreichtum*] and the incomparable

²⁴ Andrzej Warminski, "Reading for Example: 'Sense-Certainty' in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*", in: *Dialectics*, 11.2, 1981, pp. 83-94, here p. 86.

²⁵ See J.M. Bernstein, "Negative Dialectics as Fate. Adorno and Hegel", in: Tom Huhn, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 19-50, here p. 43.

²⁶ Geoffrey Hartman, *Beyond Formalism. Literary Essays 1958-1970* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 386.

²⁰ Jean Hyppolite, *Logic and Existence*, trans. Leonard Lawlor (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), p. 188.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

²² Jean Hyppolite, *Genèse et structure de la phénoménologie de l'esprit de Hegel*, 2 vols. (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1946), p. 137.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 518-19.

historical vantage point which it affords".²⁷ It is in the light of this threat of the end of diversity, of literature, and of history that we can understand that the title of Auerbach's book not merely names the persistence of "imitation"; as readers of *Mimesis* will know, the term "mimesis" hardly figures at all in the book's different chapters: the term Auerbach prefers to refer to the realist mode of representation, even in his German subtitle, is *Darstellung*. Mimesis, then, cannot be defined independently from the book's professed "mission of affirmation",²⁸ i.e., *Mimesis*'s philological performance of presenting works of literature that testify to man's persistent capacity to express "our human conscious and unconscious apprehension of reality, our attitude towards the world"²⁹ ... our capacity, that is, to simultaneously *express* and *interpret* (or, shall we say, *confront* and *enude*) the worldly, historical context in which we live.

In his 1953 "Epilegomena" to *Mimesis*, Auerbach indicates the provenance of his method: the book, he writes, "arose from the themes and methods of German intellectual history and philology; it would be conceivable in no other tradition than in that of German romanticism and Hegel" (M, 571). Still, Auerbach immediately measures his difference from this enabling tradition: he refuses an "unambiguous" "conceptualisation" that would threaten to go at the expense of "the individual and the concrete", of the "random occurrence" and "the random moment" (M, 552). Against the temptation of an all too swift and abstract generalisation, the contingency of the particular moment must be given its due in the operation of patiently "drawing together the aspects that intersect multiply into a synthesis" (M, 573). Auerbach sees his philological operation as being "guided by a few motifs"; I will briefly focus on the two most important of these in order to put Auerbach's connection between mimesis and philology into perspective.

²⁷ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, p. 553. See, for a discussion of Auerbach's intuition of a global standardisation, Ursula Link-Heer, "Die sich vollziehende Standardisierung der Erdkultur", Auerbach's Prognose", in: Kai-Inhove Barck and Martin Trenel, eds., *Erich Auerbach. Geschichte und Aktualität eines europäischen Philologen* (Berlin: Kadmos, 2007), pp. 307-22.

²⁸ Geoffrey Green, *Literary Criticism and the Structures of History. Erich Auerbach and Leo Spitzer* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), p. 68. This has, indeed, recently been suggested by Tom Huhn: "Auerbach cannot identify a comprehensive, unified theory of mimesis because mimesis is simply the abbreviated term for the fact that literature is itself already the interpretation — by means of, or styles, of interpretation". Huhn, *Mimesis*, p. 1. My discussion wants to emphasise what Paul Bové has called *Mimesis*'s status as "an engaged history of the present meant to intervene authoritatively in representation — of human reality. Auerbach's *Mimesis* thus unfolds as a survey of the various methods, or styles, of interpretation". Huhn, *Mimesis*, p. 1. My discussion wants to emphasise what Paul Bové has called *Mimesis*'s status as "an engaged history of the present meant to intervene authoritatively in representation". Paul Bové, *Intellectuals in Power. A Genealogy of Critical Humanism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 89.

²⁹ William Calin, "Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*. 'Tis Fifty Years Since. A Reassessment", in: *Style*, 33.3, pp. 463-74, here p. 465.

The first methodological motif is the gradual disappearance of a transcendental ontology that accompanies the historical development of realism. The decisive moment comes at the end of *Mimesis*'s central chapter on Dante, where Auerbach measures his distance from the Hegelianism of his earlier book on Dante (*Dante als Dichter der indischen Welt*, from 1929) and links Dante's "conception of history" (M, 194) to the interpretive principle of the *figura* as he had discussed it in "Figura", a crucial text from 1938. This earlier text opposed *figura* to allegory: whereas allegory spiritualises historical particulars into ahistorical meaning, the *figura* distinctively maintains the historical particularity of the two events that it connects by interpretation: "*figura* is something real and historical which announces something that is also real and historical".³⁰ It distinguishes itself by "the historicity both of the sign and what it signifies".³¹ Dante thus attempts to figure the transcendental scheme of Christianity in a realistic mode by affirming the splendor of the historical "earthly beings and passions" that this providential scheme sustains, only to end up affirming these beings' independence from the scheme that they were meant to confirm. This literary achievement, like the others that *Mimesis* stages, is indicated by philologically tracing the "levels of style" that these different singular achievements capably inherit and mimetically re-figure; this tracing of the different stylistic levels of literary representation is Auerbach's second motif, and sums up the method of his book. Auerbach's philological performance, in other words, consists in, first, patiently confronting the stylistic and historical determinants that the works under discussion have to adopt; second, presenting these different works in a way that suggests their capacity to stylistically transcend these determinants *within* the domain of (literary) language; and third, valorizing these evasions as the sign of the persistence of the human capacity for overcoming the lethal determination by "unification and simplification" beyond the demise of a transcendental framework — as the "differential of freedom in the midst of determination".³²

³⁰ Erich Auerbach, "Figura", in: *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 11-79, here p. 29.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

³² Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie. Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1970-), p. 260. Further abbreviated as A.T. For the translations, I used: Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

Aesthetics

Auerbach's philological practice consists in the patient tracing of the historical constraints on which a particular work of literature operates, in order to suggest how the work's actual artistic achievement consists in its successful *evasion* of its total coincidence with (and reducibility to) these determinants. It is this evasion that qualifies the literary work as a mimetic achievement. By laying out "what is factually available" and by indicating the difference between this factuality and the actuality of artistic achievement, it "insures that the artwork is more than an agglomeration of what is factually available, and this more is art's content" (ÄT, 322). In this section, I will show that it is no coincidence that this last quotation is taken from Adorno's *Ästhetische Theorie*, and can yet also stand as an adequate gloss on Auerbach's practice. There is a philological moment in Adorno, I will argue, which is structurally similar to the moment of interpretive renunciation in Auerbach, and this philological moment stands in a crucial relation to the notions of mimesis and to the confrontation of linguistic material.

This philological moment can not be derived from Adorno's often disparaging remarks on the philology of his time, which he generally equates with a mere restoration of the author's intention, and which has as such no relation to the truth content of the work and thus simply "falls silent" before philosophy.³³ In "Parataxis", Adorno's celebrated essay on Hölderlin's late poetry, this means that we must leave philology behind and set out on the proper task of philosophical interpretation. All this has, however, little to do with philology as Auerbach's *Mimesis* practices it; Auerbach's practice in effect consists in the demonstration that "form" itself is "sedimented content", and this is fundamentally the same approach as the one that "Parataxis" advocates *against* the type of philology from which it measures its distance. Indeed, philology, as Auerbach practices it, opposes the sweep of conceptual thinking, its drive toward completion, by insisting on the confrontation with a residual materiality, by insisting that "rhetoric is on the side of the content" together with the historical, the experiential, and the empirical.³⁴ This philology, in short, is a defense of mimesis against a conceptual transparency that is characterised as non-human, as full determination, and as "simplification and unification".

33 Theodor W. Adorno, "Parataxis: On Hölderlin's Late Poetry", in: *Notes to Literature*, vol. 3, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Sherry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), pp. 109-49, here pp. 109-11.

34 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1966), p. 56.

By positioning the *Ästhetische Theorie* as a theory of philology, I take my cue from the historical proximity of the *Ästhetische Theorie*, left unfinished at the moment of Adorno's death in 1969, and the *Negative Dialektik*, published in 1966, which offers one of Adorno's most topical engagements with Hegel's *Phänomenologie*; this proximity points to the relevance of the Hegelian scheme I presented in my discussion of Auerbach. Already on the first page of the *Theorie*, Adorno situates the question of art's "right to exist" in the shadow of Hegel's verdict of its irrevocable "*Umnaiwüt*" (ÄT, 9), i.e., its incapably cognitive status. It is indeed this Hegelian situation that can explain why Adorno consistently considers works of art also as (decidedly non-Kantian) "epistemological vehicles", and not simply as occasions of experience.³⁵ Viewed from this angle, the remarkable thing about Adorno's theory of art is not so much that the work of art is endowed with a capacity for truth – it is, if anything, incapable of losing that capacity in the Hegelian situation it finds itself in – but rather that its peculiar non-propositional truth is precisely defined as the pre-emption of a drive for "absolute knowledge", for full discursive and conceptual elucidation – a drive it is yet inescapably complicit with.³⁶ Adorno states explicitly that the work of art's *Rätselcharakter* is conditioned by its rationality, by its primarily cognitive operation (ÄT, 182, also 205). It is only on the strength of their inescapable participation in the drive for "conceptuality" (ÄT, 205), in the march toward the "*Eindeutigkeit*" of absolute knowledge, that works of art can assert "the aesthetic attribute" of "*Vieldeutigkeit*", a polysemy that is the "cipher of [their] resistance" (ÄT, 140-44).

As was the case in Auerbach, this resistance to *Eindeutigkeit* takes the form of an assertion of an irrevocable particularity, of a refusal of "the identification of subject and object at the cost of the particular".³⁷ Mimesis, for Adorno, is an affirmation of congnuity, of multiplicity: it is "appropriation without subsumption; in it the appropriating subject likens itself to her object, reversing conceptual appropriation; it is a relation of particular to partic-

35 Richard Wöllin, "Utopia, Mimesis, and Reconciliation. A Redemptive Critique of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*", in: *Representations*, 32, 1990, pp. 33-49, here p. 44. Wöllin only mentions this emphasis in order to blame Adorno for his downplaying of "the richness of aesthetic experience – art's status as a pragmatic phenomenon capable of altering the existential parameters of human life". My sketch of Adorno's mimesis should make clear that this "pragmatic dimension" is indeed part and parcel of his project. See my last section for more on the status of "aesthetic experience" in Adorno's critical practice.

36 Lambert Zuidervart, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory. The Redemptive Critique* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994), p. xxiii.

37 Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, p. 341.

ular".³⁸ This relation, in which the subject is "separated from [its other] yet not fully separated" (ÄT, 86) finds its explicitly linguistic instantiation in Hölderlin's parataxis, which, *qua* language, inevitably participates in "the logical hierarchy of subordinating syntax" which it yet artfully disturbs.³⁹ Mimesis' peculiar strength lies in its power to sustain its "middle position between (archaic) mimesis and (instrumental) rationality" without cultivating a nostalgia for its lost naivety *nor* a proleptic leap to conceptual subsumption.⁴⁰ It is, in short, because works of art mimetically surrender themselves to reification that their drive towards unity can partake of reconciliation, that they can, in Adorno's words, "heal with the same spear that incurred the wound" (ÄT, 201-202).

A clue to the role that this mimetic scheme assigns to critical practice — what Adorno refers to as the triad of "interpretation, commentary, critique" (ÄT, 289) — is offered by the *Theorie's* discussion of the notion of "technique", a cover-term for "all the procedures and materials that have come to be objectively available".⁴¹ It is in this technique, i.e., in the work's engagement with the materials and procedures it inherits from its historical moment, that the meaning of the work is situated. Because the work mimetically assumes its moment, its operation becomes one of *determinate* negation, rather than an impotent *abstract* negation. Mimesis, in other words, is a mode of constrained evasion that depends on the material basis that it confronts. This explains Adorno's defence of "*métier*" ("craftsmanship"), a process in which the artist breaks with tradition precisely by adopting it.⁴² Adorno writes:

While he may have at his disposal a multitude of different solutions to the problem of how to enhance his work, the number of these solutions is limited. The phenomenon of the *métier* is the agency that limits creation and prevents art from becoming a "bad infinite" in the sense of Hegel. (ÄT, 71)

³⁸ J.M. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1992), p. 201.

³⁹ Adorno, quoted in: Jay, "Mimesis and Mimology", p. 270.

⁴⁰ See Fritschl, *Mimesis*, p. 65, and Anthony Cascardi, "Heidegger, Adorno, and the Persistence of Romanticism", in: *Dialogue and Unreason*, 11-12, 2003, pp. 13-22, here p. 18.

⁴¹ Zuidervaart, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*, p. 105.

⁴² The meaning of the work of art is then located in its engagement with the materials and procedures it inherits and not in, for instance, interpretable or applicable thematic statements or implicit world-views. For the polemical context in which Adorno states this in defence of modernist literature against Lukács' case for realism, see Zuidervaart, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*, pp. 38-43, and Hilde Moots' contribution to this issue.

It is because of its assumption of these determinations that art's indeterminacy is, in J.M. Bernstein's words, a "determinate irreconcilability":

[works of art are] meaningful and determinate, albeit not determinable, because they remain *works* despite and in virtue of their negations; and in so doing they intimate a potentiality for meaningfulness incommensurable with the tradition's determinations of what might count as positive meaning. The determinacy of works of art is their lawfulness, their obedience to the demands of form; their not being commensurable with demands of discursive determination is their being without law.⁴³

It is in the determination of "the demands of form" and the maintenance of art's incommensurability "with demands of discursive determination" that I want to locate Adorno's *philological* moment, his advocacy of an approach that is "neither strictly interpretive nor strictly explanatory".⁴⁴ Adorno writes that "works of art are not to be understood by aesthetics as hermeneutical objects" — what should rather be understood is their incomprehensibility (*Unbegreiflichkeit* [ÄT, 179]). Understanding (*Verstehen*) is not the hermeneutical solution (*Lösung*) to the work's enigma, but rather the activity of dis-solving while conserving that enigma (*Auflösung* "die ihm zugleich erhält"); it is not a conceptual determination of the enigma, but rather its "concretization": "Solving the enigma means indicating the grounds for its insolubility" (ÄT, 185). Critical practice serves the truth content of the work of art by providing the space in which its truth claim can assert itself without pre-emptive conceptual subsumption or reduction to available forms — a truth claim that lodges in its "historical movement". As in Auerbach, artworks "definitively suggest the truth, but only suggest it",⁴⁵ they both express and transcend — i.e., confront and evade — the determinations of the historical moment they inhabit.

Philological Modernity

Adorno's and Auerbach's respective critical practices, then, both fundamentally consist in the patient operation of recalling the work of art (or of literature)

⁴³ Bernstein, *The Fate of Art*, p. 253.

⁴⁴ Zuidervaart, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*, p. 90.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

to its material basis, to the historical and artistic determinations that have entered into its construction; these determinations can be particular styles, techniques, or even, as in the "Rede über Lyrik und Gesellschaft", language as such. This exposition of material determinants is emphatically *not* followed by an interpretation of the meaning to which these determinants are supposed to add up – instead, a deciphering of the work is explicitly renounced, and discarded as an unwarranted imposition – in a move that, as Said and de Man underlined in their respective returns to philology, is a crucial aspect of the operation of philology. Adorno's and Auerbach's philological practices are then at least material in the sense that they direct their critical attention to the determinants that the work under discussion had to confront, and that they refuse to surrender their attention to abstraction.

Still, my preceding discussion should have made clear that Adorno's and Auerbach's philological positions also *produce* a form of materiality that is not reducible to this confrontation with textual and contextual data – that is, in fact, only produced by the evasion of these determinants. Both Adorno and Auerbach reconstruct linguistic and historical material in the context of discussions of works of art (and of literature) that have capably assumed and transcended the local determinants that the work of philology diligently reconstructs. Their name for that capacity is "mimesis". Philology, by reconstructing the elements to be evaded, then in a sense also (re-)produces the works of art that it recalls to their material basis as *mimetic material*, i.e., as objects that are liberated from the all too available ethical, theological, or historical meanings that traditional philology, among many other ideological formations, has imposed on it.

By momentarily reducing the work to its determinants, Adorno's and Auerbach's philological practices force the work to confront this material, only to suggest, by resisting the interpretation of the work, that the work can *metaphorically* transcend its reduction to these determinants. This is the strategy behind Adorno's invocation of Eduard Mörike and Stefan George in "Rede über Lyrik und Gesellschaft": it resituates works of art that have all too easily been understood in terms of particular ideological, ethical, and theological agendas in their material context in order to restore those works to the status of objects that testify to art's capacity to transcend material determination. The work of art, in other words, is restored as a site where we can experience the persistence of our humanity in the face of the threat of the non-human. While traditional philology seeks out the confrontation with materiality only

to evade it by imposing established historical, ethical, or theological meanings on it, Auerbach's and Adorno's critical philology confronts materiality while refusing such impositions, in order to make space for art's evasion of this materiality and for its production of this other, *aesthetic* materiality. Auerbach's and Adorno's wartime and post-war practices can then serve as two compelling instances where philology attempts to perpetuate, in the name of a human future, a modernity that the history of philology had almost made a thing of the past.

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