

After Too Late: The Endgame of Analysis

Nadia Bou Ali and Ray Brassier

Belated Actuality

Hegel is infamous for maintaining that what is rational is actual, and what is actual is rational. This is perhaps his most notorious and oft-criticized statement. But what Hegel means by actuality is not what is current or ‘present-at-hand’, to use Heideggerian terminology. Against the commonsensical, positivistic conception of actuality as contemporaneity, that which is directly experienced or consciously apprehended, Hegel distinguishes what is actual from what is simply present. He defines actuality as “the unity of essence and concrete existence” (Hegel 2010, p. 465). But this unity is constituted by “the continual activity of conceptual determination.”¹ Actuality as unity of essence and existence manifests the activity of the absolute: not thought thinking itself, but rather, in Sebastian Rödl’s felicitous rendering, *thinking thinking thinking* (2020). The unity of this activity is nothing

¹ “Concept and reality cannot but be in agreement, and the contingency, negativity, and contradiction that arise in the continual activity of conceptual determination are not phenomena that are external to thought, not threats that thought must neurotically repress, violently master, blindly respect, or anxiously fear, but are absolutely necessary, internal to, and constitutive of the Concept as absolute.” Ng (2009), pp. 170–171.

but its self-exposition, an unfolding that *takes time*, but only recognizes itself as such belatedly. Thus, there is a temporality inscribed into thought's acknowledgement of the rationality of the actual: what is actual is what has already happened, or what has just happened. But this is to suggest that, far from actuality realizing a transcendent rationality, or reason accomplishing itself through the medium of actuality, rationality comes after the fact: the actuality of the actual is nothing but its belated rationality. What joins substantial actuality to conceptual rationality is a delay or lapse. This non-coincidence or asynchronicity compels the becoming-subject of substance.

Precisely because actuality is constituted by "the continual activity of conceptual determination," it comprises the totality of determinations in their negativity, contradictoriness, and contingency. Negativity, contradiction, and contingency are not foreign to reason; on the contrary, they are comprehended in the rationality of the actual. Actuality is not a stable achievement but an explosive compound whose integration coalesces at the point of disintegration. It is this integral disintegration that demands to be rationally comprehended. But if philosophy, as its own time comprehended in thought, always comes after the fact, is this to say philosophical reason is fated to belatedness? Is reason always too late? Too late for change yet too soon to attempt it? These questions bring together politics and psychoanalysis. Does the symbolic (or the world of objective spirit) shift only through the displacement of *jouissance*? Is there no way out of the solitude of enjoyment, harbored by philosophy? Must desire always be embarrassed by identifications? These questions point towards another, perhaps more fundamental one: Is belatedness *nachträglich*, retroaction, or something else? Castration perhaps?

The Fantasy of the End

The logic of time governing symbolic crises oscillates between the too-soon and the already too-late. In Lacanian parlance, it is as though there is a temporality that is fated to oscillate between enjoyment and death. Every moment is a potential end, yet it is always too late for a final end; a real end to end all the failed endings. Perhaps the logic of a “fantasy of an end” is that it is too optimistic and refuses to accept that no matter how bad things are, they can always get worse. The fantasy of a final end ignores the fact that there is a potentiality for spurious infinite suffering, or an enjoyment in suffering; that although the wheels of history keep turning and turning, they are effectively going nowhere. The problem of potentiality and temporality here can be stated in terms of Alenka Zupančič’s critique of Paolo Virno: What makes history possible is a gap in potentiality itself. This gap in potentiality is inaccessible beyond appearance, beyond its imitation, which constitutes appearance. Zupančič argues that the gap in potentiality is itself doubled and that the doubling effect is the substance or form of appearance: every historical moment has its moment “with-without” cream (Zupančič 2019). There is a “with-without” status to historical unfolding, or, in Hegelian terms, there is an irreconcilable gap between the in-itself and the in-and-for-itself. But what if it is too late even for these gaps, cuts, and failures? What if it is too late to wait for repetitions or wager on the return of the repressed? If it is indeed too late, then what are we too late for? What is too-lateness?

This problem of appearance can be considered to be the same as the problem of power, or the problem of the Lacanian Other. In capitalist society, labor-power is assumed to have a potentiality – whereas it is a negativity. Labor-power, as we know from Marx, is not the source of value; rather, it is the *form* of the commodity that is the source of value. There is an incommensurability or non-relation between labor-power and its form of appearance

in the commodity-form. Thus, the failure to realize labor-power is embedded in the capitalist structure. This failure is the source of surplus-value. The fantasy of capital is concomitant with its own immanent end: it is always framed through crisis. Capitalism relies on the failures of potentiality to be realized; or the failure *in* potentiality itself. This problem is one that Lacan assumes in his theory of discourse: there is no big other as such but a “form of a big other” that is sustained by the very belief in its nonexistence. The emperor was always a fool, an empty signifier, a naked force; the master lacks and it is this very lack that sustains the symbolic order and strengthens it: it has always been too late for us to have a proper master.

The Dregs of Spirit

Jouissance or enjoyment is the “glue” that carries a repetition structure for the originally missing signifier, the S1, which inaugurates the signifying chain or symbolic function (Zupančič 2008). The status of S1 remains, however, a serious point of contention amongst contemporary interpreters of Lacan.² The contention over the status of S1 poses a set of questions: Is the symbolic unstable (characterized by a “non-existence” of the signifier), while topology and formalization are stable? Or are they both characterized by instability and it is precisely this instability that tethers them to the Real? The symbolic is sustained through the production of a surplus of desire: every chain of signification or discourse operates by encoding the body, petrifying it with meaning; the object of the symbolic is none other than a body arrested by the signifier. But that is not the only possible body; there is

² This disagreement pits Alenka Zupančič and Mladen Dolar against Adrian Johnston and Lorenzo Chiesa. It concerns Lacan’s account of signification or the question of the “emergence of the signifier” and has serious implications for the position of psychoanalysis in relation to modern science, nature, and philosophy.

also a body that dreams while reason sleeps. This is what Hegel would call the left-over dregs of spirit; once spirit realizes that it cannot but leave finitude behind, it demands the simplicity of a concept. The “baits” that lure spirit are love, the beautiful, the holy, and the eternal. In Lacanian terms, we could call these the stuff of enjoyment. Spirit is not driven by the conceptual alone, but also by the non-conceptual, by the thing itself or *das Ding*. “Spirit is time”; consciousness is the identity of thought with itself in its own disintegration and “life is the union of union and non-union.” The “absolute power” of the work of the Understanding proceeds through dissolution, negativity, and opposition: it is akin to Goethe’s Mephistopheles, without whom Faust simply could not be. The principle of negativity, embodied in Mephistopheles, is necessary for the unfolding of consciousness, and it “attains an existence of its own and a separate freedom” (Hegel 1977, Preface, §32–33). The drive, or principle of negativity, breaks from life as it attempts to return unto itself, and culture ensues in this movement of return upon itself. There is life—whose sense for Hegel is not vitalist—and there is moribund speculation; but there is also something else. Life is not some form of infinite productivity without any concrete oppositions or determinations. There is in Hegel a distinction between life and the consciousness of life, or the in-itself and for-itself. Psychoanalysis intervenes at precisely this point: Spirit is not only time; it is also held back by time and in time. Time is always too-late for the moment of apprehension; it is what holds back the possibility of grasping everything all at once. Spirit and its enjoyments can be better off without the astringencies of time; they can dream of annulling time, sublating it once and for all. Rebecca Comay points to Hegel’s mockery of Kant’s transcendental aesthetic as an “oral-sadistic phantasm symptomatic of a disavowed breach between self and world” (Comay and Ruda 2018, p. 67). The unity of apperception attempts to engorge its own failure to apprehend itself in its object and is left with an undigested lump of “cold duty” as its sole enjoyment. Comay

argues that Hegel makes a “hypertranscendental” move—one might add here almost a Schreberian one—whereby he seeks to turn “the critical bite back on itself such that the orifice between inner and outer, container and contents, is in turn involuted” (ibid.). Hegel seeks to consume time; one could even read the whole *Phenomenology* as one long procrastination: procrastination is an anal relationship to time where a sense of omnipotence is retained through a refusal of time. Anxiety, procrastination, mania, obsession, *ennui*, neurosis: all are in different ways indefatigable pursuits of an arrested time.

In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel introduces a postulate of as-if-ness to consciousness. It must always begin *as if* it is too late; as if all that had come before had been lost; as if nothing was learned. This, as Comay puts it, is “the truth of absolute knowing as a recollection of absolute forgetting” (ibid., p. 68). She considers Hegel’s Saturnine image in the figure of Kronos; a figure of obscene enjoyment and privation at once, or a perverse father, a father or worse. Comay meditates extensively on Hegel’s rewriting of a quote from Schiller and asks: Must philosophy return to poetry, as the perverse father returns to his mirror image? Kronos stands for the metaphor of digestion that Hegel employs to think of desire as the movement towards an object; an engorgement of it, a destruction of it, and a reinstatement of it into the circle of life. How do we analyze Hegel’s oral fixations: digestion and desire, Christianity and the Eucharist, the perversions of Christianity, the mouth as the knot of spirit, where both speaking and eating occur? Is the mouth a “speculative knot”? (ibid., p. 77). The oral drive that Hegel points to is our entry point to the psychoanalytic drive, which is always in any case a partial drive. The drive is what bars access to the Other; it is the sexual non-relation. Relation to an other, or self-relating negativity in Hegelian terms, is always possible through a partial drive, an excerpt (like Hegel’s excerpt from Schiller at the close of the *Phenomenology*); an *objet a* which comes into the place of the Other. In the place of a relation to

an Other, Lacan proposes there is only a relation to the object. Both sexes can only have a rapport with an object, the phallus, and not each other. Castration is the marking of negativity in the relation; both man and woman will have the phallus but only through castration, through embarrassment, through lack. In a sense, man and woman will have the phallus but only when it is too late. As Jacques-Alain Miller once put it: “To have it or not to have it, anyway it is not the being” (Miller 2001). Subjectivity is plagued with the attempts to follow desires or to take the bait, in Hegelian terms, but only falls back into the traps of identifications, into the imaginary and *jouissance*.

Stuck in Drive

The drive is precisely what we arrive at from the problem of the belatedness of thought: How do we posit the object of the drive against that of desire? What of the eventual capacity of desire versus the mundane compulsions of *jouissance*? The temporality of the unconscious is not only constituted around a retroaction or *nachträglichkeit*, but also around a second movement of cuts, breaks, and interruptions. In unconscious thought there is a repetition with retroaction and a repetition that reinscribes *jouissance* in a singular manner, but there is also the possibility of a different signifier, a naming of desire beyond *jouissance*.

The idea that the worst has already happened, that it is too late, is always accompanied with a longing for a time when nothing happens, when desire is still. Besides nostalgia for a past where nothing happens and a longing for an end that will put us out of our misery, there is also anxiety, which stands in the way of desire. Anxiety emerges in modernity precisely when it is impossible to finish, to end, to “finally progress,” but it is crucial in psychoanalysis for identifying with the symptom. Once that happens, it becomes very clear for the subject that there really is

no easy way out; that the hardest thing of all is to name a desire beyond the symptom. Anxiety is itself a form of *jouissance* that is separate from desire. Ultimately, psychoanalysis claims that we have to accept that there is no way out in order for something else to be possible.

Is there then a “too-lateness” that is not only a *nachträglichkeit*, but also not only phallic *jouissance* or idiotic enjoyment? Is there something in reality, in the thing-in-itself, that isn’t adequate to the concept? The wager of psychoanalysis has always been that there is a “stuckness,” a something that cannot be worked through, and that only through naming this “stuckness” does some form of politics become possible. Or, in other words, it is only if we really think that it is too late that something can happen. Adorno’s formulations on too-lateness in his essay on Beckett’s *Endgame* are decisive here. The dialogue in *Endgame* “sounds as though the law of its progression were not the rationality of statement and rejoinder, or even their psychological interconnection, but rather a process of hearing something out, akin to the process of listening to music that is emancipated from preexisting forms” (Adorno 2019, p. 257). Hamm’s depiction of the end (“If I can hold my peace, and sit quiet, it will be all over, with sound, and motion, all over and done with”) offers “the imageless image of death [that] is an image of indifference, that is a state prior to differentiation” (ibid., p. 266). But for Adorno (as for Benjamin), it appears that this “stand-still,” or negative ontology, offers yet another absurdity (beyond those that existentialism is stuck in) where the peacefulness of reconciliation and the peacefulness of annihilation can no longer be distinguished. The “imageless” state prior to differentiation indexes the indifference of subject and object and the liquidation of consciousness. Thus the voice through which *Endgame*’s characters speak is not the voice of consciousness or reason; it cannot be squared with the “I” against whose substantiality the ego synthesizes itself. What Beckett’s characters voice is not really something at all, yet nor is it nothing;

it is rather the impossibility of becoming. As Mladen Dolar put it, in Beckett's work: "The voice is an intruder, an alien body, the prosthesis, the *extimate*" (Dolar 2008, p. 10). This *extimate* nature of the voice is precisely what the "eternal life of spirit" hinges on. The drive, as the negation that precedes all determinate negations, cannot be the standstill of the dialectic, the moment where reconciliation and annihilation are rendered equivocal. The drive seems to be more on the side of a movement that has no end, that cannot end, that is without punctuation. In relation to this interminable movement, death becomes the hardest of tasks as what must wrest itself away from the compulsions of the drive. The subject must insist on properly dying despite all the attempts to actualize potentiality, or the crack in potentiality. In a sense, one can say that it is never too-late-to-die anyway, keeping in mind that the final repose promises no reconciliation. Death always comes on time. It is this second death, the true end, that cannot be sublated (*aufgehoben*) or grasped in its concept, but through which the concept must be staged. Beckett's *Endgame* stages this end.

The Fall

Why is *Endgame* so exemplary for Adorno? Three reasons suggest themselves. First, it is a drama about the end of drama, but one that presents drama's impossibility without dramatizing it. Second, it is a text about the end of meaning, but one that configures meaninglessness without ennobling absurdity by turning it into a metaphysical predicament (as existentialism does). Third, it constructs a form that takes the obsolescence of form as its material, without thereby presuming to have superseded it. In this regard, *Endgame's* achievement for Adorno lies in managing to express historical truth at a moment when the disparity between social experience and the resources of meaningful expression threatens

to render truth unintelligible. *Endgame* renders historical truth intelligible by confronting this disparity and reflecting upon the lapse in the conditions of meaning and the end, not of this or that, but of everything:

In *Endgame*, a historical moment unfolds, namely the experience captured in the title of one of the culture industry's cheap novels, *Kaput*. After the Second World War, everything, including a resurrected culture, has been destroyed without realizing it; humankind continues to vegetate, creeping along after events that even the survivors cannot really survive, on a rubbish heap that has made even reflection on one's own damaged state useless. The word *kaput* [finished, defeated, destroyed], the pragmatic presupposition of the play, is snatched back from the marketplace:

CLOV: (He gets up on ladder, turns the telescope on the without.)

Let's see. (He looks, moving the telescope.) Zero . . . (he looks) zero . . . (he looks) . . . and zero.

HAMM: Nothing stirs. All is—

CLOV: Zer—

HAMM: (violently) Wait till you're spoken to. (Normal voice.) All is . . . all is . . . all is what? (Violently.) All is what?

CLOV: What all is? In a word. Is that what you want to know?

Just a moment. (He turns the telescope on the without, looks, lowers the telescope, turns toward Hamm.) Corpsed.

[In the German translation quoted by Adorno, "*Kaputt!*"]
(Beckett 1986, p. 106)

(Adorno 2019, p. 240)

To snatch the meaning of destruction from the marketplace is to return it to its non-equivalence, its un-exchangeability. This requires wresting the concept of destruction free from the metaphysics of the end as accomplishment, fulfilment, completion. But this cannot be done by overturning the sovereignty of completion and turning incompleteness (understood as partial or fragmentary signification) into a new, supposedly desacralized

guarantor of meaning. This would endow the part with the power of expressing infinity previously attributed to the whole. But it is the power of expressing infinity, whether relayed by whole or part, whose termination is at issue here. Metaphysical meaning, writes Adorno, has been “exploded,” and this explosion is historically rather than metaphysically mandated. Thus, “Understanding [*Endgame*] can mean only understanding its unintelligibility, concretely reconstructing the meaning of the fact that it has no meaning” (ibid. p. 243). *Endgame* does not represent the experience of meaninglessness, dramatizing the encounter with nothingness as if it were an eternal verity. Meaninglessness is a historically meaningful fact, not a metaphysical certainty. That “all is finished,” including meaning, cannot be a metaphysical fact, since metaphysics seals allness through meaningfulness, such that meaning and totality are two sides of the same metaphysical coin. The end of meaning cannot be inscribed within a metaphysics of the end; it marks what Adorno calls “the fall” (*Verfall*) of metaphysics, which resists alignment with Heidegger’s “end” of metaphysics. For Heidegger, the end of metaphysical meaning is epochal, which is to say, conditioned by Being’s disclosive withdrawal from humanity. For Adorno, it is historical: it cannot be abstracted from the social ascendancy of capital, of which the Second World War is merely the then (1961) latest catastrophic symptom. This end—the radiant calamity of the enlightened earth—manifests the nadir of the dialectic of enlightenment, understood as nature’s recurrence in the reason that seeks to dominate it. Unbounded subjective domination binds and objectifies subjectivity. Under capital, the identity of subject and object is no longer their reconciliation in and through the Notion; it is their mutual indifference in and through the empty equivalence of the exchange abstraction, which commensurates atomized consciousness and quality-less material. *Endgame* confronts us with this vacuous equivalence: “In order to underbid history and thereby perhaps survive it, *Endgame* takes up a position at the

nadir of what the construction of the subject-object laid claim to at the zenith of philosophy: pure identity becomes the identity of what has been annihilated, the identity of subject and object in a state of complete alienation” (ibid., p. 251). Adorno cites another exchange from the play in support of this claim:

HAMM: Open the window.

CLOV: What for?

HAMM: I want to hear the sea.

CLOV: You wouldn't hear it.

HAMM: Even if you opened the window?

CLOV: No.

HAMM: Then it's not worthwhile opening it?

CLOV: No.

HAMM (violently): Then open it! (Clov gets up on the ladder, opens the window. Pause.) Have you opened it?

CLOV: Yes.

(Beckett 1986, p. 123–124)

Here is Adorno's gloss on this passage:

One is almost tempted to see in Hamm's last “then” the key to the play. Because it is not worthwhile to open the window, because Hamm cannot hear the sea—perhaps it has dried up, perhaps it is no longer moving—he insists that Clov open it: the senselessness of an action becomes the reason for doing it, a belated legitimation of Fichte's free activity for its own sake. This is how contemporary actions seem, and they arouse the suspicion that it was never much different. The logical figure of the absurd, which presents as stringent the contradictory opposite of stringency, negates all the meaningfulness logic seems to provide in order to convict logic of its own absurdity: to convict it of using subject, predicate, and copula to lay out the nonidentical as though it were identical, as though it could be accommodated with forms. It is not as a *Weltanschauung* that the absurd replaces the worldview of rationality; rather, it is in the absurd that worldview comes into its own (ibid., 265).

Rationality does not falter upon absurdity; it consummates itself in it. Purposelessness is the sole guarantor of rational stringency conceived as pure spontaneity. But the purposelessness common to freedom and compulsion is not solely negative; their equivalence is not only to be indicted. Recognizing this commonality is also the key to breaking the spell of identity, whose compulsion perpetuates history's ensnarement in nature. Taking up a position at the nadir of the subject-object identity also offers the chance of surviving history. By underbidding history, Adorno writes, *Endgame* "perhaps survives it." In laying bare this absolute impoverishment, in rendering the disintegration of historical meaning aesthetically and therefore making it historically legible, *Endgame* carves out a distance through which the calamity can be named. Pointing to the nadir, it reveals its doubling in the zenith. The worst is the culmination of the doubling that has prevailed until now; but naming it as the worst opens up the possibility of staving it off. Where idealism would affirm the difference between zenith and nadir, *Endgame* presents their indifference as the truth masked by their semblance of difference. In doing so, it does not affirm indifference; rather, it negates the semblance of difference. In this way, "*Endgame* moves away from the nadir only by calling its own name, as one does with a sleepwalker: the negation of negativity" (ibid., 254). Through this negation of semblance, history is made apparent, but apparent as *fall*: "The only part of history that is still apparent is its outcome—fall (*Verfall*)" (ibid. p. 247). The difference between fall and decline is worth marking. It distinguishes negative dialectics from metaphysical pessimism. Pessimism is reactionary because it enshrines negativity as principle. All change is deterioration. But the negation of negativity, which Adorno sees exemplified in *Endgame*, dissolves its metaphysical reification, whose affirmation of continual deterioration merely contradicts idealism's affirmation of continual progression. Whether as progressive or regressive, the continuity of metaphysical meaning is maintained.

By way of contrast, *Endgame*'s negation of negativity denies the difference between progressive apex and regressive nadir without affirming their indifference. Its denial registers their distinction, but only in negative, not as a positive datum. Thus *Endgame* does not hypocritically lament a collapse of zenith onto nadir whose inevitability it has already secretly affirmed. Where decline implies the inevitable sequel to a prior state of organic fruition, falling figures a movement in which the division between origin and terminus appears inseparable from their indivision. If the concept of *Verfall* is, as Adorno insists in *Negative Dialectics*, "the secular category pure and simple," (Adorno 1966, p. 351; 1973, p. 360) then there is no fall from grace, and this for the same reason as there is no metaphysical difference between first and second nature, or the given and the made: "Second nature [i.e. what we have made] is, in truth, first nature [i.e. what we take to be given]," which is to say, fatality (Adorno 1984, p. 124). Falling is not fatality because it first makes apparent the difference between fate and freedom, or fatality and redemption. Falling unites progress and regress, rendering their indivisibility apparent, not as something given to us but as something we have made. It reveals the meaninglessness of what has passed for history up until now. What we know as history is only prehistory, which is to say, nature once again. But this failure of realization is not a fatality to be affirmed precisely because it reveals the possibility of history, and therefore of freedom, to depend upon the negation of negativity. Negating is a doing. To take the difference between zenith and nadir as given is to render it indifferent, but recognizing that it is we who have made it indifferent by taking it as given is what allows us to make it different. Yet to allow something is not thereby to realise it. Freedom is possible, but its realization is blocked by the unfreedom of what is actual, society as fatality, ordained by the rule of capital. Rationality persists as possibility, not despite but because of the impossibility of its actuality. This hiatus between reason's actuality and possibility is fundamental to Adorno's quarrel with Hegel.

The Residue of Possibility

Adorno's 1962 essay on the concept of progress, delivered the year after the essay on *Endgame*, pushes further the suggestion that liberation is enciphered within domination, and that reason is harboured by unreason. Adorno credits Kant with the insight that unfreedom is the condition for freedom:

When, in the most sublime passage of his philosophy of history, [Kant] teaches that the antagonism, the entanglement of progress in myth, in nature's hold upon the domination of nature, in short, in the realm of unfreedom, tends by means of its own law toward the realm of freedom—Hegel's "cunning of reason" later came out of this—then this says nothing less than that the conditions for the possibility of reconciliation are its contradiction and that the conditions for the possibility of freedom are unfreedom. [Adorno 2005, p. 149]

Adorno's mention of "conditions of possibility" is significant here. Conditions of possibility are in us, not in things themselves. They are subjective conditions for phenomena, not objective properties of noumena. Thus when Adorno paraphrases Kant to the effect that antagonism is the condition for the possibility of reconciliation, and that unfreedom is the condition for the possibility of freedom, he situates this antagonism and this unfreedom in us, not in things themselves. They are man-made social phenomena, not God-given transcendent realities. The coercive and antagonistic nature of capitalist society is of our own doing. Part of Adorno's point is that recognizing this facticity allows us to see that it could be changed. Allowance here is a minimal condition: it is at least possible to change these phenomena. But of course knowing that something could be otherwise does not suffice for us to make it otherwise; it does not compel us to act. Thus the self-reflection through which reason recognizes that what it took to be given has been made by it, that it is itself

the nature from which it seeks to emancipate itself, that nature continues to dominate it through the domination which it exerts against nature, perpetuates the autarky of spirit unless it is supplemented by a practical act:

The beneficial self-reflection of reason, however, would be its transition to praxis: reason would see through itself as a moment of praxis and would recognize, instead of mistaking itself for the absolute, that it is a mode of behaviour. The anti-mythological element in progress cannot be conceived without the practical act that reins in the delusion of spirit's autarky. [ibid., 153]

This suggests that while reflection is the element within which the dialectic of Enlightenment is cognized, it is not the medium within which it can be overthrown. The element of transformation remains the social actuality (the bad totality of capital) from which reflection has become historically estranged. Thus it is the oppressive forces and conditions wrought by the domination of nature that must be resorted to in the attempt to overcome that domination. More pointedly, Adorno points to regression itself as the condition of progression: the progress of catastrophe and the wreckage of history, watched over by Benjamin's impotent angel, are in fact the only resource for the aversion of disaster and the inception of humanity:

Part of the dialectic of progress is that historical setbacks, which themselves are instigated by the principle of progress [...] also provide the condition needed for humanity to find the means to avert them in the future. The nexus of deception surrounding progress reaches beyond itself. It is mediated to that order in which the category of progress would first gain its justification, in that the devastation wrought by progress can be made good again, if at all, only by its own forces, never by the restoration of the preceding conditions that were its victim. (ibid.)

The realization of progress, understood as freedom from domination, would coincide with the abolition of progress, understood as the domination of first and second nature. But if the domination of domination (also known as the dictatorship of the proletariat) is no longer a condition for communism since it perpetuates what it is supposed to abolish, what practical act could realise the possibility of overthrowing domination? Reflection demythologizes the actual by exposing its subjective facticity. Since what is, has been made so by us, the possibilities latent in its actuality have also been shaped by our activities. But this is not to say that reflection would suffice to render the world wholly amenable to reason. Reflection itself relays compulsive identification.³ For change to be possible, we would have to change the practices that shape thinking together with the thinking that shapes those practices. This would be an impossible task, were it not for the fact that in reproducing itself the social totality reproduces the contradictoriness that stymies it as totality. This is the residue of negativity that must be negated: not just to prevent the reproduction of totality, but to transform it. This negation is the missing link between reflection and practice. Yet Adorno either will not or cannot specify the determination that would render negation practically transformative. He rearticulates the split between immanent and transcendent possibility on one hand, along with the distinction between knowledge and practice on the other. The possibilities recognised by identifying cognition harbour an unrecognised underside: this is not a reservoir of transcendent, metaphysical possibility; rather, it is constituted by the residue of nonidentity within every identification. Conversely, the knowledge governed by identity is conditioned by unidentified utilities

³ “Something compulsive distinguishes animal conduct from human conduct. The animal species *homo* may have inherited it, but in the species it turned into something qualitatively different. And it did so precisely due to the reflective faculty that might break the spell and did enter into its service.” Adorno 1973, p. 345.

(exchange), while the practice compelled by utility is conditioned by pointless identifications (equivalence). Thus knowledge is hemmed in by practical imperatives to which it is blind, just as practice is constrained by cognitive imperatives dictated by social utility. Neither knowledge nor practice exhausts the domain of the possible. But while the difference between the actual and the possible transcends cognitive and practical identification, it does not transcend reflection. Reflection rescues the residue of possibility secreted by the contradictoriness of the actual. Yet so long as it is bound only to point to negativity while resisting the compulsive affirmation of the actual, reflection merely enables the negation of negativity, without carrying it out. Naming the impasse may loosen its grip, but does not suffice to break out of it.

Living Death

Pointing to compulsion, reflection momentarily interrupts it, exercising the spontaneity in whose name it has subjugated itself to fate. This spontaneous nomination is the extremity of reflection, releasing a possibility not programmed by actuality: an impossible possibility, whose actualization requires symbolic death or subjective destitution. After symbolic destitution, after it is too late, comes a different symptom and a new nomination; a new S1 that exceeds what exists. Perhaps the Marxian analogue here is the self-abolition of the proletariat, the impossibility of affirming its identity as the working class, since to be a proletarian is to be reduced to being a bearer of labor-power (whether employed or unemployed) rather than being a laborer. As a social category, the proletariat is the negation of every anthropological predicate; it is the social embodiment of cultural destitution. The proletariat is living-labor forced to mortify itself to stay alive (by turning itself into labor-power); a mortification compelled by the dead-labor which lives from it (capital). It is the life that fuels the death to

which living has unknowingly wedded itself. While knowing this does not suffice to break the mutual reproduction of life and death, the growing impossibility of living by dying—the brute fact that their interdependence destroys its own reproducibility—may yet compel the act that terminates this compact.

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