

Art and Reconciliation: Adorno's Dispute with Hegel*

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*“Unversöhnlichem Denken ist die Hoffnung
auf Versöhnung gesellt.”*

T. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*

Adorno's attitude towards Hegel is notoriously complex. On Adorno's reading, Hegel is to be seen as *the* philosopher of totalizing closure. But it was Adorno who also extended the radical and provocative invitation for reflection upon “what the present means in the face of Hegel” (Adorno 1993: 1). So Hegel turns out at once a figure that masks the contradictions of ‘the present’ with his ideological idealism, *and* a figure that this same present must justify itself against.

Here I will not be setting myself the ambitious task of unravelling this double diagnosis regarding the historical relevance of Hegel's thought. The very diagnosis goes beyond questions of historical relevance and points to the deep and comprehensive appropriation of Hegel's thought in Adorno's project. The goal of the present article is to delineate some structures from Adorno's intensive polemic with Hegel so as to highlight them not just as any old part of Adorno's theoretical interests, but rather as constitutive moments of his thought. At the same time, the delineation of the Adorno-Hegel dialectics will, I hope, also throw light upon tensions at the heart of the unfinished and – as Adorno's texts convincingly suggest – unfinishable project of what we call ‘modernity’.

The official version of Adorno's attitude towards Hegel is contained in the idea of a negative dialectics.¹ Hegel's inalienable

* The article was first published in Bulgarian in the journal *Kritika i humanizam* [*Critique and Humanism*], vol. 4/2010. I thank Stilian Yotov, Deyan Deyanov and Raycho Pozharliev for their comments and questions, as well as other participants in the conference *Critical Theory and the Short 20th Century*, Plovdiv, 2010, at which an initial version of this paper was first presented.

merit, so Adorno, is the articulation of the nature of thinking as directed at the immanent contradiction within its object, i.e. the articulation of thinking as dialectics, a critique of everything positive as essentially finite, problematically conditioned, untrue. However, goes on Adorno, Hegel made the fatal mistake of supposing that the movement of dialectics can terminate in a completed and thus static result, in which it would have achieved a complete unification and totality of mediations, thus redeeming finitude. And with this Hegel became for him an accomplice – even a key accomplice – in the ideological justification of the positive. After the ‘non-identity’ of dialectics, Hegel wants to work out an ‘absolute identity’ in the hope of assimilating the differences, the dualities, even the ruptures that were so sharply brought to the foreground of his very own dialectics.

Of course, this official version is only a part of the picture. Stylizing Adorno as a ‘philosopher of non-identity’ and Hegel as a ‘philosopher of identity’ would not only be inadequate regarding the two authors, but would also not be in accord with Adorno’s own interpretation. In the background – behind the head on collision of ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ dialectics – strong lines of continuity hold sway. For it can be shown the Adorno draws impetus for his thinking from the idea of complex articulations between identity and nonidentity just as developed by Hegel. In his Jena period, Hegel had already formulated in all its acuteness the problem of *dichotomy* in modernity and the resulting need for *reconciliation* – a problem taken up by Marx and then adopted by critical theory as a pivotal issue. What is more, the early Hegel was also fully aware that no real unity can be achieved without preserving difference. He had arguments to show that subsumption under general rules or a mystical intuition of the absolute not only are philosophically unsound, but also unwittingly preserve the very oppositions they were supposed to eliminate.

Hegel knew well the dangers of mere identity and false reconciliation, and Adorno is well aware of that fact. That is why, for a detailed and adequate understanding of Adorno’s critique of

¹ For a nutshell formulation, see Adorno 1973, 141–2.

Hegel, of prime importance becomes the issue of in just what respect a disagreement arises between them regarding the articulation of the interplay between identity and nonidentity.² In the first part of this article, I will explore the issue of reconciliation between ‘identical’ and ‘non-identical’ as developed by the Jena Hegel and taken up by Adorno in his *Negative Dialectics*.

Adorno’s dispute with Hegel regarding the outlook for reconciliation can be seen to receive a concentrated expression in the tension between the ways each one of them interprets the philosophical significance of the aesthetic. It is this topic that I will take up in the second part of the article. Adorno recognizes in aesthetic experience a strong potential for opposition to the trends of totalization and subjection, even to the point of suggesting the aesthetic might be the only place whence true reconciliation can arise. This position is all the more interesting in view of the fact that the consistent desire to refute some earlier versions of it was strong driving force in Hegel’s thought.

1. Identity, nonidentity, modernity

The formation of Hegel’s philosophy is clearly marked by the conscious confrontation with a problem situation that mobilized the intellectual efforts of quite a few German intellectuals in the late 18th and the early 19th century. Many felt they had to think through and give solution to a relatively general but still sharply painful problem which has been subsequently identified as central to modernity as such and which can be variously formulated as the problem of alienation, of the loss of immediate meaningfulness, of the separation of value spheres, of the erosion of the bonds between particular and universal, of the nonviolent actualization of freedom.³ In this light, the system-building projects on which some of those thinkers embarked are due

² In this sense, this article will only be preparatory to the critical discussion of Adorno’s verdict that the “truth in the untruth” in Hegel’s totalizing philosophy receives a twisted and grim confirmation in the totalized actuality of the contemporary western world.

³ It can appear that I am here heaping many different problems into one. But reading those thinkers one sees that they thought that those problems have a common root, or are at least intimately interrelated.

to be viewed not so much as last powerful efforts of totalizing reason, but rather as aspirations towards what Dieter Henrich has called *Vereinigungsphilosophie*.⁴

I will not discuss here the issue of alienation sharply articulated by Hegel in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* in a way so influential for Marx and critical theory. Instead, I will go a little back in time to the more general problem pinpointed in Hegel's Jena writings under the rubric of "dichotomy", *Entzweiung*, with the German word having the richer meaning of not only twofold logical division, but also of a splitting into two of an original unity. This idea motivated the development of Hegel's Jena notion of speculation and therefore of the very task of philosophy as such, a notion that remained alive in Hegel's later systematic works.

The speculative dialectic of *Entzweiung* also presents us with a starting point from which to think over Adorno's critique. For the central place of '(non)-identity' jargon in the *Negative Dialectics* is an obvious nod towards the so-called 'philosophy of identity' launched by Schelling and Hegel in the first years of the 19th century. The significance of this parlance can be put in light of an understanding of the nature of dichotomy:

As culture [*Bildung*] grows and spreads, and the development of those outward expressions of life into which dichotomy can entwine itself becomes more manifold, the power of dichotomy becomes greater ... and the strivings of life to give birth once more to its harmony become more meaningless, more alien to the cultural whole. (Hegel 1977: 92)...
Dichotomy is the source of the *need of philosophy*; and as a culture of the era – the unfree and given aspect of the whole configuration. (Hegel 1977: 89)

These words by Hegel from his 1801 text on *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy* articulate a concern that can also be easily recognized in Adorno.⁵ The historical

⁴ Henrich 1971: 12 *ff.*

⁵ That there are strong ties between the issues tackled in Hegel's Jena works and not only to problem of modernity, but the interests of critical theory has been convincingly shown by Habermas 1987, who even quotes similar passages of Hegel. However, Habermas deals with Hegel's mature philosophy much more

situation itself is shaped by a division that not only takes away unity, but also confronts us with something alien, merely ‘given’ (or ‘positive’) and it thus engenders unfreedom. What is more, the condition is one that is ever increasingly dichotomized, to the point that the very striving for unity becomes pointless, or even worse, loses meaning.

Of course the main goal of Hegel’s project is to convincingly show that the unity that would satisfy the so defined “need of philosophy” still remains possible. At the same time, his position is articulated in a dispute with the proposals for solution given by thinkers such as Kant, Jacobi, Fichte, the romantics – and Schelling – whom all he to a great extent interprets as working in the same problem context of a dichotomizing modernity. The reasons Hegel finds their attempts unsatisfactory are of interest here, as they are in consonance with structures of thought that lie at the heart of Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics*.

Without analyzing thoroughly Hegel’s critique against the so-called “philosophy of reflection” (Kant’s, Jacobi and Fichte’s, see the 1802 *Faith and Knowledge*), I will note that, within its context, the notion of *opposition* acquires a leading role, and as a consequence it attains key significance for Hegel’s mature logic and its heirs. For instance, Hegel’s idea of speculation was designed, among other things, in order to counter the view of thinking as subsumption of objects under concepts external to them. This view of thinking, says Hegel, is based on the presupposition of an opposition between concept and object. Thus opposition – between concept and intuition, universal and particular, etc. – becomes a fundamental leitmotif of Hegel’s well-known critique of Kant. The fact that such opposition is for Hegel not just theoretically or systematically unsatisfactory, but also results in *subjection* (here, of the particular under the universal) and therefore in so-called *unfreedom*, is made vivid in the umbrella expression of Hegel’s critique against Kant’s practical philosophy and against Fichte’s thought as a whole. In them “the union is forcible. The one subjugates the other [here, the Absolute and its appearance].

easily, one-sidedly and dismissively than Adorno (but consistently with one of the lines of Adorno’s critique against Hegel). See also the reconstruction in Bernstein (2004), 23–9, which refers to the section of the Enlightenment in the *Phenomenology*, as well as to some pre-Jena topics in Hegel.

The one rules, the other is subservient. The unity is forced, and forced into a mere relative identity” (Hegel 1977: 115).⁶

What is more, the general direction of Hegel’s arguments is quite similar to Adorno’s own argumentation against positive dialectics: philosophers of reflection absolutize thinking, subjectivity and freedom, they remain on the position of “empty identity” (a Hegelian phrase), and thus they cannot assimilate in any way what is non-subjective, except by either rejecting it or subjecting it. That is why it is not surprising that this Hegelian figure is present in more than just one or two passages in *Dialectics of the Enlightenment* and *Negative Dialectics*. At this level of analysis, we can safely say that Hegel and Adorno share one and the same goal. Not just union, but *reconciliation*.

Of course, this goal was also shared by Hegel’s close friend and collaborator Schelling, as well as by the early romantics, who were among the first to formulate a critique along the above lines (targeting chiefly Fichte’s idealism). But Schelling and the romantics expected that the solution would be found, one way or another, in the domain of *the aesthetic*. According to this view, the intuition of beauty gives us the reality of the unity we are looking for – the unification of that which is otherwise in opposition.⁷ And, in spite of the quite divergent notions of the nature of the aesthetic developed by those romantic thinkers, on one hand, and Adorno, on the other, it is important that Adorno too makes a similar aesthetic move – something to which I will come back further on.

From the Jena period onward, Hegel does not put too much hope on the intuition of beauty. According to him, the aesthetic

⁶ Regarding Kant, see the relevant section from *Faith and Knowledge*, 1802. Regarding Fichte, see also Hegel 1977: 132ff., including the critique of Fichte’s notion of nature. Regarding the aesthetic, Hegel writes, among other things: „in the aesthetic sense precisely all determination according to concepts is to so thoroughly suspended that all this business of the intellect with domination and determination ... is ugly and hateful [*häßlich und zu hassen*]” (*ibid.* 154). In the text on the *Difference* Hegel uses the language of “subordination/ subjugation/ domination”, while in *Faith and Knowledge* he often prefers just to talk of “opposition”.

⁷ A thesis, interestingly, retained in Hegel’s own late *Lectures on Aesthetics* – but with crucial qualifications.

idealists tried to construct an identity too monolithic and thus unsatisfactory for the characteristically modern need for a strongly differentiated unification. In his Jena works Hegel freely uses the well-established current jargon of “intuition of the absolute”, “intellectual intuition”, etc., but what is characteristic in those texts is precisely the development of the general features of an entirely discursive conception of unification – a direct predecessor of the mature Hegelian notion of speculation.

The key here is the dual significance of what Hegel calls “reflection”. On the one hand, reflection is precisely the type of thinking that separates, abstracts and hypostatizes what has been separated – the type of thinking that leads to dichotomy. On the other hand, reflection is further capable of a higher action – it can “make itself its own object”, realize the finite and conditioned nature of the oppositions it has produced, and in this way destroy itself (Hegel 1977: 95–7). In that procedure it does not just disappear or become something else: for Hegel suggests that reason is reflection which has comprehended itself. Here the initially separated and, at first sight, absolutely opposed moments are united – not by something suspended from above, but that itself which separates them. In this sense they are also preserved. Reflection “nullifies both of the opposed realms by uniting them; for they only are in virtue of their not being united” (Hegel 1977: 96).

This forerunner of the Hegelian notion of sublation receives here the formula of the notorious phrase crucial for Adorno’s critique of Hegel: “identity of identity and non-identity” (Hegel 1977: 156). At first sight Adorno should not be having a problem with this formula, given its meaning in the context in which it appears. Hegel not only opposes the “philosophers of reflection” who try to elevate the self-determination of the subject, reason and so on at the expense of “its other”, he also (at least implicitly) expresses disagreement with the aesthetic idealists, including Schelling, who in a work published the same year wrote about “identity of identity”.⁸ Hegel, on his part, tells us:

⁸ This is the so-called *Presentation of My System of Philosophy* (1801). In the works of the next year – *Further Presentations from the System of Philosophy*

The claims of separation must be admitted just as much as those of identity. When identity and separation are placed in opposition to each other, both are absolute, and if one aims to maintain identity through the nullification of the dichotomy, identity and dichotomy remain opposed to each other. (Hegel 1977: 156)

Support for simple, undifferentiated identity is as abstract (and as much a result of opposition) as support for any of the opposition-creating standpoints of ordinary reflection. In this Hegel and Adorno are again unanimous.

Hegel's mature philosophy is to a great extent devoted to the development of these directions of thinking. A quick review of the preface to *Phenomenology* and the passages on reflection in the two *Logics* is enough to convince us of that. In summary: the problem of reconciliation as defined in Hegel, together with his criteria for acceptability of its solution – including the peculiar relation between 'identity' and 'nonidentity' – remain valid for Adorno.

2. Art between totality and rupture

If this is so, then we should attempt to answer the question why Hegel's full-fledged solution turns out to be so radically unacceptable to Adorno. A possible answer could be to say that the above reading of the formation of Hegel's philosophical project is one-sided. For in the same *Differenzschrift* Hegel seems to presuppose and tirelessly repeats the conviction that philosophy's goal is to achieve "the absolute" or "totality" – a goal to which Adorno is vehemently opposed. To what extent is Hegel's agenda not really exhausted with the carrying out of reflection consciously turned back upon itself, or of dialectics grasped as speculation?

Adorno's dispute with Hegel regarding the significance of the aesthetic domain brings together important lines of the present issue and thus gives us a convenient focal point for finding an answer.

and *Bruno* Schelling tries – with varying success – to apply some version of the Hegelian formulation. As a starting point for the often small but crucial differences of positions between Schelling and Hegel in Jena, see the important article Düsing 1969.

First, as we saw, Hegel's stepping back from aesthetic idealism goes hand in hand with his articulation of key dialectical positions, which were then adopted by Adorno. Second, in spite of that, it is precisely in art that Adorno sees a possibility for breaking away from the totalizing philosophical tradition. Third, Hegel's mature notion of art – which is a natural continuation of abandoning aesthetic idealism – is for Adorno one of the most eloquent examples of the deep 'untruth' of Hegel's philosophy, of its being an essentially totalizing enterprise.

In the *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno makes the following intriguing analogy: by postulating a logical limit to art, "in his *Aesthetics* [Hegel] broke off the dialectic just as he did in the political thought of the *Philosophy of Right*" (Adorno 1997: 267).⁹ In Adorno's reading, although in the political order argued for by Hegel some degree of unfreedom is preserved, Hegel seems to imply that at the end of the day it is justified by a certain higher principle of ethical life. And for Adorno this higher principle is not as immanent as Hegel would like to have it. Those remarks are in accordance with a well known diagnosis of Hegel's project borrowed from Marx: Hegelian logic (including the thought structures sketched in the previous section) is far more dialectical than Hegel's philosophy of spirit, where the latent static, ideologizing and subjugating elements in Hegel's thought come to the forefront. And the latter also includes Hegel's project in aesthetics (Adorno 1997: 343, 355–6; cf. 76–7, 91). Thus in the *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno immanently employs Hegel's formula of "identity of identity and non-identity" as saying something crucial about the inner workings of art (Adorno 1997: 110, 146, 176), only to note time and again that unfortunately Hegel did not remain true to his own insight and ended up placing his theoretical stakes on simple identity. Seen as a whole, the *Aesthetic Theory* consistently and eloquently articulates this characteristically ambiguous attitude of Adorno towards Hegel: as at once a penetrating dialectician and an ideological dogmatist.¹⁰

⁹ A similar diagnosis is also to be found throughout the *Negative Dialectics*.

¹⁰ That is why alongside the accusations of totalizing, Adorno can claim: "If anywhere, then it is in aesthetics that Hegel's formulation of the movement of the concept has its locus." (Adorno 1997: 181, cf. 351; see also 32).

Unfortunately, though, things again are not all that simple. Because if in the *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno gives credit to Hegel's "identity of identity and non-identity" position, then when we take heed of the arguments in the *Negative Dialectics*, the very place of identity in this structure seems to be highly suspect (e.g. Adorno 1973: 7–8). And after all, identity, however nuanced, plays the leading role in Hegel's thought figure. This would be a weaker sense in which Hegel is a philosopher of identity, an aspect that might still be troubling Adorno. But in addition to that, he hints too often, maybe paradoxically, that the dialectical and ideological moments are not accidentally linked in Hegel, but rather go hand in hand (e.g. Adorno 1993: 5–7, 12–3, 31–2, 82–3; Adorno 1973: 141–3, 157–8). It appears that for Adorno, Hegel's favoring of 'identity' is not just an inconsistency. It is as if the very claim for a dynamic and non-subordinating connection of what is different inevitably leads to the (inadvertent) subjugation of the 'non-identical'.

This line of argument however is made possible due to a certain ambiguity in the notion of the non-identical. In Adorno, it mostly means what is different *from* the subject. But in his polemic against Hegel, the notion also retains its function to mean the supposed difference *within* the subject. Thus Adorno's arguments point towards a dialectic within reconciliation, which, however, also puts into question the solution offered by Adorno himself.

The problem of Hegel's aesthetics which worries Adorno most acutely can be found in the properly understood thesis about the so-called 'end of art'. This actually quite broad thesis is not only historical, but also integrates into itself Hegel's view of the subordinate position of the aesthetic in the more general context of the so-called 'absolute spirit', as well as his interpretation of the immanent structure of the aesthetic itself. As is well known, Hegel frames his thesis of the 'end of art' in modernity as a negative answer to the question whether art can still "fill our highest need" (Hegel 1975: 9–11). Which is why Adorno's struggle with Hegel's thesis is not only a struggle for achieving a notion of art adequate to art itself, but is also a struggle concerning just what is the shape of an adequate, non-subjugating reconciliation that it is for us worth to continue hoping for.

For Adorno, Hegel's end-of-art thesis means abandoning the untamable dialectics in art in favor of postulating false reconciliations. I will point out two such reconciliations of great significance. On the one hand, says Adorno, Hegel idealizes art forms that are alleged to be "classical" and thus lays down an unjustifiedly narrow criterion for what can be adequately ascribed to the notion of art (*e.g.* Adorno 1997: 266–7, 333; also 76). On the other, he also presupposes an extra-aesthetic measure, a higher identity that is the ultimate justification of the aesthetic and thus, of course, imposes on it limits which turn out to inflict violence (Adorno 1997: 91, 352–3). Those two observations open up the possibility for an all too easy, well known and not always convincing critique of Hegel. What is more interesting however is that, according to Adorno, these two lines of thought are interrelated. The postulation of an ideal according to which perfection in art is the achievement of a complete, non-conflictual "interpenetration" of oppositions, completely transparent, devoid of any interruptions – all of that is just an application of the idea of total mediation, of the philosophical system's closure.¹¹ The "static definition of the beautiful as the sensual appearance of the idea" (Adorno 1997: 51) that marks Hegel's alleged classicism goes hand in hand with the postulation of the "meta-aesthetical identity of subject and object in the whole" (Adorno 1997: 352). Complete identity in absolute knowledge corresponds to complete identity of idea and image in classical art. According to Adorno, Hegel "subordinates [subjective] spirit to a classicism that is external to and incompatible with it, perhaps out of fear of a dialectic that even in the face of the idea of beauty would not come to a halt" (Adorno 1997: 76). In other words, modern consciousness needs a dynamic reconciliation different from the remembrance of some long gone alleged ideal, in comparison with which "nothing can be or become more beautiful" (Hegel 1975: 517).

¹¹ For Adorno it is precisely the Kantian ruptures that define the essential merits of Kant's aesthetics and even its advantage to Hegel's; see Adorno 1997: 91, 139 *ff.*, 343, 354–5. *Cf.* the more general observation on the "Kant or Hegel?" dilemma, Adorno 1993: 86 – "The debate between Kant and Hegel, in which Hegel's devastating argument had the last word, is not over; perhaps because what was decisive, the superior power of logical stringency, is untrue in the face of the Kantian discontinuities."

The story is however far from being complete. Because it is precisely the rejection of classical beauty's direct relevance of for the modern world that motivated Hegel's thesis that art had transformed itself into a radically new form. In the so-called "romantic art", it is precisely the needs of subjective spirit for a deeper consciousness of itself that leave classical reconciliation behind. We should recall Hegel's well known formula, according to which although the classical is aesthetically perfect, then the romantic is still philosophically more significant and richer. So much more that Hegel thinks the latter in such a way as to explicitly correspond to the characteristically modern need to interpret the possibilities for reconciliation in a situation in which reconciliation is always problematic. In this new understanding of the aesthetic, it cannot and ought not to be fully transparent and harmonious – art is now "infected by the loud voice of reflection" (Hegel 1975: 11), and "the separation of idea and shape" enters in full force (Hegel 1995: 79–81). The very idea of 'truth' now includes in itself the radically problematic nature of any representation of it in an image (Hegel 1975: 9–10). In this way Hegel tries to give due to the 'nonidentity' so characteristic of modernity. His aesthetics is explicitly designed to respond to the needs of modern reason, which created an "amphibian" human being made of contradictions (Hegel 1975: 52–5). The transparency and perfection of classical art, with its excessive lack of difference, cannot respond anymore to our ethical self-understanding.¹² Thus, in one decisive sense, Hegel's treatment is consonant with Adorno's, in which dissonance, discontinuity and constant putting into question all play a key role in modern art.¹³ In accordance with Adorno, Hegel would recognize something

¹² It is precisely the notion of the absence of an adequate differentiation which allows Hegel to claim that in the classical artform, however finely articulated it is, there still remains something "immediate" (Hegel 1975:503–5). Thus Hegel speaks of "the simple solid totality of the ideal" (518); *cf.* Hegel 2004: 436–8 on the aesthetic implications of the comparatively undifferentiated ancient ethical life.

¹³ Some have argued that by showing the limitations of the classical, Hegel gives an opportunity for philosophical interpretation of the radical turn which took place in contemporary art, 'abstract' or 'modernist'. See Pippin 2002: 2–7, 19–24; Henrich 2003: 65–8, 82 *ff.*, 130 *ff.*, 161–2.

dogmatic in the classical form of art. Division is manifestly present within absolute spirit.

Yet a still outstanding issue is the significance of the levels of ‘absolute spirit’ that go beyond romantic art. Here I once more leave aside the question whether they are an immanent development, or are rather an external determination, as Adorno would have it.¹⁴ The more interesting question which Adorno’s analysis raises is whether the claim of ‘something higher’, i.e. of a more comprehensive, more complete reconciliation than the fragmented unities of modern art, is a claim to false reconciliation. Here comes into play a line of Adorno’s thought deriving chiefly from *Negative Dialectics*. Even if it is not some external ideal, absolute spirit still means the self-closure of subjectivity in itself which leads to ideology, resignation – as well as to the impossibility of allowing what is not identical to the subjective. Thus in the end it means allowing subjugation to hold sway. According to Adorno, this move is what occurs in the transition to romantic art in Hegel’s aesthetics, too. The preservation of difference, of the ‘non-identical’, within modern subjectivity takes place at the expense of subjectivity’s sensitivity to the non-identical outside it. That is why Adorno can accuse Hegel that he “became caught up in the philosophy of reflection against which he struggled” (Adorno 1997: 356).

However, the structure of such sensitivity, as is desired by Adorno, leads in its turn to contradiction. As a matter of fact Hegel himself articulated a structure for such sensitivity, but for him it seems to correspond rather to the older, pre-modern forms of reconciliation. I am referring to Hegel’s interpretation of the beautiful as a relation to nature (the external, the other), in which nature, on the one hand, is made spiritual without violence, and, on the other, it is so to speak let be what it is. Thus for instance Hegel writes:

¹⁴ Adorno inherited his understanding of “absolute spirit” from an established interpretation from the second half of the 19th century. Even though this cannot be done here, a much more fruitful path would be to take Hegel’s clear remarks from the end of *Phenomenology* and the sections about the “absolute idea” in the two *Logics*, according to which “the absolute” is not something “behind”, “above” or “beyond” the moments of the system, but is just the explicit grasp of the union achieved in the previous stages.

The aesthetic judgement lets the external existent subsist free and independent, and it proceeds from a pleasure to which the object on its own account corresponds, in that the pleasure permits the object to have its end in itself. (Hegel 1975: 58, *cf.*60)

Thus the contemplation of beauty is of a liberal kind; it leaves objects alone as being inherently free and infinite; there is no wish to possess them or take advantage of them as useful for fulfilling finite needs and intentions. So the object, as beautiful, appears neither as forced and compelled by us, nor fought and overcome by other external things. (Hegel1975: 114)

It is striking to note to what great extent this moment of the Hegelian notion of the beautiful corresponds to Adorno's sentiments against the subjugation of nature that drive so much of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer & Adorno 1999: *e.g.* 17 *ff.*, 31–62, 209–10), as well as to the possible non-subjugating ways to relate identity and non-identity suggested in *Negative Dialectics* (*e.g.* Adorno 1973: 6; also 142–3, 191). Here we can also recall Adorno's declared, but yet left undeveloped sympathy with Schelling (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002: 13–5; Adorno 1997: 344), as well as his characteristic vindication of natural beauty directed against Hegel (Adorno 1997: 71 *ff.*). This is however no path on which Adorno can tread safely – precisely because since he wishes to uphold this aspect of the Hegelian judgment of modernity which in the end denies the possibility of direct reconciliation of the kind that the path promises.¹⁵ What is more, for Adorno this judgment is part of the most precious legacy left by Hegel (Adorno 1993: 8–10, 32 *ff.*). In this sense, certain aspects of Adorno's aesthetic move are open, from Hegelian positions, to the charge of ideologization in just the same way as the old aesthetic idealism was criticized by Hegel for postulating a false unity.¹⁶

¹⁵ Thus Adorno tirelessly criticizes then current projects in philosophy – paradigmatic among them of course being Heidegger's – which allege a return to an alleged primordial unity.

¹⁶ Thus among German critical theorists there is a line of reading Adorno criticizing him as far as it recognizes in him the hidden acceptance of some relatively unproblematic reconciliation with nature in the aesthetic: see Habermas 1987, Honneth 1991: 65 *ff.*, and, more sharply, Bubner 1997, who makes the valuable suggestion to examine Adorno's aesthetics in its connection to Schelling, 157–8.

Adorno is of course perfectly aware of this situation and consistently strives to disentangle himself from it, intensifying the Hegelian thought figure of the ubiquity of division and the deeply questionable character of all reconciliation. What is present at hand is not just opposition: the expanding attempts for integration of the non-identical into subjectivity only enhance the opposition with the non-identical. This drives Adorno to the other extreme – it drives him in the direction of a position which in antithesis to Hegel could be formulated as “nonidentity of identity and nonidentity” (e.g. Adorno 1973: 5,140ff., 157–9). From here, naturally, arises the question whether in the end Adorno’s goal is not just to criticize false forms of reconciliation, but to oppose the very idea of reconciliation in general. For, on this reading, reconciliation always bears latent within itself the danger of subjugation. All in all, a guiding thread in Adorno’s philosophy is the remorseless invasion, systematization, totalization and “societalization” of thought and society (Adorno 1993: 63–80).¹⁷ In this sense one can conclude that Adorno finds destructive the very striving for unity that drives Hegel’s thought and that of the idealists in general – a conclusion undoubtedly often confirmed by the *Negative Dialectics*.

Such interpretation, even if it has important arguments to speak for it, would nevertheless again be too one-sided. In accord with the conception of the *Negative Dialectics*, the simple “nonidentity of identity and nonidentity” would again be an opposition, again a condition of subjugation. It would be just the claim that identity and nonidentity are irreversibly, absolutely different. And so Adorno would also find himself ensnared in the ‘philosophy of reflection’. He writes that if everything coincides with the subject, then idealism refutes itself and becomes an agent of nonidentity (Adorno 1993: 69).¹⁸ But in much the same way, the excessive emphasis on nonidentity would on its turn deprive identity of meaning.

A more positive and balanced reading is proposed by Wellmer 1991, who makes a point of reading this aspect of Adorno’s thought as utopian: 7, 11–2.

¹⁷ Compare also the reconstruction in Bernstein (2004), 35–7.

¹⁸ But compare Adorno 1973: 25–6 – “What the conception of the system recalls, in reverse, is the coherence of the nonidentical, the very thing infringed by deductive systematics.”

Consequently, the painful awareness of how fragile and prone to distortion all reconciliation is doesn't mean abandoning the effort towards reconciliation (see Adorno 1973: 144 *ff.*). This line of thought is articulated and further strengthened by the overarching notion of significance of art in the *Aesthetic Theory* as a dynamic giving of right to each of the conflicting moments in a given domain. In accordance, Adorno does not criticize but rather formulates a nuanced support of Hegel's view of art as a practice of making oneself a home in what is alien.

But Adorno does this with the explicit warning that in all 'making for oneself' lies the direct danger of subjugating the other. That is why "the idea of reconciliation bars its affirmation in a concept" (Adorno 1973: 160, 145) – thus, for instance it cannot be claimed that somewhere in art a *correct* integration has been achieved.¹⁹ Art is not just an unachievable utopia – it is a utopia which should not be actualized, even if it could be (Adorno 1997: 32).

With Adorno the idea for transformation of reality inherited from Marx naturally loses much of its immediate attractiveness (despite its being retained), since all transformation of reality falls under the risk of functioning as subordinating and to achieve false reconciliations only.²⁰ Together with the actualization of every act of reconciliation there must be present the consciousness that it is only local and that complete reconciliation is unachievable. Reconciliation in a radically non-reconciled condition is only possible as consciousness of the non-reconciliation – an exceptionally Hegelian thesis. Akin to Hegel, Adorno must perform an 'absolute reflection', albeit with the opposite sign. That is why in an important sense the solution Adorno gives to the problem is a self-declared non-solution. The situation calls for a paraphrase of a fragment by Friedrich Schlegel that was already paraphrased in another way by Adorno himself: "We can only strive for

¹⁹ See Günther 1985: 251 *ff.*, and also Pippin 2005: 106, 111 *ff.* Each of them shows in a different way that despite the fact that Adorno struggles against different forms of subjugation and unfreedom, his own dialectics does not allow him to elaborate a non-contradictory notion of freedom.

²⁰ Compare the concentrated reflections on the distancing of critical theory from Marx in Bubner 1971.

reconciliation, but not achieve it: as soon as we start thinking we have achieved it, we have stopped striving for it”.

In this way, Adorno’s dispute with Hegel reveals dialectical structures in the very concept of reconciliation developed by the two philosophers. These structures are determined by the dual meaning of the notion of nonidentity, or of what must be preserved and assimilated without violence. Adorno and Hegel put differing emphases in this structure, which both of them share. If we adopt the position of the endless quest for reconciliation, we risk leaving what we are striving for (and what motivates our suspicion against all identity) undefined, empty, too akin to simple identity. If we adopt the position of the constant happening of reconciliation in an alleged process of mediation, we risk remaining insensitive to what, for one reason or another, we have not been successful in adequately integrating.

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