

Adorno's Poetics of Form

Josh Robinson

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Reading Adorno

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In the introduction to *Late Style*, Edward Said remarks that "no one needs reminding that Adorno is immensely difficult to read."¹ Said here gestures toward a sort of implied scholarly consensus that extends well beyond his own brief commentary. Indeed, in his monograph dedicated to Adorno, Fredric Jameson focuses at various stages on the "protean intelligence" and rebarbative structure of Adorno's sentences, "which turn on themselves like the solar system, together in a larger sequence or passage of textual time."² In defense of her own difficult writing, Judith Butler appeals to the Adorno of *Minima Moralia* straight away.³

It is this sort of critical atmosphere that makes Josh Robinson's *Adorno's Poetics of Form* so welcome. Because most readers, Adornoians and otherwise, have a tendency to highlight the *difficulty* of Adorno, both the urgency and utility of Adorno's work gets shrouded in an aura of modernist performance. Contra the cult of difficulty, Robinson seeks to meet Adorno on and with his own terms and think carefully and directly about his theoretical interventions.

Robinson's title neatly states the book's manifold premise. First, Robinson wants to draw out a theory of form from the wide breadth of Adorno's work. In their own words, they want to "make a case for the mutual implication of philosophical reflection and literary criticism, by means of the investigation of the terms and concepts with which we make such judgments about literature" (12). For Robinson, then, form is specifically *literary* form. Offering a brilliantly summative reading of the New Formalism at the book's beginning, and contemporary formalist critics throughout, Robinson pointedly distinguishes themselves among the burgeoning formalist and

formalist-adjacent scholarship in the field. Rather than highlighting the availability of literary form to social projects like, for instance, Caroline Levine's *Forms*, or the morass of sociologically-inflected formalism of Latourian Actor-Network Theory, Robinson's investment in Adorno's formalism puts aesthetics first. This leads into the second ambition of the monograph. If form is the monograph's conceptual signature, the work this term will do falls under the rubric of poetics. Poetics, though, is a bit harder to pin down, emerging from a tradition rooted in philosophical discourse (Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, and so on) and participating in a more contemporary field of literary studies. The book emerges from the meeting of these two traditions.

In their own terms, Robinson "attempts to examine the implications of the way in which Adorno reflects on, deploys, and alludes to one particular concept of aesthetics and poetics in his discussions of literature in particular, and of art and artworks in general—that of form" (13). Form is thus the term of art shared between literature and aesthetics; and it is the concept that gives Robinson's investigation ballast and orientation. As such, the book is organized along five radiating axes, each of which are given a thorough and ranging chapter: "Form and Content," "Form and Expression," "Form and Genre," "Form and Material," and "Artistic Form and the Commodity Form." These chapters each serve to collect and arrange a distinct set of Adornian concerns, calling out and upon the breadth of the terms at use. Form becomes prismatic: the angle at which it is held refracts a distinct intellectual itinerary.

Indeed, much of the appeal of Robinson's book is how it draws out and brings to coherence the various Adornos. While Adorno has some obvious and abiding concerns that form through lines in his work (the critique of commodity culture, modernism, anti-fascism) his wide reach of intellectual interests is part of the reason he is so often regarded as forbiddingly difficult. Adorno, after all, was a thinker of tremendous expanse: literature and the history of ideas, music and sociology, philology and philosophy. There is the Adorno of *Aesthetic Theory*, who comes with all the conceptual armature of a philosopher, and the Adorno of *Philosophy of New Music* a skilled listener and theorist of orchestral music. But then there is Adorno the memoirist of *Minima Moralia* and perhaps, best known of all, Adorno the collaborator, who with Max Horkheimer wrote *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. To wrest these otherwise wilding and sometimes-antagonistic disciplinary formations into coherence and conversation is no mean feat.

Robinson's willingness (and ability) to confront the range of Adorno's thinking will make their book of equal interest to scholars across a wide berth of the humanities. That said, the book is published through SUNY Press's series in continental philosophy, and Robinson is, as noted above, attentive to a primarily literary audience. The poetics of form may be at bottom a philosophical problem, but Robinson hews closely to literary scholarship in order to scaffold his thought. What kind of book does this make *Adorno's Poetics of Form*? While ample in both citation and readings, it doesn't follow a traditional path of either straightforward argumentation or explication, but

rather casts into increasingly useful and unexpected shape Adorno's collected works. The chapter "Form and Content," to take an example ready to hand, is a chapter of poetics through-and-through, one that takes Adorno's writing on Holderlin (and so Heidegger) as its exemplar. Robinson is remarkably deft at transcoding Adorno and Heidegger, generating explications of decidedly thorny texts on one and the others' terms. Here we find the notorious anti-formalist Heidegger placed in the context of a form-matter distinction, and we find Adorno as a thinker of "thing-character."

Most useful, though, is that this chapter introduces one of the books more understated motifs: the ongoing (i.e., contemporary) urgency of philological interpretation. Throughout, Robinson comments on the relative suitability of one translation or another, generally to great utility. And this concern comes from Adorno himself. In a long reading of Adorno-on-Heidegger-on-Holderlin, Robinson cites Adorno's own restriction of philology—"the philological method is restricted in relation to the truth content"—before offering up an Adornian counterpoint: philology "is necessary in order to be able to attain the point at which poetry demands philosophical interpretation" (37). The dual-questions of the monograph, of translation and explication, philosophy and poetry, can be stated here with relative ease. Poetry "demands" philosophy, but only when properly routed through philology. That is, Robinson finds a series of priorities in Adorno's reading practice, and this series offers a helpful guide to both the history of thought and contemporaneous formal readings offered.

Robinson's solution is a properly Adornian strategy: elevating contradiction to the level of conceptual necessity. The chapter on genre is most instructive in this regard. "Form and Genre" is potentially the thorniest chapter of the monograph, if only because the terms it takes up are so often confused. Whereas material, content, and expression are all more-or-less plausibly other to form, genre shares more than a little conceptual real estate. As Sandra MacPherson has argued, form and genre are strange bedfellows, at some points exchangeable, at others antithetical.⁴ While not putting the problem in precisely these terms, Robinson is not unaware of the similarities between form and genre. In Adorno, Robinson suggests, "form offers a way of thinking both the singularity of the individual work *and* the shared characteristics of different works" (95, emphasis mine). While not foregrounding this particular distinction as much as they maybe could have, Robinson does transform the problem into a more familiar one: the thoroughgoing dialectic of the particular and universal. This dialectic entails first a sort of aesthetic history—"the singular form of the individual work comes into conflict with the artistic form that is established by previous works, a conflict that is played out at the level of the artistic subject" (107)—but also, inventively, Robinson suggests that the problem starts to look like Hegelian formulation of the relation between form and content. This then becomes a byway that productively into the many sides of Adornoian sedimentation.

The book culminates and finds clearest expression in what may be its most valuable

chapter, the concluding study of aesthetic form and commodity form. This chapter synthesizes much of the labor of the preceding chapters and presents the Adorno most immediately familiar to readers. Much of the work is an extended reading of *Aesthetic Theory* inflected by *Negative Dialectics* and some of the less familiar (at least to readers of literature) text on music. Here, Robinson sets the preceding theorizing of “form” to work, now including most explicitly the political-economic conditions that always mediate the work.

the concept of form that becomes apparent through close analysis of Adorno’s writings on literary artworks in particular reflects (and, indeed, results from) the peculiar nature of these works’ connection to the reality from which their content and material are taken and which they oppose. The apparent conceptual looseness mirrors the recursive nature of the artwork’s relationship to reality. Form thus helps render this complex relationship thinkable, and what appear as inconsistencies within the concept reveal something of its intricacy. (179)

This, at last, resonates as an apt summation. We have form as dependent on (that is, only intelligible through) its relation to content and material. We have the enduring question of “reality” and the artwork’s opposition to it. Consummate dialectician that he is, Adorno (as Robinson presents him) maintains these oppositions and relations *in motion*, turning “conceptual looseness” into “intricacy.” This move is convincing and well supported by careful readings of the Adornoian canon.

For instance, in their fifth chapter Robinson unfolds the thorny problem of the commodity form from his long preceding discussion of form more generally throughout the book. Robinson writes, “the contradictions and tensions that exist within the concept of form can be seen as constituting a reflection or encapsulation of the antagonisms that permeate bourgeois society.” Robinson then turns to the famous “On Commitment” essay by way of *Aesthetic Theory*. In “On Commitment,” Robinson suggests, “the relationship between art and politics...” inheres in “political potency of art consists in the ideal of the autonomous artwork—of art for its own sake—which exhibits a radical potential because of the autonomous work’s refusal to submit to the logic of commodity society...” (164-165). Thus, *Aesthetic Theory* becomes important in its claim that the artwork “wants to interrupt the eternal exchange of need and satisfaction, and not to offend by providing ersatz-satisfaction of unmet needs” (163). Taking a synoptic view of Adorno’s career, Robinson folds all of Adorno into the more contemporary question of the commodity and aesthetic form.

At this phase of the book, Robinson could be read in productive conversation with Nicholas Brown’s *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art under Capitalism* (Duke 2019) and the ongoing work of the *nonsite.org* editorial collective. Adorno’s relationship, the question of autonomy is addressed throughout the text, generally by way of

his voluminous references in *Aesthetic Theory* or “On Commitment.” Where Brown understands autonomy as the moment of suspension of capitalist logic, Robinson is careful to draw out the tensions of Adorno’s privileging of art’s autonomy and its “rejection” of capitalist instrumentality. Art here is what Brown calls capitalist society’s “unemphatic other” (9). But Robinson is also careful to draw out the “significant tensions” in Adorno’s account of autonomy. “There is something jarring” Robinson admits, about art’s more or less historical “emergence out of cultic praxis in the process of its secularization” existing at the same time as “its...epiphenomenal existence alongside an economy based on commodity exchange” (180-81).

The above is paradigmatic of Robinson’s expositional mode throughout. Aside the philological work a different, more comprehensive, sort of translation at work throughout much of the book that merits commentary. With a book of this sort, the necessity of paraphrase, ventriloquism, transcoding is apparent. But with the sometimes hazy translation of Adorno into Robinson, Robinson into Adorno, it is easy to get lost in the weeds. Without a traditional style of argument, it is sometimes difficult to know where Adorno leaves off and Robinson picks up. Adorno’s sentences are so carefully calibrated, so precisely wrought, that producing summations is an unenviable task.

This could be said to be one of Adorno’s *Poetics of Form*’s limitations, though it is not necessarily Robinson’s fault. The book is written in clear (one might say un-Adornoian) prose and organized with obvious intention. The limitations admitted are simply a necessity in this particular type of study. *Poetics of Form* is at once a kind of casebook (Robinson has read a lot of Adorno so you don’t have to) and a critical work (Robinson has drawn out implicit Adornoian concerns and drawn together a constellation of formal concerns). Taken together, this simply means that *Poetics of Form* invites (and deserves) the same kind of attention it gives to its collection of texts.

Notes

1. Edward Said *Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (New York: Vintage, 2004) 14.
2. Frederic Jameson *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso 1990) 19.
3. Judith Butler, “A ‘Bad Writer’ Bites Back” *New York Times* 20 March 1999 np.
4. Sandra MacPherson, “A Little Formalism,” *ELH* 82.2 (2015).

I like Minima Moralia as an introduction to Adorno's writing. The book is written as a collection of short aphorisms, each of which is loosely connected to the one that follows it as a chain of negations (i.e., each aphorism subtly "negates" or contradicts the one that came before it), starting with observations clearly rooted in Adorno's own biography and moving towards more general arguments about philosophy and society. You can just pick a few each day to read and familiarize yourself with Adorno's way of thinking and writing.

Adorno: A Biography Adorno Stefan Muller-Doohm Edebiyat YazÄ±larÄ± - Theodor W. Adorno. 220 PagesÂ·2013Â·1021 KBÂ·3,123 DownloadsÂ·TurkishÂ·New! . Adorno, bu uzlaÄ±maz karÄ±tlÄ±n bÄ±tÄ±n gerilimi kaydeder; ama onu donmuÄ±, kÄ±mÄ±tÄ±sÄ±z bir karÄ±tlÄ± ½ Marx, Benjamin, Adorno - Sanat ve Edebiyat. 505 PagesÂ·2013Â·2.98 MBÂ·2,201 DownloadsÂ·TurkishÂ·New! makalesi ve Åok sayÄ±da kitabÄ± bulunmaktadÄ±r. Marx, Benjamin, Adorno - Sanat ve Edebiyat Onur Bilge Kula Reading Adorno. The Endless Road. Editors. This collection reveals the depth and potentialities of Adorno's critical theory in understanding our present. The contributions examine the resources of Adorno's culture industry theory, his accounts of popular and classical music, and how his theory helps us understand the emergence of the alt-right: a valuable addition to Adorno studies. J. M. Bernstein, Distinguished Professor of Philosophy, New School for Social Research, USA. Discover Theodor Adorno famous and rare quotes. Share Theodor Adorno quotations about art, culture and life. "The power of the culture industry's ideology is..." Theodor W Adorno (2005). "The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture", p.104, Routledge. 36 Copy quote.