

After Auschwitz:

Adorno and the Aesthetics of Genocide Jonathan Kemp

"To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric"
Adorno, 'Cultural Criticism and Society'

"Auschwitz wadn't diddly!"
-Jachym Topol, *City Sister Silver*

one,

Suppose, for a moment, that we take Adorno's famous remark about the barbarism of post-Auschwitz poetry not simply as a chronological marker or end-point, an 'after-which' something follows (in this case, culture as barbarism); nor as that which can no longer 'be', lest it debase, in its very being, the horror and loss of reason expressed by such an event; suppose we take it not, that is, as a purely temporal expression of something passed, some event no longer present, - not, in short, an escape from the past; but suppose, instead, or as well as, we take it, for a moment, as an 'after-which' that attempts to name the non-identical by marking it with an aesthetic of negation, genocide, annihilation; an aesthetic, that is, which takes Auschwitz as its greatest influence; not just its apotheosis, but its ability to mark, indelibly, the way we are, the way we live, now; its ability to comment upon, even make manifest, an entire real world. Suppose we stop thinking of

Auschwitz as some kind of metaphor or apotheosis of genocide for the sake of those in Palestine, Rwanda, Timor, Bosnia, Indonesia, Turkey, Sudan, Kosovo, Iraq, Chechnya, Kashmir, Zaire, Romania, Haiti.....

What then?

Once we stop thinking of its relevance as a paradigm (Gilroy, 2000, 246) and start, perhaps, instead thinking of its relevance as an aesthetic? In short, I want to ask if it is possible to understand the 'after' of Adorno's remark as referring to 'an imitation of, in the manner of.....': in other words, a stylistics of existence which is brutal, barbaric, savage and inhuman. An aesthetics of genocide.

In this sense, then, 'Auschwitz' might be said to function not only as a symbol of each and every concentration camp, past, present and future, but as a kind of sick aesthetic comment on the capitalist mode of destruction, and an attempt to name the style of that destruction, that obliteration of the object(ive). As such, Adorno is suggesting that the holocaust has become a model for - as well as modeling itself upon - the wide scale process by which meaning is established *at any cost*. Which is to say, in short, that the social processes by which 'reality' functions are a form of genocide. Social reproduction, for Adorno, is modeled after Auschwitz. To put it yet another way, culture has become a gas chamber.

But to evoke an aesthetics of genocide? What might that mean?

two,

It is clearer now than ever that we do not live in a perfect world. Further, it is clearer now than ever before that we are unlikely to attain such a goal – if, indeed, it ever was within our reach. For to use concepts - such as 'democracy' or 'freedom' - that have become estranged from any reality they claim to represent is to remove us even further from the realm of what 'is', of what is going on, here and now. This, according to Adorno, is the state reached by contemporary philosophy: it "removes us from things as they are"(Adorno 1996, 364). Nevertheless, Adorno claims at the very beginning of *Negative Dialectics* that "philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed"(Adorno 1996, 3). That something can live on *after* the moment of its realization has been lost suggests such a profound poverty of conceptual thinking as to make real thought all but impossible. This poverty, however, results not from a lack, absence, or negation, but rather from a surplus or excess of meaning, a mad multiplicity of imponderably complex 'truths', none of which can claim supremacy without first establishing such supremacy through an act of supreme violence. This multiplicity of discourse - what Deleuze and Guattari call the rhizomatic nature of 'reality' - thus leads to a vertiginousness arising within the very language used to articulate any claim to capture that 'reality'. Meaning becomes giddy and unstable; it stumbles, sometimes falls.

At a time when the rhetoric of democracy's defenders has become indistinguishable from that of its enemies, meaning has never been less clear. Indeed, such ambiguity is the inevitable characteristic of a language in which not only are words multidimensional, but their multidimensionality is crushed in the rush for clarity. To paraphrase Gertrude Stein, a bomb is a bomb is a bomb.....

Yet never has it been more pressing to understand the full impact of what Adorno is claiming - that all cultural production is the expression and articulation of a thinking which bases itself upon genocide, a thinking which imitates or employs the strategy of a systematic annihilation of all difference or deviation - all nonidentity. Thus, not only is Auschwitz the inevitable, logical outcome of instrumental reason, but, for Adorno, it also functions as an event - an artwork or stylistic - after which instrumental reason models itself. The invincibility of instrumental reason *after* Auschwitz constructs a dialectic that is chillingly negative: a teleological progress towards, not absolute truth, as Hegel believed, but absolute genocide, as if the two were now somehow frighteningly synonymous.

**"And the gases rush to fill the cavities of/
The poets who grew wild on suffering/
The professors who would have only told more lies/
The minor officials who would have sent cruel notices/
The revolutionaries who would have got the moment wrong/
And writers posing for the camera**

**Truth is not stable/
Any more than passion/
Truth will expire/
Just as quickly as desire**

[...]
**The only thought afforded status/
Is that which in the end accords/
With what exists"**
Howard Barker, 'Don't Exaggerate'

three,

Adorno's first use of the phrase 'after Auschwitz' was in the 1955 essay 'Cultural Criticism and Society'. The closing paragraph of this essay makes for chilling reading:

The more total society becomes, the greater the reification of the mind and the more paradoxical its effort to escape reification on its own. Even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter. Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today. Absolute reification, which presupposed intellectual progress as one of its elements, is now preparing to absorb the mind entirely. Critical intelligence cannot be equal to this challenge as long as it confines itself to self-satisfied contemplation (Adorno 1986, 34)

Amongst other things, Adorno here links the holocaust to the culture that produced it. Hitler's monstrosity, Adorno suggests, was more than matched by the monstrosity of a culture that could allow the holocaust to happen in the first place; not to mention the monstrosity of a culture that refuses to learn anything at all from such an event. According to Adorno,

a new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen (Adorno 1996, 365)

Has unfree mankind done this? Has it risen to the challenge of this new categorical imperative? Have we ensured that nothing similar will happen, secured the impossibility of its repetition? Or have we arranged our thoughts and actions in another way, a way far more conducive to such repetition, perhaps even contingent upon it? Has our understanding of Auschwitz as that-which-must-not-repeat-itself blinded us to the ways in which it is repeating itself every day of our lives?

For Adorno, "Auschwitz confirmed the philosophy of pure identity as death" (Adorno 1996, 362). The nonidentity between the "jews" and the Aryan ideal became the target for a genocidal attack which gives its name to the structures of thought that seek to justify such slaughter. Indeed, the efficacy of the attack set a standard we have done our utmost to ensure we can surpass. After all, a culture/country now values itself for its capacity for mass destruction; this is the gauge of modern civilization and the aspiration of any country modernizing itself; this is the task toward which identity thinking has applied itself.

After Auschwitz, democracy means never having to say you're sorry.

Towards the end of *Negative Dialectics* (1966), Adorno reneges on the impossibility or barbarity of post-Auschwitz culture.

Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems (Adorno 1996, 362)

In this 'wrong' lurks the promise of poetry - the promise that it *can* express torture, and that, moreover, "the need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth"(Adorno 1996, 17-18). In this later work, Adorno thus allows for an aesthetic of negation, acknowledging the fact that suffering influences expression, or that pain can drive thought. Despite poetry's barbaric impossibility after Auschwitz, we must nevertheless still write it, for as Adorno states in *Aesthetic Theory*, "the artwork is not only the echo of suffering, it diminishes it" (Adorno 1997, 39). It is here, in this domain where art and suffering collide and heal, that the full claim of this essay resides. For Adorno is not promoting the redemptive function of art, but the opposite: an erasure or eradication, art's destructive capacity. For the end of suffering for those in the gas chambers was also the expression of that suffering: this is what is contained within the concept of 'Auschwitz', after which it comes to stand for such suffering. The meaning of Auschwitz is the disavowal of meaning, a resistance to the wholesale destruction of those elements considered superfluous or antagonistic to meaning. Annihilation is thus the expression of a suffering that is denied through its

destruction: "meaning inheres even in the disavowal of meaning"(Adorno 1997, 105). The full impact of this paradox is found in the phrase 'after Auschwitz'. For only *after* Auschwitz can the name 'Auschwitz' mean what it has come to mean. The name of a small industrial village in Southern Poland has come to represent for us who live beyond it the most infamous excesses of human cruelty; that is, it has acquired a meaning it did not have before - and as a consequence has become a metaphor for the kind of organised mass murder that is now associated with the most intractable thinking. A thinking Adorno recognizes as characteristic of advanced capitalist culture.

After Auschwitz, terrorism means never having to say you're sorry.

**"Peace surprised us: we needed more time
to pretend we deserved it, more time
to be 'the survivors',**

**as if we had plans, as if we knew
what next, as if
our dreams were not all of seagulls and the sea."
Goran Simic, 'Sarajevo Spring'.**

five,

For Adorno, Auschwitz thus demonstrates “irrefutably that culture has failed”(Adorno 1996, 366). Furthermore,

that this could happen in the midst of the traditions of philosophy, of art, and of the enlightening sciences says more than that these traditions and their spirit lacked the power to take hold of men and work a change in them. There is untruth in those fields themselves, in the autarky that is emphatically claimed for them. All post-Auschwitz culture, including its urgent critique, is garbage....Whoever pleads for the maintenance of this radically culpable and shabby culture becomes its accomplice, while the man who says no to culture is directly furthering the barbarism which our culture showed itself to be
(Adorno 1996, 366-7)

A fine trap to be caught in, to be sure, wedged between the sharp teeth of a necessity to speak and a knowledge that to speak is only to emit another turd. Survival, Adorno claims, can only find expression through guilt and complicity. If the survivor speaks, s/he wrongs the victims; if s/he does not speak, s/he wrongs the victims. The survivor is caught in a double bind, or what Lyotard terms a *differend*. It is no longer true (if, indeed, it ever was) that what does not kill me makes me stronger; rather: what does not kill me makes me grateful.

To speak or not to speak, when both speech and silence are different modes of condoning what has happened, is a question of artistic expression, of using language to say something language cannot say, of using the strategies and tools of untruth or falsity in order to gesture towards the truth.

**"Whatever we inherit from the fortunate/
We have taken from the defeated/
What they had to leave us - a symbol:
A symbol perfected in death**

[...]

**Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning;
Every poem an epitaph"**

- T. S. Eliot, 'Four Quartets'

six,

As David Carroll points out, however, in his introduction to Lyotard's *Heidegger and "the jews"* (1990), the fact that Auschwitz has made philosophy irrelevant "does not diminish the role of the critical faculty but on the contrary makes it all the more crucial and necessary"(Carroll 1990, xi). What Adorno calls "thinking against itself"(Adorno 1996, 365), and what Carroll calls "writing against itself" (Carroll 1990, xi) are (almost) all we have. Art's task is thus both to be art and not to be art at the same time, to be simultaneously recognisable and unrecognisable, both fragment and totality. Art must always run the risk of destroying itself. The aesthetic of genocide is therefore a paradigm in which we must think and work in order to undermine it: the artwork must both acknowledge and refute a reality in which the nonidentical is pursued systematically and murderously. For,

If thought is not measured by the extremity that eludes the concept, it is from the outset in the nature of the musical accompaniment with which the SS liked to drown out the screams of its victims (Adorno 1996, 365)

Because thinking against itself hurts, we avoid it, preferring instead the safety of affirmation, the comfortable identity of concept and object. Because after Auschwitz all music has become the soundtrack to genocide, we turn it up further still. Because all thinking that does not accord with what exists lays down the gauntlet of irrationality, of an extremity that eludes the concept and hints at madness, we turn away from it, believing that there is more pleasure - more sanity - to be had from its denial than its acceptance. Because we do not know how to die, we do not know how to live. Reason after Auschwitz is *after* Auschwitz, a mode of collapse perfected in the concentration camps and administered ever after to each and every one of us who think we know what culture is, and how it differs from barbarism.

seven,

If genocide is the logical outcome of identity thinking, and if identity thinking in turn models itself upon genocide, the promise of a non-genocidal culture resides in the non-identification of what Adorno calls the fragment, the trace, or the scar: "the loci at which the preceding works misfired"(Adorno 1997, 35). Artworks thus both come out of or into a tradition, but must critique that tradition, go beyond it, identify its faultlines and mine them. In this way, according to Adorno, "the truth content of artworks is fused with their critical content"(Adorno 1997, 35), which throws into relief the non-correspondence with reality,

promoting this fragmentary or disintegral aspect as the lever of change.

The battle of the fragment is thus a battle against a totality in which the fragment makes sense, and with which it nevertheless has a relation. For Adorno, "art must go beyond its own concept in order to remain faithful to that concept"(Adorno 1997, 29). Fragmented art, art that turns away from totality, from reification, is an art that insists on individuality, on the singular multiplicity of art's work, on the irreconcilability of the dialectic:

The truth content of art, whose organon was integration, turns against art and in this turn art has its emphatic moments. Artists discover the compulsion toward disintegration in their own works, in the surplus of organization and regimen; it moves them to set aside the magic wand as does Shakespeare's Prospero, who is the poet's own voice. However, the truth of such disintegration is achieved by way of nothing less than the triumph and guilt of integration. The category of the fragmentary - which has its locus here - is not to be confused with the category of contingent particularity: The fragment is that part of the totality of the work that opposes totality (Adorno 1999, 45)

We cannot assume an artwork to be an expression of something such as suffering on the part of an individual artist - although that is, in one sense, exactly what it is - because there is always a fragment lodged within art's work that has nothing to do with expression, that resists such a totalizing interpretation, that opposes totality, even if its appearance is contingent upon such integration, as both a triumph and a guilt. Absolute integration is genocide, the destruction of nonidentity. Far

from being barbaric after Auschwitz, a certain poetic or aesthetic expression, a certain *poiesis*, is absolutely necessary to counteract the gravitational pull of identity thinking.

A new way of thinking is required that is not an expression of annihilation, that does not seek to obliterate difference, but instead requires difference, expresses difference, embraces difference; a poetic thinking that does not seek to reduce everything to a simple logic of the either/or, but instead seeks ways to understand and articulate non-identity in an attempt to dismantle instrumental reason. What J. M. Barrie calls a 'transformation of reason' is necessary, for the sake of our survival.

It remains to be seen whether this can be done, or whether capitalism has destroyed even the remotest possibility of an ethical life.

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