

Adorno and Kant

Theodor Adorno owes an immense debt to Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. The major terms and categories of Adorno's aesthetics are informed by a thoroughly sympathetic understanding of what Kant posits as the centrality of aesthetic judgment and experience to the shape and formation, as well as experience, of subjective life. Yet despite the continuity between Kant and Adorno's aesthetic theories, Adorno finds Kant's aesthetics unfinished. Adorno begins to draw the trajectory of his own aesthetic theorizing in the Kantian passages that are incomplete or unreconciled—in particular, those dealing with beauty and the sublime and with the opposition between the beauty of nature and that of art.

Adorno is a faithful Kantian both in his elaboration of the subject, of aesthetics and in the subjectivity he imagines is constituted by aesthetic judgment. Adorno's insights regarding the nature of aesthetic appearance are modeled on Kant's descriptions of the form of beauty and the character of the sublime. Just as Kant finds the legible image of subjective constitution in aesthetic judgment, Adorno theorizes that the artwork is its reverse image. Adorno, like Kant, attempts to see by means of this image, as well as through it. For Adorno, perhaps the only substantive difference between his aesthetics and Kant's is two hundred years of history. For him, that history consists of a transfiguration of what was once embodied by aesthetic judgment into what now occurs as the history and process of art.

The most profound intimacy between Kant and Adorno's texts lies precisely in the inextinguishability of the aesthetic hope for reconciliation within human life. Yet Adorno reads the *Critique of Judgment* as the richest, most nuanced treatise on aesthetics and, simultaneously, as a site of immense repression. Rather than fault Kant's text for the latter, Adorno instead reads that repression as integral to the aesthetic. Specifically, what is being repressed is the subject in whose name aesthetic taste occurs, only on the basis of a thorough disinterest and a pervasive disavowal of sensuousness. Adorno does not attempt a liberation of sensuousness or of subjective interests, but instead examines the specific sites of repression within the judgments of beauty and the experiences of the sublime, as well as in their relation to one another. Whereas the hope for reconciliation registers itself in Kant as a refusal to forsake nature as the realm in which human freedom comes to fruition, Adorno proceeds instead to recount the historical migration of this hope from the Kantian site of natural beauty to that of the sublime and finally (or at least up until the present) from there to art-beauty, and a subsequent self-evisceration.

It is as though Kant and Adorno peer at the same phenomenon from opposite points of view. Kant glimpses a view of the constitution of subjectivity, and intersubjectivity as well, by suppressing the view of the object, which, ironically, is the occasion for the judgment of beauty. The Kantian aesthetic subject congeals in the evacuated space of the object. For Adorno, Kant's aesthetic theory—especially in its overdetermined rigidification and suppression of the object—is thus a mimetic recapitulation of the very dynamic by which judgment functions. Indeed, we might well say that for Adorno the ontogeny of each Kantian aesthetic judgment recapitulates the phylogeny not only of judgment in general, but also of subjectivity. Adorno's own aesthetic theory, rather than attempting, like Kant's, to look past the object of judgment in order to discern its subject, draws a precise focus on the object as the best way to illuminate both object and subject. The object of aesthetic judgment is thereby to reveal

itself as subjectivity in its otherness. Thus, it is the artwork, and no longer Kant's (nonetheless correct critique of) aesthetic judgment, that becomes the richest and most privileged site of alienation for Adorno.

Adorno's critique of the third *Critique* is that it attempts to hold at a standstill what Adorno sees as an unceasing dialectical momentum within aesthetic judgment between an expanding and a contracting subjectivity. Kant's inclination is to keep natural beauty separate from art-beauty and, further, to keep both these instances of taste separate from the judgment of the sublime that occurs within—though seemingly above—the all-too-civilized heads of men. Adorno's immanent critique of Kant's account of the sublime contains the insight that the very movement of Kant's sublime—encompassing the move from beauty to the sublime, from the mathematical to the dynamical sublime, as well as the move within the sublime from pain to pleasure—is already a symptom of the seeming success of taste's judgments of beauty. Thus, for Adorno the symptomatic expression of what ails the success of taste is found in the account of the sublime. Adorno's aesthetics persists with the theme that nature might indeed "free itself from ... imperious subjectivity" by way of an art aligned in opposition to us. Although Adorno suggests that art's opposition to us might also be taken as the return of repressed nature, this return is motivated by something more than revenge for what we have technologically inflicted on nature. This revenge is also prompted by our having ceased to hold regard for nature in any of its guises; that is, since art's ascendancy necessitated a continuing disregard for nature, the return of repressed nature in art (i.e., the sublime) produces an appearance of nature as exaggeratedly oppositional. Art's contrariness, then, is a historical product of the sublime that has migrated, following Kant, from nature into art. For Adorno, the third *Critique* is the avant-garde of this migration.

The historical era of the sublime appearing in nature, say, the second half of the eighteenth century, Adorno describes as coincident with a development in which "the unleashing of elemental forces was one with the emancipation of the subject and hence with the self-consciousness of spirit." The subject did indeed come into its own (Kant's account of aesthetic judgment records this), even though it (mis)recognized itself as sublime nature. This misrecognition and arrival, this hope and reflection, could not persist, however, if only because of the subjective failure to realize itself as indeed something more than mere life. In this regard it is helpful to recall Friedrich Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* as the failed but valiant attempt to realize and sustain the achievement of the Kantian sublime.

For Adorno, it is Kant's account of taste—the experience of beauty in contrast to that of the sublime—that might best be described as a diagnosis of subjectivity's somewhat blinding attempt to universalize itself. For Adorno's Kant, subjectivity succeeds as a universal project in the moment of aesthetic (tasteful) pleasure. But that same moment must also be judged—by Kant's own account—a failure, insofar as it is precisely the universality of that moment that remains unrecognized by subjectivity. Indeed, for Adorno, it is just this inability and opacity, the persistent failure of aesthetically realized subjectivity to recognize itself as such, and therefore as an agent, that calls forth the need for a continuing critique of aesthetic judgment.

Subjectivity, pace Kant, realizes itself in taste, but fails to recognize itself therein and thereby likewise fails to reproduce itself as explicitly social. Although the singular success of taste lies, according to Kant, in the achievement of positing and "feeling" intersubjectivity, its failure nonetheless is twofold: taste fails either to transform its achieved universal intersubjectivity into something objective (for example, a political state) or, what seems the very least, to apprehend its achievement—hence its continuing opacity. This particular failure of taste—again, in the very moment of its success—sets in motion, according to Adorno's reading of Kant, the project of the sublime.

The first task of the sublime is to remove from taste the presentation that allows it to misrecognize itself as objective. For Adorno, the migration of the sublime from nature to art is not the product of nature's revenge alone: it is also a symptom of the reciprocally increasing reification of the social and the subjective. If the sublime begins as the withdrawal of the purportedly objective, it continues more purely as the force of the negative. As reification increases, so too does the urgency for a dynamism that cuts across it. The migration of the sublime into art might then well be construed not merely as the product of a disregard of nature, but also as the signal of an increased reification within the confines of art itself. For Adorno, if art was ever a realm of free play, the arrival of the sublime indicates that it exists as such no longer. Since art, for Adorno, now requires sublime, art is no longer the realm of mere appearance but, beyond that, the realm of false appearance, which is to say of appearances that demand to be disavowed. If aesthetic appearance once served, pace Friedrich Nietzsche, as a God to reflection and life, it must have since hardened into an impediment, especially itself.

Adorno finds in Kant's aesthetics a symptomatic readiness to posit, in the object of beauty, too smooth and seamless a relation between particularity and universality. Hence, "despite his aesthetic theory's having originated in critique, -Kant nonetheless helps keep invisible the technological machinery of transition from particular to universal. Since the object of beauty—whether artistic or natural—therefore occurs for Kant as a wholly harmonious identity between particular and universal, it thereby fails to serve as a dynamic site of promise or reconciliation. In Kantian beauty, for Adorno, there is no productive tension, slippage, or dialectic. These qualities instead reside in Kant's theory of beauty. It is as if Kantian natural beauty too readily avoids what Adorno considers art's inescapable telos: "Since time immemorial art has sought to rescue the particular; advancing particularity was immanent to it."

So too, for Adorno, the Kantian redemption and promotion of the particular object (but so too surreptitiously of the subject) come at too high a cost: at the price of the complete obliteration of what, for Adorno, ought to be the persistent tension between particular and universal in a still unreconciled world. In the end, the Kantian aesthetic elevation of the particular becomes the total effacement of the object of beauty itself. For Adorno, Kantian beauty severs forever—in order to gain the universality of subjectivity—whatever remaining ties bound it to the particularity of the object. With this effacement of the object for the sake of beauty, or with what Adorno will formulate as the later evisceration of art, art's immemorial project of redeeming and prompting the particular now becomes the problem of the sublime. More simply put, Kant's formulation of beauty resolves, but all too quickly and completely, the immemorial tension between particular

and universal. Adorno suggests that this immemorial tension migrates into the domain of the sublime, where the fault line within subjectivity becomes all the more precipitous.

Yet Adorno finds in Kant's favoring of natural over artistic beauty an implicit recognition of the importance of some resistance to an all-pervasive and seamless identity of particular and universal. For Adorno, Kant's natural beauty is also a precise cipher of that which resists identity: "the beauty of nature is the residue of nonidentity in things spellbound by universal identity. As long as this spell rules, nothing nonidentical is positively there." Natural beauty partakes of the weakness of all promissings: they are inextinguishable." This inextinguishable promise is also fragile: "The reason one shies away from natural beauty is that one might wound the not-yet-existing by grasping it in what exists." The sublime, in its attempt to extinguish the promise once borne by natural beauty, bears no regard for this fragility. At the same time, however, the sublime is also the attempt to allow the not-yet-existing to come into being.

Adorno reads the historical genealogy of art-beauty as the dialectical response to the implicit failure of Kantian natural beauty: the beauty of art now carries the burden of what was once promised of nature in the guise of natural beauty. Natural beauty might then be understood as a dynamic, indeed a dialectical one: it begins as the hope for identity and comes near to achieving it, but in the proximity of this near-identity, it "conceals itself anew," which is to say, it retreats finally from positing identity. It is as if the sublime arrived in the eighteenth century as the most advanced dialectical technique for producing human freedom, and so too reconciliation. Adorno describes the traditional concept of the sublime as an "infinite presence ... animated by the belief that negation could bring about positivity." In having sacrificed empirical existence so completely and readily, the sublime thereby also discarded nature, the realm that until then was requisite for the prolongation of hope provided by natural beauty. With the sublation of human existence in the sublime's hope for transcendence, the place where, as well as the means by which, reconciliation might occur is disregarded. If this sweeping, purposive disavowal is already a feature of natural beauty, then the negation of empirical existence affected by the sublime is but a more thorough version of the effacement of nature achieved in Kant's account of taste. The salient difference, then, between Kant's theory of taste and his account of the sublime is that in the former beauty still required nature (whatever that might have been or comes to be) as an occasion for an aesthetic experience—for the harmonization of the particular and universal—even though Kant explains the functional importance of that occasion as merely as opportunity for subjectivity to misrecognize itself.

What Adorno means by the autonomy of art may well be a result of the historical piling up of functions onto art and art-beauty such that art, merely by the accumulation and variety of tasks and expectations that fall to it, comes to be autonomous. Art thus functions as the default sphere into which migrate the historic frustrations of the failed dreams and projects of human emancipation. Yet insofar as this sphere not only serves as a reservoir of these frustrations, but also maintains them, the aesthetic sphere of art thereby becomes—for Adorno—an active, independent agency. This, of course, is not to suggest that all art is autonomous, or that all or any art making occurs in autonomy, but rather that some art achieves—like Kant's aesthetic judgment—autonomy. Put differently, the autonomy of art signals the transfer of human autonomy (that is,

freedom) from the human subject to the aesthetic artifact. When we speak of the spirit of art, we do not just infer our own alienation but posit *the* privileged site of alienation.

Like natural beauty, the sublime is hope. It is also a good deal more, and less. It is more than hope insofar as it attempts to make actual the hoped-for identity between particular and universal. The sublime, in this regard, is the refusal of the solace of hope evoked by and sustained in natural beauty. We might well recall here Adorno's statement explaining how- the sublime and taste come into conflict in the late eighteenth century as a result of the "unleashing of elemental forces" that were "one with the emancipation of the subject." The subject, however, was not emancipated, and to paraphrase a well-known passage from *Negative Dialectics*, we might say that the moment when the subject was to realize itself has passed. The residue of this passed moment, of a subject stillborn, is not the hope for some future birth but the refusal of nature as the locus of generation and regeneration. The sublime, after Kant, thus migrates to art, to the realm of artifice par excellence. The fact of this migration means that hope has been transferred, not extinguished. The question is how this migration affects the hope, and whether there is more to hope for from art and art-beauty than once was allowed by nature and natural beauty. This, for Adorno, is the task of aesthetic theory.

[See also Kant.]

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