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Durcharbeitung: Adorno after Freud

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It is a mistake to pass over the term “durch” without pause. We need to ask after the work of the word to grasp the terms of a critical analysis that eschews neither the mediation of the dialectic nor the working or unfolding form of the aesthetic. The present remarks contribute to my current project on the mediating terms of analysis, of how “gender” and “race” from one perspective and “art” and “aesthetic” from another serve as mediating terms when sandwiched between “critical” and “theory” to prevent the outer terms from falling into stasis. By “analysis,” I mean the three types that so dominated at least the first half of the twentieth century: logical analysis, music analysis, and psychoanalysis. Here, I ask only what it has meant to work through the losses of dialectical movement that may occur often in translation or in isolating sentences for the purposes of quotation. Many sentences, when set in relation to each other, as Horkheimer and Adorno insisted, prove true and false at the same time. What makes a sentence true is not exhausted by the logical form or grammar that joins words into meaningful wholes: what counts as much are the relations of the elements that

work in truth and falsity to make and break ideologies without which world-orders of power cannot do.

In 1959, in his popular address “The Meaning of Working Through the Past,” Adorno recorded a finding from the post-war group experiments carried out at the Institute for Social Research: “[M]itigating expressions and euphemistic circumlocutions were chosen in the reminiscences of deportation and mass murder, or [...] a hollow space formed in the discourse.”¹ In German, the talk’s title “Was bedeutet: Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit”—with its colon, its sense of provocation and questioning, and with its implied use of quotation marks—suggested that Adorno was going to rescue a proper way of working-through from what had been wrongly turned into a fashionable slogan, a way of working over or off a past situation to ensure that it left no troubling shadow in the present. “Aufarbeitung,” as he used the slogan, was set against the term I believe he preferred but did not use—“Durcharbeiten.” Whereas the *auf* of “aufarbeiten” modified the work as a reworking, rehabilitating, refurbishing, reprocessing, reconsidering, or recycling, the “durch” could keep the “auf” in check. Consider then retranslating the title: “The wrong meaning of...” or “The wrong way of working through the past.” Or, better: “what it means “to work [...] the past” with a suggestive ellipsis for the missing (and almost untranslatable) preposition. And consider next how well the ellipsis would suit the key sentence where an “or” brings the phrases “mitigating expressions” and “euphemistic circumlocutions” into precisely the troubled relation that allowed Adorno to describe the dominating tendency in post-war Germany to fill the hollowed space that had emerged in the public discourse with milder terms that could slide off the tongue quickly, easily, and without effort. Either we get the hollow space—the “Hohlraum” that suggests a cavity or lacuna, but then also an x-rayed space of vibrations beneath the surface—or we get the comforting filler. Contrary to the euphemisers, Adorno hoped to give the hollow space back to a public as a correlative of the terrifying blankness of the pages over which the history of mass murder was being wrongly written. Filling the pages quickly with the wrong words was how and why past actions and attitudes were coming into view not as true or new, but as false. What sort of work, now, was at stake when the stakes of speaking and writing, or remaining silent, were so high? The answer was the critical work of analysis, a “working through” of the distortions and deceptions in the many mirrors of reflection to expose the false fillers by which

1 Theodor W. Adorno, “Was bedeutet: Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, vol. 10:2 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997), 555–572; “The Meaning of Working Through the Past,” in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 90.

persons individually and collectively went on as normal. Normality was arguably most at stake in the aftermath of catastrophe. Failing to work through a situation because one believed one had already worked it over left one with only a perfectly false identity between one's face and image in the mirror—an identity, that is, that left no living room for a proper work to be done.

In his 1914 article, “Erinnern, Wiederholen und Durcharbeiten,” Freud described the dynamic in analysis, the psychic process, as a filling in of the gaps of a repressed memory that emerges given resistances built up. Filling in the gaps meant first, but not last, a transformational process of altering the state of memories from their being unconscious or unknown to their being conscious or known. There is nothing easy or smooth in altering a state of the mind. Freud described the dynamic process as necessitating displacements and transferences because the repressed memories as repressed cannot by definition or analysis be accessed directly. He called up the dreamwork, the interpretive enterprise, by which the resistance to the sort of remembering that results in the repression of memories begins to be broken down or dissolved. But what is left over after the dissolution? Not memories but an awareness of a special sort of experience for which “no memory can as a rule be recovered.”² Moving away from remembering, Freud now assessed the repetition, the compulsion to act over and over again in a way that, despite any apparent satisfaction, does not satisfy. A patient does not remember anything of what has been forgotten and repressed, but acts it out “without, of course, knowing” that it is a repetition.³ Because the analysis is designed to reveal the deception in the repetition, it must bring attention to the unwanted accompanying feelings of unease, confusion, defiance, shame, self-denial, and self-contempt. Were those feelings entirely absented, the patient would not come to the couch. It is precisely the inconsistency between one's action and one's reaction that leaves one with that uncanny nervousness that one is living doubled up or masked even though, when questioned, one holds one's tongue so as not to give the secret of one's discontent away. Having displaced the impulsion to remember by the compulsion to repeat, Freud noted the pathological character-traits, the repressed material of inhibitions and unserviceable attitudes that, showing themselves only as symptoms, disclose the protective armory worn so as to conceal what one safeguards in secret. The embattled terms suggest a test of one's mettle, as when the ego becomes weaponized against the id. The war is waged in a field constructed as though on solid ground but which in truth

- 2 Sigmund Freud, “Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through (Further Recommendations on the Technique of Psycho-Analysis II),” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 12 (London: Hogarth Press, 1950), 149.
- 3 Freud, “Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through,” 150.

is sinking mud. Dismantling the weapons one by one is then the analytical work that paves the way toward a recognition and reconciliation, a path for something concealed by the symptoms to come far more to expression than to explicit articulation. (Here is the gesture toward the much needed indirection of the aesthetic.) The recognition is an uneasy toleration that one's compulsive habits and repetitions are not normal so that one cannot go on as one hitherto has done. Here, from Freud (alongside Hegel and Marx), emerges the condition (intrinsic also to a critical gender, race, and class analysis) of a tense normality premised on a split or divided consciousness.

For his always revisionary path of analysis, Freud used the term "durcharbeiten," to work-through, where the "through" necessitates not a direct route but the indirection of displacement and projection. This was the indirection that Adorno found in his many passages of mediation, but where the logical or formal unfolding of any idea does much more than yield a straightforward clarity or transparency. "Durchsichtigmachung," being another term to connote the work toward illumination and transparency, conceals the darkness or obscurity in the "durch" that goes into the analytical work of *Durcharbeitung*. To stress the concealment, we are led to a world of art-making and imagination where the normal is revealed as anything but, under the topsy-turvy conditions of a "verwalteten" world. Borrowing from the aesthetic domain, Freud described the waiting game, the suspensions and postponements of everyday life where actions have consequences. In a field of "useless" play, all literally life-changing decisions are set aside to give the mind the time and space to displace, project, and transfer—to work in waiting through the mirrors or reflections of the self to a point where one becomes conversant with the hold or protective armor of one's resistances, as though a door were opened to the repressed impulses or instincts that feed the resistances in the first place. But the door always being "as though" opened, less cures the patient than leaves the now patient more conversant and comprehending.

Years later, in 1937, having perhaps had too much time to reflect, Freud wrote his "Analysis Terminable and Interminable."⁴ He wondered whether the "time-consuming" exposure, to render patent the latent material is really of the essence. Having begun with the burial of repressed memories, he arrived at the foundation of human instincts, the sex and death drives that, because they are biological, no amount of recognition and reconciliation can resolve. One works not to erase the drives but to live with them in their permanent tension. Freud's skepticism toward the working-through of analysis was a response in part to those analysts of mind whom he condemned as being in

4 Sigmund Freud, "Analysis Terminable and Interminable," *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 18, (1937): 373–405.

too great a hurry to declare a cure or victory, a hurry that he identified with the tempo of American life to move quickly past the post-First World War misery of Europe. If working-through had turned to an efficient assessment or overcoming of the past, what better than to describe the loss of wealth, as Freud did, on the part of patients too willing or able to pay? Before Adorno, Freud refused the analysis that sells magic potions or is designed only to tame, discipline, or institutionalize the necessarily conflicted expressions of drives. He worried about a growing inertia, passivity, or easy acceptance literally in “letting sleeping dogs lie.” He condemned an analysis of what is actual if the actual masks the potential or latent possibilities of altering current states of affairs. He further proposed a provisionality to counteract hardened solutions, or the sort of censorship that reinforced blind spots of error, or the noisy claims of an ego strength that was but a cover up for its weakness. Seeking the kernel of truth in the unresolved oppositions of competing and contradictory drives, he traversed a dynamic middle ground between life and death, homo- and heterosexuality, *pulça* (love) and *veixos* (strife)—to arrive at a working-through to a bedrock that finds no final settlement in either the bed or the rock.

When Adorno dismantled the post-war avoidances in working through the past, he silently displaced the “auf” with a “durch.” Where the former suggested a work indifferently done in haste as a sort of reluctant duty, the latter took the time to locate the potential to break the hold, the fascination and enthusiasm, of fascism. Time, however, was again as much the issue as the space of a new estrangement, a discomfort that, in his 1945 remarks “What National Socialism Has Done to the Arts,” allowed Adorno, with Horkheimer, to describe the barbarism in the cultural expression that the Nazis had paraded around as a social “massage,” a promise with clear and direct rewards: “Kraft durch Freude.”⁵ He saw the unmediated “durch” as affirmed by a culture industry that traded an unmediated mass art, delivered with an American streamlining and efficiency and triumphalism. He proposed a counter-resistance to the massive resistance of a society to refuse the delivery of false promises. Only in a work (*Arbeit*) and in an art-work (*Kunstwerk*) that turns inward to its form, to its through-composing, through-construction, through-formation, does one reach the non-identifying moment of non-recognition and non-reconciliation to the social edifice of repression so well capitalized on in the massive industrial complex that is culture or mind. Mediating the “durch” enabled a power to disable the slogan that lies in the dominant ideology: “Ar-

5 Theodor W. Adorno, “What National Socialism Has Done to the Arts,” in *Theodor W. Adorno: Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert, trans. Susan H. Gillespie et al. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), 385.

beit macht frei.” The thought of enlightenment—with the “auf” of *Aufklärung* demanding always more revisions of enlightenment’s progress—came with a critical response to the mediation of the mind that was working through the times with the haste of urgency, so that, well-tempered, the mind might decide rather to slow down.

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