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THEORIZING SYMBOLISM: ADORNO ON GEORGE AND HOFMANNSTHAL

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I analyze Theodor Adorno's essay "The George-Hofmannsthal Correspondence" to investigate the relationship between the sociology of literature and aesthetic theory in Adorno's works. While Stefan George's poetry holds a significant place in Adorno's philosophy, his essay on the correspondence differs from his other works on symbolism such as "On Lyric Poetry and Society," since it places heavy emphasis on the sociological analysis of the social and political positions of Stefan George and Hugo von Hofmannsthal. As such, "The George-Hofmannsthal Correspondence" displays the way in which Adorno abstracts his later theoretical framework in Aesthetic Theory from the work and life of the two symbolist poets. The essay's oscillation between sociology and aesthetic theory, I argue, illuminates Adorno's complex methodology in its entanglement of social critique and aesthetic autonomy.

Keywords: Symbolism, Adorno, George, Hofmannsthal, aesthetic theory

SEMBOLİZMİ KURAMLAŞTIRMAK: ADORNO'NUN GEORGE VE HOFMANNSTHAL ÜZERİNE DÜŞÜNCELERİ

ÖZ

Bu makalede Theodor Adorno'nun "George-Hofmannsthal Mektuplaşması" denemesi incelenmekte ve Adorno'nun yapıtlarında edebiyat sosyolojisi ile estetik kuram arasındaki bağlantı ele alınmaktadır. Stefan George'nin şiirleri Adorno'nun felsefesinde önemli bir yer tutmaktadır, fakat bu mektuplaşmalara dair denemesinde "Lirik Şiir ve Toplum Üzerine" gibi sembolizm hakkındaki diğer çalışmalarından farklı olarak Stefan George ve Hugo von Hofmannsthal'ın toplumsal ve politik konularının sosyolojik analizine ağırlık vermektedir. Bu nedenle "George-Hofmannsthal Mektuplaşmaları" Adorno'nun daha sonra Estetik Kuram'da ortaya

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koyduğu kuramsal çerçeveyi nasıl iki sembolist şairin eserleri ve hayatlarından soyutlayarak biçimlendirdiğini ortaya koymakta, Adorno'nun sosyal eleştiri ve estetik otonominin iç içe geçtiği metodolojisini aydınlatmaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Sembolizm, Adorno, George, Hofmannsthal, Estetik kuram

1. INTRODUCTION

“Not a decade passed” Paul Fleming (2004) writes, “without Adorno turning to and addressing George” (p. 99). From “On Lyric Poetry and Society” (Rede über Lyrik und Gesellschaft, 1957) to “George” (1967), Stefan George exerts considerable influence on Adorno's theories about poetry. In these works, Adorno, “who is careful to keep George's elitist ideology at arm's length,” does not only defend George's work against its “reactionary reception history” but also formulates his theory of the artwork's autonomy, which later becomes the central argument of his *Ästhetische Theorie* (1970) (Berman, 1999, p. 174).¹ In this respect, I would argue that Adorno's essay “George und Hofmannsthal. Zum Briefwechsel: 1891-1906,” written in 1940 and published in *Prismen* in 1969, showcases the way in which Adorno abstracts his theoretical framework from the work and life of George at the expense of the poet's biography, which nevertheless holds an uneasy significance for Adorno's arguments in this essay.

Interpreters of Adorno's aesthetic theory have noted the way in which Adorno uses individual works of art to think about language. Fleming (2004) writes that “Adorno is interested not in lyric poetry but in ‘the idea of pure language’” (p. 98) while Ulrich Plaas (2007) claims that he “re-duces literature to the medium and the representative of language” (p. 105).² Peter Uwe Hohendahl (1991) elucidates Adorno's philosophical interest in poetry by contrasting his project to the socio-logical methodology of Lucien Goldmann. While Goldmann focuses on the “homology between the social and the literary structure,” in Adorno's work “the interpretation of the poem refers to the meaning of history, not to the facts or objective structures. The two realms are mediated by philosophy” (Hohendahl, 1991, p. 84). As such, “[u]nlike

¹ As Hohendahl reminds us, in contrast to Benjamin's “truly materialist theory of art” Adorno's *Ästhetische Theorie* was not received well by the German Left in the 1970s due to its “aesthetic elitism” (Hohendahl, 1991, pp. 77-78). For his critics, Adorno's preoccupation with poets like George would be a withdrawal from the realm of politics which would resemble George and his circle's withdrawal “into the inner sanctuary of art” (Strathausen, 2003, p. 256).

² Fleming (2004) also highlights Adorno's use of the word ‘vertreten’ instead of ‘darstellen’ when he writes that “the lyrical word stands for [vertritt] the being-in-itself of language” (p. 110). For Fleming, this shows that “lyric poetry does not present language itself, but is the place holder for what cannot appear as such. Language as such can only ‘appear’ in its eternal ebbing, can only speak in the form of already having withdrawn” (2004, p. 110).

Goldmann, Adorno would never identify the work of art with an individual social group or class” since “[t]he correspondence between art and society, the aesthetic and the social meaning, transcends the particular group or class” (Hohendahl, 1991, p. 85). All the critics I have cited focus on Adorno’s “Lyric Poetry and Society”, in which he condemns associating lyric poetry, that is marked by a “pathos of detachment,” and society as an ‘arrogant’ “insensiti[ity] to the Muse,” (Adorno, 1991b, p. 37). The modest goal he outlines to over-come this difficulty is to undertake an ‘immanent critique’ by refraining from using poems to prove “sociological theses” and by trying to find the “social element in them” in order to see “in what way the work of art remains subject to society and in what way it transcends it” (Adorno, 1991b, pp. 37-38). Later in his *Ästhetische Theorie*, this model is strengthened by a more ambitious claim according to which “critique is necessary to the works” since critique “recognizes their truth content” (Adorno, 1998, p. 88). In other words, “aesthetic experience is not genuine experience unless it be-comes philosophy” (Adorno, 1998, p. 131).

Adorno’s essay on the correspondence between George and Hofmannsthal, however, occupies a strange place within his writings on aesthetics because of the unusual subject it delves into, namely the correspondence between Stefan George and Hugo von Hofmannsthal, who exchanged over 100 letters over a span of 15 years. The friendship between the two deteriorated over time due to the different paths they took: While Hofmannsthal decided to “leave the world of Aestheticism behind and turn toward sociopolitical realm,” by writing screenplays for films and establishing the Salzburger Festspiele, George “remained confined to the circle of Aestheticism” and refrained from participating in politics (Strathausen, 2003, p. 239). Because the correspondence is an intimate document that reveals more about the personalities and lives of both poets, Adorno continually refers to their biographies and notes the lack of theoretical discussions between George and Hofmannsthal, which shows that there is no “artistic understanding” between them (Adorno, 1997, p. 188). What interests Adorno in this correspondence is the way in which it displays the different positions of the two poets vis-à-vis art and society. Thus, Adorno assumes the role of the critic who, possessed with the knowledge of the difference between the poetics of the two poets, explains their lack of understanding by looking at their site of communication (or lack thereof). But unlike in the case of his essay on lyric poetry, his task is not only that of the philosopher who is interested in a pure language, but also that of the sociologist of literature who is interested in social groups. The essay’s oscillation between sociology and aesthetic theory, I would argue, illuminates Adorno’s struggle with the entanglement of social critique and aesthetic autonomy.

2. In Defense of Symbolism

As an essay on the (non-)communication between George and Hofmannsthal, Adorno’s work itself resists communication. Unlike in ‘Lyric Poetry and

Society', in which he starts by problematizing the sociology of lyric poetry, explains his theory of literature and then analyzes individual poems, in this article biographical information about George and Hofmannsthal is interspersed with lines from their poems (quoted in a fashion reminiscent of Benjamin, who had an influence on Adorno while he was writing this piece), passages from their correspondence, as well as Adorno's own rumination about literature.³ Praise and criticism (of both the persons and the poems) are juxtaposed. As such, the essay is a perfect example of the intertwining of literature and philosophy in Adorno's writing, a proximity which Gerhard Richter (2006) analyzes to illustrate the paradoxical at-tempt of philosophical discourse to 'translate' the artwork's "speculative truth content" into "graspable, cognitive, and propositional structure" of theoretical commentary (p. 122). But while this resonance between philosophy and literature bolsters Adorno's understanding of art according to Richter, James Harding (1992) claims that "[b]y speaking from the position of art, Adorno eliminates the necessity for exploring the vast complexities underlying the socio-historical" (p. 187). In the essay on the correspondence, however, the socio-historical and philosophical-aesthetic dis-courses co-exist without uniting in a comprehensive method; instead, they operate side by side.

In the essay, Adorno the critic wants to analyze and reveal the truth of the poets' works not by dividing the whole into analytical parts, but by giving the whole itself. The truth that he derives from the work is stated on the final pages, where it becomes clear that his argument aims to fight back against the critics of symbolism such as Lukács by redefining immediacy in literature. Immediacy for Lukács was the attempt to record every single detail either in the psyche or in exterior reality without having a general framework to understand the whole of societal processes and forces. For Adorno, however, the very attempt to "reflect social life in its immediacy" is problematic (1997, p. 216). The escape from immediacy is not achieved by representing the general framework of societal forces since this would still reproduce the immediacy at another level.

There are two strategies that Adorno deploys in order to give an alternative reading of symbolism against the charges of elitism, isolation and escapism. The first one, which corresponds primarily to George's position, is to emphasize the artwork's separation from society and its 'estrangement.' In Adorno's formulation, the naturalist's attention to socio-political reality also means its affirmation as "simply existing – now and always", while the

³ Emphasizing Benjamin's earlier "extraordinary praise" for Adorno's essay on the correspondence, Ulrich Plaas (2007) writes: "Adorno was always reluctant to follow Benjamin's more daring and avant-garde experiments with philosophical and critical forms of presentations. Adorno's essay on George and Hofmannsthal constitutes perhaps the moment of greatest closeness achieved in this intellectual friendship" (p. 95). When the essay was published in *Prismen*, Adorno dedicated it to Benjamin's memory.

detachment of the symbolist from reality is a “refusal to accept the status quo” (Adorno, 1997, p. 223). Consequently, George and Hofmannsthal give a more accurate depiction of reality under capitalism by the very fact that they refuse communication, while others (meaning naturalists and realists) “allow human beings to speak fictitiously as though they could still talk to each other (Adorno, 1997, p. 223). The real state of affairs, Adorno claims, is defined by non-communication and atomization in capitalist society in which dialogue is no longer possible. Naturalism is ‘up-to-date’ neither in its understanding of society nor in its conceptualization of individual’s psychology. This is why the symbolist movement is better in its “insight of the collapse” than “the assiduous description of slums and mines” (Adorno, 1997, p. 223). Herein lies the truth of the works of the two poets: not in their “prayer to beauty”, but in their “asocial” “defiance” against communicative language (Adorno, 1997, p. 224; p. 223). The poet’s detachment not only turns the poet to an ‘eccentric’ but also transforms his language into a translation. The poet’s self-willed estrangement to language moves him closer to the truth of capitalist estrangement itself. While the bourgeois order is dependent on this ‘natural aspect of everyday language, the aesthete relies on himself, as if he were “his own idol,” thereby revealing “the utopia of not being oneself,” even when it is still a posture (Adorno, 1997, p. 224). For Adorno this self-idolization is a task doomed to unhappiness, but in their denunciation of identity through the de-terminate negation of both society and its language, George and Hofmannsthal depict the very struggle of the individual against capitalism, the struggle of separation and freedom from individuality. In a sense, Adorno’s account of the two poets very much resembles Lukács’s criterion for a realist work: namely that it should represent the individual’s struggle against society and ultimate defeat and fragmentation. There are, however, two important differences: While for Lukács the struggle concerns the characters of the novel, in Adorno’s account the struggle is between the author and society through the medium of language. Second, the ultimate defeat in Adorno does not refer to a fragmentation of the unified individual, but the realization of the impossibility of becoming totally selfless.

The second strategy, which primarily characterizes Hofmannsthal’s work, concerns the accusation that symbolists flee from reality. For Adorno, symbolists are not after a “mystical inward-ness,” because they are already outside (1997, p. 216). As such, their poetry is not an expression of their interiority and subjectivity. This idea is based on Adorno’s reading of a story Hofmannsthal offers about the origin of symbols in sacrifice: In the story, a man who thinks he is hated by gods grabs a knife and kills a ram, imagining ecstatically at the moment of slaughter that the blood of the animal is his blood. As a result, Hofmannsthal claims, the man dies in the animal “just as we die in symbols”, although this self-sacrifice lasts only for an instant (Adorno, 1997, p. 222). Adorno translates this tale to the demise of the modern man and to his “non-committal sacrifice” (Adorno, 1997, p. 222): “The economic competitor survived by anticipating fluctuations in the market, even

if he could not do anything about them. The modern poet lets himself be overwhelmed by the power of things as though he were an outsider being swallowed by a cartel” (Adorno, 1997, p. 222).⁴ The first account was the story of the poet who protects himself from society and its banal language in order to create something eternal and who as a result dooms himself to unhappiness, while here, the dissolution of the individual takes place by another route, namely, by the complete submersion of the poet in societal life. Adorno’s analogy to being “swallowed by a cartel” changes Hofmannsthal’s vitalistic language to a political one. Here Adorno comes closest to Benjamin’s reading of Baudelaire who becomes a commodity in the market place, so that commodity-form can be read off his poems. By relinquishing his subjectivity, the poet becomes the “mouth piece of things” (Adorno, 1997, p. 222). Yet it is interesting to see that when Adorno translates the story of the original sacrifice into socio-political terms, he ignores the fact that such identification between the animal and the sacrificer happens only for an instant in Hofmannsthal’s story. The demise and desubjectification of the modern man, however, are taken to be happening constantly. As I will show later in this article, Adorno revises this reading later in *Ästhetische Theorie*.

These two positions, complete alienation and complete submission to the market, define the positions of George and Hofmannsthal respectively. In both cases, however, the symbolist, in contrast to the naturalist, is more successful in reflecting the spirit of his age, that of late capitalism. Furthermore, this success does not only stem from their works, but is closely linked to their positions in society. In other words, the poets occupy a special position, that of the ‘eccentric.’ Here Adorno’s implicit claim is that the very isolation and rejection of communication characteristic of symbolist artists and poets explains the lack of communication between George and Hofmannsthal. The very thing that makes the project of the symbolist successful is also the reason behind the two poets’ separation: The correspondence between the two poets can be seen, then, as the attempt of the poets, who refuse to communicate through their works, to communicate, thereby making explicit the nature of their enigmatic works.

The explanation of Adorno’s central thesis in the essay, which is stated only at the end, fully supports the two ‘conservatives’ against socialist realists without reserve. As such, at the end of the essay, where he gives us a coherent picture of the relationship between the works and lives of the two poets, Adorno distinguishes himself from the isolated poet who refuses to communicate. He wants to communicate to us the truth behind their works (in

⁴ “Der Dichter der Moderne läßt von der Macht der Dinge sich überwältigen wie der Outsider vom Kartell. Beide gewinnen den Schein der Sekurität: der Dichter jedoch auch die Ahnung ihres Gegenteils” (Adorno, 1977, p. 235). The use of the word “outsider” in English is important for Adorno’s style, as I will argue at the end of the article.

order to ‘rescue’ them) and to underline the significance of these two figures for the contemporary reader. Taken all by itself, the end section of the essay bears the tone of the critic who, very much like the Lukácsian realist, comprehends and represents the whole by careful selection and organization. The question is, how-ever, whether this conclusion really sums up all the different lines of argument in the essay. Do the final paragraphs really offer a general commentary that reveals the truth behind all the minute aspects that Adorno analyzes throughout the essay? Or is it just a fragment, which cannot claim explanatory authority on all the other parts? The laudatory tone at the end comes as a surprise, since throughout the essay Adorno criticizes both George and Hofmannsthal. All these criticisms, how-ever, are included in the essay without much explanation, and the conclusion of the essay does not dwell on them.

The contrast between the critical tone throughout the essay and the praise at the end urges us to look at Adorno’s later work, *Ästhetische Theorie*, in order to come up with an explanation of the methodology he uses. This reference to his later work proves to be illuminating not because the latter explains the essay in its entirety, but because it shows us what gets left out when Adorno the critic moves to another stage of abstraction. It also shows us to what extent Adorno’s later aesthetics was informed by his analysis of George and Hofmannsthal. Thus, consulting Adorno’s later aesthetic theory as an explanation, or a revelation of the truth in Adorno’s essay on George and Hofmannsthal is useful to see why Adorno does not (or cannot) put all his criticisms of the two poets in a comprehensive framework at the end of his essay.

In *Ästhetische Theorie*, Adorno offers a general theory of the artwork as something that is separated from outside world but at the same time connected to it. The artworks are “artifacts” and “products of social labor” which “also communicate with the empirical experience that they reject and from which they draw their content” (Adorno, 1998, p. 5). The artwork’s “gravitational force” “gathers around itself its membra disjecta, traces of the existing. [It] is related to the world by the principle that contrasts it with the world” (Adorno, 1998, p. 7). But while they detach themselves from reality by way of organizing their elements differently, they nevertheless remain bound to external reality since it is where they derive their materials in the first place. Thus, they are also products with a difference which arises from their “constitutive absenting from real society,” a detachment that is reminiscent of Adorno’s earlier take on George (Adorno, 1998, p. 236). Adorno even mentions the artwork’s position vis-à-vis society in terms of a willful detachment: “By crystallizing in itself as something unique to itself, rather than complying with existing social norms and qualifying as ‘socially useful’, it criticizes society by merely existing, for which puritans of all stripes condemn it” (Adorno, 1998, pp. 225-226). Moreover, the artwork cannot “be described or explained in terms of the categories of communication” (Adorno,

1998, p. 109). Rather, the work expresses “extraartistic things and situations. Historical processes and functions are already sedimented in them and speak out of them” (Adorno, 1998, pp. 111-112). All these concerns mirror Adorno’s earlier analysis of George and Hofmannsthal, but there is a major difference: What appears to be unique about symbolists is interpreted here as the very ontology of all works of art. In a sense, Adorno derives his definition of art itself from his interpretation of symbolism. The power of the artwork as critique of society is no longer attributed to the historically specific positions of the symbolists, who, like all artists, are “not demigods but fallible, often neurotic and damaged, individuals” (Adorno, 1998, p. 171). It is situated at the ontological status of the artwork itself. The detachment of the artist is no longer a precondition for the detachment of the work from outside reality. But this approach renders looking at a work such as the correspondence between two poets methodologically unnecessary, and even false. *Ästhetische Theorie*, then, takes from the complicated analysis of the correspondence the basic ideas about the nature of art, but in this process it loses what is specific to George and Hofmannsthal.

3. Technique and Domination

While the attribution of the symbolist aspects to the whole of art in *Ästhetische Theorie* has the dis-advantage of losing the specificity of the two poets’ position in society, Adorno elaborates further on the theoretical content of his essay later in his book. The relationship between technique and art, for example, assumes a central role in *Ästhetische Theorie*. Already in George-Hofmannsthal es-say, Adorno (1997) underlines George and Hofmannsthal’s preoccupation with technique and writes that “the gesture of the letters tends to imply that the artist’s profound immersion in his material renders extensive reflection unnecessary, or that the writers are too secure in their shared experiences and attitudes to have to talk them to death” (p. 187). In contrast to the philosopher, who reveals the truth behind the artwork, the artist is a technician. This brief reference to technique is important to understand Adorno’s analysis. Seen in the context of his earlier criticism of technical mastery and domination of the world, poetry seems to join the ranks with scientific enterprise and the poet emerges as “the complement of the natural scientist” (Adorno, 1997, p. 190). As a result, art is not seen as an attempt to reveal a mystery that is ignored by scientific outlook. It is an appropriation of the “unexpected, that which has not yet been included in the current material of expression” (Adorno, 1997, p. 191).

Reading these passages together with *Ästhetische Theorie* shows once again that in his aesthetic theory Adorno’s interest in technique extends to all artworks. *Métier*, Adorno (1998) writes later, is to set “boundaries against the bad infinity in works. It makes concrete what, in the language of Hegel’s Logic, might be called the abstract possibility of artworks. Therefore, every authentic artist is obsessed with technical procedures, the fetishism of means also has a legitimate aspect” (p. 44). In order for the artwork to exist as

something rather than being the formless expression of some unknown secret, it has to have a form, for which it needs the selective technique of the artist. This thing-like nature of the artwork makes it resemble an artifact, and as such it has to undergo the same violence against nature which is used extensively by technology: “Something is excised from the living, from the body of language, from tones, from visual experience. The purer the form and the higher the autonomy of the works, the more cruel they are. . . . This is the ritual of the domination of nature that lives on in play” (Adorno, 1998, p. 50). If technical domination over nature is an essential component of the artwork, any mystification of its technical nature appears as a cover. Since “the ordained mystery does not exist”, it is necessary to look beyond George’s claims to “[pre-serve] Being from the stream of oblivion on whose banks he erects his works” (Adorno, 1997, p. 192). Against this Heideggerian reading, Adorno (1997) sees the mystery as a technical problem:

Yet should the technique which processes the materials be revealed to the public, it would end the poet’s claim to an authority which had long since been ceded to the event itself. . . . The justification of the Circle, however, as it emerged for George through his collaboration on *Blätter für die Kunst*, is by no means participation in concealed regions nor the substantiality of the individual; rather, it is technical competence. (p. 192)

The use of the word ‘mystery’ only serves to the separation between the reader and the poet, while the real distinction is to be sought in technical skills. Thus, George and Hofmannsthal, who only talk about technical problems in their correspondence, are unconsciously aware of the real nature of art, which Adorno elucidates later in *Ästhetische Theorie*. In his essay on their correspondence, Adorno makes this ‘secret’ explicit, and in *Ästhetische Theorie* he derives the necessity of this emphasis on technics from the nature of the artwork itself. In both of the writings, Adorno is the one who communicates what was withheld from the two poets’ communication. By revealing the truth of the artwork, he makes explicit what is already implicit in the unconscious knowledge of the two poets.

In George’s poetry Adorno (1997) detects the will to dominate nature. George’s turn to nature is not a search of a pre-technical refuge from modern society, but an illumination of nature through technique. This domination of the sensible by the poet and its reduction to a certain goal would seem to stem from the instrumental rationality which Adorno and Horkheimer attack in the *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (1944). How can a philosopher, who is known for his critique of enlightenment’s dark side, praise technical domination?⁵ This

⁵ Commenting on this apparent conflict, Jameson (1990) argues that “Adorno deliberately introduces into the very heart of the aesthetic the dynamic of ‘enlightenment’ and the original sin of Western rationality and domination which he

is possible only if we bear in mind that the artwork is ontologically different and that it willfully detaches itself from this world. As such, if George “resorts in desperation to force”, “strangles words until they no longer elude him,” this violence done to the sensuous element in language should be seen as a response to the “disintegration of language” (Adorno, 1997, p. 206). In Strathausen’s (2003) words, “George’s poetry is able to redeem things only through a verbal embalmment that preserves their corpses in the mausoleum of poetic form” (p. 243). The violence inflicted on matter should be seen as a rebellious act, rather than a simple continuation of the destruction of nature undertaken by technology: “Thus George’s heroism turns into its opposite. Its mythical features are diametrically opposed to the heritage in whose name they were appropriated by political apologists. They are features of defiance” (Adorno, 1997, p. 206). Implicit in this passage is a disjunction between political discourse and the language of the poet. Although George might have been influenced by the anti-liberal sentiments of his epoch and was fascinated with archetypal relations, what matters for the poetic enterprise is the effect of estrangement. The domination of nature operating in the artwork is diametrically op-posed to the political and technological domination operating in reality. For Adorno, the artwork is always ‘too late’ and is marked by a temporal distance between what the it aims (namely the origin of words) and the artwork’s present. The domination in the artwork can never reach its goal; it is never as serious as it is in political matters. There is almost a melancholic element in George’s poetics, since it wants to achieve the impossible and to overcome this lateness according to Adorno. But if this will to capture the origins is translated into politics by ‘political apologists’, the results become serious and alarming. The gap between art and reality, as such, is not to be overcome.

4. George and Politics

In Adorno’s essay (1997) George is seen as “impervious to a mondanité which was able to conduct international dialogues even about Hitler.” (p. 197). George’s detachment from politics, just like the detachment of his poetic technique from reality, saves him from falling into the lure of fascism. His ‘secret Germany’, as such, should be evaluated in terms of art rather than politics. George’s praise-worthy act is his refusal to act and to be a part of the current events. As such, he emerges as an “outcast” (Verfemter) who “assumes the burden of unproductive resistance” (Adorno, 1997, p. 198). “[T]he hanged man’s criticism of society from an amoral perspective,” in Adorno’s words, shows that George’s poetry should not be seen in terms of preserved beauty; rather, its proximity to Baudelairean themes of immorality is more important to understand his political position (Adorno, 1997, p. 202).

was concerned elsewhere to denounce” (p. 179). This “Trojan horse,” however, proves to be “a beneficial one” since it serves to bring “the formal and the social or the historical” together in Adorno’s treatment of art (Jameson, 1990, p. 199).

Another image provided by Adorno to describe George's social position is that of the traveller who has no roots, "the homeless wanderer" in a world where others are "always at home with themselves" (Adorno, 1997, p. 199). The experience of the nostalgic wanderer or that of the outcast exemplifies the 'lateness' of the artwork that Adorno emphasizes. This lateness signals an unbridgeable gap and an impossible reconciliation with present reality. This negativity, however, tends to be ignored by the interpreters of George whom Adorno names 'The Literary Historians.' Disregarding and dehistoricizing George's immorality and anger at the world, the 'Literary Historian' can only imagine George's travel to hell "as a sojourn" in a "tourist attraction" and then can argue that George's ultimate goal has always been to preserve beauty (Adorno, 1997, p. 200). I would argue that in Adorno's criticism the "Literary Historian" appears to be the counterpart to the 'political apologist'. While the Literary Historian isolates the negative themes in George's poetry and mythifies them, thereby erasing all criticism implicit in George's refrain from current events, the political apologist takes these purified, neutralized and depoliticized themes in order to misuse them in political matters, not for negating the current condition and technical and political domination, but for affirming them. Adorno steps in at the moment when George needs to be rescued from these two figures, and reconnects him to social and political reality by emphasizing the negation of that reality in George's work.

In Adorno's essay demystification of George's project relies more on George's poetry than on George's person. George is keen enough to perceive "the relationship between international aggressiveness and imperialistic ambitions" and can speak "of Germany in words that must have sounded blasphemous to his own circle", but this recognition is not directly related to his person or to his "important international affiliations. Rather the true cause of his awareness is to be found in the substance of his poetry" (Adorno, 1997, p. 195). This is a strange formulation. It claims that George's personal detachment from historical events is 'caused' by his poetry, and not vice versa. His poetic detachment precedes his political one. They are not part of a whole and Adorno gives priority to the poetic aspect. This priority becomes most apparent in *Ästhetische Theorie*, where detachment and political resistance are elements of the artwork itself, not that of the artist. However, we should also ask what happens when Adorno himself moves from a specific evaluation of George and Hofmannsthal to his own aesthetic theory. How does he avoid resembling the "Literary Historian", who ignores the tension between society and the work? How does the philosopher, who perceives what is essential to the texts, and who derives his theory of the nature of artwork from the work of the poet, avoid losing the negativity inherent in symbolism?

To answer this, we need to look at *Ästhetische Theorie* again. Adorno (1998) claims that despite the resemblance between technological domination and artistic technique, which "[extends] the realm of human domination to the extreme", the artwork's separation from and opposition to outside world

render it antithetical to technological domination (p. 77). Artworks, like technology, operate under the means-ends rationality, but they also expose the “faulty irrationality of the rational world as an overadministered world. For the aim of all rationality – the quintessence of the means for dominating nature – would have to be something other than the means, hence something not rational” (Adorno, 1998, p. 53). The artwork is without any use and as such suspect for the bourgeois order. But in using the same technical procedure, it also reveals the meaninglessness behind the technical rationality, which does not have an ultimate end for itself. This separation from outside “strengthens and exculpates the rational element in art because it resists real domination” (Adorno, 1998, p. 54). Art’s corrective to instrumental rationalism, then, uses the same means through an immanent critique. Through its form, the work gains freedom and becomes “anti-barbaric” (Adorno, 1998, p. 143)– a term that reminds us of Adorno’s critique of culture industry and totalitarianism –, and “amoral” (p. 144). But it should also be noted that this technical aspect is never complete in itself. Art never manages to incorporate all the sensuous elements into itself. The artwork is seen as a process of this struggle to appropriate the incommensurable. Artworks continually “seek the identity of the identical and the nonidentical processually because even their unity is only an element and not the magical formula of the whole” (Adorno, 1998, p. 176). They try to become ‘self-identical’ through the reduction of the “non-identical, heterogeneous, and not already formed” (Adorno, 1998, p. 176). But this struggle does never come to an end and never reaches complete ‘enlightenment’ of the other, for if it did, it would no longer be art, but only a commodity (Adorno, 1998, p. 54). In more pessimistic terms, Adorno (1998) defines this ‘cruelty’ of the art-work as a kind of “despair” due to its powerlessness (p. 50). Its struggle is a process of disintegration. The processual “decomposition” of the work is what makes it successful, but it also dooms it to “melancholy,” since “[a]ll that art can do is grieve for the sacrifice it makes” (Adorno, 1998, p. 52). The unhappiness that was used to depict George’s situation in the correspondence essay, which I had analyzed above, is now attributed to the artwork itself and explained structurally rather than historically in *Ästhetische Theorie*. Its difference from technology is established firmly in its un-happiness and its difference from commodities.

In the George-Hofmannsthal essay Adorno (1997) claims that it is wrong to accuse symbolists for clinging to the ideal of beauty while the outside reality is so ugly as depicted by the naturalists (p. 217). While the naturalists deny that there is any beauty, thereby pointing towards the absence of beauty as an absent utopia, the symbolist poem presents a disintegrating beauty, a beauty that fights against becoming a mere commodity but falling prey to the market. The symbolist work portrays beauty’s disintegration under capitalism. Adorno (1997) also points out that the beautiful object for George and Hofmannsthal is the commercial objet d’art (p. 218). The beautiful is not situated over and above the realm of commercial objects of kitsch. The symbolist’s understanding of beauty does not differ from the kitsch, but in the

poet's portrayal of beauty, its fall into the commercial realm is revealed. Adorno (1997) gives the concluding poem of the *Pilgerfahrten* as an example of the necessity for the artwork to appear in commodity form. The poem, according to Adorno, once again points to George's unconscious knowledge of the fact that the artwork stems from real life and that it is inevitably bound to the realm of commodities. As in the case of the special typeface George uses or the beautiful books that he decorates, the artwork is reduced to its market value and made comparable to other commodities, despite the fact that George emphasizes the artwork's uniqueness at the same time.⁶

This does not mean, however, that the artwork is only a commodity. Its secret, the special kind of beauty (which is the deadly beauty of disintegration), is named by Adorno in his *Ästhetische Theorie* as the enigma or the shudder. Only the hermetic artwork, which refuses communication, namely "the adaptation of spirit to utility," can do justice to the silence of natural beauty (Adorno, 1998, p. 74). As such, beauty in the artwork is material, but it is also the falling silent of this material (Adorno, 1998, p. 79). This fleeting 'enigma' escapes understanding and cannot be put into words even by Adorno (1998) himself: "Artworks that unfold to contemplation and thought without any remainder are not artworks" (p. 121). Its elusiveness explains why George or Hofmannsthal could only write about technical themes in their correspondence. This enigma also makes the perceiver experience the disintegration of the self for a moment: "For a few moments the I becomes aware, in real terms, of the possibility of letting self-preservation fall away, though it does not actually succeed in realizing this possibility" (Adorno, 1998, p. 245). While in the George-Hofmannsthal essay Adorno seemed to think that a complete identification during the sacrificial ritual would be possible, as I have shown by highlighting his explanation of Hofmannsthal's story above, he becomes more cautious in *Ästhetische Theorie* and reformulates the experience of disintegration as a transitory one.⁷ It is also important to note that he reinterprets the disintegration of the self not as an experience of the poet but as an experience of the reader. The

⁶ While Jameson (1990) claims that the culture industry is "negatively presupposed" (p. 137) by *Aesthetic Theory*, Tyrus Miller (2007) notes that "Adorno's views on modernism, to which he ascribes a critical function in present-day society, must be seen in the context of his theory of the 'culture industry', which he understands as modernism's dialectical complement and secret sharer" (p. 81). Bernstein (1992) also notes the parallel between "the abstractness of the will to novelty" in art and the "restlessness of capital itself, this production for the sake of production, that gives modernism, in its earliest theoretical articulations in Baudelaire, 'a fatalistic ring'" (p. 192).

⁷ In Plaas's (2007) words "Poetic self-sacrifice can then be described as an artistic ruse: through self-negation, the poetic subject becomes susceptible to something that can be had only by not having it—collective language, which cannot appear, but only disappear" (p. 93).

commodification of the poet and the artwork is turned into the opposite of the enigma. In the separation between George's bearing (Haltung) and detachment and Hofmannsthal's self-abandonment into the market, George emerges triumphant in Adorno's later aesthetic theory, and Adorno (1998) abandons his Benjaminian analysis of Hofmannsthal: "To catch even the slightest glimpse beyond the prison that it itself is, the I requires not distraction but rather the utmost tension that preserves the shudder" (p. 245). The opposition between the positions of George and Hofmannsthal as formulated in the earlier essay is later transformed into a duality inherent in all works of art.

5. Commodification and Culture Industry

In *Ästhetische Theorie*, Adorno detects two forces that are at work in art: One of the poles draws it towards commodification, while the other forces the form to become self-conscious of its defeat, disintegration and unhappiness. Early signs of the formulation of this duality can be seen in Adorno's analysis of George, who cannot evade the market, even though he does not succumb to its forces the way Hofmannsthal does. Adorno (1997) praises Hofmannsthal for his "real insight that language no longer allows anything to be said as it is experienced. Language is either reified and banal, as the designation of commodities, falsifying thought in advance." (p. 203). Hofmannsthal's famous *Chandos* letter, Adorno claims, is right in its argument that communication is not really possible, and that relying on communication as naturalists do would turn the work into a commodity and would strip it of its enigmatic character. But Hofmannsthal chooses another path. Instead of relying on the enigma and the 'bearing' like George, he resorts to children's theatre in order to "emancipate literature from language" (Adorno, 1997, p. 203). Hofmannsthal's turn to children's theatre does not only signify the rejection poetry and its detachment from the word. More importantly, its technique betrays a desire to hold on to the subject and to provide self-control. His style becomes an expression of happiness instead of suffering due to the unbridgeable gap between art and life that Adorno detects in the case of George. This irresponsibility drives Hofmannsthal's work to become more marketable. In *Ästhetische Theorie*, Adorno (1998) emphasizes the danger of happiness in the work of art when he writes that "whoever enjoys artworks is a philistine" (p. 13). Entertainment, as such, is seen as a component of production, through which the artwork is integrated into the social in order to fulfill a function (Adorno, 1998, p. 253). In *Ästhetische Theorie*, Adorno comes to see this compromise as integral to the artwork's nature. Artworks are always susceptible to becoming commodities due to their "thing-character"; they are both processes of disintegration (which is the source of their enigma) and marketable, finished objects (Adorno, 1998, p. 100).

Adorno's examples in the George-Hofmannsthal essay concern less this type of compromise that is inherent in the artwork than the actions and decisions of the two poets, and his mode of analysis is closer to his writings

on the culture industry. As Andreas Huyssen (1975) claims, “Adorno’s insistence on autonomy is the logical result of his analysis of mass culture as the intentional integration of its consumers from above” (p. 8). Before the concluding paragraphs of his es-say that I have analyzed above, he is as much interested in the organizational framework and the structure of the work’s reception, namely in extra-artistic aspects, as in the immanent aspects of the work itself. Mass culture, for Adorno, does not emerge spontaneously from the masses, as he argues in his essay “Culture Industry Reconsidered”. The “customer” becomes a passive receiver and a consumer who is manipulated for the purposes of earning profit (Adorno, 1991a, p. 99). In the culture industry, the products are “no longer also commodities, they are commodities through and through” (Adorno, 1991a, p. 100). Thus, the designation ‘culture industry’ refers to a state in which the artwork loses all its enigmatic character and only caters to the audience’s enjoyment. Technique also changes form: It is no longer the violence of the work against nature as a rebellion against technical rationality, but a process of standardization, “distribution and mechanical reproduction”, based on the “extra-artistic technique of the material production of goods” (Adorno, 1991a, p. 101). The standardization of consumer products leads into “mass deception” and “impedes the development of autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves” (Adorno, 1991a, p. 106). In his work on the culture industry, Adorno’s focus is on actual people who are involved in the production and consumption, or creation and reception of works. This sociological dimension introduces an element of historical contingency to the analysis, remnants of which can also be detected in Adorno’s essay on George and Hofmannsthal.

Sociological analyses of George and Hofmannsthal’s actions and decisions are numerous in Adorno’s essay, and these moments of historical contextualization cannot be incorporated into the general framework of *Ästhetische Theorie*. Rather, these analyses insist on the historical specificity of the poets’ projects and resist the attempt to translate them to a general theory of art. Adorno gives us a sociological analysis of the position of intellectuals in German society during the lives of the two poets. Their “tortured self-rejection”, or unhappiness is attributed to the “problematic relations between power and the intellectuals” since in contrast to England and France, the intellectuals are less secure in their lives and can either “[glorify] the prevailing crudity as substance and ‘life’” or “[substitute] a dream society for the real one which they obeyed and feared” (Adorno, 1997, p. 195). This historical context serves as an explanatory framework for Adorno’s interpretation of the aspirations of the two poets and their integration into the culture industry of their time. Hofmannsthal, as we have seen before, is the one who is the target of most of the criticism. His resolution to separate himself from society is not as strong as George’s. Rather, he is a “conciliatory outsider, too self-infatuated to be truly angry with the others” (Adorno, 1997, p. 202). Instead of George’s asceticism, which Adorno (1997) cherishes,

Hofmannsthal opts for a “cosmopolitanism” and remains fascinated with the luxuries of aristocratic life (p. 194). Far from being an outsider like George, Hofmannsthal, Adorno claims, both wants to belong and to be superior to others at the same time. What compromises Hofmannsthal, Adorno seems to imply, is a personal weakness, which is also closely linked to the situation of the German intelligentsia. His sensationalism showcases his difference from George, whose circle is formed around the secret of the technique. Catering to the needs of both the “average man” with his “cultural journalism” and to more cultured audience through esotericism, Hofmannsthal exemplifies for Adorno (1997) the demise of the German intellectual right before the rise of National Socialism: “In 1914 the forces of barbarism were content with rhymes, to which Hofmannsthal, of course, also contributed. By the time of the concentration camps the scribes have learned discrete silence, rugged speech and elegiac abundance” (p. 197).

Adorno’s criticism is not only limited to Hofmannsthal. On the contrary, he also shows how George’s position turns into its opposite. With “his ascetic ideology, George is still more sensational, especially in the late works” (Adorno, 1997, p. 196). This is made explicit especially in the discussion of the two poets about prestige and their “rights over the work” (Adorno, 1997, p. 210). When George accuses Hofmannsthal for not giving him credit for his use of the word ‘infante’ and writes that “the masses could misunderstand”, these petty concerns reveal to what extent mundane issues occupy George’s mind and compromise his asceticism (Adorno, 1997, p. 210). This is where the logic of the market enters the relationship between George and Hofmannsthal. Lyric poetry itself can be defined by its detachment from culture industry and its autonomy, but the situation of its creators is more complicated. It is not possible to attribute the same kind of detachment to them.

Earlier I had suggested that Adorno was implying a causal relationship between the detachment of the author and the detachment of the work when he was praising George and Hofmannsthal against naturalists. But then, in *Ästhetische Theorie*, this detachment was derived not from the isolation of the poets, but from the status of the artwork itself. This difference between the work and the poet is already implicit in the earlier essay, in which Adorno suggests that both George and Hofmannsthal are contaminated by the logic of the market. Even if his works are not only commodities ‘through and through’, George himself behaves like a producer in the culture industry:

George opposes the market as a phenomenon without touching its underlying conditions. He would like to emancipate poetry from the demands of the public, yet at the same time he remains within a social framework which he will later mythologize with words like ‘league’ and ‘hero’ and ‘deed’. To place oneself above ‘regard for the mass of readers’ means, for George, to transform the mass of readers

into a mass of coerced consumers through a technique of domination closely allied to artistic technique. Hence his ambivalent attitude to-wards success. . . . His scorn of success applies solely to the market mechanism which sub-jects the competing parties to reverses. He strives for success while avoiding the market. The grandeur that proudly led him not to seek success is that of the literary tycoon, as which George previously saw himself and the model of which he could have easily taken from the German economy of the time. (Adorno, 1997, pp. 210-211)

George's elitism and detachment from others also separates him from his readers which Adorno likens to the separation between the producer of mass commodities and the consumer. His separation from the market only means that he wants to monopolize the mass production and distribution of his goods. Like Hofmannsthal, whose fear is not "the actual danger of lowering himself to the level of the commercial public, but rather of ruining his chances with it," George in fact takes the public into account more than he would like to admit (Adorno, 1997, p. 212). The difference between George and Hofmannsthal turns into a question of which circles they prefer. Hofmannsthal, who is critical of the "spurious quality of the collective held together by command" in George's circle, does not want to become a member of George's 'company'. What becomes clear in this professional competition in the market is the sad condition of the two poets who are defeated by the logic of the market. Both are "threatened by the existing order" (Adorno, 1997, p. 214). Despite the fact that Adorno praises art's power to resist commodification and the logic of capitalism, the same is not true of the artists. In a culture of injustice, they cannot isolate themselves easily.

In these socio-historical analyses, Adorno focuses on the two poets' circles and their ideologies, which he distinguishes from the suffering of the solitary man and his rebellious detachment. The notion 'bearing', which at first signifies such a detachment and refusal to communicate in George, is "compromised by the epithet 'elegance', meant to define that distance positively" (Adorno, 1997, p. 192). In contrast to bearing, elegance separates a person from society not as an outsider, but as a superior above the masses. This, in turn, makes it possible for the poets to form an 'aristocratic community' and compromises the solitariness and refusal of the artist to communicate: "Monads which are repelled from one another by their material interests can still attract each other through the gesture of being blasé. The necessity of estrangement is twisted into the virtue of self-sufficiency. Hence, all are united in the praise of bearing" (Adorno, 1997, p. 192).⁸ While bearing

⁸ Jameson (1990) writes that this "doctrine of the monad" helps Adorno to "think about something every part of which is social but which itself is somehow not social" (p. 186).

in art signifies a desperate attempt to hold on to oneself while inevitably disintegrating, the bearing that is collectivized in a certain group resembles a collective ideology, thereby showing us that the later appropriation of George's themes by the far right is already nascent in the integration of George to the logic of the market.

The emphasis on "elegance" helps George to form an exclusive group, but it does not necessarily mean total isolation from the outside. The people from whom George distinguishes himself with his emphasis on elegance and (aesthetic) 'understanding' in his letters to Hofmannsthal are still expected to buy his books by paying more, while the ones closer to the circle only need to sub-scribe. This economic consideration, which quite consciously reduces George and his circle to a group of marketing professionals and their readers to consumers, shows to what extent George was already integrated into the system. Adorno (1997) claims that is what compromises George's work and person. This emphasis on economic considerations explains why Adorno selects this correspondence between the two poets for his analysis and shows the difference in method between this essay and his work on lyric poetry. It reveals that the 'conversation' between these two poets inevitably becomes integrated in the language of business. If art is defined by its detachment and its monad-like isolation through which it communicates with other works without actually communicating, any attempt to use mundane language compromises it and reveals the economic, capitalistic considerations, just like the communication between the members of George circle becomes possible only through the terminology of elegance and nobility. The very communication between the two poets, I would argue, is exactly what compromises George and Hofmannsthal's aesthetics according to Adorno. Only through hermetic refusal to communicate can the poet rescue himself.

6. CONCLUSION

Adorno's praise of the symbolists at the end of his essay does not capture the mundane element in symbolism. Adorno 'rescues' George and Hofmannsthal by underlining their detachment at the end, which later makes its way to his *Ästhetische Theorie* in which Adorno formulates his theory of the artwork. But this approach, which ignores the real poets in their human relationship and professional aspirations, leaves out the analysis of the historical circumstances in which both the artist and the artwork are compromised and absorbed partially by society. To explain this integration into the market Adorno instead resorts to his methods of analyzing the culture industry and focuses on the organizations and actions of individuals in the market.

As I have pointed out at the beginning of this article, neither the theoretical argument at the end of Adorno's essay on George and Hofmannsthal, nor its later generalization in *Ästhetische Theorie* can capture the historical analysis of George and Hofmannsthal's integration into culture industry that Adorno analyzes throughout the earlier parts of the essay. The

philosopher, who reveals the truth of the work, cannot ‘communicate’ to us all the aspects in a general framework. The parts where Adorno deals with the ways the two poets fall prey to the market cannot communicate with the parts where he emphasizes the detachment and rebellion of their works. What later gives rise to the unbridgeable dichotomy between the culture industry on the one hand and the authentic artwork on the other hand is already implicit in this essay with its two different perspectives, namely, the perspective of the sociologist who looks at the work in its relation to the culture industry, and that of the philosopher who focuses on the work’s enigma. Adorno’s essay itself, then, strives to a unity, but reveals the impossibility of bringing together the two elements.

The incongruity of the artwork’s enigma and its commodification are reflected in Adorno’s diction as well. When Adorno (1997) writes that “[i]n George’s mouth the word ‘gentleman’ looks like a murderer” the English word ‘Gentleman’ also stands out in Adorno’s exquisite German like a ‘murderer’ (p. 198). Adorno employs this strategy throughout his essay and the reader is constantly reminded of the irreconcilable duality of enigma and commodification whenever Adorno (1977) mixes German and English when he refers to the social position of the poets with words like “Outsidertum” (p. 210). By its very complexity, Adorno’s essay becomes an example of the fragmentariness that he attributes to artworks and a powerful reminder of the proximity of art and philosophy in Adorno’s oeuvre.

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