

A SENTENCE FROM ADORNO

Richard Gunn

Richard Gunn, in his article, outlines the complex dialectical relationship inherent in a consideration of the terms 'autonomous' and 'committed' art as used, in the former in the ideas of Theodor W. Adorno and in the latter, the work of Sartre and Brecht. In exploring Adorno's ideas concerning the preference of 'autonomous' over 'committed', he deconstructs the notion that it is simply a matter of the former being "less political" than the latter. To do so is to misunderstand the relation between art and society. By outlining the interdependence of enlightenment and myth and the role of art as mediator, he re-examines the meaning of autonomous art with reference to historical roots in the evolution of apocalyptic and utopian thinking. This analysis forces us to reject the so-called political innocence of autonomous art.

ON page 128 of the English translation of T. W. Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* we read: 'What distinguishes aesthetical images from mythical ones is that the former submit to their own unreality which is their law of form. It is in this way that the images of art partake of enlightenment . . .'. Adorno is never the easiest of writers, and this sentence (or sentence-and-a-half) certainly needs decoding. It is my belief that it is worth decoding because it tells us something important. It declares against the political innocence of even the most formal and 'autonomous' art.

Of course it is a conventional and even a banal point to say that political innocence cannot be secured by retreating into an ivory tower. As it were, to refuse to make a political choice is to make a political choice of a kind: it is to choose to support, however tacitly, the **status quo**. It is in the light of this point that Brecht and Sartre, for example, recommend not an 'autonomous' but a 'committed' art. However Adorno's point is slightly different. In fact he favours autonomous over committed art. The passage quoted continues by saying that 'any form of direct artistic commitment to ideological or educational values' regresses from 'enlightenment' back into myth. The recommendation that art should become committed misunderstands the relation between art and society, in Adorno's view. For Adorno a social perspective on art has, in the first instance, to be developed not at the level of the artist's aim or intention nor at the level of the art-work's content but at the level of formal considerations: 'The unresolved antagonisms of reality reappear in art in the guise of immanent problems of artistic form' (*Aesthetic Theory* p. 8). The art-work is so to speak a 'monad' whose formal problems and tensions recapitulate the tensions and contradictions of social life. Adorno's heroes are figures like Mahler, Schoenberg and Beckett in whose work social commentary is absent but whose irony and liberation of dissonance (be it musical or dramatic dissonance) encapsulates precisely at the formal level the crisis of a late-capitalist world. Committed art misunderstands, according to Adorno, art's own specific possibilities and provenance. It is in autonomous art that we should look for the cracks in the surface of an alienated and reified

form of social life.

What I have said so far is by way of background, and it is what commentaries on Adorno commonly report. Roughly speaking, the import of commentaries along these lines is to impute to Adorno the view that autonomous art, unlike committed art, is a 'good thing'. Autonomous art is non-innocent in the sense of carrying within it a radical and emancipatory perspective. Certainly it is this view of autonomous art which is predominant in Adorno's writings. But the sentence quoted from *Aesthetic Theory* suggests a different, though complementary approach.

The non-innocence of autonomous art, it implies, signals complicity and guilt. This is not to say that, after all, Adorno believes we have to side in the matter of 'committed **versus** autonomous' with Sartre and Brecht. However it is to say that Adorno regards the dialectic of autonomous art (and more generally of artistic 'form') as entrapped with darkness as well as light. The move of self-understanding which allows art to detach itself from 'myth' and to 'partake of enlightenment' is a move towards, as it were, an endarkenment which enlightenment already contains. Art 'partakes of enlightenment' to the degree that it understands itself as autonomous, both from myth and from politics. To the degree that it does so it plays not just an artistic but a political game. 'Art is and is not being-for-itself', says Adorno; 'Without a heterogeneous moment, art cannot achieve autonomy' (*Aesthetic Theory* p. 9). We have now to enter on the project of decoding in a more serious way.

In 1947 Adorno published his *Dialectic of Enlightenment* co-authored with Max Horkheimer. The central theme of this work is the interdependence of enlightenment and myth. 'Enlightenment', generally seen as projecting human self-determination and an end to superstition, **via** an appeal to natural scientific rationality, is construed by Horkheimer and Adorno as bound up with an aspiration towards instrumental control. 'Enlightenment behaves towards things as a dictator toward men', we read; the dictator

knows men 'insofar as he can manipulate them. The man of science knows things insofar as he can make them'. The rationality of enlightened natural science is a **causal** and hence manipulative rationality which, since anything whatever is grist to causalism's conceptual mill, comes to be applied to nature and to humankind alike. Enlightenment points back towards the myth it denounces as superstition because projects of manipulative control and domination have their roots, no less than does myth, in fear. Myth for its part points on towards enlightenment because (so Horkheimer and Adorno argue) the quantitative equivalence of phenomena on which causalist explanation turns is already prefigured in the primitive and mythic notion of symbolic exchange. Between myth and enlightenment there is not the clean-out contrast which enlightenment holds to be the case; there is an interdependence. This, for Horkheimer and Adorno, is the key to modern technocratic ideologies, to Nazism and to capitalist mass-culture alike.

Notice that this dialectic of 1947 involves only two terms: myth and enlightenment. In Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* of the later '60's the picture is deepened to include not two terms but three: myth, enlightenment and art. Art **mediates between** enlightenment and myth. On the one hand, it serves myth up to enlightenment in an innocuous and tamed state: 'Art is what is left over after the magical and cult functions of archaic art have fallen by the wayside' (*Aesthetic Theory* p. 185). Between art and enlightenment - whereas not between myth and enlightenment - a relation of peaceful co-existence (indeed even a united front) can obtain. On the other hand, art takes on board the role of feeding the mythic fires of enlightenment's own roots. (Think of the 18th and 19th century history-paintings which fed a sense of heroism, pathetic **hubris** and self-importance into the enlightened bourgeoisie.) Art feeds - but also dampens - these fires precisely by transporting myth into an aesthetic key, and it is in its tamed (its aesthetic) state that myth appears as at its most reactionary. At the end of the road from myth to aesthetics lies art which is autonomous. Autonomous art is art in, as it were, its pure form. Such art counts as innocent, because it can make its peace with

enlightenment in such a way that enlightenment finds nothing to say against it. Every philistine counts as an art-lover. But this innocence is a guilty one because of the solace and support it offers to those whose words offer to it only a hymn of praise. Autonomous art is tamed art, and this taming is its danger. One the one side autonomous art is a site of critical consciousness containing emancipation's **promis de bonheur**; on the other side it is art which has made its peace with the enemy's camp. Neither side is separable from the other (just as enlightenment and myth are inseparable). This is the dialectic of autonomous art which Adorno's **Aesthetic Theory** attempts to follow through.

It is in the context of this three-way distinction, as between myth and art and enlightenment, that the sentence quoted at the start of this article is to be read. 'What distinguishes **art** from **myth** is that the former accepts its own unreality' (I offer here a paraphrase and not a quote). To take artistic claims literally would be to confront enlightenment with its own mythic roots, i.e., it would be to challenge head-on enlightenment's bad faith. Art has to make its peace with enlightenment by retreating into beautiful illusion, as for example Nietzsche in his **The Birth of Tragedy** clearly saw. Beauty is allowed to hover above the world on condition that it never undertakes to make its appearance within it. Art is allowed to say anything and everything as long as it agrees to place all its claims in brackets, or in other words as long as it agrees that it has nothing literal and substantive to say. 'Unreality' becomes its condition. It belongs in the realm of the 'Unhappy Consciousness', in Hegel's sense. And yet it is permitted to belong there, innocently, only because the mantle of its beauty is placed on the shoulders of enlightenment and philistinism and capitalism themselves. It for its part is allowed the mantle of innocence only because it is complicit, like a court jester who oils bureaucratic wheels with wit. In fact it is superstition and myth to say that art has no place and no reality in a bourgeois order. 'It is by accepting complicity in the myth of its own impracticality that art makes its peace with enlightened reality' (a paraphrase rather than a quote once more). Precisely it is the radiance of beauty which shines through, and legitimises, the technology and discipline of a bourgeois world.

At this point we should take stock; doing so allows us to see how precise Adorno's historical insight is.

Art passes the buck to and fro between enlightenment and the myth on which enlightenment depends, and so is acceptable to both. It is acceptable to bo... because its claims are seen as marginalised and trivial: who cares about beauty when fun is to be had and profits made? This trivialisation of aesthetic claims is, I suggest, an ideological illusion. Or rather it is the crucial illusion of bourgeois ideology because in the end of the day it is on the mediation of aesthetics that the case for bourgeois legitimacy rests. Art is not just non-innocent but non-trivial, as for example every single advertising image and the whole culture-industry of fashion demonstrates. Advertising is

just one example of this, although the most obvious. The historical roots of the point go deeper. At the outset, however, notice this: it was in the eighteenth century (the heyday of enlightenment) that 'aesthetics' as a term for an independent discipline - the study of the beautiful - was first coined. At the end of the eighteenth century Kant, perhaps the first and the most serious theorist of aesthetics, demarcated aesthetics from on the one hand instrumental reason and on the other morals (as it were demythologised myth). In other words the wings of aesthetics were clipped at the very moment when, with the Romantics and the heirs of the French Revolution, it threatened to take flight. Aesthetics was ghettoised in the same movement as it was constituted. And the condition of a ghetto is that no-one can leave it but anyone else can enter it at will. Aesthetics, in other words, is **traversed** from its point of origin by the lines of power which it is invited to mystify and legitimise but about which it is disallowed to speak.

I said that Adorno's point has deeper historical roots than a consideration of the modern advertising and culture-industry which, to be sure, he deplores. Here, only a brief indication of these roots can be given. To see them we have to return to the early-modern period of political thought and to the battle between **apocalypse** and **utopia** which was then fought out, with utopia winning in the capitalistic end (cf. my article on apocalyptic and utopian thinking in **Edinburgh Review** 71).

Apocalyptic thinkers in the latter days of the Middle Ages prefigured in their various ways the end of the world, and indeed the end of historical time. By the politically radical apocalypticists, the ending-event was seen as a revolution whereby authority is overturned and the poor inherit the earth. From the standpoint of enlightenment, apocalypse counts as the purest kind of myth against which scientific rationality must declare. For a start, apocalyptic predictions were without exception falsified by the unfolding of events. Apocalypse accordingly stands 'refuted', by the canons of the natural science whose day, during the Renaissance, began to dawn. (When in our day Jean-Francois Lyotard, in his **The Postmodern Condition**, declares against what he terms 'metanarratives' he is in effect replaying this same scientific critique of apocalypse inasmuch as apocalypses are metanarratives of the most paradigmatic sort.) Over apocalypse, so much of which enshrined popular protest against nascent capitalism, enlightenment condemnation breaks out.

The enlightenment condemnation breaks out in the form of **utopias**. Utopias, especially those of the early 17th century, enshrined scientific values; and they enshrined beauty as well. Their physical planning radiates geometric perfection; their circularly laid out spatial ordering connotes not just aesthetic harmony but epistemological harmony as well. Beauty and knowledge (or enlightenment) go together in utopian thought. The study of utopian thinking shows that enlightenment comes into the world trailing clouds of beauty at its heels. Enlightenment thereby taps the mythic sources

of utopia and makes them its own. It makes them its own by transforming 'myth' into 'art'. Utopian enlightenment is a police-action against popular and insurrectionary apocalypse which goes forward not just by repression (although this certainly took place) but by incorporation. Precisely, utopian images 'submit to their own unreality which is the law of their form'. They seem like impractical dreaming - but this innocence of theirs conceals prosaically practical aims. Their concern is not just with beauty and knowledge and geometric spatial harmony but with social discipline, and these concerns flow together: in a geometrically ordered world, everyone has their place and anyone out of his or her place will stand out as sharply as does a misplaced pawn at the start of a game of chess. In utopia, beauty figures as social order. A clearer case of the non-innocence of aesthetic considerations would be hard to find. Utopian enlightenment condemns radical protest aesthetically, epistemologically and politically so that to this day radical upsurge of the meekest sort can be ghettoised as the province of a loony (read: mythological and unenlightened) left. Far from being impracticable, utopia installed itself as the world of capitalist work-discipline and surveillance: already we live in a utopian world. That is, we live in a world whose enlightenment is legitimated by considerations of aesthetics. The autonomy of art both conceals this mode of legitimacy (through trivialisation) and supports it. Capitalism marginalises art only because it relies on its support.

If this is so then Adorno was right. Let us read him again: 'What distinguishes utopia from apocalypse is that the former submits to the bad faith of construing its own beauty as unreal and thereby trivial. It is in this way that bourgeois legitimacy is born . . .' Adorno is never the easiest of writers, and so I offer this as a decoded version of his political insight. It is my belief that this decoding sheds light on his writings because it allows us to see his recommendation of autonomous art as dialectically complex rather than univocal and straight-down-the-line. 'Art may be the only remaining medium of truth in an age of incomprehensible terror and suffering' (**Aesthetic Theory** p. 27). Hence there is no political innocence even for the most autonomous and formal species of art.