The "Aesthetic Dignity of Words": Adorno's Philosophy of Language

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There can be little doubt that Jürgen Habermas has decisively set the terms of the reception of Theodor W. Adorno's work. Indeed, Habermas's elaboration of critical theory as a theory of communication rests on the claim that in Max Horkheimer and Adorno critical theory reaches a fatal impasse, insofar as it represents "the exhaustion of the paradigm of the philosophy of consciousness."[1] By philosophy of consciousness Habermas means a philosophy that is grounded in the essentially monological relation between representing subject and represented object, which, having passed through post-Kantian idealism, is both canceled and preserved in what he calls the "paradigm of production." Drawing on Hannah Arendt's critique of Karl Marx, Habermas argues that within this paradigm, the human species is conceived as an undifferentiated collective subject that transforms itself in the act of transforming nature.[2] Evidence of the impasse reached by Horkheimer and Adorno is that, in having abandoned the very possibility of an expanded conception of reason, they have no other recourse than to fall back on a vague notion of mimesis—as a communicative relation between subject and object—about which, nonetheless,

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1. Jürgen Habermas, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, vol. 1 of *Theory of Communicative Action*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon, 1984), 386.

2. See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

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they are unable to give a theoretical account without self-contradiction. In the wake of the exhaustion of the philosophy of consciousness, Habermas aims to reconstitute critical theory through a pragmatic and linguistic turn, by grounding it in an account of intersubjective communication that is simultaneously immanent and transcendental. It is immanent because it is grounded in actual communicative interactions against the backdrop of the symbolically mediated lifeworld and transcendental because every speech act contains within it a context-transcending ideal speech situation.

On closer inspection, however, Habermas's claim that Adorno remains within the paradigm of consciousness philosophy is questionable.[3] Since the publication in the 1990s of Fredric Jameson's *Late Marxism* and, subsequently, Peter Uwe Hohendahl's *Prismatic Thought* and Shierry Weber Nicholsen's *Exact Imagination, Late Work*, as well as recent essays by Hermann Schweppenhäuser,[4] it has become increasingly evident that, given Adorno's nuanced reflections on the question of language, Habermas's characterization is, at best, misleading.[5] Already in the mid-1980s, Albrecht Wellmer—who, in fact, stands much closer to Habermas than do Jameson, Hohendahl, or Nicholsen—noted: "Perhaps we might speak of an implicit language philosophy or theory of rationality in Adorno. But whatever we decide to call it, I doubt whether the reformulation of Critical Theory in terms of language pragmatics is sufficient to supersede this implicit philosophy of Adorno's."[6] Such an implicit philosophy of language in Adorno—what Wellmer nicely calls "buried treasure"—does not circumvent the problem of communication but rather complicates it. Adorno's short text titled "Theses on the Language of the Philosopher" can be viewed precisely as this type of buried treasure that provides vital insight into Adorno's philosophy of language.[7] Not previously translated into English, this text from the early 1930s has received com-

3. For a critique of Habermas's philosophy of language see David Rasmussen, *Reading Habermas* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990).

4. Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno; or, The Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 1990); Peter Uwe Hohendahl, *Prismatic Thought* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995); Shierry Weber Nicholsen, *Exact Imagination, Late Work: On Adorno's Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997); Hermann Schweppenhäuser, "Dialektischer Bildbegriff und 'dialektisches Bild' in der Kritischen Theorie," *Zeitschrift für kritische Theorie* 16 (2003): 7–25.

5. It comes as little surprise, then, that Nicholsen's powerful interpretation of Adorno's account of language draws largely on his essays and literary criticism. See *Exact Imagination, Late Work*.

6. Albrecht Wellmer, "Ludwig Wittgenstein: On the Difficulties of Receiving His Philosophy and Its Relation to the Philosophy of Adorno," in *Endgames: The Irreconcilable Nature of Modernity; Essays and Lectures*, trans. David Midgley (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 259.

7. Theodor W. Adorno, "Thesen über die Sprache des Philosophen," in *Philosophische Frühschriften*, vol. 1 of *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp,

paratively little critical commentary. This is surprising, given that it shares common topoi with the other main texts contemporary with it, namely, "The Actuality of Philosophy" (1931) and "The Idea of Natural-History" (1932). At the same time, problems that continue to occupy Adorno throughout his career can be discerned in this short text: for example, the relation between the logic of exchange and communication, and a critique of representationalism or the idea that language is to be thought exclusively in terms of its ability to accurately represent reality. A significant contribution of this text is to pose a question that becomes decisive for Adorno's subsequent oeuvre, namely, the "convergence of art and knowledge." While Adorno's philosophy of language is usually discussed in connection with Walter Benjamin, whose *Trauerspiel* book was particularly influential for Adorno's thoughts on language, in this essay I shall take a slightly different path and suggest certain convergences between Adorno's understanding of language and the tradition of pragmatism.[8]

In the "Theses" Adorno issues the following statement, which may be taken as programmatic for his philosophy as a whole: "All philosophical critique is today possible as the critique of language" ("Thesen," 369). Far from confirming Habermas's thesis that Adorno represents the exhaustion of the philosophy of consciousness, this statement, naturally, undermines Habermas's reading inasmuch as it suggests that a linguistic turn of a particular kind might be, in fact, immanent to Adorno's writings. After all, Richard Rorty defines the "linguistic turn" as "the view that philosophical problems are problems that may be solved (or dissolved) either by reforming language, or by understanding more about the language we currently use."[9] But the meaning

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1997), 369; Adorno, "Theses on the Language of the Philosopher," trans. Samir Gandesha and Michael Palamarek, in *Adorno and the Need in Philosophy: New Critical Essays*, ed. Michael Palamarek et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, forthcoming). Hereafter cited as "Thesen."

8. Such a strategy does not seem quite as outlandish as it might at first when one considers the latent pragmatism in the writings of the early Marx. See Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1977). As has been indicated by others, given the fact that one of Benjamin's aims in this book was to distinguish between tragedy (*Tragödie*) and seventeenth-century "mourning play" (*Trauerspiel*), a worse rendering of the title can hardly be imagined.

9. Richard Rorty, introduction to *The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method*, ed. Richard Rorty (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 3. Interestingly, Rorty suggests that the linguistic turn embodies the tension between the pull of art and science. It is possible to argue that this is the central "force field" in Adorno's work, if we alter the terms to include the following oppositions: art and philosophy, expression and communication, particularity and universality, name and concept.

of this statement, composed by Adorno not long after his return to Frankfurt from Vienna after a brief hiatus studying music under the illustrious member of the Second Viennese School, Alban Berg, remains to be clarified.[10]

The connection with Viennese modernism might provide some insight into what Adorno means by this.[11] A parallel has been drawn, for instance, between the early Ludwig Wittgenstein and the "critical modernist" attack on ornamentation in the work of the Viennese architect Adolf Loos.[12] Adorno's own understanding of philosophy could be seen, therefore, as motivated by something like the attack in the *Tractatus* on how, just as clothes disguise the body, "language disguises the thought" that "all philosophy is critique of language" (Alle Philosophie ist Sprachkritik).[13] At the same time, Adorno's statement could be taken as aiming, in an antithetical way, at a conception of critique as a form of "*Destruktion*," not of the history of Being per se but rather as the attempt to think "conceptually beyond the concept."[14] In other

10. For an interesting, if abbreviated, discussion of the relation between Adorno and Alban Berg see Raymond Guess, *Morality, Culture, and History: Essays on German Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 116–39.

11. See Wellmer, "Ludwig Wittgenstein," which also draws attention to the connection between Wittgenstein and Adorno in a common Viennese culture.

12. See Allan Janik, *Wittgenstein's Vienna Revisited* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2001), 18–20.

13. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Peters and B. F. McGuiness (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), 63. In "The Actuality of Philosophy," for example, Adorno argues that "it would be better just to liquidate philosophy once and for all and to dissolve it into particular disciplines than to come to its aid with a poetic ideal which means nothing more than a poor ornamental cover for faulty thinking" ("The Actuality of Philosophy," *Telos*, no. 31 [1977]: 125; hereafter cited as "Actuality"). This statement provides tremendous insight into Adorno's own style. Inasmuch as it is rigorous, Adorno's style is aesthetic, and inasmuch as it is aesthetic, it is rigorous. I appreciate the differences between the early Wittgenstein and logical positivism centering on the problem of the "mystical." See also, e.g., Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (London: Cape, 1990); and Wellmer, "Ludwig Wittgenstein." Yet at the same time, Adorno, for good reason, takes the early Wittgenstein to be exemplary of logical positivism's attempt to establish a purely logical language. Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, "Why Still Philosophy?" in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 8. For the specifically modern dimensions of Adorno and Wittgenstein see Rolf Wiggershaus, *Wittgenstein und Adorno: Zwei Spielarten modernen Philosophierens* (Göttingstein: Wallstein, 2000).

14. Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Seabury, 1973). Indeed, Adorno has been viewed, with some justification, as a protodeconstructionist. See, e.g., Christoph Menke, *The Sovereignty of Art: Aesthetic Negativity in Adorno and Derrida*, trans. Neil Solomon (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998); Sabine Wilke, *Zur Dialektik von Exposition: Ansätze zu einer Kritik der Arbeiten Martin Heideggers, Theodor W. Adornos und Jacques Derridas* (New York: Lang, 1988); and Martin Jay, *Adorno* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

words, the history of philosophy is understood as a metanarrative of forgetting and, by extension, reification, insofar as philosophy has translated the "non-identical" into a static, representational relation between subject and object.[15] There is, of course, a third alternative: the one presented by the author of the *Philosophical Investigations*. In this later text, Wittgenstein argues that "philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment [*Verhexung*] of our intelligence by means of language."[16] The problems (or more precisely pseudoproblems) of philosophy arise from a search for substances, corresponding with the substantives of grammar. Here, one can identify without much difficulty a parallel between Wittgenstein's diagnosis of the pathology of philosophy as a bewitchment and Horkheimer and Adorno's thesis about the intertwining of myth and enlightenment. In what follows, I shall try to situate Adorno in relation to these three, still regnant, schools of linguistic philosophy.[17] Reading the "Theses" permits a test of Adorno's own concept of "configurative language" or "constellation"; to begin interpreting this difficult text it is necessary, as alluded to above, to situate it in relation to the other important texts from this period.

"The Idea of Natural-History"

While he took up a deeply polemical stance vis-à-vis Martin Heidegger throughout his career, Adorno seeks nonetheless to develop his own concepts and categories out of an immanent critique of Heideggerian philosophy. Such an immanent critique plays a vitally strategic role, for example, in the structure of *Negative Dialectics*, a text whose account of philosophical experience becomes a critique of "the ontological need" (das ontologische Bedürfnis) and an elaboration of models of "negative dialectics."[18] A much earlier, yet equally strategic, instance of Adorno's engagement with Heidegger emerges in his lecture "The Idea of Natural-History," delivered to the Kant Society in Frankfurt in

15. Cf. Samir Gandesha, "Leaving Home: On Adorno and Heidegger," in *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 101–28.

16. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), sec. 109.

17. The logical positivism of the early Wittgenstein is represented, for example, by W. V. Quine and his student Donald Davidson. Heidegger's conception of language has had a profound impact on approaches as different within the so-called Continental tradition as deconstruction (Derrida) and hermeneutics (Gadamer). The later Wittgenstein has, of course, influenced the neopragmatism of Rorty, the postempiricist philosophy of science of Thomas S. Kuhn, and the postmodern agonistics of Jean-François Lyotard.

18. Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, "Vorrede," in *Negative Dialektik*, vol. 6 of *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), 10.

1932. According to Rolf Tiedemann, taken together with other early writings, this lecture can be seen as an important transition from the neo-Kantian position of his teacher Hans Cornelius to materialism.[19]

In the lecture, Adorno argues that Heidegger moves beyond the antithetical construal of "time" and "being," thus overcoming "false stasis and formalism"; that is, he pushes beyond the antithesis between the Platonic essences and life.[20] This step forward is, however, at the same time, a step backward, insofar as such a destruction is purchased at the cost of the subordination of history (*Geschichte*) to historicity (*Geschichtlichkeit*) ("Idea," 114). From this, two implications follow: (1) the difference between real historical contingency and the concept of historical contingency, namely, the concept of historicity, is effaced; as a result, (2) ontology becomes tautological (115). Actual historical events become, then, indistinguishable from Heidegger's own ontology. It is possible to discern here a question that will occupy Adorno throughout his philosophical career: how is it possible to think the particular conceptually without subsuming it beneath concepts? To the two critical points mentioned above—the elision of the difference between actual contingency and the concept of contingency, and the problem of tautology—Adorno adds a third: the aspiration not just to the systematic but to a structural definition of the encompassing whole (*umfassende Ganzheit*) ultimately grounded in being's (*Daseins*) grasping its own most possibility or Being—toward-death (*Sein-zum-Tod*) (115).

Despite his far-reaching claims, Adorno insists on the determinate, as opposed to abstract, orientation of this critique. Thus Heidegger demonstrates how natural and historical elements are insuperably interwoven. Yet this insight can be fully realized only by moving away from the "possibilities of Being" (*Möglichkeiten des Seins*) toward really existing entities (*Seienden*) (117). The intention of Heidegger's approach to the tradition can be realized only inasmuch as it relinquishes the ontological understanding of temporality and moves toward considering actual history itself. Yet such actual history cannot, itself, be construed exclusively as the realm of either pure freedom or natural necessity. For the second leads to "false absolutes," while the first leads to "false spiritualism" (117).

Adorno seeks, therefore, to push the engagement with the philosophical tradition in a direction rather different than that of Heidegger. Drawing both on the early Georg Lukács's notion of "second nature" as the "charnel

19. Rolf Tiedemann, "Editorische Nachbemerkung," in Adorno, *Philosophische Frühschriften*, 381–84.

20. Theodor W. Adorno, "The Idea of Natural-History," trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Telos*, no. 59 (1984): 114. Hereafter cited as "Idea."

house of long dead interiorities"[21] and on the Benjaminian notion of "allegory," Adorno offers an alternative account of reification as the "forgetting" of what is transitory or what he will call the "nonidentical." If Lukács, in *Theory of the Novel*, understands history as composed of cultural forms or conventions, which, over time, become inert and come to be experienced as a kind of natural necessity antithetical to the will that produced them,[22] then in the baroque *Trauerspiel* Benjamin detects nature as an allegorical text in which it is possible to read the unfolding of historical events. The setting of the sun, for example, allegorizes the death of a tyrant ("Idea," 121).

Through his reading of Lukács and Benjamin, then, Adorno transforms the categorial opposition of being and time into the concept of natural-history, which enables him to adhere to Heidegger's intentions of undermining this traditional opposition, without allowing either side of the opposition to simply collapse into the other. Indeed, rather than permitting these oppositions to remain static, Adorno seeks to grasp history at its most historical as nature; at the same time, he seeks to grasp nature at its most natural as history (121).[23] The dereifying strategy of undermining the opposition between nature and history aims at releasing the "new" or transience from its reduction to either a naturalized history *or* a historicized nature—Heidegger's *Geschichtlichkeit* or Hegel's *Weltgeschichte*. Adorno's dialectical conception of natural-history is also to be distinguished from Marx's own materialist transcription of Hegel's understanding of conceptual labor. Indeed, in Marx's materialist conception of history, the "new" gets swallowed up by the idealist vestiges of Hegelian universal history that persist within it.[24]

21. Georg Lukács, *Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: MIT Press, 1971), 64.

22. Ibid.

23. As he puts it in *Negative Dialektik*, "Die herkömmliche Antithesis von Natur und Geschichte ist wahr und falsch; wahr, soweit sie ausspricht, was dem Naturmoment widerfuhr; falsch, soweit sie die Verdeckung der Naturwüchsigkeit der Geschichte durch diese selber vermöge ihrer begrifflichen Nachkonstruktion apologetisch wiederholt" (351).

24. Interestingly, when Marx uses this new materialist method to understand concrete, historical events, things become much more complex. In a way connected with his extremely important if abbreviated discussion in *The German Ideology* of how the material form of language subverts the pretensions of Hegel's account of absolute knowing, Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* evinces a profound worry that the workers movement might be condemned to repeat the political languages and idioms of revolutions that constitute a history that now "weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living." Hence Marx writes, "The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future" (*The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd ed. [New York: Norton, 1978], 597). The unmistakable connection between Marx's account of history and aesthetic modernism—in particular, Stephen Dedalus's statement that "history. . . is the nightmare from which I am trying to awake" (James Joyce, *Ulysses* [Mineola, NY: Dover, 2002], 34)—throws Adorno's defense of aesthetic autonomy into a different, perhaps more political, light.

The critical intention of the idea of natural-history aims at "the new in its newness, not as something that can be translated back into the old existing forms."[25] This problem of addressing the novelty of the new leads Adorno, as it does Arendt, to a rethinking of aesthetic judgment.[26] Adorno uses the concept of natural-history as a model in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which seeks to lay bare the entwinement of myth (or nature) and enlightenment (or history). While it might seem peculiar to read this text as a response to *Being and Time*, it is worth bearing in mind that in the preface to his *Habilitationsschrift* of 1927, "The Concept of the Unconscious in the Transcendental Theory of Mind," Adorno states that he intends enlightenment in a double sense: first as the enlightenment of "problematic concepts," and second "as Enlightenment as the goal in the comprehensive sense, which lends history to the concept: The destruction of dogmatic theories."[27]

Through his engagement with Heidegger, Adorno develops a concept of writing, as set forth in "The Essay as Form," as the dialectical configuration of Kant's concept of aesthetic reflective judgment.[28] Writing, in its mimetic tracing of an object, namely, an artwork, accomplishes two things simultaneously: it participates in the disclosure (*Erschliessung*) of the world while making rational, that is to say, conceptual, truth claims about objects in the world. The "Theses" presents an embryonic notion of writing in this sense. To put it differently, it is in writing that the force field between expression and communication is constituted. This is what Adorno in the "Theses" calls the "aesthetic dignity of words." Before a discussion of the "Theses," however, it is first necessary to examine in some detail the other major text from this period, namely, Adorno's inaugural lecture to the philosophy faculty at the University of Frankfurt, "The Actuality of Philosophy."

On the Actuality *of Philosophy*

The early lecture, "The Actuality of Philosophy," is critical to the development of Adorno's thinking as a whole. It represents his continued attempt to

25. Theodor W. Adorno, "The Essay as Form," in *Notes to Literature*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, 2 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991–92), 1:21.

26. See Samir Gandesha, "Schreiben und Urteilen: Arendt und der Chiasmus der Naturgeschichte," in *Arendt und Adorno*, ed. Dirk Auer et al. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), 199–234, rpt. as "Writing and Judging: Adorno, Arendt, and the Chiasmus of Natural History," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 30 (2004): 445–75.

27. Adorno, *Philosophische Frühschriften*, 81. My translation.

28. For Adorno, writing is quintessentially a form of aesthetic experience. That experience and judgment are complementary was recognized as early as Aristotle and then restated in the early modern period by Montaigne.

develop the insights of Benjamin's *Trauerspiel*, which Adorno subversively taught in his philosophy seminar. In this lecture Adorno presents a sketch of the recent history of German philosophy, which, as Herbert Schnädelbach has shown, from the last third of the nineteenth century had become stridently anti-Hegelian. With the rapid expansion of the forces of production in German society, guided by the firm hand of the Prussian state, and the central role played by science and technology as productive forces, philosophy yielded to the overwhelming pressure to distance itself from the grandiose claims of Hegel's speculative system, which had understood science (*Wissenschaft*) in terms of a comprehensive, totalizing grasp of the real.[29] Set against this backdrop, Adorno's lecture can be viewed as marking the terms of a philosophical program that attempts to revive a form of dialectical thinking that is materialist yet, at the same time, as suggested above, relinquishes the concept of totality inherent in Hegelian and prevailing forms of Marxian thinking.[30] In contrast to the young Lukács, who sought to synthesize Hegel and Marx,[31] Adorno's reconfigured materialist approach to philosophy takes the form of a hermeneutics that seeks to orient, but refuses to be swallowed up by, praxis. Yet what here is meant by "historical praxis"? While space does not permit an extended discussion of this concept here, Adorno's perspective can be usefully distinguished from both the Lukácsian and Althusserian conceptions of praxis. According to Lukács, as is well known, through praxis the alienation of subject and object is finally overcome as identity in the unfolding of the historical process. According to Althusser, praxis is a knowledge-producing activity that remained relatively autonomous from its social and historical conditions—the sphere of "ideology." In contrast to both, Adorno's conception of praxis is deeply indebted to "real sensuous activity," which is mediated by practical consciousness or language as in the writings of Marx.[32] Like Marx's early critique of religion, Adorno's deflation of the claims of pure philosophical

29. Herbert Schnädelbach, *Philosophy in Germany, 1831–1933*, trans. Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 12–32.

30. This is what Susan Buck-Morss calls "dialectics without identity" (*The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* [New York: Free, 1977], 43–62).

31. Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972).

32. For example, Marx argues in his critique of Feuerbach that "the question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a *practical* question. Man must prove the truth, that is, the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which is isolated from practice is a purely *scholastic* question" (*Marx-Engels Reader*, 144).

thinking—for example, phenomenology[33]—hinges on asking how philosophy comes to pose the kinds of questions that it does. For example, as we have already seen, in his critique of Heidegger, Adorno engages in a critique of the "ontological need" that itself is rooted in an analysis of the material conditions, and the suffering to which they give rise, that make possible the contemporary power of fundamental ontology. Adorno's strategy, therefore, is to resituate philosophy in relation to the logic of the very social practices that it seeks to repress and yet is haunted by.

Adorno identifies the inadequacies of recent German philosophy, from the neo-Kantianism of the Marburg and Southwest German schools, through Edmund Husserl and Max Scheler. For Adorno, the two most significant philosophical positions, however, are those of the Vienna Circle and Heidegger. Adorno's survey of recent German philosophy is not intended as a general orientation in "intellectual history"; rather, because history is not incidental to but inherent in philosophizing, Adorno argues that "only out of the historical entanglement of questions and answers does the question of philosophy's contemporary relevance [*Aktualität*] emerge" ("Actuality," 124). In other words, the question of philosophy's contemporary relevance is formulated in quintessentially Weberian terms, which is to say whether it is able to address the problem, posed most sharply by the Vienna Circle, of "the liquidation of philosophy" or its dissolution into the "separate sciences" (*Wissenschaften*).[34]

How can such a liquidation be countered? By asking about the presuppositions that govern science itself—presuppositions that it inherits from philosophy and is unable to do without. Yet philosophy itself rests not on self-posited but on historical grounds. The first presupposition has to do with the "meaning of the given itself"; this in turn poses the problem of the transcendental subject, as Kant had already shown. In contradistinction to Kant, however, this question "can only be answered historico-philosophically, because the subject of the given is not ahistorically identical and transcendental, but rather assumes changing and historically comprehensible forms" (125). The second, related, problem is one that afflicts all forms of skepticism, namely, that of the "unknown consciousness," which can be understood only in analogy to one's own experience. However, and in a way that connects up directly with the problem of the nature of the "given," as Adorno puts it, "the empirico-critical

33. See, e.g., Theodor W. Adorno, *Against Epistemology, a Metacritique: Studies in Husserl and the Phenomenological Antinomies*, trans. Willis Domingo (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982).

34. Cf. Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. H. H. Gerth and C. W. Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 129–58.

method already necessarily assumes an unknown consciousness in the language it has at its disposal" (125). The Vienna Circle wishes, therefore, to escape the historical unfolding of philosophical problems by settling accounts once and for all, not simply with particular schools of philosophy but, rather, with philosophy per se. Yet, according to Adorno, "solely by posing these problems, [it] is drawn precisely into that philosophic continuity from which it wanted to distance itself" (125). This does not, however, detract from this school's momentous significance, which lies not in having successfully carried out its program but rather in sharpening the division of labor between science and philosophy. While the guiding idea of the separate sciences is "research," that of philosophy is "interpretation"; therefore, Adorno argues, the sciences "accept their findings, at least their final and deepest findings, as indestructible and static, whereas philosophy perceives the first finding, which it lights upon as a sign that needs further unriddling" (126).

As mentioned earlier, Adorno argues that philosophy is a historically grounded interpretation as opposed to transcendental research. However, if what is historically disclosed is not the fullness but fragmentation of being, then such interpretation cannot aim at "meaning" as such. To depict reality as inherently meaningful is, at the same time, to justify a historically contingent and therefore changeable reality. In other words, the interpretation of meaning, or what Paul Ricoeur calls "recollective hermeneutics," is perpetually in danger of sliding into an ideological justification of what exists.[35] Neither is interpretation to be understood as the attempt to uncover the (meaningful) essences lying behind the (meaningless) appearances.[36] Both of the above rely on an understanding of language in terms of its "symbolic function" or an understanding of the particular as a "moment" of the universal: the part as a mediation of the whole. By contrast, the language of philosophy is allegorical in that, if configured correctly, the tiniest grain of empirical reality could disclose the whole. Adorno suggests that

> interpretation of the unintentional through juxtaposition of the analytically isolated elements and illumination of the real by the power of such interpretation is the program of every authentically materialist knowledge, a program to which the materialist procedure does all the more justice, the more it distances itself from every "meaning" of its objects and the less it

35. See Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970).

36. For the classic statement of this see Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin, 1961).

> relates itself to an implicit, quasi-religious meaning. For, long ago, interpretation divorced itself from all questions of meaning, or, in other words, the symbols of philosophy are decayed. If philosophy must learn to renounce the question of totality, then it implies that it must learn to do so without the symbolic function in which for a long time, at least in idealism, the particular appeared to represent the general. ("Actuality," 127)

Interpretation, understood as the "construction out of the small and unintentional elements," thus provides, on the one hand, an alternative to the formal and unbinding procedures of logical positivism and, on the other, the "multitude of possible and arbitrary worldview positions" (*weltanschaulicher Standpunkte*), which try to counter it. The crucial, materialist orientation of such an approach to philosophic interpretation is revealed in its relation to praxis. If philosophical problems are ultimately historical ones, then those problems will continue to persist or be transformed or indeed abolished with new, emergent forms of historical praxis. This is what Adorno means when he speaks of the answer negating the riddle itself. Hence Adorno asserts the primacy of practical reason yet, again, in a way that breaks with Kant's presupposition of the split between the noumenal as the realm of will and reason, and the phenomenal as the realm of the understanding. Rather, in a way that echoes Marx's "Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach," Adorno argues that "the interpretation of given reality and its abolition are connected to each other, not, of course, in the sense that reality is negated in the concept, but that out of the construction of a configuration of reality the demand for its [reality's] real change always follows promptly" (129). Significantly, Adorno closes "The Actuality of Philosophy" with a defense of the essay form, which represents his attempt to define a form of intellectual experience that is at once unrestricted and rigorous. In contrast, then, to both positivism and Heideggerian phenomenology, Adorno takes history, or, to be more precise, natural-history, as his starting point. This is the idea that—as with other constructs or accomplishments of the human species, elaborated and developed over long periods of historical time—language becomes, as a kind of second nature, hollowed out or drained of any inherent meaning. For signs to be meaningful, they must be wrested out of the contexts in which they are historically given, recontextualized, and deciphered. This is the philosopher's task in relation to language.

"Theses on the Language of the Philosopher"

In both "The Actuality of Philosophy" and "The Idea of Natural-History," Adorno develops the idea of natural-history to address the capacity of phi-

losophy to justify its continued existence against the apparently devastating program of logical positivism to decisively undermine the legitimacy of philosophy as such.[37] Despite its confidence, bolstered by the then recently won hegemony of natural science within culture as a whole,[38] logical positivism remains, like the sciences themselves, unable to reflect on itself and therefore to answer the question of the nature of "given" as Heidegger had already shown in *Being and Time*. Nor is it able to answer the question as to the possibility of other minds.[39]

One question must be posed at the outset about the title of this text: why does a writer who thinks so carefully about titles not call the text "Theses on the Language of *Philosophy*"?[40] It could be argued that to speak of philosophy, at least in its modern inflection, presupposes a prior understanding of its subject as transcendental, as in the Cartesian cogito or in Kant's claim that the " 'I think' must accompany each of my representations." Such a conception of philosophical language subordinates language to the logically necessary or transcendental mental states that it must transparently communicate. To speak of the language of the philosopher, however, is to speak of one who philosophizes, that is to say, one who engages in a certain sort of activity. This, in turn, implies that philosophy, as an activity, is situated socially and historically within the tissue of other practices inasmuch as the subject who poses philosophical questions is not a self-generating transcendental subject, like Johann Fichte's absolute "I," but an embodied, situated, empirical subject who nonetheless makes context-transcending claims. To put it in different terms, the "language of the philosopher" stands to the "language of philosophy" as the perspective of the "participant" stands in relation to that of the "observer."[41]

Why, also, does Adorno use "Language" in the title? Traditionally, philosophy has sought to legislate culture, in particular meaning, from a position outside and, indeed, above it. In posing the question of meaning from "the inside," however, that is, as a problem for philosophy itself, Adorno is pointing to a deep contradiction: if the philosopher employs a language continuous with that of society—that is, if philosophy is itself one form of social and

37. Cf. also Adorno, "Why Still Philosophy?" 5–18, in which Adorno addresses, again, this basic question in relation to positivism, on the one side, and Heidegger, on the other.

38. Cf. Schnädelbach, *Philosophy in Germany*.

39. As Michael Theunissen has shown, Heidegger's philosophy ultimately fails to address this problem as well (*The Other: Studies in the Social Ontology of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Buber*, trans. Christopher Macann [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984]).

40. Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, "A Title," in *Notes to Literature*, 2:299–302.

41. Cf. Wiggershaus, *Wittgenstein und Adorno*, 10.

historical praxis among others—and if language per se requires legislation or clarification to convey meaning, then philosophical language is itself in need of such legislation. Yet, to paraphrase the young Marx, who legislates the legislator? In other words, it is far from clear that the philosopher's language will be equal to the task of philosophizing understood in the traditional sense as legislation. At this stage, philosophy enters into a crisis of its own meaningfulness and intelligibility. Philosophy can rescue such intelligibility only by pursuing a strategy that it has resisted since the dialogues of Plato's middle period: rather than drawing itself upward and away from situated social practices—including and especially politics—perhaps philosophy can address this pervasive crisis of its own intelligibility only by drawing toward those practices.

Two implications can be said to follow from this. First, philosophers are unable to think thoughts that are autopoetic or self-generating because they must formulate thoughts in a language that necessarily precedes them. Or, as Adorno puts it, "That language imprisons those who speak it, that as a medium of their own it has essentially failed."[42] Philosophers, whose starting point must be freedom, therefore become entangled in a contradiction. Philosophical texts are constituted not in relation to a world of objects or facts whose essence or transcendental structure they precisely mirror but, rather, in relation to the other philosophical texts that constrain them in the form of a tradition.[43] Or, to put it somewhat differently, the world of objects or facts takes shape only through the particular tradition or "frame" constitutive of a given set of discourses. Second, the language of the philosopher is not only historically but also socially impure. That is, it is imbricated in the fractured totality of the social and thus is itself fractured. "The purity into which philosophy regressed," according to Adorno, "is the bad conscience of its impurity, its complicity with the world."[44]

An important starting point for all three approaches to the relation between philosophy and language discussed above—namely, the early Wittgenstein, the late Wittgenstein, and Heidegger—is the "everyday," the "ordinary," or what I have been calling praxis. For, prior to the linguistic turn, it was much easier for philosophers to separate themselves from the shadowy realm of appearances.[45] Once the question of language is posed as intrinsic

42. Theodor W. Adorno, "Words from Abroad," in *Notes to Literature*, 1:189. Hereafter cited as "Words."

43. Stanley Cavell calls this "inheritance" (*This New Yet Unapproachable America: Essays after Emerson after Wittgenstein* [Albuquerque, NM: Living Batch, 1994]).

44. Theodor W. Adorno, "Progress," in *Critical Models*, 148.

45. This is what for Plato was the realm of politics. Hence there is an intrinsic connection between world, language, and politics. Cf. Arendt, *Human Condition*.

rather than extrinsic to the practice of philosophy, another question is simultaneously posed: the relation to the everyday. The first position seeks to clarify the vagueness of the everyday use of language in a way that transforms it into an "ideal language" capable of providing a limpid picture of the totality of facts, or "everything that is the case," while remaining silent on all other questions including what properly constitutes "that which is the case." The second turns language away from the "fallen" or inauthentic modes of Being in the everyday, the realm of "the they" (*das Man*), toward an authentic self-disclosure understood as embodying the structure of care (*Sorge*). The third strategy seeks to dereify philosophical language by reorienting metaphysical language toward the ordinary. This approach attempts to counter the "bewitchment of our intelligence by means of our language," by decentering and situating philosophy's attempted generation of an ideal language: "One thinks that one is tracing the outline of a thing's nature over and over again, and one is merely tracing round the frame through which we look at it."[46]

As we have already seen, the chiasmatic structure of natural-history—the historicization of nature (domination) and the naturalization of history (forgetting)—reveals history as a seemingly natural process obeying lawlike regularities and nature as the realm in which new, technologically mediated forms of domination appear. Language as a dynamic, conventional, and therefore historical structure calcifies in the fixity of significations that, in fact, makes possible "progress" in the domination of nature.[47] That is, concepts are the intellectual (*geistige*) effects of the historical domination of nature. Words are sundered from the experiences that they initially signified and become, in the process, death masks of intentionality, signifying not a full, unequivocal meaning but rather meaning's absence.[48] Or, as Nietzsche puts it in his meditation on history: "How much of the past would have to be overlooked if it was to produce that mighty effect. How violently what is individual in it would have to be forced into a universal mould and all its sharp corners and

46. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 41e. At first glance, such an invocation of the ordinary or ordinary language philosophy seems particularly misguided as an interpretation of Adorno inasmuch as Marcuse has characterized it, with good reason, as a reified view of the "concrete." On the other hand, when we consider the enterprise of interpretation from within, for example, psychoanalysis—its attempt to account for the associative meanings of ordinary language in terms of the fundamental workings of the unconscious as expressed in, for example, *parapraxes*—the idea of understanding Adorno as a kind of dialectical philosopher of the ordinary is not as far-fetched as it may at first seem.

47. For Adorno, the positivist understanding of truth as the equivalence of a proposition with a state of affairs in the world becomes indistinguishable from the giving of commands ("Words," 1:191).

48. Cf. Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*; and Nietzsche, who, in the second untimely meditation, speaks of the "mummification" of life.

hard outlines broken up in the interest of conformity."[49] To be redeemed, linguistic signs have to be configured into new constellations, which enables the occluded object—the particular—to come into view without being subsumed by a concept that, through its own subsumptive logic, presses particularity into a "universal mould."

In the first two theses, Adorno poses the problem of language in terms recognizable from the mature philosophy of *Negative Dialectics*: the separability of form from content and its corollary, the purely arbitrary nature of signification or the idea that the same object could, in principle, be given or represented in a multiplicity of ways. Adorno tells us, "It is a sign of all reification through idealist consciousness, that things can be named arbitrarily" ("Thesen," 366). Thus the intellectual constitution of objects remains merely formal—as in, for example, transcendental apperception—unable to determine "the material shape of language" (*Sprachgestalt*). If all reification is a forgetting, then such a conception of language is constitutively premised on the disappearance of the particular it purports to name. The "Theses" could be said, then, to, as it were, linguistify Kant's differentiation between deductive judgments that subsume particulars beneath preexisting universals and reflective judgments that generate universals out of particulars. The former is transcendental; the latter, historical. Significantly, while the logic of deductive judgments predominates in the first two critiques, namely, the realms of science and morality, reflective judgment is central to the aesthetic. Adorno's linguistification of reflective judgment centers on what he calls "the aesthetic dignity of words" and approaches the philosophy of language from the standpoint of historically mediated experience (*Erfahrung*). It is precisely because language is subject to the dialectic of natural-history that it is in the process of decay. Words cannot simply be taken as inherently meaningful signifiers beneath which it is possible to subsume objects that they signify as the expression of authentic philosophical contents. Philosophers must, in contrast, find the right words to enable such an expression according to the historical truth stored up in the words themselves. The language of philosophers is, therefore, always already "materially prefigured," which is unconsciously expressed in the demand for an accurate representation of a thing by a word. This demand, generated by the fractured nature of society, would be superfluous in a nonantagonistic society where everything would be called by its right name.

49. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 69.

It is against these assumptions that Adorno takes up again his dialectical critique of logical positivism and fundamental ontology. The demand for the communicability or understandability of philosophical language is either banal or untrue: banal in the sense that it simply takes words as inherently meaningful in themselves; and untrue in the sense of concealing how language has become historically problematic. In opposition to the presupposed communicability of philosophical language is Heidegger's philosophy of language, which, as mentioned above, seeks to wrench a language that has degenerated to being a mere function of "the they" or the mindless anonymity of the public realm into a sphere of the authentically generated meaning of being (*Sinn des Seins*). Against the historical obliviousness of logical positivism, "Heidegger gauges the historical problem of words" ("Thesen," 368); however, rather than seeking to ground problems of language in history, he understands it in terms of historicity.[50] In displacing the concept of history by the existential notion of historicity, Heidegger inadvertently universalizes or, better, ontologizes the historical experiences (and radical insecurities) of actually existing history, for example, the Weimar Republic, leading to a view of *Dasein* as ontologically constituted by fear and guilt. As Adorno puts it: "Heidegger's language flees from history, yet without escaping it. The places which his terminology occupies are altogether locations of conventional philosophical and theological terminology, which shimmers through and prefigures the words before they begin" (368).

Thus, at first glance, Heidegger seems to represent a viable alternative to logical positivism inasmuch as he seems to pose the problem of the constitution or disclosure (*Erschliessung*) *of the world* as prior to any "scientific" propositions about objects *in the world*.[51] Yet, inasmuch as Heidegger understands such disclosure in terms of an ontologized temporality, he takes leave of history and, perhaps more important, the historical problem of the relation between words and things. Adorno's own approach to language—what he calls "configurative language" (*konfigurative Sprache*)—situates itself, then, between logical positivism, which, as its own name implies, provides a justification

50. In many respects, Adorno's understanding of the relationship between positivism and ontology follows from Weber's account of how rationalization, specialization, and disenchantment generate the search for experience and meaning. See Weber, "Science as a Vocation," 129–58. Of course, this approach is taken and radicalized in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* where the very antithesis of magical ways to approach the world, namely, the technical-scientific, actually turns into its opposite: mythology.

51. See, e.g., the analysis of the relation between *Zu-* and *Vorhandenheit* in Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper, 1962), 96–102.

for positivity or what simply exists, and Heidegger's attempt to invent a new language de novo.

We can now situate Adorno's reflections on language in relation to the early Wittgenstein, the late Wittgenstein, and Heidegger. As should be clear, I have been arguing that Adorno's understanding of a critique of language (*Sprachkritik*) is to be distinguished from the early Wittgenstein's attempt to provide a unified conception of language that would enable it, once and for all, to accurately picture reality as it really is. Indeed, as Wittgenstein himself acknowledges through the celebrated simile of the ladder, this is a self-revoking philosophy of language. Such a philosophy of language, based on presenting a clear picture of "everything that is the case," would render the *Tractatus*—a text clearly not about anything that is the case but rather how we might talk about what *is*—senseless. At the same time, while Adorno, like Heidegger, seeks to address the reification of meaning in the "tradition" of Western metaphysics, Adorno refuses to understand this tradition as self-contained but rather situates it in relation to other all too "ontic" practices comprising the history of domination. Adorno's conception of a critique of language engages, therefore, in a critique of both linguistic positivism and Heidegger's ontology of language. Hence "the official philosophical language, which treats any and all terminological inventions and definitions as if they were pure descriptions of states of affairs, is no better than the puristic neologisms of a metaphysically consecrated New German, which, incidentally, is derived directly from that scholastic abuse" ("Words," 1:190). "Philosophy must," therefore, according to Adorno, "dissolve the semblance of the obvious as well as the semblance of the obscure."[52]

Adorno's double-edged critique approximates the language philosophy of the later Wittgenstein. While this relation cannot be addressed here in all of its depth and complexity, it is possible to suggest broad areas of convergence. Rolf Wiggershaus, for example, has pointed to significant convergences in Adorno and Wittgenstein, primarily in the way they decenter the perspective of the observer in favor of that of the historically situated participant.[53] In other words, both emphasize praxis over disinterested observation. Moreover, Wellmer has indicated three principal areas of convergence: the nonidentical, representationalism, and cultural criticism. Starting from the last and working forward: the problem of the chiasmatic structure of natural-history is what Wittgenstein referred to as the "bewitchment of our intelligence by means

52. Adorno, "Why Still Philosophy?" 12.

53. Wiggershaus, *Wittgenstein und Adorno.*

of language," or the idea that the concepts or words that we use have some ultimate purchase on the world as it is. Consequently, the problem of the adequacy of word and thing is displaced by the relationship between words within sentences and between sentences themselves within a plurality of language games that, themselves, cannot be understood through a unified set of rules. Rather, language games display in common only family resemblances—a nonunitary play of identity and difference. Similarly, as we have seen, the adequacy of language to express the philosopher's intentions must be considered on its own terms and not with reference to a thing beyond it. Indeed, it is precisely through loosening the pretensions of the representational paradigm within culture more broadly that it is possible to clear space for that which is nonidentical.[54] The philosopher's task is to place words in new, that is, heretofore untried, configurations derived not only from the philosophical tradition but also from the "intentionless refuse of the physical world."

While the implications of this remain to be worked out at this early stage of Adorno's career, it is possible to argue that the "aesthetic dignity of words" takes the form of a mimetic relation between philosophy and art, mediated by criticism or writing as it culminates in the essay. From the French *essayer*, to try or attempt, and *essais*, experiments,[55] the essay form is Adorno's model for open intellectual experience and judgment. He understands intellectual experience by way of analogy with the émigré—the person compelled to learn a new language through everyday life "instead of piecing it together out of its elements according to rules learned in school." In a manner that parallels Wittgenstein's critique of the traditional, Augustinian account of language acquisition,[56] Adorno argues that rather than grasping denotative meanings of words or formal definitions in a dictionary, the émigré is confronted with the richly nuanced, connotative meanings of words from the plurality of contexts in which they are used. Language is acquired across a plurality of incommensurable senses that arise from praxis. The nature of such nonrepresentational usage is itself shaped by the multiple, shifting, and fluid contexts in which it takes place. Language acquisition is, then, a form of socialization through praxis. Adorno writes, "This kind of learning remains vulnerable to error, as does the essay as form; it has to pay for its affinity with open intellectual

54. Wellmer, "Ludwig Wittgenstein."

55. See Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Works*, trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957).

56. The entire first part of *Philosophical Investigations* is geared to a critique of this account of language.

experience with a lack of security that the norm of established thought fears like death." The reason why "established thought" actively condemns such a conception of language and its implications for open intellectual experience is that it undermines or undoes the univocality of meaning underpinning the traditional philosophical enterprise. While such an enterprise relies on the stability of meaning, the essay "erects no scaffolding and no structure."[57] The essay sets to work a dynamic constellation that lights up a specific dimension or aspect of the object, which is possible only by relinquishing the aspiration to grasp the object as no more than a moment of an unfolding totality.[58]

What Wiggershaus's and Wellmer's compelling accounts of the relation between Adorno and Wittgenstein fail to address, however, is the conservative tenor of *Philosophical Investigations*, which appears to be suspicious of change.[59] After all, Wittgenstein avows that his philosophy of language "leaves everything as it is." Yet this is not unlike Adorno's own recognition that social praxis determines language, "a process in which the writer can intervene to make changes only by recognizing it as an objective one." At the same time, Adorno's understanding of language possesses a utopian dimension that Wittgenstein would no doubt have rejected. An answer to this question of possibility of the historical transformation of language is implicit within the essay "Words from Abroad" in which Adorno suggests that foreign or strange words (*Fremdwörter*) can be understood as countering the bewitchment of our thinking through language. The foreign word (*Fremdwort*), "the silver rib" inserted "into the body of language," alerts us to the inorganic nature of language ("Words," 1:187). It blasts meaning out of the continuum of history whose "customary ring of naturalness deceives us about [the separation of subject matter and thought]" (1:194). In other words, by functioning as something that is clearly "nonidentical" with the thing it purports to name, the foreign word offers insight into the nature of language per se. In a manner that almost directly parallels Wittgenstein's discussion of the multiplicity of individual words in *Philosophical Investigations*, Adorno suggests that

57. Adorno, "Essay as Form," 1:13.

58. As Adorno would famously put it later, "Das Ganze ist das Unwahre" (*Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben*, vol. 4 of *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann [Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997], 55). Adorno's later confrontation with Heidegger's reading of Friedrich Hölderlin focuses centrally on the image of the foreign woman as the utopian sign of longing.

59. Cf. Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America*. For precisely this interpretation see Ernest Gellner, *Language and Solitude: Wittgenstein and the Habsburg Dilemma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 157–74.

"the weight of words in different languages, their status in their context . . . varies independently of the meaning of individual words" (1:194).

The *Fremdwort*, then, makes possible the experience of the new within the continuity of the old. How does it accomplish this? One might, with Jean-François Lyotard, argue that an account of language or language games based on different grammars or sets of rules makes it possible to think of power as penetrating the structure of language itself.[60] That is, if the rules of language are conventional—albeit conventions that exist and change as a moment of the production and reproduction of the material conditions of life—then they can be understood as a kind of "social contract" and, therefore, embody power relations. How is change possible within this account of language? Transformations in historical praxis are made possible inasmuch as existing language games are always open to transmutation. Foreign words, according to Adorno, "express the solitude of the intransigent consciousness in their reserve and shock with their obstinacy: in any case shock may now be the only way to reach human beings through language" (1:192). Such a shock in effect breaks or at least loosens the hold of prevailing or dominant language games by radically historicizing them and, in the process, discloses alternative possibilities.[61]

This returns us, finally, to Habermas's critique of Adorno as representing the aporetic nature of the philosophy of consciousness. Undoubtedly, Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* stands at the heart of his philosophy. Habermas's attempt to characterize Adorno's philosophy as representing the exhaustion of the "philosophy of consciousness" is central to marginalizing Adorno's conception of mimesis. What Habermas's characterization misses is that mimesis concerns the resonance of nature, its reverberation or "rustling" in language rather than an immediate relation of communication between subject and object.[62] As I have been suggesting, Adorno's philosophy of language must be situated within the context of the idea of "natural-history" and culminates in

60. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). As Derrida and Foucault have done, albeit by way of structuralism: cf. Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 278–93; and Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972). For a structuralist account of Adorno's own theory of language see Jameson's *Late Marxism*.

61. For example, the historical emergence of the novel in the nineteenth century makes possible a certain conception of inner experience. This is not to say, however, that the novel simply represents something that is already there waiting to be expressed through narrative form. Rather, the novel brings into being a certain kind of subjective experience previously unavailable.

62. See Nicholsen, *Exact Imagination, Late Work*.

what he calls the "aesthetic dignity of words." What Adorno means by this might be explicated through an understanding of how Wittgenstein's account of language is itself premised on the distinctively human "form of life" that, as Wittgenstein himself suggests, is based on a concept of what he calls, significantly, "natural-history"—that language use is to be understood alongside other human activities that satisfy material needs, such as eating and drinking. In other words, Wittgenstein presents us with a materialist account of language.[63]

Similarly, aesthetic experience for Adorno explicitly allows nature or sensuous particularity to find its way into language. As Adorno puts it in his reading of Hegel, "Truth is not *adaequatio* but affinity, and in the decline of idealism reason's mindfulness of its mimetic nature is revealed by Hegel to be a human right."[64] The critical force of art—whose truth content is excavated and explicated by philosophical concepts—lies in its ability to force sensuous particularity up against the limits of language.[65] What Habermas's essentially Kantian appreciation of the place of the aesthetic can grasp only inadequately is that such a forcing of limits transforms the patterns of linguistic usage themselves; it changes the rules of the game, so to speak. If we encounter objects in the world only through the multiplicity of language games through which they are given to us, then such a pushing up against the limits of language pushes up against and occasionally ruptures the limits of the world.

63. For suggestive interpretations of a materialist Wittgenstein see Gavin Kitching and Nigel Pleasants, eds., *Marx and Wittgenstein: Knowledge, Morality, and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2002).

64. Theodor W. Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 41.

65. In this sense, all authentic art is sublime art.