

# The Sovereignty of Art

*Aesthetic Negativity in Adorno and Derrida*

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# Introduction: Autonomy and Sovereignty

Characteristic of modern reflection on aesthetic experience is an unresolved ambivalence.<sup>1</sup> It manifests itself in the two lines of tradition that have shaped modern aesthetics from its outset. In one tradition, aesthetic experience represents just one element among the various discourses and modes of experience making up the differentiated realm of reason. In the other, aesthetic experience is ascribed a potential that *exceeds* the limits of reason of nonaesthetic discourses. Already intertwined in Kantian aesthetics, these two lines of tradition are even more enmeshed in their most recent confrontation: in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*. In his central thesis on the "antinomy of aesthetic semblance,"<sup>2</sup> Adorno claims that the clarification of this relationship is the real problem confronting aesthetics today. Moreover, he believes resolution of this relationship requires doing justice to the duality (*Doppelpoligkeit*) of aesthetic experience, without subordinating either of its two defining features to the other.

*On the one hand, the antinomy of the aesthetic is defined by the concept of autonomy. Following Kant and Weber, we can take this term to describe the status of aesthetic experience generated by the modern differentiation of experiential modes and discourses. It is a phenomenon adhering to its own internal logic, and its autonomy vis-à-vis nonaesthetic discourses implies that it occupies its own place alongside these discourses within the pluralistic structure of modern reason. Accordingly, the validity of that which is experienced aesthetically is necessarily particular in nature: it is relative to the sphere of experience that is delimited by its orientation toward the specifically aesthetic value of the beautiful. The nature and object of our aesthetic experience possess no negating or affirming powers over the object of our nonaesthetic experience and representation. That the autonomous form of the aesthetic is but one element within differentiated modern reason is demonstrated by the fact that it takes its place alongside, rather than above or below, the other discourses, each unfolding its own distinctive internal logic.*

Only a theory that links this first model of the modern form of aesthetic experience, oriented as it is around the concept of autonomy, with a second one can satisfy the antinomy of the aesthetic. The core of this second model is defined by the concept of sovereignty. It reformulates the characteristic of differentiated aesthetic experience emphasized in the first tradition of modern aesthetics into a claim extending from Romanticism through the surrealist avant-garde movements: in Adorno's words, the promise that in art "the absolute is present."<sup>3</sup> On this view, aesthetic experience is sovereign insofar as it does not take its place within the differentiated structure of plural reason, but rather exceeds its bounds. Whereas the autonomy model confers relative validity upon aesthetic experience, the sovereignty model grants it absolute validity, since its enactment disrupts the successful functioning of nonaesthetic discourses. The sovereignty model considers aesthetic experience a medium for the dissolution of the rule of nonaesthetic reason, the vehicle for an experientially enacted critique of reason.

The central task facing philosophical aesthetics, once the two lines of its modern development are understood, is to connect these two lines in a logically consistent and comprehensive manner. By characterizing the relationship between aesthetic autonomy and sovereignty in terms of the Kantian concept of antinomy, Adorno links this task with a twofold claim: an adequate conceptualization of aesthetic experience must avoid sacrificing either of these two elements while simultaneously finding a comprehensive resolution of the tension between them.

The modernity of aesthetic reflection is defined by this refusal to sacrifice either side of the antinomy, and indeed by the insistence on granting full expression to both in all their mutual tension. This thesis stands in contradiction to a widely held view that—since one of its two defining features is not compatible with the modern situation of the aesthetic, but is rather an expression of uncritical nostalgia—the antinomy resolves itself on its own. There are really two versions of this view, and each assumes that the antinomical conceptualization of aesthetic experience is no longer relevant: the shape of post-avant-garde art and its experience has shown, according to these positions, that aesthetics can

only survive by opting for one of its two modern strands. The first variant opposes any insistence on an autonomous logic of aesthetic experience that radically distinguishes it from nonaesthetic experience. It considers such a logic to be a *reifying* way of cutting aesthetic experience off from nonaesthetic discourses, a path that manifests a nostalgic orientation toward a bourgeois ideal of aesthetic autonomy. It claims that this ideal—which has always been in contradiction with aesthetic practice—has been definitively overcome, moreover, by art in its avant-garde and postmodern forms. The second variant of the view that the antinomy of the aesthetic is based on a nostalgic projection challenges any insistence on a postulate of aesthetic sovereignty that ascribes to aesthetic experience the potential to mount a critique of reason. It sees this as a *heteronomous* overburdening of art that manifests a nostalgia toward idealistic truth claims, which, being irredeemable in nonaesthetic terms, are projected on aesthetic experience. According to this view, we have finally been freed from the pressure of these expectations, which have always placed too great a burden on aesthetic experience, by the failure of the avant-gardists in their hopes to transcend the realm of art. <sup>4</sup>

Each variant considers one of the two defining poles of the antinomy of aesthetic experience to be a nostalgic projection, that is, to be incompatible with the modern constitution of aesthetic experience as it has emerged out of the failure of the avant-garde movements as such. In claiming that the definition of aesthetic experience in terms of both autonomy *and* sovereignty no longer corresponds to the post-avant-garde situation, however, they both put forth a structural argument. They argue, namely, that aesthetic experience cannot be defined by both autonomy and sovereignty, since there is no way to coherently conceive of both of these qualities holding at the same time. Both lines of criticism start with the assumption that any program claiming to provide a twofold definition of aesthetic experience via autonomy and sovereignty actually subordinates one of the defining qualities to the other. In the face of such criticism, it is not enough simply to characterize their interrelationship as one of antinomy. The twofold definition of the aesthetic by both autonomy and sovereignty can only be considered an adequate model, even for its most recent manifestations, if it can be shown in detail that the apparent contradiction between these two terms can be resolved without illegitimate compromises: that is, that it is indeed possible to conceive of the autonomy and the sovereignty of art at one and the same time. This, in turn, necessitates an account of the concept of the autonomy of the aesthetic that gives full due to its internal logic while leaving it compatible with the concept of aesthetic sovereignty. At the same time, it necessitates an account of the concept of the sovereignty of the aesthetic that gives force to its potential to provide a critique of reason without committing a heteronomous violation of the autonomy of that aesthetic. Only by successfully carrying out both of these tasks is it possible to defend the twofold definition of aesthetic experience against the charges of nostalgia brought against it.

Adorno's aesthetics can provide an orientation for the formulation of this antinomy of sovereignty and autonomy, which is central to modern art and its theoretical discourse. It is not so clear, however, that Adorno fully realized the urgency of providing an argumentative resolution to the antinomy he himself had formulated; the *Aesthetic Theory* largely holds to this antinomy without giving any real plausibility to the paradoxically formulated thesis that the autonomous semblance of art is precisely its sovereign truth. <sup>5</sup> But an even more serious problem is the lack of clarity in Adorno's efforts toward resolving the antinomy of the aesthetic. For his central aesthetic category, that of negativity, is much too imprecisely defined to serve as a convincing basis for redeeming this program. Nonetheless, a reconstruction of Adorno's antinomy of the aesthetic and its resolution can start with this category. For, when adequately conceived, aesthetic negativity is capable of completing the twofold task: by reformulating the internal logic of aesthetic experience in its full scope, it gives force to the potential of aesthetic experience to provide a critique of reason without reshaping this experience to meet extrinsic ends. The concept of aesthetic negativity is the key to understanding the twofold definition of modern art in Adorno, of art as both one of several autonomous discourses and a sovereign subversion of the rationality of all discourses. If the realization or enactment of aesthetic experience is conceived as aesthetic negativity, it takes on a sovereign import that is premised on the autonomy of the aesthetic, rather than its curtailment.

The twofold achievement of Adorno's suggested concept of aesthetic negation in linking autonomy and sovereignty cannot be reconstructed simply in terms of an interpretation of Adorno's writings. The latter do pose the problem—in terms of the thesis of the antinomy of aesthetic semblance—and point to a possible direction for resolving it—in terms of the concept of aesthetic negativity. It is not possible, however, to solve the central problem left us by Adorno's aesthetics solely in terms of the conceptual and argumentative tools that this aesthetic theory supplies. For it does not provide us with a consistent way of conceiving of both autonomy and sovereignty in terms of an account of aesthetic negativity. Instead, a systematic reconstruction of this theory's basic concepts needs to be undertaken in light of and with the help of other theoretical approaches. Those positions with conclusions strictly at odds with Adorno's aesthetics of negativity but with very similar intentions can be expected to offer the most support in this effort. For confrontation with them allows one to give a more precise account of the basic idea underlying the concept of aesthetic negativity and, above all, to free it from misconceptions. Those theories collected under the rubric of deconstruction and marked especially by the formative influence of Jacques Derrida meet these two criteria. By coming to terms with them, one can help explicate the concept of aesthetic negativity in two ways.

The first gain involves the power of the concept of negativity to give an account of the autonomous process of aesthetic experience (see Part I). Deconstructive theories point out that aesthetic negation has to be reformulated semiologically. As such, they criticize the conflation often found in Adorno between aesthetic negativity and types of nonaesthetic negation, especially that of social critique. In contrast, the basic thesis put forth by deconstruction is that the unique and peculiar logic of aesthetic experience can only be reconstructed if aesthetic negativity, which Adorno moved to the very center of his theory, is defined in terms of semiotic processes, in terms of the use and understanding of signs. Thus the first explanatory gain to be credited to the recourse to deconstructive theories consists in the freeing of Adorno's concept of negativity from its conflation with the negativity of social critique and in its explication as the subversion of understanding (chaps. 1 and 2).

Recourse to the deconstructive theory of the aesthetically enacted negation of successful semiosis, however, does not only remedy a deficiency in the explanatory model of the aesthetics of negativity: it also reveals a shortcoming of deconstructive theories. For the latter usually develop their basic theses in confrontation with inadequate countermodels. The most formidable counterthesis to a semiologically reformulated aesthetic of negativity is put forward by hermeneutics. Accordingly, the semiotic definition of aesthetic negativity achieved through reflections of deconstructive theory can only be defended by developing—on the basis of reflections from Adorno—both an immanent critique of hermeneutic aesthetics and a countermodel to its theory of the interpretation and evaluation of aesthetic experience (chaps. 3 and 4).

Moreover, the explanatory gain promised by the recourse to Derrida's deconstructionism is not limited to the definition of autonomy. It also applies to the conceptualization of the sovereignty of the aesthetic provided by negativity (see Part II). Deconstructive theories point out that the potential of the aesthetic to provide a critique of reason can only be conceived of as an internal subversion of nonaesthetically functioning discourses and their forms of reason. Here they criticize the traditional, "romantic" conception of the aesthetic critique of reason, which views aesthetic experience not as the site of the deconstruction of reason, but as the site where reason is overcome. In what remains to me his most important book, *Writing and Difference*, Derrida demonstrates how the avant-garde view of aesthetic sovereignty (in Artaud and Bataille) is still marked by this romantic idea of the positive transcendence of reason. He goes on to show, though, that at the same time this view contains starting points for overcoming the romantic model. At the margins of the (surrealist) avant-garde, it becomes clearer that art is not a utopian transcendence of reason, but rather represents a crisis for and a threat to reason.

Nevertheless, recourse to the modifications made by deconstruction to the common romantic misunderstanding of the sovereignty of art also highlights the way in which the theory itself still shares in this misconception (chaps. 1 and 2). Deconstruction attempts to separate the subversion of the successful functioning of our nonaesthetic discourses that aesthetic experience achieves from the particular claim to validity involved in this

enactment. It attempts to conceive of this experience instead as the object of a cognitive process that has universal validity claims. It participates in the romantic misconception that art *itself* is the vehicle of a critique of reason. In truth, when the problems of a radicalized critique of reason are more deeply considered—problems of which no one was more conscious than Adorno—it turns out that the potential for aesthetic experience to provide a critique of reason cannot be described as an implication of this experience, nor as contents separable from it, but only as an effect of it (chap. 3). Art is not sovereign in that it tears down the boundaries separating aesthetic and nonaesthetic experience, thereby proving itself to be the direct overcoming of reason. It is instead sovereign in that, as a discourse of merely particular validity, it represents a crisis for our functioning discourses. The aporias of the traditional romantic view of the sovereignty of art can only be resolved by combining two theses: (1) the deconstructive thesis that the aesthetic critique of reason is the subversion rather than the overcoming of reason; and (2) the thesis, which can be found in Adorno, that it is not the contents but the effects, consequences, or repercussions of art that are the foundations of this critique (chap. 4). Taken together, these two claims outline an understanding of aesthetic sovereignty—as an aesthetically generated critique of reason—that not only does not violate the autonomy of the enactment of aesthetic experience, but is actually premised upon it.

# I

## On the Negative Logic of Aesthetic Experience

### 1

## The Concept of Aesthetic Negativity

The basic thesis of the aesthetic of negativity rests on a simple equation: aesthetic difference, the distinction between the aesthetic and the nonaesthetic, is, in truth, aesthetic negativity. Only by conceiving of works of art in their negative relationship to everything that is not art can the autonomy of such works, the internal logic of their representation and of the way they are experienced, be adequately understood. The distinctiveness, the uniqueness of art, is that it sets itself apart, that it separates itself off. It is just as inadequate to explain the autonomy of art in terms of distinction, coexistence, or complementarity as it is to subordinate art to externally imposed ends. What art actually is, is contradiction, rejection, negation.

Determinations of this kind are basic to Adorno's aesthetics. <sup>1</sup>As soon as one takes up Adorno's texts, however, it turns out that the seeming simplicity of this basic equation actually harbors an array of enigmatic conclusions that permit the most diverse of interpretations. The only way to decide among them is to test their ability to resolve the problem at hand, that is, to provide an adequate account of aesthetic autonomy. For in spite of all the difficulties that arise for modern art and aesthetic experience out of the successful unfolding of art's internal logic as it differentiates itself from other realms of society, it is solely its autonomy that allows its unique and peculiar achievements. Naturally, these achievements do not stop aesthetic theory from pointing out the losses suffered by art in the course of its modern differentiation or from speculating on the state of a postautonomous art. Nevertheless, the only adequate means of evaluating any theory of modern art is in terms of its success in grasping this autonomy. If Adorno's theory of aesthetics is viewed in terms of this question, it is quickly seen that even its basic explanations of the autonomy of the aesthetic in terms of its negativity are in danger of failing to satisfy this condition. For there are at least two different (though not equally explicit) conceptions of aesthetic negativity to be found in Adorno, neither of which is compatible with any effort to explain the concept of aesthetic autonomy. The first of these two (mis) conceptions deems the relationship between art and nonart as negative because it conceives of art as a critique of nonaesthetic reality. By contrast, the second characterizes the relationship as negative because it sees art as a place where the intensity of lived experience (*Erleben*) is increased vis-à-vis that of nonaesthetic reality.

If the first of these misconceptions of aesthetic negativity can be termed the social-critical misconception, the second can be designated the purist misconception. Both have left—with differing degrees of clarity—their traces in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*. *Whereas the social-critical misconception of aesthetic negativity represents the neo-Marxist legacy in Adorno's aesthetics, the purist misconception represents its aestheticist heritage.* <sup>2</sup>*Out of their contrast, two images of aesthetic difference arise, mutually complementary in their incompleteness. The former misconception distinguishes art from society as its critical negation; in doing so, it implies the idea of potentially overcoming aesthetic difference. According to this interpretation, art brings to bear potentialities, capabilities, and insights, which, though still unrealized in society, can, in principle, remove themselves from the esoteric reality of the aesthetic and become incorporated into social relations. The equation of aesthetic and critical negativity occurs within the framework of a potential identity of that which is distinguished, art and society. In contrast, the purist understanding of aesthetic negativity insists on the insurmountability of the divide between the two. On this view, the intensification of lived experience that art promises retains its purity only through its indifference to social reality. Whereas the social-critical misconception*

*conceives of aesthetic difference in terms of its potential surmountability, the purist model rigidly establishes it as representing a static unrelatedness of distinct spheres.*

The question is thus raised: to what extent do these two interpretations involve an inadequate explanation, an undercutting of the concept of aesthetic difference or autonomy? If Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* is regarded in terms of this question, the answer is initially unclear. For it is certainly true that both conceptions are continuously present in it; in fact, their combination creates the basic framework for Adorno's later aesthetics.<sup>3</sup> Adorno's effort to link them, however, is based on an explicit critique of both positions. The way this critique is mounted, though, provides no direct indication of a concept of aesthetic negativity that could avoid both pitfalls. For though Adorno's critique of aestheticism is directed against the separation of the aesthetic from the societal sphere, this critique is itself premised on a mirrorlike reversal, namely, the reduction of aesthetic difference to social critique. Similarly, when Adorno criticizes the equation of art with critical cognition, he does this in the name of a motif he finds exemplified in aestheticism: the irreducibility of the intensified character of the lived experience of art and the aesthetic pleasure associated with it. The relationship of *Aesthetic Theory* to both the social-critical and the purist conception of aesthetic difference appears to seesaw back and forth, a movement by which Adorno's writings typically allow inadequate positions to criticize, correct, and supplement each other. This makes the question raised even more urgent: does Adorno's adoption of different motifs from the pure aestheticist and social-critical positions involve merely an aporetic linking of their opposing definitions of the structure of aesthetic negativity, or does it suggest a deeper understanding of aesthetic negativity that avoids their complementary deficiencies?

This question, in turn, raises a further question: can Adorno's objections to the social-critical and purist misconceptions of aesthetic negativity be understood as outlining the basic and necessary conditions of a concept of aesthetic autonomy that any useful concept of aesthetic negativity must, at the very least, satisfy? If we put the question this way, the motifs that Adorno musters (in his attacks against the respective deficiencies of the positions put forth by the social-critical and purist conceptions of aesthetic negativity) at the same time designate the elements of a concept of aesthetic negativity that can be understood as an elucidation rather than an undercutting of the concept of aesthetic autonomy. For Adorno brings to bear the *processuality* of aesthetic difference against the purist conception and the importance of aesthetic *pleasure* against the social-critical conception. His critique of deficient interpretations of aesthetic negativity thus represents more than just a rejection of them on the basis of equally inadequate countermodels; it can also be understood as an exposition of the basic conditions of aesthetic autonomy that the aesthetics of negativity must also satisfy.

This initial chapter aims to give a somewhat more precise account of this reading of Adorno's critique of deficient aesthetic positions. It is, however, imperative from the outset to make clear the sole possible result of such an account: its purpose is to uncover from this critique, drawn from Adorno's writings, indications of the basic features of aesthetic autonomy. Thus this interpretation takes the critique to ascertain some of the basic conditions that any aesthetics must satisfy, including one oriented toward the concept of negativity. By doing so, the critique merely sketches a program for an aesthetics of negativity under conditions of aesthetic autonomy. The defining features that it draws upon have long been known: they are a variation on Kantian motifs. Nevertheless, there is good reason to bear this in mind when studying the *Aesthetic Theory*. *For the most cogent objections to the basic equation underlying Adorno's aesthetics of negativity are made in the name of Kantian positions.*<sup>4</sup> *Their proponents are convinced that Adorno's aesthetics of negativity does not satisfy the basic conditions of a theory of autonomous art, but is instead "heteronomous" ( Bubner). This is indisputably true of many of Adorno's formulations and theorems. It is, however, false to attribute these inadequacies to the basic thesis of the aesthetics of negativity. Instead, if we proceed on the basis of a "stereoscopic reading,"*<sup>5</sup> *we can discern different layers in Adorno's texts, allowing us to draw the following conclusions: it is rash to critique the aesthetics of negativity in the name of an adequate (Kantian) understanding of aesthetic autonomy; such a critique only holds for individual, inadequate developments of its basic theses; Adorno himself criticizes deficient conceptions of aesthetic negativity in the name of a Kantian understanding of aesthetic autonomy; and in doing so, he presents the aesthetics of negativity as a position*

that does not undercut the basic conditions of the Kantian understanding of autonomy, but, on the contrary, specifically satisfies them.

Let us begin the process of securing the aesthetics of negativity against both its own misconceptions and the critique just cited by taking a closer look at Adorno's relationship to the social-critical interpretation of aesthetic negativity. At first glance, Adorno appears to endorse this conception and even to radicalize it to a previously unequalled extent. This leads to the following, often-repeated charge: Adorno's negative-aesthetic elucidation of art as a critique is not capable of grasping that moment basic to all aesthetic experience: aesthetic pleasure.<sup>6</sup> In emphasizing the fundamental importance of aesthetic pleasure for theories of aesthetics, this critique of the aesthetics of negativity is overtly in agreement with the historical deployment of philosophical aesthetics. For such programmatic, antinegativist maxims of aesthetic pleasure or enjoyment appeal to those formulations of aesthetic autonomy that are found in the debate on aesthetics in the late eighteenth century, especially in the resurrection of the Aristotelian question about the basis of pleasure elicited by the aesthetic representation of those contents "that are distressful to see in reality."<sup>7</sup> The modern answer to this question finds programmatic expression in Kant's concept of "free" or disinterested pleasure: ugly and tragic subjects can be aesthetically enjoyable since what is involved is not (dis) pleasure arising directly from these subjects themselves. That aesthetic pleasure is not a quality of the subjects depicted per se also means that the pleasure elicited by these subjects cannot be experienced and described nonaesthetically that is, "in reality" (Aristotle). This creates an inherent link between the question of aesthetic pleasure and that of aesthetic difference. Aesthetic difference is exemplified by our ability to derive pleasure in the medium of aesthetic experience from subjects that would arouse displeasure outside of this medium.

If, for the time being, one keeps to this roughly sketched conception, the question of aesthetic pleasure is more than just a question regarding secondary aspects of our response to works of art; instead, it is inherently linked to the question of aesthetic difference or autonomy. For this reason, the very core of the definition of the latter is affected by Adorno's frequent rejection of aesthetic enjoyment in the name of a sociocritically charged understanding of art: by defining art as "a plaintive cry or lament" (*Klage*) or committing it to "the primary color of black,"<sup>8</sup> he robs its viewers of their constitutive distance or detachment from the object or content viewed. But people who respond only plaintively to the aesthetic representation of the deplorable forfeit their specifically aesthetic perspective: by lamenting the deplorable, they view art from the perspective of moral judgment. In short, the conception of aesthetic negativity as a morally based critique of society disputes the possibility of aesthetic pleasure, levels the difference between aesthetic and moral experience, and thus fails to grasp a defining feature of aesthetic autonomy.

Rejections of aesthetic enjoyment based on social criticism or morality cannot be overlooked in Adorno's aesthetic writings. He seems to find aesthetic pleasure justified only when it is charged with utopian contents. As long as aesthetic negativity is reduced to critical negativity, aesthetic pleasure can only be conceived as the anticipation of the sublation of negativity. As such, aesthetic pleasure functions as the aesthetic correlate to the normative, historico-philosophical basis of critique, namely, reconciliation: art "measures its profundity by whether or not it can, through the reconciliation that its formal law brings to contradictions, emphasize the real lack of reconciliation all the more."<sup>9</sup> In a feeble, historico-philosophical interpretation of the Stendhalian maxim that aesthetic pleasure is a "promesse de bonheur," which Nietzsche had already misleadingly set against Kant's discussion of disinterested pleasure,<sup>10</sup> Adorno subjects the autonomous significance of aesthetic pleasure to the functional requirements of a logic of critique. This demonstrates that in Adorno's social-critical understanding of aesthetic negativity aesthetic pleasure can only be understood—whether it be rejected or accepted—at the price of being subsumed under moral judgment: either it is rejected for obscuring the true task of art—which is to indict present social ills—or it is accepted as an anticipation of a future reconciliation of those ills.

Nothing would be more misleading than to dispute that Adorno's work in its basic features is marked by such moralization of aesthetic pleasure and that this is a consequence of interpreting aesthetic negativity as social critique. On the other hand, the above-cited



relationship between the aesthetic concepts of pleasure and negativity supports the notion that changes in the conception of aesthetic pleasure directly affect the concept of aesthetic negativity. Such shifts in the concept of aesthetic pleasure can already be found in Adorno. His polemic against a moralization of the Kantian concept of free or disinterested pleasure <sup>11</sup> cannot be overlooked and makes it rather dubious to simply attribute to Adorno such a moralization. If, however, a general rejection of aesthetic pleasure, the category central to the theory of autonomous art, cannot be ascribed to Adorno, how is his indisputable critique of this category to be understood? Does Adorno's critique of the prevailing conception of aesthetic enjoyment contain an insight that gives expression to, rather than contradicts, the recognition of its autonomy?

A more discerning view discovers that Adorno's critique of the lightheartedness (*Heiterkeit*) and pleasure of art primarily applies to the way in which such notions are opposed to the "seriousness of life," as in the repeatedly cited declaration to this effect in the prologue to Schiller's *Wallenstein*. *This opposition, the epitome of traditionally conceived aesthetic difference, defines art as "leisure and celebration or at least a festival."* <sup>12</sup> Adorno's critique is thus directed against a conception of aesthetic enjoyment that—in keeping with Nietzsche's concept of "minor" art "in the age of work"—reduces it to "recreational activity" in the "evening hours" of the working day. <sup>13</sup> The "established and popular distinction between work and leisure" is reproduced and affirmed in the "edifyingly noncommittal character" of this form of aesthetic pleasure. <sup>14</sup> This critique of aesthetic enjoyment made by Adorno does not target the explanation of such pleasure in terms of the structural conditions of aesthetic experience, that is, in terms of the specific distance or detachment from the object that aesthetic experience provides. Instead, it is directed against its equation with a type of pleasure that he analyzes as part of the culture industry. This interpretation is immediately plausible, given a deficit found in many theories of aesthetic pleasure. For though the latter take into account and emphasize the distinction between aesthetic experience and the moral evaluation of the contents of aesthetic representation, they nevertheless identify aesthetic pleasure with socially functional leisure. The validity of Adorno's critique thus involves the underdefined character of aesthetic pleasure in any explanation that calls attention to the inviolable distinction between the aesthetic and the moral, but which lacks any means of distinguishing between aesthetic and nonaesthetic forms of pleasure. It is precisely this second distinction that Adorno seeks to recover (with rather one-sided emphasis in the *Aesthetic Theory*) by polemicizing against the philistine definition of art as a vehicle for the satisfaction of needs or desires. <sup>15</sup> Only this twofold distinction of aesthetic pleasure, from the moral sentiments that accompany the normative-critical assessment of aesthetic contents *and* from the pleasure of the direct satisfaction of needs, is adequate to the concept of free aesthetic pleasure in Kant. For this pleasure is not only free from all moral justification or grounding (as provided in catharsis theory, for instance), but it is also free of the "sensuous" (*sinnlich*) satisfaction of needs: "We may say that, of all these three kinds of pleasure [of the good, the agreeable, and the beautiful], only the pleasure involved in taste for the beautiful is disinterested and free, since we are not compelled to give our approval by any interest, whether of sense or of reason." <sup>16</sup> Thus Adorno's critique of aesthetic pleasure qua compensatory recreation has the legitimate function of pointing to the customary failure to distinguish aesthetic from sensuous pleasure. This still leaves open the question as to which argument is to be advanced by emphasizing this distinction. It seems reasonable to suspect that Adorno is only able to give force to the distinction between aesthetic and sensuous pleasure by appealing to a concept of aesthetic enjoyment charged with utopian or moral contents. This is exemplified by Adorno's critique of the culture industry: he criticizes its "prescribed fun" as the "transposition of art into the sphere of consumption" and as the degradation of aesthetic pleasure into purely sensuous enjoyment. <sup>17</sup> One way to carry out this critique would be to point out the structural difference between the two forms of pleasure, as does Kant. For the most part Adorno does not choose this course, however; instead, he denounces in moral or social-critical terms their crude amalgamation in the culture industry: "But the *natural* affinity, between business and amusement is seen in the real purpose of the latter: as an apology for society. Being amused means being in agreement.... Amusement always means: not having to think about it, to forget suffering, even where it is shown." <sup>18</sup> By condemning the culture industry's disregard for the distinction between sensuous and aesthetic pleasure for moral rather than aesthetic reasons, however, Adorno makes himself an advocate of the supposed social-critical or moral contents of aesthetic pleasure rather than a defender of its autonomy.

This shows that it is not sufficient to understand Adorno's critique of aesthetic pleasure as a one-sided emphasis of the difference between aesthetic and sensuous pleasure and to integrate it into the Kantian model. What is relevant is the basis of this critique. Here, too, a more precise, "stereoscopic" reading results in a more differentiated picture than the one initially sketched. Admittedly, Adorno always criticizes, from the standpoint of the negativity of the aesthetic, the crude amalgamation of aesthetic and sensuous pleasure in the culture industry. The concept of negativity begins to free itself from its misleading equation with critique, however, in Adorno's description of the structure of experience from which the nonaesthetic, sensuous pleasure of the culture industry arises. Adorno explains the pleasure of amusement as an "identity," "imitation," or "repetition" experienced in a "state of diversion"; it is the pleasure aroused by the "automatic" recognition of something already known.<sup>19</sup> The negativity of the aesthetic is directed toward this basic feature of automatic repetition or identity in sensuous pleasure and not toward its contents or functions: the "threshold between artistic and preartistic experience" is the negation of the "rule of the identification mechanism."<sup>20</sup> In such formulations, Adorno criticizes the amalgamation of aesthetic and sensuous pleasure not because the two modes of experience confounded in it are of different moral magnitude, but because they are structurally different: whereas sensuous pleasure is marked by the "rule of the identification mechanism" or "automatic repetition," aesthetic pleasure arises in a negative process.

Though such a structural distinction between aesthetic and sensuous pleasure on the basis of the conceptual opposition between negativity and (automatic) identification still has moral or social-critical connotations, this is no longer the substance of the distinction. On the contrary: from its perspective, the affinity between aesthetic and moral pleasure often asserted in Adorno is dropped in favor of an affinity between the two forms of nonaesthetic pleasure, the moral and the sensuous. In contrast to aesthetic pleasure, in which there is "a playing with elements of reality without any mirroring," both sensuous and moral pleasure *equally* appear to be efforts to gain a "positive meaning of negativity."<sup>21</sup> Understood in this way, the meaning of the concept of aesthetic negativity no longer consists in disputing—on moral grounds—the autonomous logic of aesthetic pleasure, but in securing it vis-à-vis the two forms of nonaesthetic pleasure: according to Adorno, the uniqueness of aesthetic enjoyment is based on pleasure from that which does not let itself be recognized or identified.

Thus Adorno's discussion of aesthetic negativity vis-à-vis the concept of aesthetic pleasure has two practically opposed functions. On the one hand, aesthetic negativity is ascribed the task of providing aesthetic pleasure with a moral value—be it positive or negative. This results in either identifying aesthetic pleasure with sensuous pleasure and criticizing it in moral terms, or, conversely, equating it with moral pleasure and then rejecting on moral grounds the way it is taken to be linked to sensuous pleasure. Both of these variants are based on a conception of aesthetic negativity as social critique, and both fail to satisfy the Kantian program of securing the autonomy of aesthetic pleasure. On the other hand, a second concept of aesthetic negativity marks aesthetic pleasure off from both moral and sensuous pleasure by distinguishing between the different experiential structures out of which aesthetic and nonaesthetic pleasure respectively arise. Whereas the latter is based on a process of automatic recognition or identification, the former results from an aesthetic negation of this process. Thus no "apologia" is required for aesthetic experience and its pleasure vis-à-vis the aesthetics of negativity (Jauß)—if the latter is correctly understood, it itself represents this very apologia.

Only the second concept of aesthetic negativity, which distinguishes it from automatic identification, can satisfy the task of explicating the autonomy of aesthetic pleasure; the first concept, by equating aesthetic negativity with the negativity of social critique, must fail to do so. This holds, however, not just by the second concept's ensuring an account of aesthetic pleasure as dually differentiated, that is, from both sensuous and moral pleasure. A further link to Kant exists in Adorno's establishment of the structural interconnection between aesthetic negativity and pleasure—a link which provides Adorno with a second means of securing the concept of aesthetic negativity from any purist misconception. For by conceiving of aesthetic pleasure as the effect of aesthetic negativity, he takes up a notion central to the Kantian theory of aesthetic pleasure, that such pleasure arises not in direct confrontation with an object, in our rationally or sensuously testing its qualities, but

in our reflective recourse or return (*Zurückbeugen*) to the process of experiencing the object. <sup>22</sup> Accordingly, aesthetic pleasure should never be thought of as a direct or unmediated response or reaction; instead, it always refers to that which occurs in aesthetically experiencing an object. As such, this connection between aesthetic pleasure and aesthetic experience further construes aesthetic experience essentially as a process. Aesthetic pleasure arises in reflection not on what the individual contents of experience *are*, but rather on what happens during the process of their *becoming* aesthetic experiences. No single defining characteristic of the elements of such a context of experience can qualify it as aesthetic; there are no predicates that can directly designate aesthetic qualities. <sup>23</sup> It is only against the backdrop of this connection between aesthetic pleasure and experiences that it becomes comprehensible how Adorno's concept of aesthetic negativity can fulfill the function of ensuring the dual distinctiveness of aesthetic pleasure. "Negativity" is the designation Adorno recommends for characterizing the logic of precisely that genuinely aesthetic process of experience out of which aesthetic pleasure or displeasure arises. It is not the direct experience of an object and its qualities that we term aesthetic, but rather the aesthetically experienced *fate* of diverse, nonaesthetic, automatic acts of recognition. Initially, every process of aesthetic experience is defined by experiential acts that are not genuinely aesthetic. Aesthetic difference can thus only be defined as the result of that event or happening which takes up these initially nonaesthetic qualities and negatively transforms them. The enactment or carrying out <sup>24</sup> of this event is what we term aesthetic experience. It succeeds in forming processually that quality of difference that cannot be ascribed to its individual contents taken in isolation. The aesthetically experienced fate of these characteristics, which transforms them into aesthetic ones, marks their nonaesthetic form with their aesthetic difference. As a difference enacted processually, however, this difference is negation: it negates the nonaesthetic moments, which do not stand opposed to it externally but are instead themselves present as the initiating aspects in the aesthetic process. Thus aesthetic difference is the formation of difference, the negation of those very nonaesthetic characteristics the existence of which is necessary for any process of aesthetic experience to begin.

Consequently, a reading of Adorno in terms of the concept of aesthetic pleasure and against the backdrop of some of the defining qualities of Kantian aesthetics can be formulated as follows: the concept of negativity designates the basic principle underlying the processual event of aesthetic experience, the reflection of which offers up aesthetic pleasure. This conception of aesthetic negativity satisfies a basic condition of aesthetic autonomy that can be derived from Kant's concept of free pleasure: that it allow a concept of aesthetic pleasure that distinguishes it from both moral and sensuous pleasure. This has been shown to be possible only by determining the character of the process of aesthetic experience. If one characterizes its logic as negative, the concept of aesthetic negativity satisfies the basic condition of aesthetic autonomy introduced only if the two misconceptions of aesthetic negativity cited above, the social-critical and the purist, can be avoided. The social-critical misconception of aesthetic negativity reduces the threefold distinction of moral, sensuous, and aesthetic pleasure into a twofold one: it opposes either moral pleasure to aesthetic pleasure conceived as sensuous pleasure, or aesthetic pleasure conceived as moral pleasure to sensuous pleasure. On the other hand, the purist misconception underestimates the importance of the processuality of the event of aesthetic experience within the reflection of which aesthetic pleasure forms. It reduces negative processuality, which, in the view of the aesthetics of negativity itself constitutes the structure of aesthetic experience, to a mere prelude to aesthetic pleasure. Thus, for instance, Susan Sontag's crudely fashioned alternative, "[i]n place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art," <sup>25</sup> foreshortens aesthetic negativity into a "flight from interpretation." She is interested only in the destination point of this flight, the sensuous-erotic experience; this is what she terms the aesthetic, rather than the negating movement of aesthetic experience. By neglecting this aspect of the process, the purist misconception also loses sight of the indirectness and reflexivity of aesthetic pleasure and, in this way, of the possibility of describing the difference between aesthetic and sensuous pleasure in structural rather than substantive or gradual terms. Accordingly, both misconceptions of aesthetic negativity, the social-critical and the purist, fail to satisfy the definition of aesthetic autonomy expressed in Kant's concept of free aesthetic pleasure.

At the same time, it has been shown that the concept of aesthetic negativity is in part already used in Adorno in a way compatible with the basic condition of aesthetic autonomy

formulated in the concept of aesthetic pleasure. Alongside the negative determinations, of what the aesthetics of negativity must not be if it is to avoid undercutting the autonomy of its object, the previous discussions have also brought forth a positive determination: the account of the logic of aesthetic experience provided by the concept of negativity must make its connection to aesthetic pleasure plausible. The aesthetics of negativity satisfies this condition by showing that aesthetic experience, precisely and solely by means of its negativity, entails the pleasure of the beautiful. Nonetheless, a discussion of aesthetic negativity cannot start by establishing this connection; it in fact represents the conclusion of the discussions on the aesthetics of negativity contained in Part I (see chap. 4).

Instead, such reflections have to begin by elucidating the thesis that the category of negativity describes the processual logic of aesthetic experience. According to what has been said thus far, though, this is still a rather undefined claim, since all we know as yet about the event of aesthetic experience is that aesthetic pleasure arises out of reflection on it. Adorno, however, does not only follow Kant in terms of the connection between aesthetic experience and the "reflective pleasure" of the aesthetic; this is just the first aspect in which the aesthetics of negativity can, or should, be reconstructed not as contradicting but rather as elaborating Kant's explanation of aesthetic autonomy. There is also a second aspect in which Adorno can be read as taking up the Kantian project: the determination of the process of aesthetic experience itself. Kant provides an account of the structure of this experience by means of the concept of reflexive judgment. It is impossible to overlook Adorno's adherence in his aesthetic thinking to this concept. At the center of his theses on aesthetic experience, however, one finds not Kant's concept of the reflexive judgment, but his concept of the aesthetic "spirit" (*Geist*). Here, the concept of aesthetic spirit designates the object of aesthetic experience: that which we experience when we experience an object aesthetically. Now if, according to Adorno's thesis, the process of aesthetic experience is defined by negativity, this also holds for the object formed in this process, the aesthetic spirit. Thus, Adorno is quite consistent when he explains the concept of aesthetic negativity in terms of that of the aesthetic spirit. Against the backdrop of this Kantian reflection, the concept of aesthetic negativity gains another defining quality: "negativity" designates the structural principle of an experiential process, the reflection of which produces aesthetic pleasure, and which is oriented toward the aesthetic spirit of a representation. Let us take a brief look at the general conditions that are entailed for the concept of aesthetic negativity by this second account in Kant of the process of aesthetic experience, that is, from its relation to aesthetic spirit.

To define aesthetic experience as the experience of the spirit of an artwork is to take it to be the comprehension of a representation (of something). Such a comprehension as representation can also be called the interpretation or understanding (*Verstehen*) of a work of art. The negativity of aesthetic experience is related to this in the following way: aesthetic experience negates the possibility of the interpretive comprehension of an artwork as the embodiment of its spirit. This raises the question as to how negative aesthetic experience experiences its object, if not interpretively as a representation of its spirit. Several of Adorno's texts point to the traditional counterconcept to spirit, that of "letter" (*Buchstabe*): the negativity of aesthetic experience arises in the impossibility of understanding an artwork as a representation of its "spirit" and orients our interpretations instead toward its "letters."

Adorno introduces this concept of aesthetic literalness in his "Notes on Kafka" (which represents one of his earliest analyses of literature) by means of an argument inspired by Benjamin's polemic against the aesthetic symbol:

If the notion of the symbol has any meaning whatsoever in aesthetics—and this is far from certain—then it can only be that the individual moments of the work of art point beyond themselves by virtue of their interrelations, that their totality coalesces into meaning. Nothing could be less true of Kafka.... Each sentence is literal and each signifies. The two moments are not merged, as the symbol would have it, but yawn apart and out of the abyss between them blinds the glaring ray of fascination. <sup>26</sup>

"Literal" is thus a predicate that describes the aesthetically experienced status of the text in opposition to that status it gains in the process of symbolic interpretation. Experience

and preservation of literalness become in this way criteria of negatively conceived aesthetic experience. To perceive texts aesthetically is to remain true to their letters.

Adorno explains his thesis that aesthetic experience follows a negative logic as the claim that it aborts or denies the symbolic interpretation of an aesthetic object and instead grasps its literalness. In this way, he follows a tendency in modern aesthetics that—most clearly since Nietzsche—makes aesthetic experience a vehicle for reevaluating the old, metaphysically defined hierarchies of spirit and letter. These hierarchies form the core of traditional hermeneutics: since they construe the relationship between spirit and letter analogously to the hierarchical one between soul and body, the general and the specific, the Idea and history, they can only conceive of the task of adequately comprehending a text as the overcoming of the letter in the spirit embodied in it. This relationship between spirit and letter in traditional hermeneutics commits it to an interpretation that, by means of established interpretive procedures, revives the torpid texts of Homer, transforms the literal law of the Old Covenant into the living spirit of the New, and brings the dead letter to life by investing it with spirit.<sup>27</sup> In contrast, the principle of literalness is the maxim of a process of aesthetic experience that in Adorno raises no less a claim than to take leave of the metaphysical relationship between spirit and letter prevailing in traditional hermeneutics. The sublation of the letter *in* spirit is replaced by its preservation *vis-à-vis* the spirit.

This motif of the aesthetic preservation of the letter *vis-à-vis* the spirit, of the surface of the artwork against the depths of interpretation, is central to Adorno's aesthetics of negativity. The question is: does this violate the second condition of the Kantian concept of autonomy, that is, that aesthetic experience is the experience of the aesthetic spirit? This question becomes all the more urgent given that Adorno's realization of the motif of aesthetic literalness leaves itself open to a misreading: if the aesthetic letter is merely externally opposed to the interpretation of its spirit, understood merely as its abstract negation, this then has positivist repercussions: the preservation of the letter of aesthetic objects becomes indistinguishable from the positivist program of its literal (*wörtlich*) comprehension. This concept of literalness assumes that the objective determinateness that characterizes the letter, independent of all "spiritual" interpretation, is the object of aesthetic experience.<sup>28</sup> According to Szondi's analysis, the principle of literalness is used positivistically in the field of philology, in its description, for instance, of individual passages, elements, and details of a work as objectively recognizable facts. Statements about such facts then achieve the status of pieces of evidence in interpretive disputes, without the interpretive hypotheses in any way jeopardizing the certainty of the establishment of the basic aesthetic data. From a positivist standpoint, the latter prove themselves to be independent of any question concerning the aesthetic spirit incorporated within them. It is evident, though, that this nonaesthetically perceivable determinateness of aesthetic objects cannot be what Adorno means by the aesthetically experienced literalness of artworks. But Adorno can only avoid this positivist consequence of his arguments if he avoids abstractly opposing the concept of the aesthetic letter, which he introduced in elucidation of the negativity of aesthetic experience, to that which it is negatively related, namely, the aesthetic spirit and the understanding of its representation.

Insight into the positivist danger implicit in taking aesthetic objects literally leads Adorno to explicitly turn away from the maxim of literalness that was still central to the arguments of the "Notes on Kafka": "The spirit of works of art transcends their materiality as well as their sensuality, and yet spirit exists only to the extent to which these two are its moments. In a negative sense, this means that in works of art nothing is to be taken literally, least of all their words."<sup>29</sup> In this way, Adorno raises an objection to the "recent reification, the regression of the work of art to the barbaric literalness of what is aesthetically the case"<sup>30</sup> that a merely abstract negation of the aesthetic spirit succumbs to. The attempt to save aesthetic literalness by means of the abstract negation of the aesthetic spirit is itself premised on a false understanding of their relationship: spirit and letter can abstractly negate each other only if they are taken to be unrelated to one another. In this way, however, the postulate of literal comprehension suffers from the same prejudice as its opponent, traditional hermeneutics, which seeks to comprehend in isolation the spirit embodied in the letter through acts of symbolic interpretation. There is a correspondence between the cult of the surface of the aesthetic letter and that of the depths of the aesthetic spirit. Both of them divide that which, as the aesthetic, can only be

conceived of in its interconnectedness—and in this way both fall short of the level of aesthetic reflection marked by Kant's concept of the aesthetic spirit.

Kant makes twofold use of the concept of aesthetic spirit: first, in terms of the aesthetics of production to define the ability of the genius, and second, to define the structure of aesthetic contents.<sup>31</sup> Both uses have in common, however, their depiction of aesthetic objects as special forms of representation. In this way, aesthetic spirit—understood as the ability of the genius to "create, as it were, another nature"<sup>32</sup>—is not the productive power of the imagination, set free and on its own, but only that imagination able to represent or express its ideas: "The second talent is properly the one we call spirit. For in order to express what is ineffable in the mental state accompanying a certain representation and to make it universally communicable ... we need an ability [viz., spirit] to apprehend the imagination's rapidly passing play and to unite it in a concept that can be communicated without the constraint of rules."<sup>33</sup> Genius or aesthetic spirit is the power of representation or expression of aesthetic ideas in an appropriate medium. On the basis of the difference between aesthetic ideas and concepts, the former remain indivisibly linked to the medium of representation, without, however, being identical to features of the medium that can be established independently of the function of representation. Kant terms the features of the expression of aesthetic ideas their "aesthetic attributes ... that accompany the logical ones and that give the imagination a momentum which makes it think more in response to these objects [*dabei*], though in an undeveloped way, than can be comprehended within one concept and hence in one determinate linguistic expression."<sup>34</sup> Aesthetic spirit is not the free movement of the imagination no longer subject to any cognitive end, but rather that movement of the imagination that uncovers "ideas to a given concept" and finds the appropriate "expression to this [concept]." The qualities of the embodied object, its "aesthetic attributes," are more than mere letters because they are only what they are as media of the representation of aesthetic ideas; and these, the aesthetic ideas, in turn, are only what they are if they represent themselves in those attributes that give impetus to the powers of imagination.

Aesthetic spirit is thus a concept aimed at the indivisible connection between the aesthetic attributes of an object and the ideas represented in them. In this way, it represents another basic condition of aesthetic autonomy, since aesthetic letter and spirit, due to their internal interconnectedness, cannot be reduced to their nonaesthetically and separately identified elements: "I should think that spirit as opposed to letter, and spirit, as aesthetic quality, would be concepts so far apart that one could not move from one to the other without digressing terribly." <sup>35</sup> If the connection with the letter intended in the concept of aesthetic spirit is thus an attribute of the structure of the aesthetic freed to follow its own autonomous logic, then both the symbolic interpretation, which seeks to separate the spirit from the letter, and the literal reading, which fixates positivistically on the literalness of its object, fail to account for its autonomy.

This also implies that the only way to hold fast to the negative impulse that gives life to the emphasis on the aesthetic letter in Adorno is to premise it on, rather than use it to undercut, the concept of the aesthetic spirit. What this intends and what significance Adorno's concept of aesthetic negativity receives within it can best be outlined by contrasting it with the most important theoretical alternative to the aesthetics of negativity: hermeneutics.<sup>36</sup>

The theory of the aesthetic spirit in Kant also represents the starting point for the hermeneutical explanation of the relationship between aesthetic spirit and letter. Thus Hans-Georg Gadamer reads Kant's theory of the genius as the self-transcendence of a purely subjective aesthetics or aesthetics of taste. Gadamer also interprets it as an indication of the structure of aesthetic representation: in it, the concept of spirit does not go beyond its vehicle as it does in models of symbolic interpretation, nor is the aesthetic letter reduced to its objective, nonaesthetic determinateness as it is in the positivist concept of literal understanding.<sup>37</sup> Hermeneutic aesthetics no longer abstractly opposes the letter to the spirit, since the former is charged with a meaning in aesthetic representations, a meaning that cannot be experienced independently from the medium of its representation, which is specified to be so and not otherwise. Aesthetic objects do not just *have* their aesthetically relevant attributes, they also *show* them. And they show them

in such a way that they are an expression of something, shown aesthetically, that cannot be represented in any other way. <sup>38</sup>

Thus hermeneutic aesthetics proposes, with its concept of the aesthetic spirit, a mediation between meaning and letter that is in accord with Adorno's objection to the immanent (metaphysically based) hierarchy of symbolic interpretive schemes; yet it does so without taking this to imply the need for an aesthetics of negativity. For the increased value of the letter in hermeneutics relates negatively only to those interpretations, such as the traditional symbolic one, that marginalize the dimension of the letter. In contrast to such interpretations, hermeneutics holds to a concept of aesthetic understanding that is based on the successful mediation of meaning and letter described in the concept of the aesthetic spirit. Now it is Adorno's thesis that the process of aesthetic experience must be conceived as a negative event and that this negativity is found in the preservation of the aesthetic literalness of art, as opposed to the interpretive understanding of art as the representation of something. If this thesis is taken to satisfy Kant's definition of the aesthetic spirit, then it has to be possible to conceive of it as a counterthesis to the hermeneutic position. Thus, on the one hand, the aesthetics of negativity is in agreement with the concept of spirit that has preoccupied aesthetics since it was outlined in Kant; it too postulates a link between meaning and expression: only in their mutual reference do they become aesthetic. On the other hand, however, it deviates from the hermeneutic explanation of the relationship between spirit and letter at a decisive juncture: whereas hermeneutics locates its defining moments in reciprocal correspondence, the aesthetics of negativity interprets the relationship as one of reciprocal release. The aesthetics of negativity does not construe the aesthetic spirit in terms of the hermeneutically reformulated, Hegelian definition of encompassing mediation, but in the romantic terms of a self-transcending movement, as the "breakthrough of the spirit through form (*Gestalt*)" into the fragmentary: "The rationality of works of art only becomes spirit insofar as it perishes in its polar opposite." <sup>39</sup>

In this way, Adorno's aesthetics rehabilitates the autonomy of the letter: in terms of it, aesthetic spirit is not an integrative mediation, but a releasing transformation. The negativity of the literal—which the aesthetics of negativity, as does hermeneutics, initially introduces as the counterterm to the arrogating spirit of symbolic interpretation—continues to apply even to that mediation that hermeneutics conceives of as the sublation of the abstract negative relationship of moments that have become one-sidedly independent of each other. Even though the letter, put forth as the negative principle, remains resistant even to its hermeneutic reconciliation in an aesthetically pacified spirit, it is not the independent literalness of a positivistically misconceived philology. The letter that is autonomous and resistant vis-à-vis the hermeneutically elucidated spirit is precisely so only in its persistent, but nontranscendable negative relation to that against which it makes its claim to autonomy: it is only autonomous in (and thus never separate from, either before or after) the negative process vis-à-vis the efforts at mediation (efforts which hermeneutics asserts to be successful according to its concept of the aesthetic spirit). The letter—which negative aesthetics introduces against the spirit of symbolic interpretation in such a way that it transcends even the hermeneutic sublation of this opposition in the concept of the aesthetic spirit—is structurally linked to an interminable negation of all efforts to relate it to meaning in understanding. Aesthetic experience is the scene of this interminable negation of even an interpretive understanding oriented toward the aesthetic spirit. When the letter exceeds the aesthetic spirit, this is not a positive transcendence, but a negative violation.

Thus hermeneutic and negative aesthetics differ in their interpretation of the negativity of the aesthetic letter vis-à-vis the spirit of symbolic interpretation that is fetishistically detached from its vehicle. Hermeneutic aesthetics conceives of this negativity from the point of view of its possible sublation in an expanded concept of the aesthetic spirit. In contrast, negative aesthetics defines the negativity of the letter in such a way that it survives even the integrative efforts of hermeneutics: the negativity that the aesthetic letter directs against symbolic interpretation is no longer conceived of in terms of possible sublation; it is an unsublatable negation.

Let us summarize the points clarified via this recourse to Kant's concept of the aesthetic spirit and its further development in hermeneutic aesthetics. The impulse behind Adorno's concept of aesthetic negativity—to preserve the literalness of aesthetic objects from

interpretation—cannot be understood as the severing of all connections between letter and meaning—for in this way, the aesthetic letter would regress in positivist fashion to a state of preaesthetic facticity. Instead, the aesthetic letter can only maintain its autonomy vis-à-vis the meaning ascribed to it by interpretation in its connection with this meaning, and it is this connection that is called aesthetic spirit. Admittedly, this emphasis on the autonomy of the aesthetic letter stands in contradiction to the hermeneutic interpretation of the aesthetic spirit as that mediation of letter and meaning toward which the process of aesthetic experience qua understanding is related. This, however, makes the target of the negativity of Adorno's concept of the aesthetic letter clear: the negativity of aesthetic experience does not apply only to symbolic interpretation—for the hermeneutic conception of interpretive understanding is also directed against it; nor does it apply to the connection between the aesthetic letter and aesthetic meaning in general—for then it would fail to satisfy the basic condition of aesthetic autonomy formulated by the concept of aesthetic spirit. Instead, the negativity of aesthetic experience is directed against the effort—described by hermeneutics as successful—to mediate or intermesh the two dimensions of aesthetic spirit. According to Adorno, the processual event of aesthetic experience is negative precisely because this experience cannot succeed in intermeshing letter and meaning, but rather has to fail, and in this process, its elements become independent of each other. Its negativity can never be sublated, because the aesthetic autonomy of these moments is not mere unrelatedness but is rather only possible as an interminable countermovement against the effort at their intermeshing—an effort that is one-sidedly emphasized and falsely positivized by hermeneutic theory. And this is precisely what characterizes Adorno's concept of aesthetic spirit (more accurately termed romantic than Hegelian): the fragmentation of a unity nonetheless continuously sought.

That which can be described vis-à-vis the aesthetic spirit of works of art, however, is actually located in the process of experience: the latter is the true locus of aesthetic negativity. Hermeneutic theory conceives of the process of aesthetic experience as a process of understanding. In this way, the structure of the aesthetic spirit describes what understanding is directed toward: aesthetic meaning or sense. The basic thesis of negative aesthetics, which contradicts the hermeneutic model, can accordingly be reformulated against the backdrop of the Kantian concept of aesthetic spirit in the following way: aesthetic experience is a negative event because it is an experience of the negation (the failure, the subversion) of (the nevertheless unavoidable effort at) understanding. As has already been implied in Adorno's romantic interpretation of the concept of aesthetic spirit, negative aesthetics thus provides a two-stage description of aesthetic experience: as an attempt at understanding and as the negation of this attempt.

Such a two-stage model of aesthetic experience once again risks construing aesthetic negation as an abstract rather than a "determinate" negation. One of the meanings of determinate negation is, according to Hegel, its grounding in the negated.<sup>40</sup> In acts of determinate negation, we do not reject something from without, but rather ground our negation in the immanent negativity of the negated itself. This also holds for the aesthetically experienced negation of understanding: it does not negate from without, but rather grounds itself in its immanent negativity. Admittedly, there is a fundamental difference between this aesthetic claim to grounding and its nonaesthetic form: that the negated is itself immanently negative, and thus grounds the negation directed toward it, can *only* be discovered by *means* of negating it in aesthetic experience. The grounding of aesthetic negativity in the negated is indivisibly linked to the transformation that the negated is subject to in aesthetic experience: "origin is goal." Aesthetically negated understanding is not yet, in its nonaesthetic form, the immanent negative that grounds its negation, but only *becomes* it by means of its specifically aesthetic enactment. Only in our efforts to reach understanding in our aesthetic experience do we discover a negativity that goes beyond these efforts, and goes beyond them unsublatably. Aesthetic experience is thus the releasing of an unsublatable negativity in the negated, which, at the same time, alone renders the negated suitable for aesthetic experience.

By taking stock of the conception of Adorno's negative aesthetics that emerges from the previous discussion, we will be able to indicate the next steps to be taken in its explication. It has been seen that a stereoscopic reading of Adorno's writings provides an understanding of his concept of aesthetic negativity that is compatible with the basic conditions of aesthetic autonomy as formulated in Kantian aesthetics. The concept of



aesthetic negativity can be interpreted as Adorno's suggestion for explicating the process of aesthetic experience, a process out of which aesthetic pleasure arises by negating understanding. By emphasizing this claim, that is, that the concept of aesthetic negativity satisfies the basic conditions of aesthetic autonomy, two sets of misconceptions can be dispelled. The latter are found not only in Adorno's adherents and critics, but are also connected in Adorno himself, to his central aesthetic category. The first set of misconceptions encompasses the social-critical and purist concepts of aesthetic negativity, concepts which are complementary in their mutual opposition. To clear up these misconceptions, aesthetic negativity has to be understood as the structural principle for that process of aesthetic experience the immanent reflection of which engenders pleasure. The second set of misconceptions encompasses the positivist interpretation of aesthetic negativity, and more generally, every abstract interpretation of it. To clear up these misconceptions, aesthetic negativity has to be conceived of as the structural principle for the aesthetic spirit, that is, as the determinate negation of the understanding sought in the process of the aesthetic experience of art.

The rejection, implicit in Adorno, of the cited misconceptions of aesthetic negativity—suggested by calling to mind some Kantian motifs found in Adorno's writings—makes it possible to indicate the structural principle of aesthetic negativity and, accordingly, the steps to be taken in the following chapters to explicate it: negative aesthetics describes aesthetic experience as a negative event since it is that processual enactment of the attempted interpretive understanding of aesthetic objects that uncovers the negativity immanent to it and thus lets it subvert itself; aesthetic experience is the self-imposed subversion of the understanding that is attempted in this experience. This is to be shown by means of a semiotic clarification (chap. 2).

The programmatic formulation of the concept of aesthetic negativity has resulted from a specific way of reading Adorno's concept of aesthetic spirit. I have suggested viewing this romantic concept of aesthetic spirit as an unorthodox interpretation of Kant's description of the structure of aesthetic representation. The point of this interpretation is, however, only seen when it is related to its hermeneutic countermodel. Only then does it become clear that the negativity of aesthetic experience is in no way limited to a critique of that model of traditional hermeneutics which marginalizes the dimension of the aesthetic letter. Much more importantly, it applies precisely to the attempt at aesthetic understanding that we undertake in every aesthetic experience and the success of which hermeneutics asserts. That aesthetic experience does not adhere to the models of traditional hermeneutics, which seek meaning behind and independent of its embodiment, is the premise, not the thesis, of negative aesthetics. It only makes sense to speak of negativity as the central aesthetic concept if aesthetic experience is negative vis-à-vis every effort at understanding and especially vis-à-vis the specifically aesthetic effort, which aesthetic experience necessarily undertakes. <sup>41</sup> Thus the explication of aesthetic negativity must lead to a critique of hermeneutics (chap. 3).

The description of aesthetic experience as the breakdown, failure, or subversion of its own attempts at understanding must not lead us to overlook the tasks that Adorno expects it to satisfy: first, the elucidation of the aesthetic pleasure that comes into being in the reflection on the negative phenomenon of aesthetic experience; and, second, the elucidation of the released literalness of the aesthetic object. The two coincide in Adorno: aesthetic pleasure is the experience of an object beyond understanding, and the release of aesthetic literalness occurs only in reflection on the process of aesthetic experience. This points to the fact that the negativity of aesthetic experience is not only the failure of understanding, but also the release from it; it is not only its subversion, but also its transgression. <sup>42</sup> This is shown in a negative-aesthetic theory of the beautiful (chap. 4).

## 2

# Aesthetic Deferral

Chapter 1 offered two indications about the character of the concept of aesthetic negativity. Recall that aesthetic pleasure (from the beautiful), defined by its twofold distinctiveness, arises out of the reflection of aesthetic experience. Adorno understands this experience first of all as the negation of the basic structure of the experience of nonaesthetic pleasure, which he terms "automatic repetition" or "identification." Second, in the automatic repetition it negates, aesthetic negation discovers as determinate negation precisely the negativity that it directs against this repetition. When both defining features are taken together, an outline of aesthetic negativity emerges: aesthetic experience is a primarily negative event, since it is nothing other than the enactment of automatic repetition, by which our nonaesthetic experience is defined, in such a way that it releases from this repetition its own negation.

The starting point of aesthetic experience and thus the object of its determinate negation is the way in which we experience the nonaesthetic. Adorno terms this mode of experience "identificatory." The term "automatic repetition," quoted from *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, refers in Adorno to one special interpretation of the basic, identity-oriented quality of nonaesthetic experience. No doubt, however, the emphasis in Adorno is not on the automatic nature of the identification, but on explaining the identifying moment of aesthetic experience as "conceptual." In this context, Adorno's notion of the conceptual focuses on the (scientific or idealistic) hybris of the spirit and contrasts its structure with the two defining features of the aesthetic spirit sketched above. Adorno calls a form of representation conceptual if its meaning, first of all, is—in contrast to aesthetic ideas—"statable," that is, if it is statable in a finite series of logically related sentences. Second, it is thus not connected in a constitutive sense to the letters in which it is embodied, that is, it can be translated into other terms without change of meaning. Identificatory (*identifizierende*) designation of meaning by way of clarifying translation represents the basic structure of the form of understanding that aims at conceptual representation.

If Adorno's notion of the conceptual is understood in this way, however, it proves unsuitable for providing a sufficiently general definition of the identificatory character of nonaesthetic experience. For it is clear that most of our nonaesthetic understanding cannot be subsumed under it. This is especially true for such an elementary phenomenon as the conventionality of the processes of representation and understanding that we employ in language. Adorno's exclusive orientation toward the conceptual reduces the conventionality of language to an explicit agreement on meaning and thus equates convention with definition: all nonaesthetic conceptual representation, as something conventional, has a definable meaning for Adorno. <sup>1</sup> This concept of convention, though, fails to reflect the fact that the determinacy of representation and understanding in language, far beyond any basis in definition, rests upon practice (*Einübung*). That which can be designated as "identificatory" in the nonaesthetic understanding of linguistic representations—that is, the establishment of meaning and thus the possibility of translation—does not need to be grounded in definitions and explicit agreements. This means that Adorno's idea of the conceptual is unsuitable for designating the object of aesthetic negation, for designating the "identificatory" or "automatic" quality of all nonaesthetic understanding. This can only be achieved by means of a broader conception of that which the diverse forms of nonaesthetic understanding share vis-à-vis their aesthetic counterparts.

Such an extended concept of nonaesthetically achieved identification can, however, be designated with the expression Bergson coined, Shklovsky introduced into the discussion of aesthetics, and the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* subsequently took up: "automatic repetition." <sup>2</sup> By reformulating the basic structure of nonaesthetic understanding in terms of the concept of automatism, the strictures created by its equation with conceptual unequivocality and definability are avoided. For the concept of automatism defines the opposition between aesthetic and nonaesthetic understanding in terms of the modality in which the understanding is enacted or realized, rather than in terms of the structure of that which is understood (of the contents of understanding). Accordingly, those

enactments of understanding are termed automatic that make use of conventions to successfully identify the object to be understood; on the other hand, nonautomatic enactments of understanding are those that consist solely in the process of identification, without the support of conventions. Even if identification is spoken of in both definitions of modes of enacting understanding, only the automatic mode is identificatory in Adorno's sense of the word. In automatic understanding, identification is a result; in aesthetic understanding, by contrast, it is a process. For this reason, Bergson defined their modally conceived difference as one of process and temporality. <sup>3</sup> The automatic enactment of understanding is either totally atemporal or totally temporal in the sense of mere repetition; its processuality disappears in the result of the process. By contrast, in nonautomatic enactments, processuality is constitutive; whereas automatic understanding is summed up in the act of identifying its object, the nonautomatic enactment of understanding is irremediably temporal. The time taken in its processual constitution does not disappear, but persists, vis-à-vis its result or end. Nonautomatic understanding is movement through a process that cannot be synthesized into any result distinct from it, the temporality of which Bergson described with the concept of *durée*: "In a word, pure duration might well be nothing but a succession of qualitative changes, which melt into and permeate each other, without precise outlines, without any tendency to externalize themselves in relation to one another, without any affiliation with number: it would be pure heterogeneity." <sup>4</sup> The insurmountable persistence of the aesthetic process introduces a nonidentity into the synthesis of its enactment, which destroys the idea of a unity that recapitulates understanding: "The processual character of works of art is nothing other than their temporal core." <sup>5</sup>

Bergson's distinction between automatic and nonautomatic enactment holds for two types of processes: the genuinely atemporal one, which can be summarized in terms of its result, and the constitutively temporal, the processuality of which is irreducible. In aesthetic understanding, as a nonautomatic process, its processuality is unsublatable, obstructive to and present in every result. The duration of aesthetic understanding is simply antiteleological: its end is not the sublating result of the processual event. For this reason, aesthetic and automatic understanding are not first distinguished by their respective results; they already differ in the way each is enacted or realized. Or, put more precisely, they are distinguished by the different constellation of result and enactment that each embodies. "Automatic" refers to any process of understanding that leads to an end and can thus be termed identificatory. In contrast, an enactment of understanding in which the process persists beyond its result does not have an identificatory end; it constitutes "the paradox of something that is, but the meaning of which is to become." <sup>6</sup> Such an enactment of understanding, however, can no longer be termed successful understanding or identification. For this reason, the aesthetic processualization of the enactment of understanding is also the subversion of any understanding-based identification of its object: "Objectively speaking, however, the immanent processual character of works of art, even before they take any sides at all, is the action that they take against anything that can simply be learned or committed to memory, against all that simply exists." <sup>7</sup>

The distinction between the objects of understanding is derived from the distinction between the modes of understanding—and not vice versa. <sup>8</sup> Those objects or signs are aesthetic which are understood not by means of automatic recognition, but by the unsublatable, processual realization of precisely those achievements that, in automatic understanding, are hidden by the atemporal short-circuit of convention and occurrence (*Ereignis*). Objects do not gain aesthetic character by deviating from the norms of sign use, but rather insofar as an understanding of signs is directed at them that "de-automatizes" nonaesthetic identifications. Whereas the theory of aesthetic deviation construes the otherness of the aesthetic object as an attribute of aesthetic signs, here its opposition to automatic understanding is construed as a modal difference in the enactment of understanding. When we understand something aesthetically, it is not that we understand some other object; we just understand differently. That the structure of the aesthetic sign might very well deviate from the norms of nonaesthetic use is not of primary importance; what is important is the de-automatization of the way in which it is understood. And it is precisely this modal, de-automatizing estrangement of automatic understanding that represents the act of aesthetic negativity: for in aesthetic understanding, the estranging transformation of the automatic is the determinate negation of the latter, since in its

reenactment of the identification process it injects a processuality that causes this process to fail.

Aesthetic negativity, that is, the peculiar de-automatizing processuality of the realization of aesthetic understanding, needs now to be recast in terms of semiotics. At first, this might appear to move the discussion far from Adorno's terminology, but ultimately it will prove to provide the structural basis for his model of negativity. Recourse can be made to a whole series of approaches influenced by Bergson's distinction in order to provide such a semiotic reformulation. They range from authors who directly follow Bergson, such as Shklovsky and Valéry, to Jakobson and Heidegger, to those who offer the deconstructionist theory of semiological processes. Though none of these positions will be discussed at length here, they serve to guide the following course of argument.

## 2.1 Material or Signifier?

The negativity of the enactment of aesthetic understanding consists in its de-automatizing processuality. The definition put forth by Paul Valéry and Roman Jakobson of the object of such a process of de-automatization provides one starting point for clarifying this claim. According to this definition, the object of aesthetic understanding is, due to its unsublatable temporality, not a meaningful sign, but rather a "hesitation between the sound and the sense."<sup>9</sup>

Hesitation or vacillation, which is what the aesthetic object is, is found precisely at the point where automatic understanding achieves "the connection between *signans* and *signatum*"<sup>10</sup> that results in the sign. The latter bridges the gap between the two dimensions of language, between the signified or meaning and the signifier or bearer of meaning, by means of "codified contiguity" (Jakobson). The connection between the signifier and the signified is based on the condition that they can both be identified by application of the rules contained in the code. These rules that are applied in automatic understanding are constitutive rules. There are two dimensions in which they establish what something is held to be: automatic understanding identifies the signifier (*Bedeutende*) and, at the same time, the meaning (*Bedeutung*) embodied in it. By identifying both according to rules, it also establishes their relationship as a "codified contiguity." By contrast, the aesthetically processual enactment of understanding lacks such rules that make identification possible. For this reason, aesthetic understanding does not result in any identifications of meaning or its bearer; every effort to answer the question as to what an aesthetic object might mean is confronted by the even more basic question of what, if anything, in this object signifies (i.e., conveys meaning or is significant). The aesthetic enactment of understanding vacillates between sound and meaning, as it hesitates in identifying either one of them. Let us take a closer look at this hesitation in terms of the problem of identifying aesthetic signifiers.

Our preliminary examination of the structure of the aesthetic spirit suggested binding the aesthetically signified in a special way to the material stratum of its representation. Emphasizing such parallelism of spirit and letter does not, however, suffice to produce a distinguishing criterion for their aesthetic relation. Such parallelism of two dimensions is instead characteristic of all representations. Due to its semiological structure, all representation is defined as the linkage of two different dimensions, one side of which—that of the signifier—borders on the field of material phenomena. Even the term "signifier" underscores the difference between the meaning-related letter and its material facticity. Signifiers are not given; instead, they are distinct from those things of which they are materially composed by means of their relation to meaning: signifiers are significant materiality. They have both a material reality *and* a constitutive relation to the dimension of meaning. Signifiers are the result of a structuring of material for the purposes of the representation of the signified. It is only the relationship between material and meaning that first generates a signifier clearly distinct from others. Taken by itself, phonic substance is "neither more fixed nor more rigid" than the conception of meanings, which taken by itself is a "vague, uncharted nebula."<sup>11</sup> It is for this reason that "it is impossible for sound alone, a material element, to belong to language. It is only a secondary thing, substance to be put to use."<sup>12</sup> When something material becomes a signifier, it loses its

"positive quality" and becomes a "value," a functional link between two distinct orders or dimensions.

Regarding the aesthetic signifier, it is important that their material is selected by an operation that takes into account the meaning to be represented. It is only in terms of this meaning-oriented selection, which *makes* signifiers out of material, that both the iterability of signifiers and the formation of signifying systems can be explained. The iterability of signifiers is based on the fact that they are distinguished from their materially varying realizations by means of their selectivity. It is not the material occurrences of signifiers that can be reproduced but only some of their selected aspects.<sup>13</sup> That signifiers are well defined by a number of selected material attributes thus correlates to iterability insofar as the lack of the latter would rob the concept of signifier of its potential for applicability. Iterability and selectivity mutually define one another. At the same time, the selectivity of signifiers involves them in signifying systems. Selectivity makes system formation possible—since only selected material can be integrated into systems; selectivity requires system formation—for only the meaningful difference to other things, namely, to other signifiers, defines the identity of any given signifier. In this way, signifier systems reduce the differential aspects of signifiers: they are not totally or diffusely different, nor are they alike: they are different in a well-defined way.

The possibility of such systems—like that of iterability—is based on selection, which occurs in the step from the purely material to the signifier. It always takes place in terms of the meaning to be represented; signifiers, as values, are functional in terms of meaning. The choice of signifier (system) and that of represented meaning are strictly correlative, and both dimensions of semiotic representation are parallel here. Thus we form—to take an example of what Barthes calls the "neutralization" process involved in the selective formation of signifiers from material—signifiers in denotative understanding, in which, for example, dialect-related variances are irrelevant. On the level of connotation, however, these variants can "become significant . . . and from being combinative variants they refer now to two different signifieds."<sup>14</sup> The two acts of understanding do not merely ascribe different meanings; they also make different selections from the wealth of phonetic material: a change in the signified results in a change in the signifier.

Against this background, it is now possible to give a more precise definition of the concept of automatic understanding and the point at which aesthetic enactment differs from it. All understanding is automatic that ends in a meaning-establishing decision about which properties of a meaning-conveying material signify; it is "identificatory" in Adorno's sense, since it selects the traits of a material thing that are relevant to meaning and in this way makes it into a signifier. In our present context, it is of secondary importance how automatic understanding accomplishes this—whether by application of already existing rules or by means of a situationally invented model. What is decisive is that all successful nonaesthetic understanding is automatic insofar as it results in the identification and thus the linkage of the two dimensions of the sign. In contrast, the theorem that Valéry and Jakobson formulated, building upon Bergson and Shklovsky, about the aesthetic "hesitation between sound and meaning" points to the fact that, in aesthetically enacted understanding, the linkage that guarantees meaning—since it is at the same time the selective identification of signifiers—is not successful. The signifier trembles aesthetically between the two poles that it holds together when it is automatically formed: that of the material and that of meaning. Since the signifier can never be definitively identified by the process of aesthetic understanding, but always loses itself in an unending vacillation, in aesthetic understanding, the bridge—which defines the comprehensible sign—breaks down between the two dimensions of semiotic representation.

To what extent, though, does the theorem of the aesthetic vacillation of the signifier correspond to the reality of aesthetic understanding? Are not the conventions of automatic signifier formation also presupposed in aesthetic understanding in some elementary sense, for instance, in the reading of the letters of a novel? Does not aesthetic understanding adhere to exactly the same conventions in its first step, signifier formation, that guide the selective formation of meaning-related signifiers out of an initially nonsignifying ("insignificant") wealth of material? At first glance, this question does not even seem answerable in a general sense, since it is falsely posed; it appears to include in the concept of the aesthetic signifier phenomena too diverse to allow a general question about the laws

that govern it to be answered. Thus, to start with the extreme cases, there are, on the one hand, literary texts that make use of exactly the same letters as their nonliterary counterparts. On the other hand, in abstract painting there does not seem to be even a vague resemblance to signifiers of pictorial representation known from nonaesthetic contexts. That at the respective other ends of the continuum of each of these art forms (literature and painting) there are also examples that differ from our initial ones—for example, the confusion of signifiers (with known nonaesthetic meanings) in texts by Joyce, Jandl, and Helms and their exact reproduction in pop art tends to confirm this classification rather than undermine it. For just as the confusion in signifier formation in literature is only that of the combination of letters that are themselves unchanged, so is the reproduction in painting of signifiers, which are unequivocally defined in nonaesthetic terms, subjected to decisive transformations due to a change of the medium. Does this difference among the arts mean that the distinction between the aesthetic and the nonaesthetic discussed above, which is produced by the process of understanding, is actually a distinction between different forms of art: between those arts that presuppose and automatically apply the nonaesthetic conventions of signifier selection and those that suspend these conventions? If this is answered in the affirmative, it would mean that only some arts or art forms force aesthetic understanding to hesitate between sound and meaning, whereas others, by recourse to established conventions, bridge the abyss of processual enactment. This confusion can only be resolved by taking a closer look at the semiotically describable distinction between different forms of art and its significance for a concept of aesthetic understanding.

The difference between those forms of art that presuppose the automatic formation of the signifier and those that do not has been formulated by Nelson Goodman in such a way as to allow for the clarification of the constitution of aesthetic signifiers. After a comprehensive discussion in the first two chapters of *Languages of Art* on the suitability of the concept of representation for defining aesthetic meaning, he raises, in the third chapter, the question of the suitability of the concept of signifier in the field of aesthetic objects (a discussion he continues in rather technical terms in chapters 4 and 5). Here he asks why in certain arts (above all, music and literature) there is no distinction between an original and a forgery. Thus a pirate edition of a literary work is not a forgery; at most, only the pirate edition that is not declared as such of a specific printing of a literary work can be considered a forgery. In these arts, there are only forgeries of certain versions of the work, but not of the work itself.<sup>15</sup> The distinction made between an original and a forgery does not apply in this field. This also holds in a fundamental sense for an art form such as film. The latter art form makes clear, at the same time, that the difference involved is not one of "one-stage" versus "two-stage art." Goodman groups under two-stage arts those arts in which there is a distinction between the completion of a work and its appearance as an object for aesthetic perception, such as in music (the written score versus its performance) or in etching (the plate versus the print). In contrast, Goodman classifies under one-stage arts those arts in which these two steps coincide, such as in literature or in painting. There can be forgeries in both one-stage and two-stage art. Thus both literature and painting are one-stage arts, but only in the latter can the concept of forgery be used. In the former, in literature, there is—as in film—only the possibility of plagiarism. The concept of forgery applies in the same way to the two-stage arts: thus, it applies, for instance, to (signed/numbered) etchings, but not to music. The latter case only involves either a copying of the score or a performance of the score that is either true to the original or distorts it, but never forges it. The decisive criterion for distinguishing between forgeable arts (which Goodman calls "autographic," since they entail the idea of an original) and nonforgeable arts (which he terms "allographic," since every reproduction is a version of the work) is thus whether the first stage (and thus in the case of one-stage arts the only stage) of an art work is "singular": "About the only positive conclusion we can draw here is that the autographic arts are those that are singular in the earliest stage; etching is singular in its first stage—the plate is unique—and painting in its only stage."<sup>16</sup>

Aesthetic objects of the allographic arts are not singular and thus prove no basis for the distinction between original and forgery. Reproducibility is implicated in the very way they are structured since they only exist at all in a "definite notation," the conventional definitiveness of which guarantees the nonfalsifying reproducibility of the work. For the notation allows, on the basis of its conventionality, aesthetically irrelevant variation in the material attributes of the material object that embody the work: "In effect, the fact that a literary work is in a definite notation, consisting of certain signs or characters that are to

be combined by concatenation, provides the means for distinguishing the properties constitutive of the work from all contingent properties—that is, for fixing the required features and the limits of permissible variation in each." <sup>17</sup> Thus, because literature like music employs a conventional system of notation, every reproduction of the signifiers of a work, independent of differences in material, is equally correct. This does not hold, for example, in painting: "In painting, on the contrary, with no such alphabet of characters, none of the pictorial properties—none of the properties the picture has as such—is distinguished as constitutive; no such feature can be dismissed as contingent, and no deviation as insignificant." <sup>18</sup> Accordingly, in contrast to the notational work of literature and music, Goodman terms the work of painting and sculpture an "actual object." Since its enactment does not make use of a conventional notational system, the conditions are also missing for a "test for determining that an object has all the constitutive properties of the work in question," that is, for a test as to whether it involves a "correct[ly spelled] performance." <sup>19</sup> In contrast, such a test is always possible in the case of allographic (nonforgeable) arts: even the performance of a piece of music or a play can be examined—completely independently of the question of the relevance of the procedure—to decide whether it is "true to the letter" of the original or not. The preconditions for such a test are missing in painting and sculpture, since there are no "letters" (no "alphabet of characters") here.

But the difference between allographic and autographic arts does not disappear even if—in contrast to Goodman—one considers it possible to apply a test procedure that examines the identity of the work in autographic art. Such a correction of the criteria for distinguishing allographic and autographic arts is suggested by an accurate objection raised by G. Patzig. Goodman's claim that the works of autographic arts are singular because they have the status of "actual objects" identifies those art works with the physical objects in which they were first objectified. Goodman makes this equation in order to be able to apply the concept of the forgery even to such perfect copies, which, in truth, are nothing but "a second issue of the same art work." <sup>20</sup> Patzig objects, however, that the work of art is "[even] in the fine arts ... not identical with the physical object that represents or conveys it: it is, instead, the embodiment of those elements and attributes of the physical object that are relevant for the aesthetic experience of it." <sup>21</sup> This formulation and the identity criterion for art works that it entails, however, appear to strip the distinction between allographic and autographic arts of the "fundamental significance" (Patzig) that it has for Goodman: correspondence or agreement "in all aesthetically relevant regards" <sup>22</sup> is a criterion that *encompasses* painting and literature, etching and music, on the basis of which one decides whether the same art work is involved.

The problem with such a uniform criterion is that in its application, it once again splits apart along the lines of the distinction between allographic and autographic arts. It overlooks the correct basis of Goodman's approach, which, in spite of the valid critique of his concept of the autographic art work as an actual object, should still be maintained. The reason Goodman designates every "second specimen" a forgery in the case of autographic arts is that he assumes it is impossible to have a criteria-based test or procedure for deciding the identity of aesthetically relevant attributes of such works. It is this qualitative rather than gradual difference between autographic and allographic arts, concerning the possibility of a test for deciding the aesthetic identity of objects, that is the correct basic idea hidden by Goodman's imprecise formulation that works of the autographic arts are actual objects. The basic idea is the following: in the autographic arts, as opposed to their allographic counterparts, there is no notational system that could serve to determine "automatically" which of the material attributes of the given object are aesthetically relevant. Potentially, any attribute of an object can be relevant, and this possibility describes the wide range granted future experience whereby presently overlooked attributes of an actual object can prove themselves to be aesthetically significant. <sup>23</sup> Thus for the criterion of identity suggested by Patzig there is, in the case of the autographic arts, no implementable test analogous to that of the allographic arts: since the latter employs a conventional notational system, it excludes from the outset certain material attributes of its physical objects (lines, paper, noises, and so on) from the field of aesthetic signifiers.

This does show, however, that the application of Patzig's identity criterion (i.e., the identity of aesthetically significant attributes) is subject to completely different conditions in each

of the two kinds of art: whereas in the allographic arts the identity criterion is based on the determinations provided by a conventional notational system, in the autographic arts, it can only be applied to already interpreted works of art. The aesthetic significance of material attributes of autographic art works can only be decided upon retrospectively, from the perspective of a successful interpretation. In "[merely] looking at them,"<sup>24</sup> we find all of their material attributes to be of equal aesthetic significance or insignificance. In the case of autographic works of art, the selective criterion of the identity test is the significance of material attributes, a significance that would first have to be established in a process of aesthetic understanding. In contrast, in the case of allographic art works, this selective criterion is based on the nonaesthetic operation of signifier formation according to notational systems, an operation that precedes the just-cited process. In this way, the difference in the forms of signifier determination that distinguishes allographic arts from their autographic counterparts achieves a level of generality that goes beyond the distinction between two types of art. In the case of the signifiers of the allographic arts, determination of the signifier involves the results of automatic nonaesthetic understanding, whereas in the case of autographic signifiers, it involves the results of aesthetic understanding. Aesthetic objects in the allographic arts have notated signifiers insofar as they are understood nonaesthetically; on the other hand, every formation of aesthetic signifiers (in allographic *and* autographic arts) is bound to the process of aesthetic understanding and is subject to its processuality. Hidden in Goodman's description of the difference of the arts, then, is the distinction between nonaesthetic and aesthetic signifiers.

Against the backdrop of this clarification, however, what does the controversy between Goodman and Patzig about the criterion of identity for aesthetic signifiers say about the logic of aesthetic understanding in which they are formed? It appears that Goodman and Patzig each bring to bear a legitimate insight into the structure of aesthetic signifiers. Nonetheless, their articulation of these insights fails to do justice to the peculiar constitution of aesthetic signifiers, located as they are *between* automatically identified signifiers and nonsignifying objects. Patzig fails by establishing the same criterion of identity for aesthetic signifiers as for their nonaesthetic notated counterparts, even though (only) allographic arts are realized in this latter manner. Goodman, on the other hand, fails by reducing aesthetic signifiers to those material objects in which (only) autographic art works represent themselves. Both fail to recognize the twofold distinctiveness of aesthetic signifiers in this way: that automatic, nonaesthetic processes of signifier formation can be extended to apply to art works of the allographic type does not mean that these automatic attributions define their aesthetic signifiers. Nor is it conversely true that just because they cannot be applied to autographic art works, they do not, qua "actual objects," have the status of aesthetic signifiers at all.<sup>25</sup>

Viewed in another way, though, Patzig's and Goodman's one-sided suggestions can be understood as complementary contributions toward defining the aesthetic signifier. Thus Patzig's application of the identity criterion to autographic arts points to the fact that all art works, including autographic ones, can only be viewed aesthetically when the physical objects in which they manifest themselves are taken up in terms of selective signification. Viewing them aesthetically—which differs from "merely looking" (Goodman) at physical objects—is the creation of a signifier structure, a creation which takes place by means of circular anticipation of an attributable meaning. This simultaneously initiating and basic feature of aesthetic understanding, that is, this meaning-related process of selection or abstraction, is described by Gadamer under the title of "articulating reading" in his critique of an aestheticist conception of art:

Even perception conceived as an adequate response to a stimulus would never be a mere mirroring of what is there. For it would always remain an understanding of something as something. All understanding-as is an articulation of what is there, in that it looks-away-from, looks-at, sees-together-as. All of this can occupy the center of an observation or can merely "accompany" seeing, at its edge or in the background. Thus there is no doubt that, as an articulating reading of what is there, vision disregards much of what is there, so that for sight, it is simply not there anymore. So too expectations lead it to "read in" what is not there at all.<sup>26</sup>



The fundamental act of all aesthetic understanding is the attempt to realize a categorizing or classificatory vision, the effort to selectively transform undefined material into interrelated and meaning-related signifiers.

Patzig bases his advocacy of a criterion of identity that would also apply to autographic arts—in contrast to Goodman's strict differentiation—on signifiers that are first formed in the enactment of aesthetic understanding. As correct as it is to point out that we always have to subject aesthetic objects to efforts at signifier formation, it is just as dubious to take the position that aesthetically formed signifiers can provide a foundation for a critical test in the same sense as automatically understood, notated signifiers. Goodman's argument is actually much more convincing, that is, that the test applied to aesthetic signifiers is qualitatively different from the one applied to automatically formed signifiers. Thus, in light of Patzig's critique and counterproposal, Goodman's insistence that aesthetic objects are actual objects (which he initially applies only to the objects of the autographic arts) receives a new sense and new justification. Decisions about the identity of autographic art works are based on the correspondence of their aesthetic signifiers. According to Goodman, however, the latter have a fundamentally and inherently different status than the notated, nonaesthetic signifiers in which allographic art works manifest themselves. On first glance, the distinction appears to involve only the way in which they are selectively formed: the difference between the application of pre-given conventions (encoded in notational systems) and the creation of such conventions. If the difference between aesthetic and nonaesthetic signifiers were actually exhausted by the mode of their formation, they would correspond to one another in status: as formed signifiers that could be applied as criteria of identity. This, however, is precisely the conception of aesthetic understanding that Goodman argues against: aesthetic objects can be designated actual objects insofar as the selection of signifiers that aesthetic understanding attempts to carry out upon them is always—as a matter of principle—reassimilated into the overdetermination of the material they are carried out upon. The selections of signifiers that we seek to carry out in aesthetic experience continually break down in the face of their material. If aesthetic objects therefore have to be described in terms of the tension between material and signifier, regardless of the medium in which they manifest themselves (be it allo- or autographic), then it makes good sense to talk of the aesthetic vacillation between the two poles of (presignifying) sound and (signifier-forming) reference to meaning. The aesthetic signifier is nothing more than this interminable vacillation, since its selective acts are never definitively decided; for, in this way, the aesthetic object is always, *vis-à-vis* the selection of signifiers, both signifier and material. According to the thesis of aesthetic vacillation, the enactment of this doubling, this simultaneity of opposing determinations, in fact constitutes the unique and peculiar status of aesthetic objects. Aesthetic objects exist only in a constant transition between their two poles.

Let us summarize the implications of our brief look at Goodman's arguments. The most important insight to be gained here is that talk of the vacillation or hesitation between sound and meaning holds for works of art of all types. It is not affected by the distinction between allographic and autographic arts. For while the latter distinction is related to the way in which an art work manifests itself—in a physical object (autographic arts) or in notated signifiers (allographic arts)—the thesis of aesthetic vacillation applies solely to aesthetic signifiers, which sometimes have physical objects and sometimes have notated signifiers as their vehicles. Aesthetic vacillation is related solely to those meaning-related selections of signifiers that we attempt to carry out in aesthetic understanding. For this reason, the two poles in the face of which or between which aesthetic signifiers vacillate also have to be defined as genuine elements of the enactment of aesthetic understanding: the reference to meaning is that of a signifier to an aesthetically created or generated meaning, and the reassimilation back into material, a reassimilation into aesthetically experienced material. The negation of automatic understanding that is reflected in the vacillation of the aesthetic signifier is an event immanent to aesthetic experience: it negates precisely that automatic understanding that we attempt to carry out in the identification of aesthetic signifiers by releasing the processuality of this understanding.

## 2.2 The Self-Subversion of Signifier Formation

The ontological model of the aesthetic object developed in the discussion of aesthetic vacillation describes this object as an incessant transition between its two poles of material and meaning. This in turn implies an image of an interminable process of aesthetic experience, a position in marked contrast to two alternative, one-dimensional aesthetic methodologies: On the one hand, it contradicts a descriptive structuralism that is premised on the identifiability of the relevant features of an aesthetic object and which promises, on this basis, to provide a reconstruction of its closed system of signifying relations as the grammar of their interconnections. At the same time, discernment of the vacillation of aesthetic signifiers stands in contrast with an unmediated rehabilitation of the material determinations of aesthetic objects, as proclaimed, for instance, in Lyotard's model of an affirmative aesthetics. The latter raises the demand to dissolve not only the boundaries or limits within the work of art, but also the boundaries separating the work from pure, meaningless materiality. <sup>27</sup> Both of these alternatives, identity-based selection and the unmediated affirmation of mere material, are forms of what Valéry terms aesthetic reification. They fail to recognize what distinguishes the aesthetic object from anything we are able to identify by way of understanding: that this object is what it is only in becoming it; that it is only in the process of being enacted. <sup>28</sup>

In opposition to these two alternative versions of aesthetic vacillation, each of which reduces the latter to one of the two poles of the aesthetic object, aesthetic experience is actually the processual enactment of the transition between the two. To redirect one's view from the claimed double determination of the aesthetic object to the process of its experience, however, is not merely to reproduce its structure in another dimension. The meaning of aesthetic vacillation cannot be adequately understood as a change in the aggregate state of the aesthetic object, which sometimes presents itself as a meaning-bearing signifier and sometimes as material. Heidegger, who adopted the postulate of deferral from Valéry, pointed to the inadequacy of this notion of a mere back-and-forth movement. He asserted that the "endured hesitation between sound and meaning" is "no mere wavering" between two alternative perspectives that stand in external opposition to one another. <sup>29</sup> Undoubtedly, vis-à-vis the two reductive methodologies cited, only the experience that perceives its vacillation or transitional character and nevertheless refrains from making a definitive decision between the two alternatives is adequate to its object. The transitional character of the aesthetic object can only be explained, however, by relating it to its ground or basis: the Bergsonian theory of the resultless processuality of aesthetic experience. The vacillation of the signifier between meaning and material is an effect of the processual deferral of aesthetically enacted signifier formation; that the aesthetic object exists in vacillation between its two poles can only be made comprehensible in terms of the aesthetic mode of continuously deferred signifier formation within it.

The context of justification that thereby is claimed to link the ontology and the experience of the aesthetic object, the account of aesthetic vacillation and that of aesthetic deferral, is also behind the difficulties involved in Goodman's claim that aesthetic objects are to be conceived of as actual objects. Unlike selectively formed signifiers, there just cannot be an actual object that is simply given in aesthetic experience, if, as Gadamer has made plausible, this experience is always an attempt at an articulating reading, a creation, a generation of signifier networks. Every object that our aesthetic experience takes up is already perceived as an articulated object. This is the starting point of our aesthetic experiences, the effort at signifier formation, and not the "mere looking" at things (Goodman). For this reason, Goodman's actual object can never simply exist vis-à-vis selectively formed signifiers; it always has to be produced aesthetically. This is the first formulation of the law of aesthetic experience, in which the vacillating aesthetic object constitutes itself: aesthetic experience is the production of the actual object as unselected material, and this occurs only in that this experience processually enacts the attempt to automatically form signifiers. When we enact our automatic selection of signifiers in aesthetic experience, these selections, rather than being mechanisms for the valid selection of signifiers, are themselves reduced to attributes of that material out of which

we attempt to form aesthetic signifiers. The aesthetic mode of signifier formation is self-destructive or -subversive: when the means of selectively reducing the material are put into use, they end up producing just the opposite, namely, the increase, the supplementation of unselected material; the aesthetic depotentialization of signifier selection is, at the same time, a potentiation of its material.

For a more precise explanation of this thesis, let us start by taking another look at the "articulating reading" of works of art. Its goal is to impress upon the aesthetic object a signifying structure, without which it would be incapable of embodying meaning. Articulating reading begins by determining the individual elements of an object. The bases of these primary determinations are acts of recognition. Thus, in perceiving objects, we identify common forms of pictorial representation in pictures, objects in sculptures, manners of speaking in texts, patterns of sound in pieces of music. Such acts of identity-based recognition, however, are not limited to purely isolated elements; in addition, they include means of combining and interrelating this shade of color, view, expression, or this sequence of notes with that one. And these acts are not just acts of recognition of the nonaesthetic in the aesthetic, but are just as much acts of recognition of traces of other works and of other styles of painting, sculpture, literature, or music in the work in question. Though all of this occurs in all aesthetic experience, none of these recognition-based identifications *is itself* aesthetic experience. We only speak of aesthetic experience when our understanding goes beyond the realm of mere recognition and turns the recognized into the material from which it selects attributes and relates them to one another. This raises the question of the relationship between acts of identity-based recognition that we can carry out independently of any additional connections to aesthetic experience and those that are related to the understanding of the aesthetic object that occurs in articulating reading. Are they distinguished only by the fact that articulating reading selects from a wealth of possible recognition-based identifications? Or does their status change by being incorporated in efforts at aesthetic understanding?

Emphasis is often placed on one aspect of the aesthetically experiential use of recognition-based identifications. According to this view, the effort at aesthetic understanding begins, strictly speaking, at that point at which we raise the question about the aesthetic interconnection of various identified elements. This relating of elements represents an act of understanding, since it creates meaningful connections between these elements. The simplest examples of this involve two recognized elements: the landscapes of Paul Klee, made up of transcribed signs (numbers, letters, geometric figures, and so on), are depictions of landscapes as systems of signs, the world of signs as landscape or nature. It is this meaningful linkage that can be termed aesthetic meaning. The transformation that elements identified via recognition are subject to, consists, according to this view, in their contribution to aesthetic meaning. Structuralist approaches in particular investigate how aesthetic signs form meaning solely out of the combination of their signifiers. According to this, aesthetic understanding is not a process of making the depth dimension of symbols comprehensible; instead, it is a reconstruction of the given, relation-setting "technique of signification." [30](#)

The formation of aesthetic meaning out of signifiers and their interconnection appears also to designate the point at which one can speak of the processuality of aesthetic understanding. Aesthetic understanding does not consist in establishing relationships between signifying elements, but in the reenactment of the process by which they are interconnected in such a way as to gain meaning. Aesthetic meaning is pushed back into the experiential enactment of the interrelation of signifying units. Establishing that aesthetic meaning is formed out of the interconnection of its signifiers does not by itself, however, provide an account sufficient to ground the thesis of the interminable, nonteleological processuality of aesthetic experience. Interminable processuality comes to characterize aesthetic experience because this experience needs to do more than just aesthetically relate elements already identified as signifiers; instead, even the identification of those elements interrelated to one another, of the signifiers of aesthetic meaning, becomes a problem for it. The problem arises, moreover, in the simple fact that Patzig reminded us of in his earlier criticism of the excessive burden Goodman places on the distinction between allographic and autographic works of art: aesthetic representations are distinct from the objects in which they are realized since only some of their attributes are aesthetically significant. If, however, aesthetic signifiers are only formed by means of a

selection from recognition-based identifications, then a "problem of understanding" is raised for each one of them. A decision among alternatives is required as to how to conceive of a *diversely identifiable* element. The difficulties of aesthetic understanding do not arise in the attribution of aesthetic meaning to already identified signifiers by means of the reenactment of their interrelations; they arise earlier, in the processual identification of aesthetic signifiers themselves. <sup>31</sup>In terms of the question raised above about the transformation of the recognition-based identifications of the aesthetic object that results when such identifications are incorporated into aesthetic experience, crossing this boundary transforms the very status of all recognition-based identifications: each identification itself, and not just its interconnection with other identifications, becomes the object of the processual reenactment of aesthetic experience.

I would now like to discuss the problem of the formation of aesthetic signifiers in terms of an apparently extreme yet instructive case, in which the aesthetic disruption of the process of identification is seen on an elementary level, on the level, namely, of literal understanding. More than a few literary texts, especially in the literature of modernity, place the disruption of even the recognition-based identification of their elements into their expressed procedure, by breaking basic rules of language usage. In this context, disruptions fall into roughly the following four categories:

1. Disruption of understanding by means of an infraction of *linguistic* rules. Linguistic rules include those that establish phonemic combination, word and sentence formation (relative to a given language), by prohibiting certain combinations. A disruption of understanding on this level is achieved by using phonemic combinations (Joyce, Helms) or word formations and grammatical structures (M. Fritz) that are excluded by the combinational rules of a language.

2. Disruption of understanding by means of an infraction of *semantic* rules. Semantic rules formulate conditions of compatibility for (and among) the elements of speech acts. First of all, such rules refer to the interconnections among the elements of a speech act, and especially the elements of its propositional contents. The features of a speech act are subject to definite restrictions on what can be combined; semantically permissible combinations represent a selection from the mass of syntactically acceptable combinations. A literary example of an infraction of such a rule (which disrupts understanding) is found in Kafka's formulation in "*On Parables*": "If you only followed the parables you yourselves would become parables ..." <sup>32</sup>The use of the predicate "become parables" in conjunction with people contradicts semantic rules of combinability and is thus incomprehensible in a literal sense. Second, semantic rules define the relation among elements in a speech act and establish, in particular, conditions of compatibility for linking speech acts (or speech-act types) and propositional contents. Speech acts that break these rules disrupt understanding—as does the following formulation in Kafka's "*On the Tram*": "I have not even any defense to offer for standing on this platform, holding on to this strap, letting myself be carried along by this tram, nor for the people who give way to the tram or walk quietly along or stand gazing into shop windows." <sup>33</sup>The listing of (propositional) contents of the (illocutionary) act "to have a defense for" does not merely follow a course of intensification (in terms of the decreasing degree to which something is defensible or not), but is also marked by a discontinuity. The only actions that are defensible are those that are within the realm of responsibility of those called to defend them. The fact that "people ... walk quietly along or stand gazing into shop windows" is not understandable as the propositional content of something I can defend.

3. Disruption of understanding by means of an infraction of *pragmasemantic* rules. These rules define the conditions of validity and acceptability that establish illocutionary content. Pragmasemantic rules establish the consequences (obligations and implications) that are inherently (i.e., noncontextually) linked with a speech act. A great number of examples of infractions of pragmasemantic rules are found in Kafka's short stories: in "*On Parables*" (incomprehensibility of the conditions of satisfaction <sup>34</sup>of the command "go over"), in "*The Problem of Our Laws*" (incomprehensibility of the conditions of acceptability of normative statements), in "*Prometheus*" (incomprehensibility of conditions of satisfaction and acceptability of the pseudo-argumentative closing sentence).

4. Disruption of understanding by means of an infraction of *pragmatic* rules. Pragmatic rules establish the conditions of conformity for those actions, attitudes, other speech acts, and so on, connected with certain speech acts, that is, generally speaking, their implications and their premises. Whereas pragmasemantic rules link speech acts with implications and premises by means of convention, pragmatic rules make these connections by institutional or situational means. Scores of examples of disruptions of the comprehensibility of institutionally defined speech acts are found in Kafka's *The Trial*. The dissolution of the common institutional connections between speech acts and their consequences or the attitudes they appear to express works retrospectively to disrupt the understanding of the speech acts made. A similar procedure, this time on the level of habit instead of that of institution, is found in the "Conversation with the Supplicant": here, speech acts are linked up with actions and modes of behavior with which they are not customarily connected, and in this way they disrupt efforts at understanding them.

In the nonaesthetic treatment of disruptions of understanding, we always have the opportunity to compensate for rule infractions. <sup>35</sup> Sign usages that are, strictly speaking, incomprehensible, can nevertheless be understood as realizations, even if inadequate ones, of meaningful units. Thus unacceptable phoneme combinations can be described and understood as the merging of two words, grammatically ill-conceived sentences as the irregular realization of semantically comprehensible contents, disjointed or incoherent statements as the distorted realization of speech acts. There is no way to draw a precise dividing line between "incomprehensibilities" that can be compensated in this way and those that lead to the loss of understanding. The line separating comprehension from incomprehension depends on the practiced interpretive skills of the participants in a given discourse; it can never be established in advance. In such compensations for disruptions of understanding (which restore understanding), the decision is explicitly made as to what can claim significance from among that which disrupts our understanding. In this sense, one can also speak of a "deferral" in signifier formation in the case of the nonaesthetic disruption of meaning. In contrast to the deferral asserted to hold for aesthetic objects, however, nonaesthetic deferral is not interminable. Deferrals brought about by disruptions of understanding are always resolved in nonaesthetic cases: either the unambiguous determination of signifiers allows them to be compensated for or they are incomprehensible nonsense. <sup>36</sup> The reason for this resolvability is that nonaesthetic signification is deferred only in the face of disruptions of understanding when it is initially unclear what criteria we should use in selecting signifiers. The deferral does not involve the automatic character of signifier formation, but only the determination of the criteria for their selection. Thus insofar as the problem of signifier formation arises in nonaesthetic understanding in the face of disruptions of understanding, it is only temporarily deferred, without affecting its orientation toward results.

The signifier selections with which we (can) react nonaesthetically to disruptions of understanding are based on decisions about the criteria to be used; normally, they do not even emerge as decisions in their own right. In those places where they expressly emerge as decisions, however, the presupposition of automatic signifier formation implicit in all understanding also becomes clear: the tacit agreement on a series of assumptions about the context of sign use. Without shared context assumptions, it is impossible to make a decision about the correctness of signifier formation, since the material out of which signifiers are selected can only provide indications, not any criteria, for making selections. Given the (semio)logical difference between material and signifier, it is impossible for any material to determine which are its significant features; the material out of which signifiers are selectively formed cannot itself ground the selection process that is performed on it. The correctness of a signifier selection is not simply its appropriateness vis-à-vis the material in question; for the material that every sign representation borders on always has a fundamentally surplus or superabundant character vis-à-vis its signifying function. To speak of successful or correct signifier formation—as has been shown by this look at our compensatory treatment of disruptions of understanding—necessarily implies a basis that is prior to signifier formation rather than immanent to it, namely, those contextual interpretations that decide which criteria we are to adhere to.

What is the status of the compensation of disruptions of understanding in the case of aesthetic understanding? In nonaesthetic understanding, assumptions about the context of sign use allow us to decide among various options and to let the teleology of the

enactment of automatic understanding run its course. This course is not open to aesthetic understanding, however: aesthetic signs are not used in any context. There is not even a point of reference for assumptions about the context in which aesthetic representations can be used, let alone the possibility of deciding among various conceptions of such a context. For this reason, when faced with disruptions of understanding in aesthetic experience, we cannot help ourselves to knowledge about the context of use of the incomprehensible signs in question. Automatic signifier formation, based on the contextual knowledge of nonaesthetic interpreters, is replaced by the immanent reenactment of this process in aesthetic experience. The mode of this aesthetic enactment is defined not by subsumption under contextually inferred meanings, but by the step- by-step repetition of the process of selective constitution of the signifiers from out of their material. Aesthetic transformation as de-automatization is thus the effort to form meaning-bearing elements processually rather than subsumptively; rather than assume the results that are preserved and transmitted by conventions, aesthetic experience seeks first to achieve them. In this way, incorporation into aesthetic experience entails a change in perspective on signifier formation, a change that leads to the decomposition or unraveling of this formative process. For if no criteria for the selections to be made from the material can be gained from the material itself and there is no context that encompasses the aesthetic signs, then the aesthetically processual enactment of signifier formation must end in failure: it has been divested of the only preconditions with which it might have resolved the disruptions of the understanding of the aesthetic object. When the direction of the act of selection is reversed, it becomes interminably deferred.

If we apply this thesis about the reciprocal relation between the contextlessness of the aesthetic sign and the processual enactment of understanding to the examples of rule infractions in literature, it does not appear to be substantiated. Is not the very opposite true, that disruptions of understanding in literary texts prompt us to consider which assumptions about the context of speaking could allow us to overcome them and thus recreate comprehensibility? The central function of aesthetic disruptions of understanding consists precisely in triggering efforts to create contexts of meaningful use. Only insofar as such activities are undertaken can we even speak of procedures of nonaesthetic (automatic) understanding being repeated within the medium of aesthetic experience. It is precisely when these procedures of compensating for disruptions are repeated in this situation, however, that they are de-automatized. For the contexts about which we have (or can have) knowledge nonaesthetically, by means of independent information, have only a hypothetical design in aesthetic experience. Whereas assumptions about nonaesthetic contexts are supported by our knowledge about the speaker, the situation, common practices, and so on, the only basis for the aesthetic creation of contexts is the very thing that triggers this creation: the aesthetic object that disrupts our understanding. In this way, there is an irresolvable circularity to the aesthetically undertaken effort to compensate for disruptions of understanding: since we create the contexts for the aesthetic sign that disrupts understanding, the contexts that first make understanding possible, these contextual assumptions cannot be grounded alone in this sign—for this would presuppose that the sign is already understandable to us. At the same time, however, in our effort to aesthetic understanding, we have no basis other than the sign that disrupts our understanding. The aesthetic *repetition* of nonaesthetic modes of using contextual knowledge to secure automatic understanding is the de-automatizing reenactment of understanding solely on the basis of the material of the sign and thus, at the same time, the *destruction* of the validity of the context created.

But can the thesis that the deferred aesthetic process both creates and undermines contexts raise any claim to generality? At first glance, it appears to apply only to those cases in which the literal understanding of the elements of the aesthetic object is disrupted. It is only here, it appears, that we need to formulate assumptions about the context of sign use; it is only for objects of this kind that the identification of their elements involves an appeal to the contexts represented within them. If this objection is valid then that which was originally raised as a general claim—that aesthetic signifier formation consists in the de-automatizing repetition of the automatic acts of understanding—turns out to hold only for some aesthetic objects. For this thesis was based on the argument that since the literal understanding of aesthetic signs is disrupted, assumptions about the context of use of the disruptive signs have to be formed. Since these assumptions are not backed up by any knowledge, however, they themselves must depend on the sign material that disrupts literal understanding. Thus the theorem of the

deferral of aesthetic understanding can apparently apply only if there are no aesthetic objects whose literal understanding is completely undisrupted; for in such an undisrupted case there would be no necessity to create (as the basis for defining aesthetic signifiers) contexts for their use.

This latter (undisrupted) case, however, appears to describe many fictional texts. It is true that a basic component of the language of fiction is the fact that it is divested of any assertive claims; anyone who attempts to understand it as a set of assertions will find many cases of it to lack reference or to be false. This, however, "does not make them meaningless, because we can perfectly well understand them, and we know, what would have to be the case in order for them to become statements." <sup>37</sup> Fictional language is understandable because we know how the world would have to be structured for the statements it makes to be true. But what kind of knowledge is involved here? Is it a kind of knowledge that can be directly inferred simply from the words expressed—so that it does not presuppose anything other than knowledge of the lexical and syntactic rules of the language involved? This can be answered in the affirmative if our initial point of reference is nonaesthetic fictional texts. We understand statements about fictional circumstances such as flying witches, because we know which objects (and which assumptions) we would have to add to the world we know for such statements to be true. Our understanding of statements in fictional language of this type is secure because we know which grammatical role the term "witch" plays; we know that it has no reference in the world as constituted and what would have to be the case for it to have one. We can understand such fictional statements because we know precisely how our world would have to change for them to be true. The fictional statement is based on a controlled extension of or change to our world. By reconstructing this, we define the "frame" <sup>38</sup> of fictional language that ensures our understanding and that deviates from our world.

The model of fictional language, the statements of which refer to a frame that deviates from reality, is applied by a series of aesthetic positions to aesthetically fictional texts as well. It is quite apparent for the aesthetics of the probable: they describe our understanding of aesthetically fictional texts as a process in which we relate these texts to a recognizable rule of deviation from observations of reality. We understand aesthetic statements as probable if we, in reconstructing (by reenacting) their changes to present reality, follow those laws underlying that which has been changed. The understanding of aesthetically fictional language as probable is based on insight into hidden necessities and regularities. <sup>39</sup> But just because one no longer takes the topos of probability as the point of orientation, since it represents too narrow an interpretation of aesthetic modifications and extensions, this in no way implies the rejection of this two-stage model, in which fictional language is related to the frame of its use and understanding: even the aesthetics of the improbable or the fantastic describe the understanding of fictional statements as the comprehension of the frames they evoke. The only difference between them and the concept of aesthetic probability is how the deviations of the fictional frame from our world are achieved. Whereas the (Aristotelian) aesthetics of probability understands the formation of guaranteeing frames as a matter of the cognition of hidden laws of reality, the (romantic) aesthetics of the improbable understands it as a matter of an imagination that goes beyond reality. Even the aesthetics of the fantastic, which liberates itself from the limits of the aesthetic of the probable, still conceives of fictional language with recourse to those rules that modify reality to form a frame that makes understanding possible.

And this is the limitation of this model. For even though it radicalizes aesthetic change vis-à-vis existing reality to such an extent that it goes beyond the bounds of the probable, even the frames formed in an unrestrained fantasy remain clearly definable, as do nonaesthetic ones. The assumption that literal understanding of fictional language allows one to make out the frame in which its statements are comprehensible is, without a doubt, applicable to nonaesthetic fictional texts. In regard to aesthetic texts, however, this conception is inadequate: there are no aesthetic texts—in the sense in which we use the term "aesthetic" in modernity—for whose statements a frame could be identified that guarantees their understanding. This is not because the frame of aesthetic fictions is so bizarre, or strange, or fantastic that it can no longer be grasped by the understanding. The secrets of the aesthetic imagination do not resemble exotic discoveries, surrealist slogans notwithstanding. What is responsible for the fact that no frame guaranteeing understanding can be identified in aesthetic fictions is rather that its frame, its "world," is

only given in an array of fragments provided by different perspectives. Admittedly, for individual statements (or groups of statements) in aesthetically fictional language, one can also describe how the world has to be constituted for these to be true. The pieces of information that its literal meanings provide about its frame, however, are never completely compatible with one another. Thus, in this sense, even those aesthetically fictional texts that first appear to pose no problem for literal understanding actually disrupt our understanding: we cannot put them—taking the text as a whole—into a frame strictly analogous to our treatment of nonaesthetically fictional texts. This always directs our understanding of aesthetically fictional language to those contexts evoked by their statements. The frame we construct, the world we conceive in which they could be true does not hold directly for this world, but rather for the different perspectives on this world evoked in the text by means of the contexts of the uses of its statements. In contrast to nonaesthetically fictional texts, our conception of the constructed frame is not only based on knowledge of lexical and syntactic rules, that is, on knowledge of the system of language; it is based to a much greater degree on our knowledge of language discourses, that is, on the multifariously (socially, culturally, historically, etc.) different kinds of meaningful language.

This digression on the understanding of aesthetically fictional language provides support for the following claim about the structure of aesthetic signifier formation that has been observed in terms of the problem of disruption of literal understanding: the aesthetic identification of significant elements—our understanding them "as" something—is always based on assumptions about the context of use of representations or signs whose direct understanding is disrupted (in some way); the process of aesthetic experience begins only where understanding is disrupted. This thesis can also easily be applied to the nonlinguistic arts. That there is no literal understanding in the sense of language-based works of art is of only secondary importance: for it is not literal understanding itself that is incorporated into aesthetic signifier formation, it is assumptions about the contexts of use of signs. The identification of aesthetic signifiers makes use of contextual assumptions, which we, supported by our knowledge of other uses of signs, both aesthetic and nonaesthetic, make about the elements of aesthetic objects.

If it thus holds for all aesthetic experience that the identification of aesthetically significant elements is related to the contexts of their meaningful use, then it is also true for all aesthetic experience that it is defined by the structure described in the above discussion of the disruption of the literal understanding of literary texts: the aesthetic identification of signifiers, qua the selection from contextual assumptions, is also the attempt to ground these signifiers. When we choose a recognition-based identification from among the array of alternative possibilities, we are trying at the same time to prove its aesthetic validity. The only way to do this is to aesthetically reconstruct the recognition-based identification from the very material for which—because it disrupts our direct understanding—we form recognition-based contextual assumptions. There is no way, however, that this reconstruction (or reenactment) can be corroborated. The aesthetic subversion of automatic identification necessarily involves a dissociation or distancing (*Distanzierung*) from the interpretation of context that would ensure such an identification. In the aesthetic estrangement of nonaesthetic automatic processes, an object is constituted that, in the transitory vacillation between sound and meaning, dissociates from the contextual readings that guide these automatic processes, because this object is irretrievably estranged from them: "Estrangement from the world is an aspect of art; anyone who perceives art as anything other than estranged does not perceive it at all." <sup>40</sup>

It would, however, be a misunderstanding of the dissociation of contextual interpretations, if it were conceived as the production of something simply exterior to all understanding. No aesthetic object can be conceived that could escape *each and every* effort at understanding it: "To create meaning is very easy, our whole mass culture elaborates meaning all day long; to suspend meaning is already an infinitely more complicated enterprise—it is an 'art'; but to 'annihilate' meaning is a desperate project in proportion to its impossibility." <sup>41</sup> It is only by *self-subverting* signifier formation that the aesthetic enactment of understanding achieves a dissociation or distancing from contextual assumptions. It is for this reason that the aesthetic object (this "place without location" <sup>42</sup> that artworks make accessible by violating the boundaries of our world of automatic understanding), which creates its estrangement in the deferral of signifier formation, also



achieves a deictic ("showing") character. The dissociation of contextual assumptions not only negates, but also reveals. That which is supposed to guarantee the correctness of signifier formation in automatic understanding becomes the object of a dissociating experience in the process of its aesthetic de-automatization.

Our knowledge of contexts of use, which guarantee automatic understanding, is now replaced by the quotation of contextual assumptions. The contexts of use that we employ for aesthetic elements can never, as quoted contexts, attain the validity of stable foundations. In (the effort at) aesthetic understanding, we do not form them directly for the signs that are to be understood; instead, we quote them from our acts of automatic understanding. Quoting is the form of aesthetic showing. Repeating them by quoting them introduces a "range of variation" into the internal structure of understanding that infinitely delays its identifications: "they enter into them [the works of art] as if from afar and are transformed into something different as soon as they do so."<sup>43</sup> In aesthetic understanding, we do not apply contextual assumptions that make automatic processes of understanding possible; instead, we quote situations of such applications. This reference to the context by quotation rather than by application creates distance: contextual assumptions that guarantee understanding become ambiguous when they are quoted and in this way subject the elements identified through them to an unoblittable indeterminacy.<sup>44</sup> For aesthetic objects, the search for contexts that guarantee understanding only ever leads to results one step removed: possibilities played through at a distance (*distanziert*), rather than validly established contexts.

Such reference to context, a feature of the estranging dissociation of the aesthetic, must not, however, be confused with the concept of aesthetic meaning. Aesthetically presented contexts are not meanings embodied in aesthetic signifiers, but rather implications uncovered in the failed application of automatic understanding to the aesthetic. That which is shown in the aesthetic object is not what it conveys through the sense of a concept of aesthetic meaning. Instead, it is that which as the result of the process of breakdown or decomposition of aesthetic understanding always must first be understood anew in an aesthetic sense (but never can be). For the contextual assumptions of aesthetic understanding are not presented in the meaningful connection of already identified aesthetic signifiers, but in the aesthetic negation of the automatic identification of aesthetic signifiers. This implies that the defining features that aesthetic elements gain in the showing of contextual assumptions cannot have the status of automatically formed signifiers. Instead, they, for their part, revert back to the semiological status of the material from which selections first have to be made before it can be incorporated into signs. This is also seen in the fact that an aesthetically estranged object presents a different context for every possible attempt at signifier formation. It is precisely in the attempt at aesthetic signifier formation that the aesthetic object produces itself as material and achieves its superabundant quality vis-à-vis each and every signifying selection.

## 2.3 A Critique of Polysemy

The above reflections on the aesthetically processual enactment of automatic understanding seem to suggest that the aesthetics of negativity is a variant of the theory of polysemy or ambiguity in aesthetics. If efforts at understanding, in their aesthetically estranged enactment, always end up being depotentiated into attributes of the material out of which signifiers have first to be selected (instead of producing identifications of signifiers and the meanings embodied within them), this implies that it is not possible to make an unambiguous selection of signifiers from aesthetic objects. Even the determinations achieved in the deictic moment of the self-subversion of signifier formation are only those of the material, and in this way superabundant. They are the object, rather than the result, of selective understanding. It thus appears characteristic of the attempts at understanding undertaken by means of aesthetic experience to admit a diversity of mutually competing determinations of its object. Where, however, none of the many alternatives can be distinguished from others as correct, all are equally permissible; where nothing can be right, nothing can be false: everything is allowed.

The assumption that the aesthetics of negativity ultimately amounts to nothing more than a variation on the theory of polysemy is reinforced by statements in Adorno, who (following Valéry, and in the wake of the German dissemination of the theorem of ambiguity of aesthetic objects by the conception of *Werkinterpretation*) speaks of the "objective ambiguity" of the work of art, which evokes an "infinite number" of proposed interpretations "none of which it can satisfy without violating others." 45 In this, Adorno concurs with a host of the most diverse theories, all of which declare an indifferent juxtaposition of not only differing but even opposing understandings to be the central characteristic of aesthetic experience and its object. Thus "skeptics" such as Odo Marquard describe "pluralizing hermeneutics" as the sole mode of access appropriate to the aesthetic object, to the "literary text, which (as Jauß's version of the aesthetics of reception has urged) can always be read in yet another way and can always have yet another meaning, because it has 'no meaning in itself,' but rather—through delight in the context—is capable of endless interpretation." 46 In the same way, structural semiologists, such as Roland Barthes and J. Lotman, emphasize that "symbolic language, which thus includes that of literary works, ... [is,] according to its structure, a plural language, the codex of which is so constituted that every work which makes use of it has multiple meanings" 47 and "[d]ifferences in the interpretation of works of art are common and, despite general opinion, do not arise from attendant and easily obviated causes, but rather are organic to art." 48 Disregarding for a moment that the explanation of aesthetic negativity takes place on the level of signifier selection rather than on the level of the establishment of interpretive meaning, viewed superficially, it does seem to refer to the structure of diverse determinability of the aesthetic object, as does polysemy theory. Is the aesthetics of negativity thus nothing more than an elaborately constructed version of the polysemy thesis? Or is it precisely the indirect explanatory strategies employed by the aesthetics of negativity—as compared to the simple establishment of ambiguity—that possess an explanatory potential that the direct approach of the polysemy thesis lacks?

To answer this question, let us first turn to the form the concept of aesthetic experience takes in the claim of aesthetic ambiguity raised by polysemy theory. "Pluralizing" hermeneutics or semiotics projects a picture of the unrelated coexistence of many alternative readings. Only the observer not currently taken in by one of these readings can see the arbitrariness of his or her understanding in comparison to other acts of understanding, which are equally undisrupted when taken on their own terms. The aesthetic quality of understanding, or of the object it seeks to understand, is according to the descriptions of the polysemy thesis not based on the status or structure of any *individual* act of understanding, but instead becomes predicated to it from the outside, in the process of comparing it to many other acts of understanding. From the perspective of the observer, "aesthetic" in polysemy theory refers to those signs that tolerate a frictionless simultaneity of meanings which are actually mutually exclusive. In this context, aesthetic understanding appears to be solely the sum of all those coexisting and mutually indifferent postulates. Each of them is structured and produced according to the model of automatic understanding and breaks down only when viewed from an external point of view and confronted with other equally likely, but mutually incompatible acts of understanding.

Usually, the polysemy thesis equates aesthetic experience with only one act of understanding, which, from an internal perspective, is identical with one of automatic understanding. The relativizing and pluralizing contribution of the external perspective is then the task of the scholar—as the historian of the many, mutually incompatible readings. The aesthetic quality of these readings is then no longer a quality grounded in its internal mode of enactment, but is only attributed to these readings by means of recounting, from an external point of view, the history of the responses to (the reception of) the aesthetic object in question. In this way, the polysemy thesis loses sight of the aesthetic character of the respective individual readings, in order to then attribute this quality to the coexistence of incompatibilities that they achieve in their historicity. In this manner, aesthetic quality and historicity become one.

The fundamental conflation of the internal and external, and of the aesthetic and historical points of view, holds even in a modified version of the polysemy thesis in which the external standpoint is integrated into the understanding of the aesthetic object, in this way inscribing the latter with a vacillating movement between the internal and external point of

view. It does not go further than the abstract distinction between the internal enactment of aesthetic understanding, which cannot be distinguished from automatic understanding, and the external consideration of it, which is solely responsible for its aesthetic quality. Vis-à-vis this fundamental distinction, it is of secondary importance whether the external perspective is conferred on the historian of the alternative modes of understanding or whether the subject of aesthetic experience is now declared to be the historian of his or her own understanding. Though the second variant abandons the hybrid enhancement of the status of the historian of the reception of works of art into the trustee of its specifically aesthetic quality, it does not give up the structural equation of aesthetic quality and historicity that forms its basis: according to either variant of the polysemy thesis, aesthetic objects become ambiguous only from the standpoint of an external perspective on the individual acts of understanding aimed at it, and this is comparable to the ambiguity that *all* signs assume, in the retrospective view of the historian, when we project the diachronic and historically changing ways they are appropriated onto a synchronic level. The polysemy thesis conceives of the "simultaneous plurality of the reference of the aesthetic object" according to the paradigm of "aesthetic pluralism in the temporal dimension, of aesthetic historicism." <sup>49</sup>

This shows that the pluralization of efforts at understanding has a completely different status in polysemy theory than it does in the aesthetics of negativity. In the former, it is the result of a bracketing, to which an external approach subjects the individual acts of understanding. By contrast, in the latter, it is indivisibly connected to the self-subversion or -negation of its results that occurs in the aesthetically internal enactment of each act of understanding: the only reason we experience an object as irreducibly plural in definition is that we always reproduce it as material in the aesthetic deferral of signifier formation. The irreducible plurality of determinacy is not an attribute that we ascribe to the aesthetic object in external comparisons of various respective efforts at automatic understanding, but rather a quality that we bring forth in every aesthetically processual enactment of efforts at automatic understanding. We only experience multideterminacy (which the polysemy thesis correctly emphasizes, but wrongly analyzes) as aesthetic if we trace it back to that process of internal negation of automatic understanding (rather than the external bracketing of the latter) in which this quality first arises. Multideterminacy in aesthetic experience is not the result of an external point of view on acts of automatic understanding that are in themselves intact; it arises only as the effect of the experientially enacted negation of understanding, which, as a determinate negation, is itself grounded in this very understanding.

The rejection of polysemy theory for the sake of the interminable processuality of aesthetic experience forms one of the central motifs of poststructural and deconstructive theory. This shows the close affinity between aesthetic negativity conceived of processually and the key terms of deconstruction, which are initially interpretable in aesthetic terms. <sup>50</sup> This congruence between the aesthetics of negativity and deconstruction are concealed, however, by Derrida's critique of the concept of negativity. The latter applies to the concept of the negative, though, only insofar as it, in its traditional philosophical form, limits its own potential for negation in a "nostalgic" ("romantic" or "Rousseauian") or a teleological way. <sup>51</sup> Derrida's critique of the concept of negativity does not, however, apply to its aesthetic usage as explicated here. Quite the contrary, it is precisely the processuality of aesthetic experience that Derrida brings to bear against the polysemy theory, a processuality that represents the sole referent of the concept of aesthetic negativity in Adorno as well, once it is divested of its "heteronomous" recasting (*Überformungen*). According to Derrida's thesis, the polysemy theory is caught up in a contradiction between the infinite ambiguity of texts that it asserts and the conceptual instruments that it provides for explaining this equivocality: "If polysemy is infinite, if it cannot be mastered as such, this is thus not because a finite reading or a finite writing remains incapable of exhausting a superabundance of meaning." <sup>52</sup> As long as the thesis that aesthetic texts are distinguished from other types of texts by their polysemy is understood to mean that this ambiguity is based on a "polythematicism," it remains trapped in the "order of meaning." <sup>53</sup> Derrida objects to polysemy theory by pointing out that the thesis of a host of possible explications of meaning does not, by itself, represent a fundamental criticism of positions that postulate a connection of different ascribed meanings as integrated in a unity of meaning that can be aesthetically experienced. Instead, according to such positions, the mere ambiguity of aesthetic signs can always still be integrated into a "hermeneutic teleology." <sup>54</sup> According to these positions, the many

acts of aesthetic understanding—which, following polysemy theory, refer, with equal merit, to an aesthetic object—aim at an inexhaustible aesthetic meaning. Here, we are forced to undertake more than one effort at understanding because aesthetic meaning, per se, goes beyond any individual effort, but can be approached by means of numerous such efforts. If the claim of aesthetic ambiguity can be adequately explained in terms of the "superabundance of meaning," then it is in no way compelled to break with the idea of the successful understandability of aesthetic objects. In this sense, polysemy theory represents an aesthetically inadequate theory, since it is indifferent to the way in which the superabundance of the aesthetic object is grounded. As such, it leaves unresolved whether we are dealing with a superabundance of aesthetic meaning that eludes any individual act of understanding but not understanding per se, or rather with a superabundance of aesthetic signifiers that is produced in the infinite deferral of acts of understanding which prevents their own success.

From this inadequacy of polysemy theory Derrida draws conclusions akin to those of the analysis of the aesthetics of negativity: the infiniteness or interminability of the text, upon which every interpretation of meaning is dashed to pieces, cannot be the object of an observer who adds together the diverse efforts at understanding from a metaperspective. Instead, this infiniteness has to constitute the inner logic of every individual (aesthetic) experiential act itself. The superabundance of an aesthetic object cannot be explained in terms of a large number of ascribable meanings, no matter how large the number. Instead, it can only be explained in terms of the processuality or movement it possesses when seen from the perspective of aesthetic experience:

The movement of these marks pervades the whole of the space of writing in which they occur, hence they can never be enclosed in any finite taxonomy ... they are the marks of dissemination (and not of polysemy) in that they cannot be pinned down at any one *point* by the concept or the tenor of a signified. <sup>55</sup>

This movement, however, is not added to the text from without, but rather represents nothing other than the practice in which the text composes and decomposes itself. "What counts here is not the lexical richness, the semantic infiniteness of a word or a concept ... what counts here is the formal or syntactical *praxis* that composes and decomposes it." <sup>56</sup> Thus the text is not superabundant beyond any possible unity of meaning because, as polysemy theory held, it indifferently tolerates the coexistence of an incomprehensible number of attributions of meaning, but rather because "aesthetic text" refers to that mode of existence of signs in which the infinitely delaying movement of meaning formation is at the same time inscribed upon these signs: "Each pair in the circuit will always have referred to another pair, signifying *in addition*, the very operation of signifying ..." <sup>57</sup>

Thus the task at hand is to relate this infinite indeterminability of aesthetic objects, which polysemy theory takes up, through the aesthetics of negativity or deconstruction to the infinite processuality of the understanding or meaning that is inherent in these objects from the perspective of aesthetic experience. This does not entail, though, disputing the phenomenon that polysemy theory has taken up. On the contrary: the ambiguity or multideterminability of aesthetic objects is only explainable in terms of insight into the negation of automatic understanding. For the objects of aesthetic experience are subject to diverse determinations only because each individual effort at understanding fails to identify significant elements and the meanings they embody, but instead always reverts back to its semiological starting point, unselected materiality. Thus the experience of aesthetic deferral implies the plurality of possible identifications of aesthetic signifiers and the meanings they embody, since it subverts every individual selection of signifiers. At the same time, however, the aesthetics of negativity and deconstruction show that the plurality of defining alternatives is an aspect of aesthetic objects that is derived from the negativity of the enactment of aesthetic understanding—but not an aspect that reveals its specific structure or constitution. If, however, aesthetic plurality is separated from its grounding of understanding-negating, aesthetic processuality, then it does not describe anything specifically aesthetic. As we have seen, all signs are ambiguous, simply because they are historical in character. The same sign material is always subject to different signifier selections and thus to different ascriptions of meaning. This confirms that, although polysemy theory can appeal to an important aspect of aesthetic objects, it removes this aspect from its context of justification or grounding and, for this reason, does

not succeed in giving force to its specifically aesthetic character. Plurality of determinacy is inherent in aesthetic signs because they reproduce themselves as material vis-à-vis all efforts at identification. By separating the result—the materiality of the sign that still has to be selected and understood—from the process that produces it—the production of material that occurs in precisely the opposite effort at generating automatic understanding—polysemy theory also loses sight of the specifically aesthetic status of this result. In analyzing the aesthetically processual enactment of automatic understanding, the key conclusion is not that unselected material is once again found at its end, but that it is found at its end. In short: to experience aesthetically the unselected materiality of the sign is to experience it in the way it (re)produces itself against any efforts at automatic understanding in the aesthetic enactment of efforts at understanding. Thus to experience it aesthetically is not to forget its genesis and arrive at a new interpretation, the failure of which is just as forgetfully followed by others. Rather, to experience it aesthetically is to relate it to the negative process of efforts at aesthetic understanding. Such an experience can be had, however, without first losing oneself in an infinite rush of interpretations. It does not require the assumption of the external perspective of the historian or "scientist" on aesthetic experiences from which polysemy theory defines the aesthetic quality of understanding. <sup>58</sup> For the enactment of the aesthetic self-subversion of automatic understanding, the internal perspective of the person undergoing the aesthetic experience suffices.

The course of the argument made in this chapter is once again repeated in the critique of polysemy theory when placed in the context of undecidable plurality, aesthetic vacillation and process, and the superabundance of the object: the aesthetic object is the object of an understanding that is defined, in its primary dimension, as signifier formation. This means that it can never be merely an actual object ( Goodman), but is always also a signifier selectively formed out of the material. At the same time, moreover, the aesthetic object is never just a signifier formed in reference to meaning, but is always a constant vacillation between such a signifier and the unselected material that is superabundant beyond all understanding. A more precise explanation of the thesis of the constant vacillation of the aesthetic object in its transition between its two poles can be provided if one retraces the aesthetic fate of that act that has the task of signifier formation and thus of ending this vacillation: the act of (automatic) understanding. This act, in its aesthetic enactment, is the production of the aesthetically vacillating object insofar as it fails in its effort to select signifiers and thus, instead of constituting signifiers, reconstitutes superabundant material. Our efforts at automatic understanding fail, though, because when they are enacted by means of aesthetic experience, the external instances supporting them, the shared interpretations of context, are stripped away. They are dissociated in the negation of understanding, and in the act of being dissociated they are shown as quotes, to become in turn, as that which is shown, attributes of the material out of which the signifying aspects are still to be chosen. Aesthetic experience is the experience of the failure of automatic understanding and, in this, the self-producing superabundance of the aesthetic object vis-à-vis every act of understanding. The fact that, as Derrida sometimes puts it, an "overpowerfulness," an "autonomy," or a "surplus" <sup>59</sup> vis-à-vis the definition of its functional meaning inheres in the aesthetic object in its meaning-averse materiality is not a quality of all objects, but a quality they first achieve in the process of the aesthetic deferral of understanding. And they first achieve this superabundance of meaning in this movement because it is first this movement that breaks with nonaesthetic automatic processes, which reduce signifiers to their meaning function. They first become autonomous as the objects of an experience that has separated itself from the automatic processes of understanding by releasing in it a processuality that subverts every meaning-generating result.

*Faire de la langue un travail ..., oeuvrer dans la matérialité de ce qui, pour la société, est un moyen de contact et de compréhension, n'est pas de faire, d'emblée, étranger à la langue? L'act dit littéraire, à force de ne pas admettre de distance idéale par rapport à ce que signifie, introduit l'étrangerité radicale par rapport à ce que la langue est censée être: un porteur de sens.* <sup>60</sup>

### 3

## The Aesthetics of Negativity and Hermeneutics

Hermeneutic aesthetics raises a basic objection to the account of aesthetic experience presented in chapter 2, namely that the theorem of the interminable deferral of aesthetic understanding—as it developed from the Russian formalists to the deconstructionism of Derrida and Kristeva by way of such diverse authors as Heidegger, Jakobson, and Valéry—is based solely on a restrained view of the process of aesthetic understanding. The thesis of the aesthetics of negativity that the aesthetic is alien to all forms of understanding is, according to this view, not an appropriate description of the logic of aesthetic experience, but rather only a distortion of this logic that results from the methodology of the aesthetics of negativity.<sup>1</sup> On this view, the aesthetics of negativity resembles those semiological theories of understanding (the conceptual instruments of which it makes use in its arguments) that restrict their investigation to the first step of understanding: signifier formation. The aesthetics of negativity is premised on a "semiological abstraction" from the attributions of meaning found in every case of signifier formation. From the hermeneutic perspective, however, the understanding of meaning cannot be conceived of in terms of its first step, signifier formation, but—just the reverse—has to be described in terms of its aim, comprehended meaning. Only on the basis of such a reversal of perspectives can the rules of hermeneutic understanding come fully into view. To recognize that in aesthetic experience understanding is achieved rather than subverted, all we have to do—according to the argument of hermeneutics—is abandon the semiological view of hermeneutic processes, returning them to their proper contexts.

The dispute between hermeneutics and the aesthetics of negativity involves the appropriateness of their opposing descriptions of the processes of aesthetic understanding: according to hermeneutic aesthetics, aesthetically enacted understanding is also successful understanding, since it, as is any example of understanding, is located in external contexts. The aesthetics of negativity holds that this view loses sight of the unique and peculiar character of the processes of aesthetic understanding. For the latter are forced—due to the undecidability of contextual premises—into the internal reenactment of attempts at understanding, attempts that take signifier formation as their starting point and are subject to a process of interminable deferral. Thus, on the hermeneutic view, the aesthetics of negativity fails to realize that aesthetic experience can *also* be described as successful understanding—as the attribution of meaning in contexts. Conversely, in the view of the aesthetics of negativity, hermeneutics fails to appreciate that aesthetic experience, *and only it*, must be conceived of as the infinitely deferred enactment of understanding. In short, the aesthetics of negativity seemingly loses sight of the hermeneutic character of aesthetic experience, whereas hermeneutic aesthetics apparently overlooks the unique and specific character of this experience.

The aim now is to take up and examine both of these criticisms.<sup>2</sup> My initial move will not involve a direct contrast of the opposing explanations of the enactment of aesthetic experience that each view provides. Instead, I will indirectly relate them to one another in terms of a third element. The systematic alternative to both hermeneutics and the aesthetics of negativity can be developed as an alternative interpretation of the basic structure of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*. Involved here is Adorno's procedure of describing the constitution of the aesthetic object and the experience of it in terms of pairs of interrelated concepts. It remains undecided, and thus unclear, how the logical structure of these conceptual oppositions (or pairs) is to be understood in Adorno. In interpreting the *Aesthetic Theory*, I argue that this indecisiveness reflects the book's ambivalent position, somewhere between the aesthetics of negativity and hermeneutics. The dispute between these two approaches takes place at the very heart of the *Aesthetic Theory*: in two interpretatively equally plausible, but systematically opposed readings of the logical structure of their conceptual oppositions. A reading guided by the aesthetics of negativity finds that they are structured paradoxically and that this paradoxical character gives expression to the opposing tendencies involved in the effort at—and the subversion of—understanding. The interminable hesitation between the two poles of superabundant

material and comprehensible meaning makes itself felt in the necessity of reproducing the status of aesthetic objects by means of paradoxically structured conceptual pairs. In contrast, on a hermeneutic reading, the pairs of interrelated concepts mutually supplement one another and only appear paradoxical when falsely interpreted. On this view, the irreducibility of aesthetic understanding to its statable (*aussagbar*) moments manifests itself in the concepts' mutual supplementation. Thus a more precise examination of the conceptual pairs of the *Aesthetic Theory* necessitates a further clarification of the opposing accounts of aesthetic experience, provided under the rubrics of the aesthetics of negativity and hermeneutics, as well as a decision about their validity.

The conceptual pairs of the *Aesthetic Theory* are combinations of determining qualities, which when read in isolation, designate aspects of the aesthetic object, such as whole, part, form, material, construct, mimesis, and so on. It is only in terms of further reflection on their status—namely, in reflections on the conditions of their use—that they become interlinked pairs. Adorno's arrangement of these concepts in pairs implies that any consideration of aesthetic objects in terms of one aspect entails a second consideration (a doubling of considerations, so to speak) in terms of a second aspect. Arranged in pairs, the concepts do not directly designate aspects of the aesthetic object, but rather dimensions of the way this object is defined in aesthetic experience. "Whole" and "detail," "construction" and "mimesis" stand for aspects of the explication of—or dimensions of—the experience of aesthetic objects.

I propose distinguishing two systematically relevant types of conceptual pairs from among the host given in the *Aesthetic Theory*. I consider "whole" and "part" examples of the first type and "construction" and "mimesis" examples of the second type. A further series of conceptual pairs represent borderline types, "form" and "material" presenting one such instance. Since I am not interested here in a comprehensive classification of the interlinked concepts of the *Aesthetic Theory*, but in their systematic relevance, I will ignore such borderline conceptual oppositions. The two basic types of conceptual pairs can be distinguished in the following way: the first type formulates the relationship between two basic dimensions of the understanding of an aesthetic object (see section 3.1); the second type formulates the relationship between the effort at understanding and its aesthetic enactment (see section 3.2). The hermeneutic criticism of the aesthetics of negativity—that it emphasizes signifier formation at the expense of understanding's reference to meaning—can be examined in terms of the first type of concepts. For the first type of contrasting aesthetic concepts in Adorno involves the relationship between aesthetic meaning and aesthetic signifier. Conversely, the objection from the aesthetics of negativity to hermeneutics—that it undermines the autonomy of aesthetic understanding—can be investigated in terms of the second type of concepts. For the second type of opposing aesthetic concepts involves the relationship between the effort at understanding and its processual enactment.

### **3.1 The Manifest Object of the Controversy: Whole and Element**

Let us first attempt to locate more precisely the point of controversy between hermeneutics and the aesthetics of negativity. Here it is useful to take a look at conceptual oppositions of the first type in the *Aesthetic Theory*, and especially at Adorno's discussion of the aesthetic concepts of whole and part, or unity and moment. In a paradigmatic formulation, Adorno writes the following about their relation: "The unity of art works cannot be what it must be, i.e., unity of a manifold. By synthesizing the many, unity violates the synthesized, and in it, inflicts damage on the synthesis. Works suffer from their mediated totality just as much as from their unmediated traits."<sup>3</sup> Adorno describes the interrelationship of the dimensions of aesthetic understanding—which are designated in terms of synthesis and manifold, whole and part, unity and moment—as one of paradox. Though aesthetic unity synthesizes the manifold, the latter is at the same time irreducibly opposed to such a unity. Despite its opposition to synthesis, however, the manifold exists only in its relation to synthesis. Thus synthesis and manifold exist only by means of one another and in opposition to one another.

One can get a better idea of the paradox that Adorno has in mind if the concepts of synthesis and manifold are understood as rubrics for statements about aesthetic objects located on different levels. The first level contains statements about aesthetic details as an unstructured manifold, the second about their aesthetic synthesis. The aesthetic linkage of the two levels of statements is paradoxical since, on the one hand, it is defined as a consequence: the statements of level two (on the aesthetic whole) are based on statements of level one (on aesthetic details). On the other hand, the two levels of statements stand in opposition to one another: the statements of level two distort the statements of level one. In this way, the statements of level two are, on the one hand, the summation, the balance of the statements of level one; but, on the other hand, the statements of level one contain determinations or defining features that contradict their summation in the statements of level two. Due to the contradictory definition of their relation, each statement level is itself defined by contradiction. The statements on the manifold are, on the one hand—insofar as the two levels are what they are by means of one another—statements about the manifold *in* a synthesis. Nevertheless—insofar as the two levels are what they are in opposition to one another—they are statements about the manifold *in opposition* to their synthesis. In the same way, the statements on aesthetic synthesis are, on the one hand—insofar as the two levels are what they are by means of one another—the summation of the statements on the manifold. Nevertheless—insofar as the two levels are what they are in opposition to one another—they stand in contradiction to these statements.

The relationship between the two levels can be more precisely defined, if, for preliminary purposes, we use the terminology inspired by *Gestalt* theory. Monroe C. Beardsley uses it to describe the connection between the aesthetic part and the aesthetic whole: "In fact, it is precisely the purpose of analysis to discover, first, what is true of the parts, and second, how the parts contribute to the peculiar qualities of the whole."<sup>4</sup> Here, Beardsley employs the concept of the whole in a relative sense; a whole is any combination of at least two elements: "Any part of a sensory field is then itself a complex if further parts can be discriminated within it. An absolutely homogeneous part of a field is partless, and such a partless part may be called an element of the field."<sup>5</sup> Beardsley constructs the distinction between "local qualities" and "regional quality" in analogy to one between "element" and "complex": a regional quality is "a property, or characteristic, that belongs to a complex but not to any of its parts." Beardsley describes the aesthetic relationship between local and regional qualities in terms of two characteristics: first, the regional qualities of the relative whole are new in the sense that they cannot be attributed to their constitutive elements; second, they are based on the local qualities of the elements and their configuration.

Beardsley then goes on to present aesthetic interpretation as the univocal progression of stages that moves from the description of the figure's elements via that of their relations to that of the "regional qualities of the figure as a whole." If one follows Beardsley's description of the relationship between the whole and the part in aesthetic analysis thus far, the relation between levels one and two presents itself as a nonretrospective progression of stages: all level-one statements are, in their aesthetic sense, contained in the statements of level two. And this is due to the fact that all level-one statements of aesthetic relevance have been incorporated into level-two statements.

It is now possible—against the backdrop of Beardsley's one-sided linkage of the two levels—to give a more precise depiction of Adorno's paradox. Adorno does not dispute the validity of the argument that level-one statements have to be transferred and transformed into those of level two. On the contrary, this is the sense of the conclusion, made in a variety of forms, that "it is the whole that imparts incandescence to [the] details."<sup>6</sup> Adorno follows this argument precisely to the extent to which it reformulates the antipositivist objection to crude literalness and binds elements to their place within the whole. At the same time, however, Adorno considers the statements about elements to have a larger function than just the one attributed to them by Beardsley, that is, of being the "perceptual conditions" of statements on aesthetic unity: "The manifold may seek its own synthesis in the aesthetic continuum, but it also balks at being synthesized, for it is in part determined by forces outside of art. The synthesis, which is extrapolated from the many that contains it as a potential, is also, unavoidably, its negation."<sup>7</sup> In contrast to Beardsley's suggestion, not only is it true that level-one statements of aesthetic



understanding are transformed into level-two statements, but moreover, this transformation is not entirely possible. Furthermore, not only are statements about the aesthetic whole irreducible to those about aesthetic elements, but also, conversely, statements about aesthetic elements cannot be completely transformed into those about the aesthetic whole.

It is in no way necessary to base this argument—as Adorno seems to assume—on an appeal to social-critical or historico-philosophical theorems. The irreducibility of the parts to the whole is neither an aesthetic mirroring of "antagonisms that are unresolved in reality" nor, conversely, a restitution of the "culpability" of art vis-à-vis the "living."<sup>8</sup> The insoluble inadequacy of all aesthetic synthesis asserted by Adorno, which, for structural reasons, "fails in the face of the detail," can be stripped of its historico-philosophical language. It then only makes sense in reference to a conception of understanding that asserts the total transformability of statements about details into those about the whole. And it is precisely this gap between the two statement levels in aesthetic understanding that allows Adorno to equate the concept of dissonance (which is usually only stylistically employed) with that of an aesthetic that has found its truth.<sup>9</sup> "Dissonance"—as an aesthetic and no longer a stylistic category—refers to paradox in the discussion of art per se, including stylistically nondissonant art. The appropriateness of Adorno's equation of autonomous with dissonant art is not in reference to any stylistically describable phenomenon. It is based solely on the fact that any discussion of art that is no longer grounded in the external integrative figures of whole and part cannot avoid the cited paradox of statement levels. Discussion of art, which for the first time in modernity is divested of all nonaesthetic support, is practically defined by its becoming the opening for the development and movement of paradoxical cross-referencing between the two statement levels.

Accordingly, Adorno is much clearer about the reasons for the paradoxical linkage of whole and part in those places where he refrains from basing it on the philosophy of history or social critique. What is involved instead, as implied in the generalization of the originally stylistic concept of dissonance, is the limitation of all statements about the aesthetic whole: they always refer back to the question of the nature of those local qualities which Beardsley claims are nothing more than the perceptual conditions of the whole. Against their claim to be statements about the whole of the parts or about the synthesis of the manifold, Adorno argues for the uncircumventably "chimeric" character of all such statements about the aesthetic whole: they always refer back to those statements that give expression to the wealth of manifold details. Against their immanent claim to formulate fully the aesthetic sense of level-one statements, level-two statements are *thrown* back to the level of the level-one statements that they supposedly sublated within themselves. This holds in the same sense for level-one statements: they also do not represent a secure basis independent of the validity of level-two statements. Rather than being able to independently define the parts of aesthetic objects, level-one statements repeatedly *refer forward* to level-two statements made on their basis.

It seems reasonable to consider Adorno's demonstration of the paradoxical relationship between the two levels as a direct confirmation of the argument from the aesthetics of negativity about the hesitation of the aesthetic sign: no statement can be made about the aesthetic whole or its elements that would not have to be admitted to be inadequate and superseded in favor of its opposite. The paradox in the relationship of the two levels appears to confirm the thesis of the aesthetics of negativity, that aesthetic experience is enacted as an unsublatable conflict between the attempt at understanding (the transformation of statements about elements into statements about aesthetic unity) and the failure of such an attempt (the objection of statements about aesthetic elements to those about aesthetic unity). If Adorno's thesis about the paradoxical character of the relationship between levels is examined more closely, however, it becomes clear that it in no way provides a basis for drawing major conclusions. The paradoxical thesis, instead, has an initially much weaker critical function, aiming, as it does, to block a twofold misconception: On the one hand, Adorno emphasizes that the two levels stand "opposed to one another" to contradict any appearance that the aesthetic sense of the elements is fully expressed in the statements about the whole. On the other hand, he underscores the fact that both levels are possible only "by means of one another" to contradict any appearance that statements about parts could be made independently of their reference to statements

about the whole. The first misconception results in a falsely idealistic conception of aesthetic unity, whereas the second misconception results in a falsely positivist conception of the aesthetic elements. Though opposed to each other in substantive terms, both misconceptions share a common denominator: they both assume that each dimension of aesthetic understanding can be adequately articulated in statements, and thus be identified independently of the other, in order to then serve as the basis for the other. In this sense, Adorno's paradoxical thesis initially serves simply to emphasize that neither aesthetic unity nor aesthetic detail can be stated and defined independently of one another.

The impossibility of formulating independent statements about the two levels of whole and part is not identical with the vacillation analyzed by negative aesthetics, that is, the aesthetic deferral of understanding. Thus the contents of the paradox as presented do not in any way represent a sufficient basis of support for the theses of the aesthetics of negativity. For it is premature, though common, to conclude on the basis of the paradoxical relation between statements that any and all determinations of the aesthetic object by understanding are impossible, and consequently, to conclude from the unstatable (*unaussagbar*) character of the aesthetic whole and of its parts their general indeterminability by means of understanding. The aesthetics of negativity would be condemned to failure from the very outset if it were based solely on the assertion that aesthetic elements and aesthetic unity cannot be stated. For this fact does not justify conceiving of aesthetic understanding as removed from all forms of successful understanding. The provinces of possible understanding are not identical with the provinces of possible statements of that which is understood. For this reason, insight into the paradox of the two levels of statements—which a series of authors have taken to be a fundamental barrier to the possibility of aesthetic understanding per se—is also the very starting point of hermeneutic aesthetics.

To recognize the mistake of equating the unstability of aesthetic signs with their incomprehensibility, one need only take a quick look at one of the basic theorems of hermeneutics, the theory of the hermeneutic circle. Its logical structure corresponds exactly to the problem posed here. The hermeneutic circle is the resolution of a paradox that arises solely due to the false interpretation of the status of its elements:

[H]ow is it possible, since we can always only perceive (*auffassen*) one thing after another but never the whole at once, to recognize the particular, since to do so presupposes knowledge of the whole? The circle, i.e., that I can only recognize a, b, c, etc. by means of A, but can only recognize A itself by means of a, b, c, etc. is irresolvable if both A and a, b, c are conceived of as opposites that mutually condition one another without recognizing their unity . . . Only in this way is it possible for me to recognize the particular by means of the whole and, conversely, the whole by means of the particular. <sup>10</sup>

The theory of the hermeneutic circle is nothing other than a processual resolution of the paradoxical relationship of the two levels of statements. It criticizes the false presupposition that the two moments of the aesthetic object can be articulated in statements independently of one another, the assumption on which the paradox is based. At the same time, however, it maintains the correct insight into their paradoxical relationship: the simultaneity of the constitutive reference—and the irreducibility—of the two contrasting poles. What each is can only be determined in reference to the other; neither is that which it is only for itself or only for the other. Accordingly, every statement about one of the moments has to be refracted in terms of a statement about the other moment—without this connection itself then being made into the object of a statement. That their connection, in accordance with the hermeneutic conception, eludes the "dimension of statements" <sup>11</sup> does not however mean there is a deferral, much less a subversion, of all understanding. Instead, according to the hermeneutic thesis, the moments, which in isolation are only linked paradoxically, complement each other in the understanding of an unstatable content.

This brief look at the hermeneutic circle points out that, if properly understood, the two levels, initially placed in a paradoxical relation to one another in Adorno, are actually the basic elements of aesthetic understanding. They mark the end point and the starting point of processes of understanding: meaning and the interpreted, signified and signifier.

Understanding, advancing tentatively and without the aid of rules, is, in this case, the building of a signifying structure in a projective "foreconception of completeness" <sup>12</sup> of its meaning. In contrast to Beardsley's account, this understanding defines its levels, the element and the whole, not in terms of empirical conclusions, but rather in terms of interpretive conclusions, since it necessarily involves the formation of a signifier—which is always meaning related—out of material. <sup>13</sup> Sentences about aesthetic particulars produce determinations of aesthetic signifiers between crude materiality and reference to meaning. The conclusions about aesthetic unity or the aesthetic whole that they are confronted with formulate the results of aesthetic understanding, the meanings ascribed to the object structured in terms of signifiers. Even though neither determination can be established in statements independently of the other, in the hermeneutic conception, they do complement each other to form a circle of reciprocal reference: the establishment of aesthetic signifiers occurs in a foreconception of the meaning they embody; the establishment of aesthetic meaning is inseparable from the description of its signifiers. Their relationship only appears paradoxical if one claims to deduce the meaning of aesthetic signifiers from the determination of the meaning they embody, or conversely, to establish the meaning of aesthetic signifiers independently of their embodiment. In relation to these claims, it is correct to speak of the "conflict or antagonism" between the two dimensions of aesthetic understanding. The theory of the hermeneutic circle, however, describes a process of determination that has given up two claims: the positivist claim of the deducibility of meaning from its bearers, of the whole from its elements, and the idealist claim of the sublation of the signifiers in their meaning, of the moments in their unity. This appears to mark the end of the "antagonism" between the two poles of contrast and to retain only their relation of "mutual interdependence" (their existing only by means of one another) from the paradox. In the process of aesthetic understanding we never establish one of the two—signifier or meaning, part or whole—independently of the other, but establish them only in their irresolvably complementary reference to one another.

Hermeneutic aesthetics secures the specificity of aesthetic understanding by means of two steps. In its first step, it emphasizes that aesthetic experience, as do its nonaesthetic counterparts, represents an act of successful understanding; in a second step, it goes on to underscore the uniqueness of aesthetic understanding. The polemical starting point of hermeneutic aesthetics consists in its demonstration that the basic structure of all understanding also holds for aesthetic experience. Opposition to hermeneutic aesthetics in this context is represented by those ever-repeated efforts to describe aesthetic signs detached from all efforts at understanding them. Thus hermeneutic aesthetics turned first (especially in Gadamer and Heidegger) <sup>14</sup> against the attempt to interpret aesthetic experience in terms of a direct experience (*Erleben*). More recent variants of hermeneutic aesthetics have directed similar arguments against different models of descriptivist interpretations of aesthetic experience, such as the categories of *Gestalt* theory and formalism, on the one hand, and those of structuralism on the other. The former target of criticism holds above all for the American literature, whereas the latter target applies to the more recent use of hermeneutics in reception aesthetics. <sup>15</sup>

At the same time, there is more to hermeneutic understanding than its emphasis on the understanding-based character of aesthetic experience. Its second step is to underscore the specific difference of aesthetic understanding from other forms of understanding. The characterization of this specific difference, however, is usually less than clear. Gadamer himself often marginalized the difference between general hermeneutic understanding and aesthetic understanding and subsumed aesthetic understanding under the general hermeneutic orientation toward meaning: "Thus our task is to understand the meaning of what it [the work of art] says and to make it clear to ourselves and others. Even the nonlinguistic work of art, therefore, falls within the province of the proper task of hermeneutics." <sup>16</sup> Gadamer underscores the common character of all understanding, including its aesthetic variant, in its orientation toward meaning. This, however, threatens to eradicate the difference between aesthetic and nonaesthetic (e.g., historical) understanding. This distinction can, however, be defined in terms of the different relationship between meaning and meaning-vehicle in each type of understanding: historical understanding defines its object as the document of its meaning, aesthetic understanding defines it as the expression of this meaning. <sup>17</sup>

In both cases, that of historical as well as aesthetic understanding, one can speak of the impossibility of capturing meaning within a catalogue of statements, of the dependency on a hermeneutic circle of statement levels. But the hermeneutic circle is not configured in the same way in each case: the historical understanding of the meaning of a document goes beyond the individual document and relates it to a general context provided by other documents. In contrast, the understanding of aesthetic meaning buries itself in its expression and relates it to its unique reality within a singular aesthetic object. In historical understanding, the hermeneutic circle of understanding connects meaning (of the particular document) and its context; in aesthetic understanding, it links meaning and its expression. This distinction has its counterpart in the fact that the meaning explicated in historical understanding can only claim also to be historical truth if it presents itself in more than one document, whereas the truth of aesthetic understanding is contingent on its encompassing a meaning that is solely the meaning of this one work: "The work of art, in its irreplaceability, is not just a vehicle of meaning—such that the meaning could also be placed upon other vehicles. The meaning of an art work is instead dependent upon the fact that the art work exists." <sup>18</sup> Thus, according to the thesis of hermeneutic aesthetics, the dimensions of aesthetic understanding are interrelated in a singular fashion: meaning and its vehicles, that is, meaning and its signifiers, cannot be defined independently of each other and then deduced from each other. Instead, they can only be defined reciprocally. It is here that the successful understanding of an aesthetic sign articulates itself. Hence hermeneutic aesthetics does recognize an aesthetic negativity and deferral vis-à-vis the postulate of the independent statability of the dimensions of understanding; what it disputes is a negativity and deferral vis-à-vis successful understanding as such.

The hermeneutic resolution of the paradox characterized by Adorno explicitly entails a critique of the aesthetics of negativity. <sup>19</sup> Whereas the aesthetics of negativity claims that the respective determination of the elements and the unity of aesthetic experience are marked by an irresolvable paradox, in the hermeneutic view, this theory has mistaken one thing for another: it claims something holds for understanding that actually only holds for the isolated determination of the dimensions of aesthetic signs. Thus, according to a hermeneutic reading, the aesthetics of negativity is right in emphasizing the interminable deferral involved in every effort to articulate in the form of statements the different moments of aesthetic signs independently of one another. It misunderstands its own insight, however, when it concludes from this that aesthetic understanding breaks down into two, only paradoxically related dimensions. According to hermeneutic aesthetics, it is rather that aesthetic understanding distinguishes itself by enacting a process of circular referencing between its dimensions. This process is not ateleological, but rather complements the independent dimensions in such a way as to result in a common reference to aesthetic meaning. Accordingly, the only interminable deferral in aesthetic experience involves the efforts to establish aesthetic signifiers and meaning in separate statements, but does not arise in attempts at understanding of their meaningful connection. That the aesthetics of negativity claims this, moreover, shows that it secretly is still committed to the ideal of the independent determinability of aesthetic dimensions.

This critique of the aesthetics of negativity that can be extrapolated from hermeneutic aesthetics applies to many of its versions. Again and again its proponents have given accounts of the claimed negation of understanding simply in terms of the rejection of inadequate (i.e., isolated, conceptual, meaning-fetishizing) efforts at understanding. In this sense, however, the thesis of the aesthetics of negativity does not represent an objection to hermeneutics, but only an aspect of it: for hermeneutic aesthetics also emphasizes the aesthetic negation and deferral of inadequate attempts at understanding. The claim of the aesthetics of negativity, though, can only be taken seriously if it produces an alternative to hermeneutics. And the aesthetics of negativity represents a serious counterthesis to hermeneutics only if it can elude the convincing critique mustered by the latter. Having learned from hermeneutics, the aesthetics of negativity no longer speaks of a vacillation simply between statements about aesthetic signifiers and meaning, but speaks more generally of the way they are defined by aesthetic understanding. The aesthetics of negativity can be considered a serious alternative to hermeneutics if and only if, instead of claiming that statements about aesthetic signifiers and meaning are each mediated in terms of the other and have made themselves independent of one another, it claims that, in the enactment of aesthetic understanding, even signifiers and meaning that are related to one another nevertheless do not complement each other, but instead make themselves independent of one another. <sup>20</sup>

Later, in the context of reflections on the structure of aesthetic interpretation, I will discuss in detail the character of the relationship between the dimensions of understanding, which are set free from one another in the very effort at aesthetic mediating between them (see section 4.1). Here, I am interested first of all in finding a way to choose between the alternatives of circular reference (in hermeneutics) and the autonomizing release of the dimensions of understanding (in the aesthetics of negativity). A key to making this choice is an understanding of the extent to which the aesthetics of negativity, as developed in chapter 2, is not guilty of what hermeneutics accuses it of, namely, falsely deducing the paradox in the relation of the dimensions of understanding from the paradox of their articulation in the form of statements. The aesthetics of negativity does not ground the aesthetic negation of understanding in the unstability of the latter. Instead, it grounds it in the processual enactment of aesthetic signifier formation that occurs in terms of the foreconception, the anticipation, of meaning attributions. Enacted processually, the latter is always the production of superabundant aesthetic material that cannot be combined within the unity of any understanding of meaning. Aesthetic signifiers continue to exceed the meaning they are supposed to embody. This holds not only for stable meaning, but for all meaning, including that realized by means of the hermeneutic circle. For that signifier formation is aesthetic that first proposes its own selections, without which no understanding is possible, and then revokes them.

Thus the aesthetics of negativity grounds the claimed paradox of the dimensions of understanding not in the fact that they cannot be stated independently of one another, but in the fact that their aesthetic enactment occurs processually. This still does not refute hermeneutics' more general criticism, however, that the aesthetics of negativity is based on a methodological abstraction from hermeneutic processes. It does allow a more precise statement of this criticism: hermeneutics objects to the way in which the aesthetics of negativity grounds its paradox. It namely states that the negative processuality of signifier formation does not end with the foreconception of meaning attribution, but, on the contrary, draws this attributive process as well into the negative processuality. In this sense, the focus of the aesthetics of negativity on the first step of understanding, signifier formation, is justified by the aesthetic processuality of understanding itself. The opposing interpretations of the relationship between the dimensions of understanding found in the aesthetics of negativity (as paradoxical) and in hermeneutics (as mutually complementary) are thus based on the different ways in which they treat the processuality of aesthetic understanding. In claiming there is successful aesthetic understanding that manifests itself in a relation between statement levels that is neither paradoxical nor stable, hermeneutic aesthetics provides the process of signifier formation with an attainable goal, in direct conflict with the claim of interminability that the aesthetics of negativity claims for this process. Hermeneutics finalizes aesthetic signifier formation: the vacillation between material and reference of meaning comes to an end with an art work that is understood. This contrasts with the thesis of the irresolvable antagonism of the inseparably intertwined dimensions of understanding put forth by the aesthetics of negativity. It does so by claiming that the processuality of aesthetic understanding first demonstrated in signifier formation continues in the attribution of meaning. For this reason, the decisive question in the controversy between negative and hermeneutic aesthetics comes to involve the way in which the processual enactment of aesthetic understanding and its foreconception of meaning are related to one another. That aesthetic signifier formation is itself lacking in criteria, as the aesthetics of negativity concludes, is something that hermeneutics cannot dispute. The question that remains, though, is whether this represents the last word on aesthetic signifier formation or whether, as hermeneutics assumes, aesthetic understanding, in which this formation takes place, provides the latter with criteria externally.

## **3.2 The Deep Structure of the Controversy: Mimesis and Meaning**

The discussion of the first type of conceptual distinction in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* has resulted in the opposition between two standpoints: on the one hand, there is the

hermeneutic thesis according to which the defining aspects of aesthetic objects designated by the concepts of whole and part—namely, signifying elements and meaning—together refer to a successful act of understanding. On the other hand, there is the thesis of the aesthetics of negativity, that the specifically aesthetic character of signifier and meaning is precisely the paradox of their lack of a common reference. This first conceptual distinction, however, does not provide the basis for choosing between these two interpretations. Each suspects the other of offering a truncated view of aesthetic understanding motivated by theoretical presuppositions. Hermeneutic aesthetics sees in the aesthetics of negativity a one-sided emphasis on processes of signifier formation that abstracts from their reference to meaning. Conversely, the aesthetics of negativity accuses hermeneutic aesthetics of a one-sided emphasis on aesthetic meaning that neglects the processual occurrence of its formation. This controversy can only be resolved in view of a second type of conceptual opposition found in *Aesthetic Theory*. *It is formed through a series of oppositions to the concept of mimesis: mimesis and construction, mimesis and form, mimesis and objectification, mimesis and meaning.*<sup>21</sup> The second conceptual pair offers an account of the first conceptual distinction: it relates the two opposing views of the aesthetic relationship between signifier and meaning to those of the process of aesthetic experience, which Adorno describes in terms of the tension between mimesis and meaning.

The identification of signifying parts represents a series of abstractions from a simultaneously meaning-related aesthetic process. Its different stages "are not simply juxtaposed but bump into each other, creating repulsion or attraction, as the case may be."<sup>22</sup> Aesthetic meanings are only formed in a processual linking of signifying elements, which, at the same time, only arise as such elements by means of this processual linking: "What is crucial is ... the potential for transitions between iconic elements (patches of color, lines, interior surfaces, etc.), the play of reciprocal references that I am able to follow through the image. Meaning arises simultaneous with this dynamic genesis, with the flowing structure that discloses itself, but this meaning remains, at the same time, kept back within an unsublatable deficiency."<sup>23</sup> Just as level-one statements designate elements independently of their processuality, level-two statements initially formulate their result without reference to their genesis. Both together refer to aesthetic processuality only by means of their correlation, which is no longer subject to the structuring of the statement: "Only in their dissolution do the individual moments mesh with one another and determine form by means of their demise."<sup>24</sup> This allows an explicit response to the controversy between hermeneutics and the aesthetics of negativity over how the relation of the levels interrelated in the first pair of concepts should be conceived in order to adequately reproduce the relationship between the dimensions of aesthetic understanding. This relation has to be thought of in such a manner that it refers to the aesthetically processual interconnectedness of the latter dimensions: "Analysis . . . first reaches the level of the art work, if it conceives of the interrelation of its moments processually and does not reduce it by breaking it down into its supposedly original elements."<sup>25</sup>

The two alternative interpretations of the first pair of concepts are grounded in alternative conceptualizations of the processuality that we enact in aesthetic experience, the stages of which are designated by the moments of the first pair of concepts. Hermeneutic aesthetics describes the aesthetic process to which the two levels of explication of aesthetic meaning refer as precisely that nonstatable understanding whose expression, according to their model, they merge to create: the aesthetic process consists of the successful formation of meaning. In contrast, negative aesthetics conceives of it—as a continuation of the interminable deferral of signifier formation—as a process of failed formation of meaning that simultaneously undermines and surpasses this formation process. It finds its expression in the unbridgeable gap between the dimensions of aesthetic understanding. The second pair of concepts in Adorno no longer presents the opposition between hermeneutics and negative aesthetics as alternative conceptualizations of the relation between the two dimensions of understanding. Instead, it presents this contrast as one of alternative conceptualizations of the relation between two aspects of aesthetic understanding, in which the two dimensions are processually linked. For aesthetically experienced processuality has two dimensions: it is enacted (and comprehended) by both *understanding* and *mimesis*. The way in which they respectively define the relationship between these two means or modes of enactment is at the heart of the controversy between negative aesthetics and hermeneutics: whereas hermeneutics places them in a relation of interaction, negative aesthetics reenacts their irreducible oppositionality.

Adorno discusses the alternative interpretations of the relationship between the two modes of aesthetic processuality, understanding and mimetic comprehension or reenactment (*Nachvollzug*), in terms of the second type of conceptual distinction (or pairs of opposing terms) found in the *Aesthetic Theory*, in the relationship between *mimesis* and *meaning* (*Sinn*) or *form*.<sup>26</sup> "Meaning" and "form" are conceived of as borderline concepts in Adorno; they stand on the boundary between aesthetic and nonaesthetic figures. Form represents the very aspect of art whose transformative potential first allows art to distinguish itself from society, and it reproduces at the same time societal structures. Once its borderline character, which is usually conceived of in social-theoretical terms, is divested of its objectivistic appearance, it can be taken to represent an appropriate formulation of a basic feature of aesthetic understanding.

It states that aesthetic form or meaning—the point of reference of the understanding of the work—can only be understood if it can be grasped as the (transforming) repetition of those structured units that we find meaningful nonaesthetically. Aesthetic meaning is meaning understood, and that means that it is related to nonaesthetically known meaning by means of reiteration.

One side of the second type of aesthetic conceptual distinction in Adorno, then, describes aesthetic processuality in terms of its understandability, directed toward the formation of meaning or form. Understandability—and this is the meaning of Adorno's theory of the borderline character of the concept of form—is attributable to this processuality only insofar as it repeats something that is understandable nonaesthetically. Adorno's remarks on the concept of meaning point to the same connection. His initially incomprehensible linkage of the concept of aesthetic meaning to a nonaesthetic concept of meaning that he terms "metaphysical"<sup>27</sup> is not merely based on a constriction of the concept of meaning. It is based instead on the fact that aesthetic meaning, just like form, is located on the boundary of the nonaesthetic. The core of truth in Adorno's binding of aesthetic meaning to metaphysical meaning is already implicit in the concept of form: insofar as aesthetic understanding depicts aesthetically immanent processuality as formative of form or meaning, it necessarily conceives of this processuality in relation to prior nonaesthetic experiences of meaning. There are strong and weak interpretations of such a thesis ranging from the equation of aesthetic meaning with nonaesthetic meaning to their connection in a way that maintains their distinctiveness. Be that as it may: without some kind of linkage to meaningful, nonaesthetic structures, the concept of aesthetic meaning loses its foundation.

I suggest that Adorno's thesis of the necessary linkage of all concepts of aesthetic meaning with a concept of metaphysical meaning be given a weak rather than a strong reading. It is precisely the apparently weak version that provides proper insight into the premises of the hermeneutic concept of understanding. It is easy to demonstrate the exaggerated character of the strong version—which relates aesthetic meaning to metaphysical meaning by misconstruing all meaning as metaphysical—by showing how it fails given corrections to the concept of meaning.<sup>28</sup> In contrast, even in terms of a hermeneutically based concept of meaning, the weak reading retains its validity. That is, it confirms that even hermeneutics has to conceive of aesthetic meaning as being secured by experiences of nonaesthetic meaning. The dependence of aesthetic meaning on nonaesthetic meaning (which secures this meaning and which Adorno unclearly calls "metaphysical") is the index, on the weak version, of every understanding-based access to the work of art, and not just ideologically distorted versions of this process. In this way, the weak reading is in agreement with a decisive feature of the elucidation of aesthetic understanding provided by hermeneutic aesthetics. Up until now, we have only presented the defining features of the latter up to the argument that the process of aesthetic experience that is reflected in the movement between the two dimensions of aesthetic understanding forms a circle of complementary references. Hermeneutic aesthetics does not conclude here, however, but goes on to inquire into the enabling conditions of this process. Examining its answer to this question will at the same time enable us to examine Adorno's claim that the (hermeneutic) concept of aesthetic meaning requires the support of the experience of nonaesthetic meaning.

Gadamer's dictum that hermeneutics encompasses aesthetics makes a parallel between the otherness (*Fremdheit*) of aesthetic signs and that of signs from the historical past. On

the hermeneutic view, historical signs become the paradigm for those signs that have become incomprehensible to us, because the contexts that alone make their understanding possible are no longer currently given. For this reason, in the explication of the hermeneutic logic of interpretation, the focus is on the question of how a context-"integrating" understanding is possible that is distinct from both the mere "respelling" of the incomprehensible and the projection of our own context onto it. <sup>29</sup> The hermeneutic procedure of interpretation finds a point of departure and support in the prejudicial structure of all understanding. Prejudices are not erroneous opinions, but instead reflect that context-boundedness on which understanding, including that of otherness, has always been dependent: prejudices "are freely taken over but by no means created by a free insight or grounded on reasons." <sup>30</sup> In contradistinction to the projection of one's own onto the other, interpretive understanding is at the same time consciousness of the hermeneutic situation, or more precisely, the working out of this situation. This process involves more than just knowledge of the otherness of alter; it also includes one's own prejudices, which have a twofold status. First of all, they are structurally unsurmountable: "Rather, we must always have a horizon in order to be able to transpose ourselves into a[n alien] situation." <sup>31</sup> The foregrounding (*Abhebung*) of one's own horizon, one of the "phasal moments" of expressly enacted understanding, does not follow the logic of reflection and thus cannot be completely known nor overcome in any enlightened sense. But even if one's own horizons are structurally insurmountable in this way, they at the same time find themselves in a process of never-ending flux. And it is this transformation rather than the overcoming of one's own horizons that understanding of the other consists in:

We started by saying that a hermeneutical situation is determined by the prejudices that we bring with us. They constitute, then, the horizon of a particular present, for they represent that beyond which it is impossible to see. But now it is important to avoid the error of thinking that the horizon of the present consists of a fixed set of opinions and valuations ... In fact the horizon of the present is continually in the process of being formed because we are continually having to test all our prejudices ... There is no more an isolated horizon of the present in itself than there are historical horizons which have to be acquired. *Rather, understanding is always the fusion of these separately existing horizons.* <sup>32</sup>

Starting from and premised on one's own horizon, understanding creates a new horizon, which encompasses the object whose incomprehensible otherness had blocked understanding. This is the result of a two-phase process: the foregrounding of one's own and the generation of the horizon of the other. Understanding of the other can only be spoken of insofar as "it immediately recombines with what it has foregrounded itself from in order to become one with itself in the unity of the historical horizon that it thus acquires." <sup>33</sup> What the aesthetic sign that disrupts understanding has to say, and, at the same time, the only thing it can say, it can only say *to us*. Experience of the other is not just recognition of its otherness, but the experience that it "has something to say to me." <sup>34</sup> The other only speaks to the conditions of its understandability. What the aesthetic sign is capable of saying to us, we—as the persons we are, or who we can become—have to be able to understand. The understanding of the other succeeds only because the horizon of understanding on which it is based is capable of being disrupted in some but not all of its defining features by the otherness of the sign. Understanding is based on the limitedness of the disruption to understanding it comes up against.

Defining the result of understanding as the fusion of horizons guarantees that the hermeneutic conceptualization of the understanding of otherness is not restricted in its validity to the type of understanding in terms of which it was initially designed, namely, historical understanding. It, too, involves not only the foregrounding of an original horizon, but also its definition from our perspective. For this reason, the theory of understanding qua the fusion of horizons also applies to aesthetic understanding: its meaning is a horizon that it develops from the perspective of the observer's own horizon. The horizon embodied in the aesthetic sign is a perspective of experience that can only be grasped against the backdrop of those experiences that the aesthetic observer has already had within his or her own horizon. The otherness of the aesthetically experienced *vis-à-vis* the observer's own horizon does not consist, as in historical understanding, in one's own view of that which is alien or other, but in the alien view of that which is one's own. Aesthetic understanding of the signified horizon is at the same time the gaining of a estranging view



of that which is one's own, which can only be experienced as one's own in this manner. The novelty or otherness of the aesthetic thus must not be confused with that of the historical: whereas the latter is also the substantive novelty of information and knowledge, in the case of aesthetic understanding novelty or otherness consists in a transformed experience of one's own, which, having always been one's own, is at the same time not known. Aesthetic understanding follows a teleology of appropriation: the provocative otherness of the aesthetic sign drops like a probe into the all-too-familiar, to make it in this way into something genuinely familiar for the first time. The aesthetic sign does not speak to us because, as Gadamer writes, it has to proclaim a truth that has been classically stated elsewhere. It speaks to us because what it says is something that has always been there for us and yet also hidden from us. Aesthetic understanding reveals that which is hidden in the realm of one's own.

This hermeneutical clarification now allows us to get a more precise grasp of Adorno's claim of the proximity or contiguity (*Angrenzung*) of aesthetic understanding to the nonaesthetic in the concept of meaning. Aesthetic understanding is understanding of that which is represented in an aesthetic representation. At the same time, the aesthetically represented is only at all understandable because it is the fusion of horizons, and according to the explication above this means it allows an estranging and, precisely in this way, appropriating view of that which is one's own. This explanation ascribes aesthetic understanding a certain "cognitive sense or meaning" (Gadamer) that distinguishes it from all others. It focuses on the estranging experience of one's own horizon in aesthetic representation; it thus realizes a transformative doubling, which Gadamer describes with the term "repetition." Correspondingly, aesthetic understanding is an understanding of aesthetic representation in its repetitive function; aesthetic understanding is "recognition":

But we do not understand what recognition is in its profoundest nature if we only regard it as knowing something again that we know already—i.e., what is familiar is recognized again. The joy of recognition is rather the joy of knowing *more* than is already familiar. In recognition what we know emerges, as if illuminated, from all the contingent and variable circumstances that condition it; it is grasped in its essence. It is known as something. <sup>35</sup>

Aesthetic understanding is, by means of recognition, a (nonrepresentative) repetition of that which is one's own, which outside of its aesthetic representation has always been so, and in this way is not yet familiar. Albrecht Wellmer has given a more precise designation of the two directions of "the capacity of the beautiful to disclose reality": On the one hand, what shows itself in the work of art must be "recognized as something showing itself on the basis of a familiarity with it which did not before have the character of perceptual evidence.... We can only recognize the 'essence' which appears in the apparition if we already know it as something which does not appear." On the other hand, the "being acquainted with something" that precedes the process of aesthetic recognition first results from the transformative appropriation of that which is one's own: "But art clearly works in *both* directions: art also *transforms* our experience of the thing we are acquainted with, so that it only becomes the thing we recognize *in retrospect*. Art does not merely disclose reality, it also opens our eyes." <sup>36</sup>

In view of Adorno's linkage of aesthetic meaning with the nonaesthetic, the basic relation of repetition is of systematic importance for the hermeneutic figure of aesthetic understanding, a relation that reveals (successful) aesthetic understanding as a process of transformative recognition. It confirms Adorno's supposition that aesthetic meaning can only be spoken of as the repetition of nonaesthetic experiential patterns. The hermeneutically elucidated structure of aesthetic meaning (fusion of horizons as the presentation of a way of seeing something) is virtually premised on the criterion that what is said in it is said to us in such a way that we can recognize it, either as something that we have always known or as something we in truth should have known about ourselves. It is only the transformation of the aesthetically represented into a relation of recognition vis-à-vis one's own horizon that defines aesthetic experience as aesthetic understanding. In the hermeneutic reenactment of this experience, it takes the form of an elliptically extended appropriation that only remains understanding if it does not overextend its reach, but instead, finds its way back to its now modified point of departure.

Conceiving of the aesthetic process as recognition-based understanding, however, isolates only one of its two defining qualities. In his second type of conceptual contrast, Adorno compares it to mimetic reenactment: "The Peripatetic proposition that like can only be recognized by like, which advancing rationality has liquidated to its limit, separates the knowledge that art is from the conceptual kind: the essentially mimetic requires mimetic behavior. If works of art do not imitate anything but themselves, then no one understands them except he who imitates them." <sup>37</sup> Now the conception of the aesthetic process as one of understanding, as designated by the concept of meaning, had to construe this process as having always been involved in an iterative relation with the nonaesthetic experience of meaning. In contrast, the opposing conception of the aesthetic process in terms of the concept of mimesis describes it as an immanent, step-by-step process of reenactment. The question now is: how does Adorno's analysis of the conceptual opposition between meaning (*Sinn*) and mimesis interpret the relationship between external, recognition-based understanding and the process of immanent, mimetic reenactment?

As in the case of its first type of conceptual opposition, *Aesthetic Theory* provides two opposing answers to this question: on the one hand, there is the thesis that the aesthetic configuration of mimesis and meaning is the irresolvably "enigmatic image of art." <sup>38</sup> Adorno terms a work of art enigmatic insofar as the access to aesthetic meaning based on understanding or recognition of the repetition of nonaesthetic forms, on the one hand, and the processual reenactment of the aesthetic constitution of this same meaning, on the other, do not complement each other, but indeed contradict one another. At the same time, however, Adorno repeats the effort to bring meaning and mimetic reenactment closer to one another, and indeed, even to define the aestheticity of meaning in terms of its constitutive relation to mimetic reenactment. This latter line of argument in Adorno corresponds to an enlarged concept of hermeneutic aesthetics. Both hermeneutics and the aesthetics of negativity define aesthetic experience in terms of the relationship between the two modes of realization of aesthetic processuality. Whereas the aesthetic of negativity considers the point of aesthetic experience to be the production of their "enigmatic" tension, however, the hermeneutic interpretation integrates mimetic reenactment with the recognition-based understanding of the repetition of nonaesthetic meaning.

Being able to choose between these opposing positions requires reaching a more precise understanding of the concept of mimesis. Starting with the definition of mimetic imitation as "making oneself similar," which the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* contrasts with the mere projection of that which is one's own onto the other, <sup>39</sup> Adorno describes the mimetic enactment of the aesthetic process as the "imitation of the curve of motion of the represented"; mimetic reenactment of aesthetic formations means "to bring them forth—so to speak—once more, objectively, in an experience from within." <sup>40</sup> Adorno is above all thinking about listening to music here, which is no longer supported by any pregiven system: "The prototype of the genuine experience of new music is the ability to hear together the divergent; in an act of co-enactment, to create unity in the truly varied." <sup>41</sup> Here the mimetic reenactment of aesthetic processuality is—in contrast to both a regressive and a traditional model of aesthetic experience—a defining characteristic of the modern structure of the aesthetic. A process of aesthetic experience that has suspended pregiven judgments on what it signifies aesthetically and on what its meaning consists in has to subject itself to the indirect route of the mimetic spelling out of its processuality and transitional character.

Since the object that aesthetic mimesis makes itself similar to is that process whose stages—the signifying elements and their meaning—describe the two levels of the first conceptual opposition in isolated fashion, aesthetic mimesis takes place within the dimension of understanding itself. It is the way in which we enact understanding in an aesthetically processual sense. In this way, the concept of mimesis implies a new definition of the traditional topos of aesthetic sensuousness as the medium in which we perceive "the spiritual-intellectual quality that constitutes the content of the work of art." <sup>42</sup> Mimetic reenactment of the movement of the work of art refers to an aesthetic sensuality that is not unrelated to its understanding, but is instead the aesthetic enactment of this understanding. The processual dimension, which the explication of aesthetic sensuality gains back through the concept of mimesis, points to an active moment. Aesthetic sensuality is not a passive reception of impressions, which can then be structured; it is, instead, the activity of the formation of aesthetic meaning. Sensuality as the mimetic

reenactment of the processual constitution of the object is not the static other, the opposite of meaning, but rather the reenactment of the process of its formation. In the process of mimetic reenactment, we reach behind the already formed figures of meaning back to the dynamics, force, and energy of their formation; <sup>43</sup> in this way, we experience aesthetically meaning *in statu nascendi*. And in this way, the mimetic imitation of aesthetic processes reverses the neutralization of all "moments of force," which are submerged in the result of automatic understanding: "It can be shown in every work of painting that the ability to see it as an image, to understand it in its complexity, has basically always meant undoing the eye's synthesizing powers of abstraction." <sup>44</sup> Aesthetic mimesis puts us in the internal perspective of understanding, in that process defined by the most contrary of forces in which aesthetic materials are formed into signifying units, and signifying units into meanings.

*Aesthetic experience is mimetic because in it we internally reenact—within the play of forces of understanding—the process by which the dimensions of this aesthetic understanding are related to one another. The controversy between hermeneutic aesthetics and the aesthetics of negativity does not, however, involve this claim, but the description of the relationship between mimetically reenacted meaning formation and the meaning formed through the reiteration of the nonaesthetic experience of meaning. What is the connection between the understanding-based enactment of the aesthetic process, which is based on a meaning (Sinn) that reiterates nonaesthetic formations, and the mimetic reenactment of the same process, in which we "liquefy" meaning into the forces and stages of its becoming? Gadamer himself speaks of the "peculiar tension between the meaningful orientation (Sinnrichtung) of speech and the self-presentation of its appearance" <sup>45</sup> in mimetic reenactment. Whereas he reinterprets this tension as an "interaction" (Zusammenspiel), the aesthetics of negativity emphatically holds to it as it is, as the genuine way in which aesthetic experience occurs. Holding on to the tension in this way means conceiving of the mimetically experienced processes, which precede meaning and are concealed in their understanding, as instantiations of a subversion that continuously undermines all meaning. In contrast, reducing this tension to an interaction as does hermeneutics means interpreting the mimetic enactment of meaning formation as a vehicle for intensifying aesthetic meaning. Thus the fact that aesthetic experience is mimetic reenactment is not controversial; what is controversial is the role that this mimetic reenactment plays in meaning as it is aesthetically understood.*

Does aesthetic experience undermine understandable aesthetic meaning in a process of infinitely deferred meaning formation that we mimetically retrace, or is processual "liquification" precisely what makes understandable aesthetic meaning singular? Hermeneutics claims the latter is true: the experience of the "energetic and enactment-oriented genesis of the perceived" forms a "redynamized seeing," <sup>46</sup> which in "going back behind the fixed products of seeing" effects an expansion of aesthetic meaning and not an infinite deferral. Following Kant's definition of the aesthetic "quickenings of cognitive powers" brought about by "the mutually invigorating effect of imagination in its freedom and of understanding (*Verstand*) in its lawfulness," <sup>47</sup> the hermeneutic view ascribes a "semiotic" effect to the "energetic" potential of the mimetic reenactment of the genesis of meaning:

For already in Kant we find the attempt to frame the connection we have in mind between a "semiotic" and an "energetic" moment in aesthetic understanding; he does so in the concept of a reflexive aesthetic pleasure. If we translate Kant's insight into our way of looking at the matter, then he is saying that the expansion of the cognitive, perceptive and affective faculty is not merely an *effect* of aesthetic understanding, but also the precondition of it. The work of art breaks through the bonds of our accustomed ways of perceiving and thinking, and opens up a new dimension of meaning for us in doing so; only by shocking us, touching us emotionally, or setting us in motion, can it communicate to us. <sup>48</sup>

The mimetic reenactment of the genesis of meaning in its energetic and irreducibly dynamic moment does not undermine the semiotic formation of meaning, but, according to the hermeneutic aesthetic, itself gains a semiotic function. The controversy between hermeneutics and the aesthetic of negativity, therefore, can be summarized in the following way: whereas hermeneutics considers the aesthetically experienced process the

means for creating a *different meaning*, the aesthetics of negativity sees it as the *other in meaning* (formation). The aesthetically experienced process is not the other, opposite and independent of meaning—on this, both hermeneutics and the aesthetics of negativity agree.

Hermeneutic aesthetics provides a basis for its reinterpretation of the tension between mimesis and meaning in their mutually referential and intensifying interaction by attributing to the mimetic reenactment of the aesthetic process of the genesis of meaning a function *in* the aesthetic meaning to be understood. Since we do not automatically establish meaning, but instead form it processually, it is intensified as meaning. The objection that the aesthetics of negativity raises against this claim is that hermeneutic aesthetics is not able to demonstrate convincingly how the processual reenactment of the efforts at meaning formation result in the understanding of formed meaning. Hermeneutic aesthetics subjects the process of aesthetic experience to the teleology of successful understanding, because it is premised on the prior theoretical assumption that aesthetic experience is the medium of the understanding of an intensified meaning. The hermeneutic thesis on the harmonization between mimetic reenactment and the reiteration of nonaesthetic meaning cannot be proven within the logic of its own arguments, but is instead based on the structural heteronomy of hermeneutic theories.<sup>49</sup> Such theories subordinate the immanent, genuinely aesthetic reenactment of understanding to the postulate of the transforming reiteration of the experience of nonaesthetic meaning.

The heteronomous recasting of the process of aesthetic experience becomes apparent when intensified meaning is defined—as it is above all in the hermeneutics of Heidegger and Gadamer—as an experience of meaning that gives representation to the truth about nonaesthetic understanding. Aesthetic understanding, intensified through the enactment of its meaning formation, contributes to the sublation of the nonaesthetic reification of understanding: "the explosive energies immured in the seemingly solid housing ... are also released and made available to the subject: they are, as it were, sublated into the world of meaning."<sup>50</sup> The language of art is thus the vehicle of a higher truth, since, in the processual enactment of meaning formation, the meaning that was cut off from its basis is reconciled with it and in this way renewed. In hermeneutic aesthetics, aesthetic understanding can become the fountain of youth for nonaesthetic, automatic understanding since it is able to express "as such" and "in an intensified sense" a "relation to the whole of being" or to the whole of a meaning that makes up the "speculative" structure of every utterance: "Accordingly, poetic utterance proved to be the special case of a meaning that has dissolved into and been embodied in the utterance. The coming into language that occurs in a poem is like entering into relationships of order that support and guarantee the 'truth' of what is said."<sup>51</sup> Aesthetic language unifies language with itself, with its lost foundation.

The identification of intensified meaning with the truth of the understanding of meaning that we realize nonaesthetically in an automatic rather than a processual manner can be termed "manifestly heteronomous." This identification is not gained from an analysis of the logic of aesthetic experience, but depends instead on prior decisions about its achievements that are necessitated by the requirements of a philosophical systematization. Hermeneutic aesthetics can reverse these decisions. If it does not want to abandon its whole approach, however, it can only criticize the manifest heteronomy involved in defining aesthetic understanding as the truth of the nonaesthetic by latently holding on to this heteronomy. Hermeneutic aesthetics are "latently heteronomous" on a more basic level than that of the diverse, nonaesthetic, and philosophically systematic "substitution functions" (Bubner) which the manifestly heteronomous concepts ascribe to the aesthetic. The latent heteronomy involves the prior decision of hermeneutics to give an account of the mimetically reenacted process as successful understanding and, in doing so, to see its *telos* in meaning. The hermeneutic finalization of mimetic reenactment is already implicitly heteronomous because it can only describe the process of aesthetic experience as an intensification of a successfully understandable aesthetic meaning if it subordinates this process to the repetition of—or the translation into—nonaesthetic experiences of meaning. Even if hermeneutic aesthetics no longer defines aesthetic understanding as the truth about the nonaesthetic in a manifestly heteronomous manner, it certainly does continue to interpret it, in a latently heteronomous fashion as the medium for uncovering nonaesthetically hidden aspects of automatic understanding.

Thus one can speak of the latent heteronomy of hermeneutic aesthetics per se, and not just of some versions of it, since its reinterpretation of the tension between mimetic reenactment and the understanding of meaning as their interaction can only be grounded externally. The central aesthetic thesis of hermeneutics consists in ascribing a positive, semiotic function to the reenactment of the energetic process of meaning formation; this process results in an intensification rather than a subversion of meaning. In this way, hermeneutic aesthetics gives the relationship between mimesis and meaning a teleological structure, as that of means to end. The only way to ground the semiotic functionalization of the mimetic release of aesthetic processuality, however, is to ascribe aesthetic experience the task from the very outset of reiterating or showing, in a transforming manner, experiences of nonaesthetic meaning.

That the hermeneutic teleologization of mimesis can only be grounded in terms of the latent heteronomy of the hermeneutic concept of understanding is made clear given that it is based on a distorted depiction of the internal, mimetic reenactment of efforts at aesthetic understanding. For if the latter process is enacted without prior, heteronomous assumptions, it in no way follows an implicit teleology of intensified meaning, but rather a logic of infinite deferral. For if we reenact our suggestions on the formation of aesthetic signifying elements as vehicles of aesthetic meaning in a mimetically internal fashion, this provides us with no criteria for their significant selections, and they cannot embody any meanings without such selections. Only by means of a change in perspective, which abandons internal reenactment for the sake of external view qua instantiation of the reiteration of nonaesthetic meaning, is it possible for aesthetic understanding to avoid its own subversion of understanding. Hermeneutic aesthetics does not show that the aesthetic enactment of understanding, contrary to the model of the aesthetics of negativity, has internal selection criteria at its disposal. Instead, it subjects this process from without to the principle of an understanding based reiteration of the experience of nonaesthetic meaning. At the very point at which hermeneutic aesthetics would have to show that the never-ending becoming in which aesthetic signs are submerged leads, *from within itself*, to semantic effects, it changes perspectives, presupposing precisely what it should show. Thus it is completely right in asserting that aesthetic experience, *if* it is an instance of successful understanding, follows like all understanding the logic of the fusion or merging of horizons and thus operates on the basis of an uncircumventable structure of prejudice. It does not show, however, that aesthetic experience, in spite of its internally interminable processuality, can really be understanding. In this way, hermeneutic aesthetics faces a dilemma it cannot resolve: it cannot define aesthetic experience as both successful understanding *and* mimetic reenactment of its process, for its characterization as successful understanding is structurally based on the marginalization of its interminable processuality. If hermeneutic aesthetics allows—as in Boehm and Wellmer—that aesthetic experience consists in mimetically internal reenactment, then it can only limit its dilatory negativity at the price of an unjustifiable change in perspective. By recognizing aesthetic processuality, hermeneutic aesthetics exposes itself to the "noxious influence" of aesthetic negativity.

Against the backdrop of this critical demonstration of the latent heteronomy of hermeneutic aesthetics, it is now possible to clarify the point from which the aesthetics of negativity starts. Hermeneutic aesthetics suspects that the theses of the aesthetics of negativity are due solely to its semiological abstraction of hermeneutic processes, its concentration on the aesthetic enactment of signifier formation. In suspecting this, it assumes that the emphasis on the reference to meaning of aesthetic signifiers could end the vacillation that these signifiers maintain. But this underlying assumption of the objections raised by hermeneutic aesthetics proved to be false. The deferral of the enactment of aesthetically internal signifier formation cannot be ended simply by being provided with a reference to meaning. Whenever aesthetically formed meanings are viewed from the perspective of the mimetic reenactment of their formative process, they are drawn into their infinite processuality. Thus hermeneutic aesthetics can only expect an end to aesthetic deferral to result from pointing out the reference that aesthetic signifiers make to meaning if aesthetic meaning is stabilized from without. Since it heteronomously ascribes aesthetic experience with the task of orienting itself toward experiences of meaning which nonaesthetically are both always given and hidden, it interrupts the occurrence of aesthetic experience, which depotentializes every supposed aesthetic meaning back into material (see section 2.2) and, abstracting from this process, marks one of its stages, the showing of contextual preconditions, as its result. Thus, in this

sense, the decision of the aesthetics of negativity to reenact the process in the interminable deferral of its elementary steps does not depend on a "semiological abstraction" of hermeneutic processes. What is in fact based on a "semantic abstraction" of aesthetic processes is the view of hermeneutic aesthetics, that it could end the aesthetic vacillation of signifiers by emphasizing their reference to meaning. Hermeneutic aesthetics proves to be latently heteronomous, since it conceives of aesthetically understood meaning as the transforming reiteration of nonaesthetically experienced meaning that precedes it. By contrast, the aesthetics of negativity considers solely the autonomous logic of those efforts at understanding enacted by aesthetic experience. Whereas hermeneutic aesthetics attempts to secure the efforts at understanding in terms of tasks externally ascribed to it, the aesthetics of negativity views these efforts only from within, on their own terms.

The aesthetics of negativity does not subsume the processuality released by aesthetic experience under a teleology; instead, it allows this processuality to unfold to its subversive repercussions: "In the end, its development ('unfolding') is one with its disintegration." <sup>52</sup> The relation of mutual facilitation and opposition that exists between the *attempt* at understanding and the interminably deferred *enactment* of understanding marks the relation represented by the second pair of aesthetic concepts in Adorno. This pairing does not separate the two poles, but rather closely interrelates them, without however conceiving of them as an interaction or interplay of forces. The mimetic reenactment of aesthetic processuality is not the other to understanding, but rather the other *in* understanding. <sup>53</sup> It is in this methodologically unpretentious fashion that mimetic imitation is "deconstructive"; by means of its aesthetic enactment, it deconstructs seemingly successful understanding to its very foundations, its resultless processuality. The deconstructive logic of mimetic reenactment, of one aspect of the second pair of aesthetic concepts in Adorno, relates it indissolubly to its counterpole: only insofar as aesthetic experience attempts to translate itself into an enactment of successful aesthetic understanding can its mimetic reenactment achieve a release of the other in automatic understanding. The experience of the genesis of meaning as the experience of the other in understanding is always, at the same time, an experience against understanding; it is an experience that sees how understanding trips over its own feet.

The above consideration of the second pair of concepts in Adorno shows that the only way that the two means of enactment of the process of aesthetic experience contrasted in his work can be transformed into a relation of mutually intensifying interaction is by a heteronomous recasting. This entails that aesthetic experience cannot be described as successful understanding. The decision between the alternatives of hermeneutic aesthetics and the aesthetics of negativity for the second pair of concepts thus has direct repercussions on this decision for the first pair: if the mimetic reenactment of efforts at aesthetic understanding is their interminable deferral, then their dimensions, described in the first pair of concepts in Adorno as meaning and signifier, do not enter into a relation of mutual correspondence. Thus if the reflections of the aesthetics of negativity on the aesthetic process are accurate, they also ground its interpretation of the first pair of concepts. This interpretation claimed that its moments, the dimensions of aesthetic understanding, are paradoxically linked. For this reason, it is first necessary to provide an explanation—in terms of the aesthetics of negativity—of the logic of the interpretative speech in which aesthetic understanding articulates itself.

# 4

## On the Concept of Beauty

### 4.1 The Configurative Logic of Interpretation

Interpretations of aesthetic objects generally involve one of two forms of speech: either propositions that characterize an object in a perspective *prior* to aesthetic experience or propositions that characterize an object *from* the perspective of aesthetic experience. Propositions of the first type anticipate a potential aesthetic experience by expressing an assumption of aesthetic relevance for the conclusions they draw. Neither the validity nor the terminology of such conclusions are tied, however, to the actual enactment of aesthetic experience. Regarding their validity, they involve statements or propositions that can be ascribed to different academic disciplines and can be grounded in the terms of these respective disciplines. For example, iconographic conclusions fall under the scope of the disciplines of (art) history; rhetorical conclusions belong to the realm of linguistics or the theory of style or composition. In the same sense, though the terminology developed for propositions of the first type refers, as a rule, to objects of aesthetic experience, it is not logically tied to it; objects that are experienced nonaesthetically can also be deciphered in iconographic terms and described in terms of the concepts of rhetoric. Accordingly, interpretive propositions of the first type are not necessarily related to—in either their genesis or their validity—the standpoint of an actual aesthetic experience. They merely define some of the elements of a possible aesthetic experience.

In contrast, it is the peculiar achievement of interpretive propositions of the second type to define objects from the perspective of an actual aesthetic experience. Their primary task is to express, or give guidance to, aesthetic experience. They fulfill this function by showing us how an object presents itself to us when we experience it aesthetically. In this way, interpretations give expression to aesthetic experiences by indicating what we discover in an aesthetic object when we experience it in a specific way. Thus two achievements are always interlinked in the second type of interpretive proposition: the establishment of the aesthetic traits of an object and the expression of that aesthetic experience in which and only in which we can experience the cited traits. These two achievements do not play the same role, however, in every interpretation. Instead, we only establish aesthetic qualities to give expression to or to provide instruction about a process of aesthetic experience: "it seems the critic's *meaning* is 'filled in,' 'rounded out,' or 'completed,' by the act of perception, which is performed not to judge the truth of his description but, in a certain sense, to *understand* it." <sup>1</sup> Interpretive propositions of the second type are thus only correctly understood not as descriptive statements about the qualities of an object, but as guidance to, or expression of, the specific way in which the object to which they refer is to be experienced aesthetically.

How, though, can interpretive propositions express an aesthetic experience by establishing aesthetic qualities? At first glance, the two achievements of interpretations appear to contradict each other: what they do—namely, give expression to an aesthetic experience—and how they do it—namely, by pointing out aesthetically experienced qualities—appear to be mutually incompatible; there appears to be a contradiction between the two functions of naming something and expressing something. For this reason, a one-sided orientation toward the expressive function has often led to the simple equation of interpretive speech itself with aesthetic speech. According to this view, interpretive speech can only give expression to aesthetic experiences by itself becoming an object of aesthetic experience. Such a view not only fails to recognize that interpretive speech is usually discursive rather than aesthetic, <sup>2</sup> but, more importantly, loses sight of its primary function: if interpretive speech were itself necessarily aesthetic, it could bring forth an aesthetic experience based on itself, but it could not provide instruction about the aesthetic experience of another object. Consequently, one cannot solve the problem of how interpretations are able to give expression to the aesthetic experience of another object by suggesting that the understanding of interpretive speech itself should be conceived as aesthetic experience.

The aspect of "speaking about something," a central and defining feature of interpretive speech, was designated by Adorno, in his argument against Lukacs's claim that the essay is itself an art form, as its "claim to a truth devoid of aesthetic semblance."<sup>3</sup> Thus interpretive speech is not related to the aesthetic object in such a way that it itself is experienced aesthetically. Instead, it states, with a claim to truth, what the (aesthetically experienced) properties of an object are; it secures its object relation by raising a truth claim for its statements or propositions. In this way, interpretive speech distinguishes itself from aesthetic speech, *about which* it speaks, by taking on the form of the statement (*Aussage*).

At the same time, however, Adorno comes to criticize the discursive or statement-based form of interpretive speech in his reflections on its logic. It was already seen in the reconstruction of the first type of conceptual distinction in *Aesthetic Theory* that the elements of the aesthetic object cannot be grasped in terms of isolated statements; the form of the statement is unsuccessful in its efforts to define the dimensions of aesthetic understanding. In this way, the integrative formula of aesthetic interpretation—the expression of aesthetic experience through the designation of aesthetic properties—appears to break down into two opposing aspects and thus serve to allow to an equal extent two opposing structural models of interpretive speech: an equation with aesthetic language, in which it loses its object relation, and an alignment with discursive language, in which it sacrifices its expressive reference to aesthetic experience.

The discrepancy between means (statements about aesthetic properties) and ends (the expression of aesthetic experience) in aesthetic interpretations represents the starting point for Adorno's reflections on their logic. He considers this problem resolved, however, through the specific way in which interpretive propositions are interlinked, which he calls "configurative."<sup>4</sup> Interpretive speech achieves, by means of the peculiar manner in which it links statements, something that its statements individually (or even when linked by means of other statements) cannot, namely, the expression of aesthetic experience. Only by reconstructing the configurative logic of the linkage of statements in interpretive speech do we understand that speech correctly: not as discursive speech that is related to its object in terms of statements, but as the definition of stages of a processual aesthetic experience that is related to its object such that it also shows the perspective of this relation. In this way, the configurative form of linkage dispels the illusion attached to its individual statements: that they are able to depict that which is aesthetically experienced in the medium of statements. And it rectifies this illusion by giving expression—against the identification-based illusion of individual statements (or groups of statements)—to the nonconceptualizability of aesthetic experience.

This conclusion already emerged above in the discussion of the first type of conceptual pair in the *Aesthetic Theory*. *Hermeneutics and the aesthetics of negativity, however, interpret this conclusion in different ways. Adorno formulates the difference in terms of the contrast between "continuity" and "discontinuity":*<sup>5</sup> *whereas hermeneutics—on the basis of its subordination of the process of aesthetic experience to a heteronomous teleology of understanding—claims there is a meaningful continuity among interpretive statements that goes beyond their storable interrelations, the aesthetics of negativity—on the basis of its depiction of the negative processuality of aesthetic experience—claims there is an unbridgeable discontinuity. According to the aesthetics of negativity, interpretive speech only achieves its expressive function for aesthetic experience by placing its statements into a discontinuity, which also dissolves the meaningful continuity that hermeneutics contends exists. Only interpretive speech that creates discontinuity within itself can be an expression of the experience of aesthetic negativity. It points to aesthetic negativity by dissolving the structural illusion of interpretive speech, that is, that its individual statements can be interlinked to form a continuous (viz., coherent) interpretation. By means of a discontinuity that cannot be integrated into any form of continuity—whether it be storable or whether it be hermeneutical—that is, into any form of interpretation, interpretive speech produces a "consciousness of the nonidentity of presentation and subject matter"*<sup>6</sup> *that stands opposed to its propositional object reference, a consciousness by means of which it first achieves a relation to the aesthetic object: the discontinuity between the statements of interpretive speech opens an empty space, which allows aesthetic experience to lodge itself within interpretive speech.*



Aesthetic experience can only be expressed in interpretive speech in such a way that this speech suspends the impression of giving an adequate reproduction of the properties of the object of the experience aroused by the continuity of its statements. The basic principle of aesthetic interpretation is thus an unsublatable simultaneity of "blindness" and "insight." <sup>7</sup> Only by having a blind spot (and showing this) can interpretations relate to aesthetic objects in their negativity vis-à-vis all understanding and express aesthetic experience; it is only the blindness of interpretations that makes insight into the aesthetic possible. Correct (and correctly understood) is only that interpretive speech that—in the articulation of a textual reading—reveals itself also to be a "misreading"—that fails to grasp the aesthetic due to the illusion of continuity among its statements.

The configurative discontinuity of its statements corresponds to the way in which interpretive speech is defined by blindness and insight. That every interpretation is both insight and blindness and that one depends on the other unleashes a negative movement in interpretation, which manifests itself as discontinuity between the propositions of interpretive speech. It functions as the negation of the claim of interpretations that they can ever express the process of aesthetic experience. If we place the statements of an interpretive speech in the discontinuous relation intended by Adorno's concept of configurative interlinkage, we then contradict their interconnectedness in the meaningful continuum of an interpretation. Toward the discontinuous truth of its own propositions, every interpretation is "blind" or "fictional": "Every profound analysis of an art work will invariably uncover weaknesses in the aesthetic oneness. It may be that the parts do not spontaneously result in oneness and that oneness is imposed on them or it may be that the moments are not true moments at all but have been pre-selected with an eye to oneness." <sup>8</sup> The elements and statements that interpretation claims possess continuity enter into a relation of configurative discontinuity. In this way, interpretive speech wins back its expressive reference to the experience of aesthetic negativity.

The twofold achievement of configurative discontinuity—demonstrating the blindness of interpretations and, in so doing, pointing out the negativity of the aesthetic—now needs to be more precisely defined. For it is clear that configurative discontinuity can only achieve these results if it does more than just point out the lack of interrelatedness of statements. Two ways can be distinguished of incorporating discontinuity into interpretive speech and, in this way, of pointing out the blindness of interpretations. <sup>9</sup>

The first type of configurative discontinuity exists between statements that are integrated within one interpretation, and at least one other statement of interpretive speech that is not compatible with this interpretation but with another, equally plausible reading. Thus the first type of discontinuity corresponds to the *undecidability* of interpretations. Interpretations are undecidable because they have to select signifiers from a fundamentally superabundant aesthetic object; every interpretation carries out "fictive" (Adorno) abridgments of its object. For this reason, it is always possible to draw conclusions about an aesthetic object that are unsublatably discontinuous vis-à-vis a given interpretation. In this sense, the first type of discontinuity does not primarily involve the overall relation between two equally good but incompatible interpretations. Instead, it arises at the point at which one interpretation—as a continuous interlinking of interpretive statements—comes up against a further statement that cannot be integrated into this first interpretation, but which can be integrated into the continuity of a second interpretation with a series of further statements, including some from the first interpretation.

The first type of configurative discontinuity or demonstration of interpretive blindness represents the central way in which Derrida's interpretive practice proceeds. His analyses of Blanchot and Mallarmé take as their point of departure continuous interlinkages (suggested in the text) of individual statements into interpretations, to then show how they are—and above all in what way they are—fictive constructs of aesthetic unity. Derrida designates the necessitated blindness of aesthetic interpretations by "adding statements" <sup>10</sup> to them, that is, by citing aspects of the aesthetic object that one interpretation neglects but another takes into account (while, for its part, neglecting other aspects). Whereas Derrida has repeatedly pointed out this first type of configurative discontinuity, of designating the negating superabundance of the aesthetic object by means of the discontinuity of interpretive speech, Adorno omits it almost entirely. He focuses instead on a second form of interpretive discontinuity.

The second type of configurative discontinuity arises between two statements not because they belong to alternative interpretations of an aesthetic object, but because they characterize this object in disparate ways: statements linked to others in a meaningful continuity of interpretation are faced by others that designate the properties of the aesthetic object upon which our interpretations are based without being assimilated into the meaningful interrelations that these interpretations put forth. This second type of configurative discontinuity shows the blindness of an interpretation by confronting it with statements that are not, as in the first type of discontinuity, part of a different interpretation, but instead refer to the superabundance of the aesthetic object itself, which goes beyond the possibilities of our understanding. Here, the aesthetic object appears in its "strategies" (de Man), as an object that triggers attempts at understanding through interlinking its elements and materials without, however, being reducible to the meaningful continuity of its interpretations. In the first type of configurative discontinuity, we confront an interpretation with conclusions that are drawn not according to it, but according to another interpretation that is incompatible with it. In the second type, we confront this interpretation with the strategies of the aesthetic object on which the interpretation is based, but whose potential this interpretation is unable to exhaust.

The second manner of inscribing interpretive speech configuratively with its discontinuity and by doing so, pointing out the negative processuality of aesthetic experience is at the center of Adorno's literary analyses. Because they make no use of the first type of configurative discontinuity—which corresponds to the undecidability of interpretations—the interpretations in Adorno's *Notes to Literature* at first appear to be trapped in an objectivistic misunderstanding of their own status. <sup>11</sup>Adorno's interpretations of poetry in particular (of Borchardt, Eichendorff, George) confront this danger by giving shape to the second type of configurative discontinuity. They aim to "double" the particular interpretations put forth by naming those language strategies that lead us to adopt them and then force us to retract them. Interpretive determinations—such as talk of Eichendorff's lyrical "expression of nature," George's intention to resurrect a collective language, and Borchardt's "conjuring up a nonexistent language" or his "recourse to a less deformed language" <sup>12</sup>—profess, in this context, to be secondary attempts at interpretive appropriation of precisely those strategies that characterize their aesthetic objects not in terms of meaning, but in terms of the autonomous relationality of their language: as means of unleashing language from its understanding in a "rushing, rustling, murmuring sound of nature," in a "hermetic realm," "in making the flow of words autonomous." <sup>13</sup>The discontinuous doubling of interpretations brought about by aesthetic strategy is characteristic, however, not only of Adorno's reading of the romantic tradition in poetry, for which it seems fairly obvious, but also for quite different authors such as Kafka. Adorno cites the aesthetic strategies, which are themselves not meaningful, that we have to attempt to understand in order to reproduce them in their aesthetic incomprehensibility: that is, what Adorno terms Kafka's "epic course" or his "literary tactics." <sup>14</sup>If a more careful reading is undertaken that does not focus exclusively on the apparent results of Adorno's Kafka interpretation, one discovers that this seemingly unequivocal text (which, admittedly, begins with a warning against rash allegorizing) confirms Adorno's definition of the character of the essay (formulated almost immediately thereafter). According to this definition, only the discontinuous configuration of the essay's presentation reflects "the consciousness of the non-identity of presentation and subject matter," of interpretation and aesthetic strategy. <sup>15</sup>

It is thus possible to distinguish between two forms of discontinuity in interpretive speech, which at the same time represent two ways of showing the blindness of interpretations vis-à-vis the negative process of aesthetic experience and, precisely in this way, of giving expression to it. Hence discontinuity exists, on the one hand, between an interpretation as the meaningful continuity of individual statements about an aesthetic object and (at least) one further statement about the latter that is in keeping with an alternative interpretation. This discontinuity shows the blindness or fictitiousness of an interpretation in relation to further statements that can only be incorporated into other, incompatible interpretations. On the other hand, discontinuity also exists between any given interpretation and the very statements about an aesthetic object it evokes to justify its reading. This discontinuity, in turn, shows the blindness or fictitiousness of an interpretation vis-à-vis statements about the strategy of an aesthetic object, a strategy that simultaneously produces and undermines the interpretation.

An interpretation of Kafka's "Prometheus" can serve as an exemplary basis for consideration of the relationship between these two types of discontinuity and of several problems that arise in efforts to more precisely determine their character.

There are four legends concerning Prometheus:

According to the first, he was clamped to a rock in the Caucasus for betraying the secrets of the gods to men, and the gods sent eagles to feed on his liver, which was perpetually renewed.

According to the second, Prometheus, goaded by the pain of the tearing beaks, pressed himself deeper and deeper into the rock until he became one with it.

According to the third, his treachery was forgotten in the course of thousands of years, the gods forgotten, the eagles, he himself forgotten.

According to the fourth, everyone grew weary of the meaningless affair. The gods grew weary, the eagles grew weary, the wound closed wearily.

There remained the inexplicable mass of rock.—The legend tried to explain the inexplicable. As it came out of a substratum of truth it had in turn to end in the inexplicable.

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remained the inexplicable mass of rock" is the seal marking the exhaustion of all of the possibilities of the legend. With all possibilities exhausted, there only remains the scene of the occurrence, the mass of rock itself, as the "metaphor of a basic stratum of all events that itself no longer requires justification or theodicy." <sup>17</sup> According to Blumenberg, though, the plurality of the four legends in Kafka is not meant relativistically, because they "cannot be arbitrarily replaced"; they represent instead "a sequence that presents the formal unfolding and completion of a process." <sup>18</sup> This determination of a meaningfully realized structure in the text that first makes possible Blumenberg's subsequent interpretation marks that point at which the unity of the text projected by the continuity of interpretation has its "fictive" ( Adorno) or "blind" moment: this interpretation, as plausible as it may seem, is blind vis-à-vis the aesthetic experience of and with this text.

Let there be no mistake about the character of the objection. It is not directed against Blumenberg's use of Kafka per se. What it does claim, however, is that Blumenberg's interpretation does not capture Kafka's writings as an aesthetic text, that is, from the perspective of aesthetic experience. Instead, Blumenberg's treatment of Kafka is an example of a class of usage of aesthetic texts, which, following the title of a book by Adorno, I would like to designate as "prismatic": the use of aesthetic texts as prisms in which the rays of our view are refracted in a characteristic manner. Aesthetic experience differs from such a use as does a kaleidoscope from a prism. Whereas a prism is a timeless device, the turning of a kaleidoscope adds a dimension of development over time. It consists in the breakdown of the first prism which at the same time represents the formation of the second. The task of interpretive speech formulated about works of art, in contradistinction to their use as prisms, lies in relating each individual refraction of the artwork—by means of which it serves to provide a view of the nonaesthetic possible only in this way—back to the process in which the prismatic refraction arises through the breakdown or disintegration of another refraction, and in which it, in turn, will also break down.

The aesthetic essay unfolds only in the tension between the prism and the kaleidoscope. It first hones its object to a prism, which makes possible a refracted view of the world. At the same time, however, the essay is—if only because of its hypothetical character—marked by the consciousness that the reading it offers, correctly understood, is only one element of a kaleidoscope in motion. The essay is an interpretive establishment of meaning that keeps alive in its unique language the awareness that this meaning is the abyss of all meaning that is marked by the kaleidoscope's moment of radical metamorphosis. What Jean Starobinski said specifically about essayistic writing on "the clown, the carnival performer, the world of the circus" holds more generally for the essay per se: "First of all, in order to live at all, they have to enjoy a sense of freedom. Thus, one should not be too quick to ascribe to them a role, a function, a meaning. They are in need of our authorization to be nothing more than nonsense and playfulness. Intentionlessness and meaningless are the ether in which they reside. Only at the price of this vacantness, this initial emptiness, can they achieve the meanings that we have discovered in them." <sup>19</sup> To be aesthetic interpretations, readings such as Blumenberg's have to be interpreted as scenes from a kaleidoscope. In other words, they have to be read in terms of that point in their midst that shows the blindness with which they make reference to the process of aesthetic experience. In Adorno's words: we have to interpret them as elements of a configuration of interpretive statements that make reference to the aesthetic experience of the object on the basis of the discontinuity of their elements and not on the basis of their meaningful continuity.

How then can the configurative discontinuity in an interpretive speech be marked and the blindness of Blumenberg's reading be adequately designated? I have already sketched the general contours of such procedures above; now let me do so in terms of this example, and apply them to Blumenberg's interpretive thesis on the interrelationship of the four versions of the Prometheus legend. Blumenberg's thesis is that this interrelationship can be understood as a directed, sequential process of "ending." This reading is blind in a first sense, in that it only partially covers the possibilities provided by the text. There is at least

one other possible interpretive interrelationship among the four legend variations, one that is incompatible with Blumenberg's. Blumenberg's suggestion reads as follows: the four legends, in the way they are arranged, form a process of ending the legend, a sequence of ever further reductions of the task of the legend, of the meaningful "explanation of the inexplicable." Whereas the first variation on the legend still provides a reason for Prometheus's fate ("for betraying the secrets of the gods to men"), its context of meaning has already been replaced in the second version by a relationship of somatic reflex ("Prometheus, goaded by the pain of the tearing beaks, pressed himself deeper and deeper into the rock"), in order to then be completely abandoned in the third and fourth renditions for the sake of unintentional courses of development (processes of forgetfulness and weariness). The sequence of the four variations itself, however, has a peculiar status: if we follow Kafka's definition and understand legends as attempts to explain the inexplicable, then the processual arrangement of the four variations represents the formation of a legend about the disappearance of the legend, that is, the attempt to explain the failure of the attempt to explain the inexplicable. That this involves a process of ending, and not just the mere end of the legend, is itself part of the structure of the legend presented. The processual arrangement of the four legends to create the form in which an ending occurs represents the paradoxical application of the form of the legend to its own end.

The peculiar quality of Kafka's text, however, only comes into view if we take up a second way of arranging or systematically ordering the variations on the legend. Blumenberg himself points out that although the first variation in Kafka comes closest to the well-known form of the Prometheus legend, it too transforms it. It reads: "According to the first, he was clamped to a rock in the Caucasus for betraying the secrets of the gods to men, and the gods sent eagles to feed on his liver, which was perpetually renewed." Even this first version modifies the reason for Prometheus's fate: Prometheus did not betray "the gods," he betrayed one particular god, Zeus; and Prometheus himself is a god. What is significant is the reason Kafka probably neglected these details concerning the beginning of Prometheus's fate: apparently, to be able to neglect its end as well. For the key element of the classical version missing in Kafka's rendering is the liberation of Prometheus. And this clarifies the abridgments of the beginning of the legend: Kafka deletes those aspects that would intertwine Prometheus's fate in the struggle among the gods and thus in a (hi)story. Kafka's first variation presents only the first part of the legend, and in such a way that it can be supplemented in various ways. These supplements are then provided by versions two through four; they are alternative suggestions for different ends to the beginning presented in the first version but they are not stages in a sequence.

A closer examination of the text has shown, then, that there are at least two ways of interrelating the four variations on the legend in its first part: one can arrange them as a sequence that "ends" the legend, or one can view them as supplements of different versions of a complete legend that includes both beginning and end. Only the first mode supports Blumenberg's interpretation; the second one contradicts the latter's linear arrangement. The reference to the nonlinear, supplementary structuring of the legends is discontinuous, in Adorno's sense, with Blumenberg's interpretation. This is seen in that it could serve as the basis of a second interpretation that stands in a relation of undecidability to Blumenberg's interpretation (and which would read Kafka's text, not as the production of an ending for the legends, but as the playful use of elements of a legend taken out of their context of meaning).<sup>20</sup> Such a reference to alternative aspects of the text satisfies the conditions of the first of the aforementioned procedures for demonstrating the unavoidable blindness of a given interpretation: the interpretation is blind to alternative referencing possibilities of the text that are discontinuous with it.

The claim that the relationship cited is discontinuous has, admittedly, a peculiar status. For there is no doubt that it is always possible to broaden any interpretation so that it encompasses the statement whose discontinuity supposedly reveals its blindness. It is always possible to find an interpretation that bridges the alleged discontinuity. Thus, properly understood, the claim that the relationship between an interpretation and at least one further sentence is discontinuous in fact means that this relationship can only be appropriately grasped in an aesthetic sense if it is conceived as discontinuous. Accordingly, whether indeterminacy truly prevails between two interpretations cannot be conclusively decided purely on the basis of these two interpretations themselves. Thus the claim of

discontinuity involves not so much a conclusion as instructions for understanding: we are to understand interpretive speech in such a way that it is undecidable or discontinuous, that is, we are to have an experience of the aesthetic object that can only be expressed in undecidable interpretations or in a discontinuous interpretive speech—for this is the only way that we can perceive the object aesthetically.

The relation of undecidability or discontinuity on this first level is based on the fact that the elements it relates (its *relata*) are conceived as moments of the negative occurrence of aesthetic experience. This is why the first type of configurative discontinuity or interpretive disclosure of blindness points beyond itself to the second type. For the function of the latter is to present the aesthetic object so that it appears in its strategies as both basis for and objection to our necessarily blind or fictive attempts at understanding as expressed in our interpretations. The discontinuity of statements of undecidable interpretations is based on their reference to a discontinuous, aesthetic strategy employed vis-à-vis these statements. Let us now take a look at this second type of discontinuity in terms of the example of Kafka's "Prometheus."

The second type of configurative discontinuity demonstrates the blindness of interpretations vis-à-vis the aesthetic strategy of a text: these interpretations emerge out of a reenactment of this strategy that fails to exhaust its full potential. This type of discontinuity gives expression to that process of interpretive meaning formation and withdrawal that interpretations can only document by confining themselves to certain stages of the text's enactment; <sup>21</sup> it gives expression to this by relating these interpretations back to the aesthetic play in which they arise and dissolve. This holds for Kafka's "Prometheus," since it organizes the aesthetic experience that is in force in it as the play of the formation and dissolution of structurings. By referring the interpretations of constellations of meaning back to the process of aesthetic experience in which they form *and* dissolve, interpretive speech at the same time gives expression to the superabundance of the aesthetic text: the latter is not the object of an understanding-based interpretation, but of an aesthetic experience that encompasses every possible interpretation of itself as a mere moment. Interpretive speech makes this clear through its own discontinuity, a discontinuity between its statements about the aesthetic object as an object of understanding-based interpretation and as an object of an aesthetic experience that forms and unforms interpretations.

The process of aesthetic experience is so constituted that it encompasses each of its interpretive statements or conclusions itself as a moment—and by doing so destroys their interpretive claim without it being possible, however, to make *this* destruction in turn into the interpretively establishable content of its process. This is seen in the first part of Kafka's text in that it suggests (and withdraws) an interpretive structuring (which is formulated in Blumenberg), a structuring that belongs to the same order as the structure whose disintegration of meaning this structuring seeks to meaningfully understand: that of the legend. The relationship between the first and second part of "Prometheus" extends this insight to cover every form of commentary. The second part is a commentary on the first part, which not only cites the paradox at work in it, but seeks to make it understandable on a metalevel. It thus attempts to explain the inexplicable state of affairs, that the effort to explain the inexplicable, namely the legend, itself ends in the inexplicable: "As it came out of a substratum of truth it had in turn to end in the inexplicable." Precisely at this point, the second part repeats the tension between structure and function that tears apart the form of the legend in the first part: the argument that the commentary presents is fully incomprehensible. The commentary explains the inexplicable—that, namely, the explanation of the inexplicable (in the form of the legend) itself ends in the inexplicable—only by itself ending in the inexplicable. In this way, an interplay arises between the first and second part, between legend and commentary, that is similar to that already found within the first part, between the different ways in which the legend is formed. The supposed metalanguage is itself drawn into the very process that appeared only to hold for the legend. The expression "Sage" (German for "legend") unfolds its twofold meaning here: what initially only held for the "Sage" as a traditional, special form of "Sagen" (German for "speaking"), thus becomes a structural principle for all speaking, even when applied to a completely different type of speaking, namely that of commentary. The repetition of the breakdown of the medium for explaining the

inexplicable in the first part (the legend) as the breakdown of the medium for explaining the inexplicable in the second part (the commentary) implies its virtual generality.

If the same holds even for commentary that holds for legends, then one cannot expect to find an interpretation that could prove resistant to the play of the text. Whether the play of the legends is an "eschatological melancholy" in Blumenberg's sense or a playful combining of elements—no decision can be made between these alternatives, since both possibilities are equally distant from the aesthetic process whose isolated stages they interpretively designate. The aesthetic process consists of the formation and retraction of "explanations of the inexplicable" on three levels in the text and on unimaginably many levels in our interpretive efforts to find a metalanguage: first on the level of the formation of alternative combinations of sentences into different legends; then on the level of the formation of an encompassing understanding of the breakdown (occurring within this understanding) of the explanatory power of the form of the legend, which itself still makes use of the form as a legend about the end of legends; third, on the level of the commentary, the metalingual explanation of the inexplicable, which itself reproduces the very principle it sets out to explain: the process of ending in the inexplicable; and then on all further levels in our interpreting, since every effort to understand the textually produced (inter)play of formation and destruction, of "deactivating" and "reactivating," <sup>22</sup> as a meaningful process, is itself only a moment in this play of forces, this game.

To what extent, though, is this description of the playful event of aesthetic experience, as retracting the mutually discontinuous moments of the first type of interpretive disclosure of blindness back into itself, the inscription of the second type of configurative discontinuity? The metaphor of play harbors a configurative discontinuity of the second type; it relates two moments in a way that cannot be rendered in terms of interpretive continuity: the interpretive reformulation of individual characteristics of aesthetic experience and the strategy of the aesthetic object that calls forth this experience. Aesthetic strategies are the lines drawn by the glass splinters of the kaleidoscope when they, in the process whereby one prism disintegrates, simultaneously form another. They manifest the always specific, aesthetic production of the "autonomous potential of language," <sup>23</sup> which unleashes a play of formations of interconnection. Though these interconnections can be interpretively designated if one abstracts from their play, this description can never exhaust their potential. "Play" is a metaphor for the nonmeaningful relation between aesthetic strategy (or potential) and the interpretive abstractions that enter into a relationship of undecidability with one another. The discontinuity of the second type denotes the relation—that cannot be encompassed in a meaningful continuity—between those statements in which we define aesthetic strategy as autonomous potential and those others that continuously combine to form interpretations.

The second type of discontinuity can take on a twofold form in interpretive speech: the sides differ in the degree of expressiveness with which they articulate the noninterpreting pole of this discontinuity, that is, the statements on the strategy of the aesthetic object. If we speak of the play involved in aesthetic experience, we are not talking about *the specific contents* (the "*Was*") of the strategies of the aesthetic object, but we are speaking all the more about *the fact* (the "*Daß*") of their discontinuity. This emphasis is in keeping with the practice of interpretive speech, in which deictic expressions, proclamations, and gestures are often used instead of statements about aesthetic strategies. <sup>24</sup> These deictic expressions, like the metaphor of play, point out the discontinuity (that cannot be integrated into or encompassed within a meaningful continuity) of the first pole—aesthetic strategies—vis-à-vis the second pole—interpretations. This differs from the scientifically specialized and differentiated modes of interpretive speech: they develop a set of instruments, tailored to the needs of the various art forms, for describing precisely those rhetorical, stylistic, intertextual, and other resources <sup>25</sup> whose usage forms the aesthetic strategies of the object. For example, in literary studies, we can analyze the linguistic procedures that begin and keep in motion the aesthetic experience in Kafka's "Prometheus": the ordinal numbers that enumerate the legends; the dually interpretable interlinking of the legend variations given the use of articles with deictic functions or pronouns with indefinite references; the rhetorical devices that organize the move from "Caucasus" to "rock" to "mass of rock"; the grammatical forms of parallelism (between the comparatives in the first and second versions of the legend and the lists in the third and fourth variants); the signals of narrative grammar distributed throughout the text (which

connect the "for" of the first version to the "until" of the second and reverberate in the "meaningless" of the fourth version); the intertextual references to the different versions and adaptations of the Prometheus legend; and so on. As precisely as such specialized interpretive discourses may characterize the aesthetic strategy, they remain dependent upon the determination of the fact of (the "that" of) discontinuity, the emphasis of which secures the priority of cases of prescientific interpretive speech over the precise scientific determination of the "what" of its counterpole.

That the statements we use to speak about the strategy of an object are discontinuous with those statements that we combine in a continuity to form an interpretation cannot be deduced from the meaning of the former set of statements. No statement is discontinuous solely on the basis of the meaning that characterizes it in isolation. Discontinuity is a relation of statements in interpretive speech by means of which this speech achieves its expressive reference to the experience of aesthetic negativity. This discontinuity has to be produced against the natural tendency of speech and the understanding of speech to place its statements in a relation of some kind of meaningful continuity dictated by their meaning. In this sense, configurative discontinuity is not a relation of statements that these statements could claim to bear to one another, let alone state; it is a phenomenon of the reading of these statements. It is not possible for interpretive speech to place its statements in a discontinuity that marks them definitively. Instead, as statements of interpretive speech they always produce anew and on their own the necessarily blind connection of interpretations. No speech whatsoever is safe from such interrelations, no matter how discontinuous in intention: the interruptions that Derrida inserts according to the first type of discontinuity of interpretation—just like those that Adorno etches according to the second type—can always still be interpreted. Statements or propositions *are* never discontinuous in their relation to one another—for it is always possible to create continuity by way of interpretation; their discontinuity can only be *shown*, or more precisely, be *claimed* as the reference point of our reading of interpretive speech. To secure interpretive speech's reference to the aesthetic, we have to uncover the discontinuity between (some of) its statements.

How does interpretive speech call for us to understand the relationship of some of its sentences discontinuously? This question is answered for the first type of discontinuity through its reference to the second type, which provides an account of the first. It can be answered for the second and fundamental type of discontinuity once we make clear what it means to place the statements of an interpretive speech in a relationship of configurative discontinuity. By claiming or demanding this discontinuity, we claim at the same time that genuinely aesthetic experience consists in an enactment of the formation of interpretations of text strategies on which they are based and in which they dissolve. This "and" is decisive: it marks the simultaneity of formation and dissolution of aesthetic meaning that allows one to speak of a *self*-subversion. Thus in the call to discover a discontinuity of the second type between statements of interpretive speech, we call for the enactment of a specific process of experience, that of aesthetic negativity. In this way, we at the same time claim that it is possible for it to be enacted as a process of self-subversion, that is, that it can be enacted in a stringent sense. Now such a claim represents an evaluation: <sup>26</sup> by claiming there is a relation of configurative discontinuity, we judge the aesthetically negative process of experience to which it refers to be stringent in itself, as self-negating. Conversely, we assess a process of aesthetic experience to be nonstringent if we dispute the configurative discontinuity of its interpretive statements.

Only when interpretive speech evaluates, no matter how implicitly, whether an aesthetic experience is stringent in its negativity and whether the statements of an interpretive speech are discontinuous, can interpretive speech be the expression of an aesthetic experience. <sup>27</sup> Interpretive speech does not owe its expressional reference to aesthetic experience to the meanings of its statements, but to their function of forming (or not forming) a relation of configurative discontinuity and, by doing so, making evident in an evaluational sense which type of experience it expresses. For the question that we answer with an implicit evaluation of the configurative discontinuity of interpretive speech only arises in the face of aesthetic experience. Whereas the claim that a discontinuous relation is involved defines the experience that it expresses as stringent, the claim that a discontinuously interpretable relation is not involved marks this experience as nonstringently comprehensible. Even if the totally nonstringent borders on the



nonaesthetic—whether as determined sense or nonsense—the negative evaluation of interpretive speech relates to the latter not as something nonaesthetic, but as something not experienceable in an aesthetically stringent fashion. In this way, the negative evaluation implicit in the negative response to the question of the discontinuity of an interpretive speech also distinguishes itself from the nonevaluative determination that a certain relation of sentences is not discontinuous (e.g., in a case of nonaesthetic understanding). This evaluation assesses borderline nonaesthetic experience with regard to that value that it presumes is aesthetic value: to be an aesthetically stringent experience of negativity. In this way, it holds for both the negative and positive evaluation that implicitly results respectively in the denial or affirmation of configurative discontinuity that each relates interpretive speech in expressional terms to a stringent or nonstringent *aesthetic* experience.

Arguments for these theses on the relationship between configurative discontinuity and aesthetic evaluation will be set out in the next two sections of this chapter: first, in an explanation of the presupposed concept of aesthetic evaluation (section 4.2), and, second, in a renewed discussion of the question of the status and achievement of the statements marking the aesthetic strategy (section 4.3).

## 4.2 The Post-Facto Quality of Aesthetic Judgments

Adorno's theory of aesthetic evaluation starts by reiterating the Kantian critique of the traditional concept of beauty. Admittedly, Adorno usually criticizes the pre-Critical concept of beauty in historico-philosophical terminology as a reconciliation "extorted" by means of subjective domination.<sup>28</sup> But this criticism is only directed at certain traditional definitions of aesthetic value, such as the ideal of harmony or homeostasis. For understanding aesthetic evaluation, however, what is relevant is the epistemological point of Adorno's critique. Adorno views his critique of the concept of beauty as a critique of any positive concept of aesthetic success: the success of art works is "synonymous with decomposition."<sup>29</sup> The epistemological relevance of this critique does not reside in its demonstration of the impossibility of aesthetic success (as Adorno wrongly believes himself to have shown).<sup>30</sup> It resides instead in the impossibility of a positively formulated criterion for aesthetic success. The traditional conception of beauty thus falls prey to internal inconsistency by attempting to provide a substantive criterial definition that binds aesthetic value to the traits of the aesthetic object.

In terms of its epistemological substance, Adorno's adoption of the Kantian critique of the traditional view of beauty is in keeping with Beardsley's view: both criticize the elucidation of aesthetic value in terms of the concept of beauty, since this usually implies a pre-Critical distinguishing of certain positively definable features of the aesthetic object whose determinable existence functions as a criterion of aesthetic evaluation.<sup>31</sup> The predicate "beautiful" is conceived in such a way that its meaning establishes "perceptual conditions under which an object will always possess the quality of beauty."<sup>32</sup> Adorno and Beardsley argue similarly against the reduction of aesthetic value to features of the aesthetic object. Adorno's initially seemingly meaningless claim that every aesthetic success is at the same time decomposition and everything truly beautiful is also ugly<sup>33</sup> in truth characterizes the mistake of a concept of beauty that seeks to define aesthetic value in terms of the descriptive features of a work of art: "[f]or the sake of the beautiful"—that is, that which we experience aesthetically—"is no longer beautiful"—that is, that which we define in terms of criteria.<sup>34</sup>

Beardsley draws consequences from this critique that also shed new light on Adorno's conception of aesthetic evaluation. He recommends instead of defining aesthetic value descriptively in terms of its "perceptual conditions" to define it instrumentally "in terms of consequences, an object's utility or instrumentality to a certain sort of experience": "I propose to say, simply, that 'being a good aesthetic object' and 'having aesthetic value' mean the same thing. Or 'X has aesthetic value' means 'X has the capacity to produce an aesthetic experience of a fairly great magnitude (such an experience having value).'"<sup>35</sup> Thus Beardsley avoids the conceptual mistake of defining aesthetic value in terms of

perceivable features of the aesthetic object by defining this value instrumentally as the capacity of aesthetic objects to produce an aesthetic experience of a certain magnitude. Those aesthetic objects have a positive (negative) value—or are aesthetically good (bad)—that are good (poor) at making possible that which defines aesthetic objects, namely, aesthetic experience. The aesthetic value of objects is determined by the experiences that they produce, or put more cautiously, the experiences they make possible.

The concept of aesthetic value as the "capacity of the object to provide aesthetic experience when accurately and adequately apprehended," <sup>36</sup> however, appears to fail to explain precisely what it set out to, namely, the specifically normatic sense of aesthetic value judgments. And it appears to do so because its instrumentalism seems to equate the value of aesthetic objects with the relative value of a given means to an end. Means to an end have instrumental value if their appropriate use brings about desired ends in accordance with causal laws. But the relationship between aesthetic object and aesthetic experience cannot be thought of in this way: objects do not have aesthetic value because they produce aesthetic experience of great magnitude, but because they (can) become the object of such an aesthetic experience.

If one divests the systematic interrelation between aesthetic value and aesthetic experience of Beardsley's implicit instrumentalism, then the real difficulty of his argument becomes clear: if we understand the content of the instrumental formulation to be that objects have an aesthetic value insofar as they are experienced aesthetically, then the expressions "aesthetic" and "aesthetically good," on the one hand, and "nonaesthetic" and "aesthetically bad," on the other, appear to mean the same thing. Beardsley takes this distinction into account by defining aesthetic value more precisely as the "capacity to produce an aesthetic experience of a fairly great magnitude." Only then does his definition of aesthetic value capture the decisive aspect of specifically aesthetic evaluation as opposed to instrumental evaluation: Beardsley proposes no longer linking aesthetic value to specific, objectively testable features as its criteria and instead linking it to the magnitude of that aesthetic experience from whose perspective the object gains an aesthetic value. The judgment of the aesthetic value of an object is based on the magnitude of its aesthetic experience.

Beardsley himself explains the magnitude of aesthetic experience in terms of three aspects, the "primary critical criteria":

One aesthetic experience may differ from another in any or all of three connected but independent respects: (1) it may be more unified, that is, more coherent and/or complete, than the other; (2) its dominant quality, or pervasive feeling-tone, may be more intense than that of the other; (3) the range or diversity of distinct elements that it brings together in its unity, and under its dominant quality, may be more complex than that of the other. <sup>37</sup>

As indisputable as it may be that the expressions listed by Beardsley belong to the vocabulary of the evaluative differentiation of aesthetic experiences (and through them, of its objects), it remains equally unconvincing to consider them to be the aspects through which the specifically aesthetic quality of experiences is defined. The (theoretical) experience of a convincing argument can also be termed "unified" or "coherent," the (religious) experience of overpowering evidence can also be called "intense" or "strong," and the (practical) experience of intersubjective relations can be described as "complex" or "rich." Accordingly, one has to distinguish an aspect that defines the quality of *aesthetic* experience. For this reason I suggest defining the magnitude of aesthetic experience only in reference to the processual negativity that distinguishes it from all other modes of experience. If, following the aesthetics of negativity, we see aesthetic experience as an occurrence of immanently grounded self-subversion of understanding, we can attribute magnitude to that process of experience that can be satisfactorily enacted as this subversion. Such a process of experience is stringent. Stringency is not defined by the features of an object, but is instead the evaluative definition of the way in which experience directed at aesthetic objects is enacted. An object that is stringently experienced (or can be so experienced) in an aesthetical manner is aesthetically good; an object that is not stringently experienced (or cannot be so experienced) in an aesthetical manner is aesthetically poor. Thus, in aesthetic evaluations, we establish whether an

aesthetic object makes stringently aesthetic experience possible as well as the degree of stringency of the experience compared to that of other experiences.

The medium in which the evaluation of the stringency of an aesthetic experience first comes into play is interpretive speech. By deciding whether its statements stand in a relation of configurative discontinuity, we also implicitly judge whether the aesthetic experience that it expresses is stringent. Thus interpretive speech necessitates an implicit evaluation because it is the only means by which it can perform its function of expressing an experience of aesthetic negativity: "To understand a work of art means to understand [i.e., judge] its truth."<sup>38</sup> This makes interpretive speech the place where we decide how we are to evaluate an aesthetic object or the stringency of an experience; it is not the medium, though, in which the evaluation, which stays implicit, can be grounded. Interpretive speech does normally furnish evaluations with certain plausibilities: "The answer to the concrete aesthetic question of why it is that a work can reasonably be said to be beautiful is a case-by-case application of ... [its] self-reflective logic [to itself]."<sup>39</sup> The conclusions of interpretive speech cannot supply its judgment with independent evidence, however, about the "coherence" and "extent" of an aesthetic articulation.<sup>40</sup> For the specifically aesthetic context, which constitutes itself only as the correlate of a more or less stringent (or not at all stringent) experience of negativity, cannot be derived from the conclusions of interpretive speech. Interpretive speech names the isolated elements of this context and, by means of its (implicit) evaluations on the basis of previous aesthetic experiences, suggests how its aesthetically experienced context is constituted. Its naming of elements cannot, however, furnish grounding evidence for the judgment of the stringency of aesthetic experience.

Adorno, though, does not settle for merely plausible evidence of aesthetic evaluation. Instead he demands the establishment of "drastic objective distinctions" which allow us to "show in an initially very tangible manner" why "Brahms, Schonberg, and Webern are great composers and why Sibelius and Pfitzner are poor ones."<sup>41</sup> The procedure for providing this account or grounding of aesthetic evaluations rests, according to Adorno, on a technical analysis that stands in the service of a critique of judgment. Technical analysis in Adorno's sense can be taken to mean the scientific form introduced above for determining the strategies of aesthetic objects. We have seen, though, that it alone does not provide any definitive answer to the question of whether the technically analyzed object is also experienced in an aesthetically stringent sense. Technical analyses of correlations per se do not yet say anything about the stringency of their experience. To expect information from them about the stringency of aesthetic experience goes against the insight formulated in *Aesthetic Theory* that no "single rule for subsuming particulars under a judgment of taste nor all such rules taken together can result in a statement about the dignity of a work of art."<sup>42</sup> Nonetheless, in searching for evidence to support aesthetic evaluation, Adorno did attempt to produce a close correlation between technical analysis and the evaluation of stringency and in this way objectify aesthetic evaluation. A general criterion for deciding which of the technically demonstrated correlations can be experienced in an aesthetically stringent manner is supposed to be the guarantee of this close correlation. Adorno finds this criterion in a historically evolving standard of stringency. Reference to historical standards permits the possibility of an objectification of evaluation without regressing back to the reductionism of descriptive criteria that Adorno criticized but this is only true if these standards are themselves determined in an evaluative fashion. Adorno considers the concept of aesthetic progress such a simultaneously normative and objective criterion.

Adorno's *Philosophy of Modern Music* provides the following account of the historically dynamic norm for distinguishing between various degrees of aesthetic stringency: those works of art are good whose procedures are appropriate to the historical state of aesthetic production. This appropriateness does not mean, however, that such art works merely reflect the historical state of aesthetic production. The appropriateness of stringently experienceable and thus good works of art refers instead to the state of possibilities open to contemporary aesthetic production that have been made available by preceding production; in other words, it refers to the aesthetic "forces of production" and to the aesthetic "material."<sup>43</sup> An aesthetic artifact is appropriate to the state of aesthetic production and good in this sense if it makes use of the historically developed possibilities available in aesthetic production.

But even this definition does not yet provide an adequate account of Adorno's progress-based model of aesthetic evaluation, since it does not include his more precise definition of "making use" of the possibilities available in aesthetic production. It only terms those works "good" for which a history of progress can be reconstructed that encompasses both the genesis of the historical state of the material and the relationship between the evaluated work and state of production available to it. Accordingly, the only works that are good are those that advance the historical state of their material, dynamically defined in terms of its "tendency." "Furthering the history of the previous progress in aesthetic production" is the norm that is supposed to allow a decision about the stringency of the aesthetic experience of an art work. The aesthetically positive judgment of a work of art is based on a demonstration that this work further develops that which its "predecessors" sought to do but could not:

The alleged immediacy of their way of doing things is actually quite mediated.

Viewed from the centre of the aesthetic monad, the problem posed by art is to keep pace with the socially most advanced level of the productive forces, consciousness being one of them. Works of art prefigure solutions they themselves cannot really provide short of intervening practically in social reality. This alone is the sense in which tradition is legitimate in art. Every significant art work leaves traces in its material and its technique. Pursuing these traces is the task of modern art—rather than just sniffing out what is in the air. It is the critical element that makes art concrete. <sup>44</sup>

Those artworks can be stringently experienced, that is, are possible objects of stringent aesthetic experience, that correspond to the norm of aesthetic stringency insofar as they can be understood as the "determinate negation" <sup>45</sup> of the historical state of aesthetic production. In this sense, we judge only those technically analyzed works as successful that satisfy our unambiguously definable expectations of stringency, which we construct as a continuation of the direction of the aesthetic progress of its most recent specimen.

The progress model is supposed to furnish aesthetic evaluation with an objective criterion that allows one to distinguish between those technically analyzable aesthetic strategies that can be stringently experienced and those that cannot. It found exemplary use in *Philosophy of Modern Music*, which criticizes Stravinsky for being "reactionary" and praises Schönberg for being "progressive." Adorno accounts for his judgment of the failure of Stravinsky's works by showing that these works stand in a relation of abstract, unmediated "self-annulment" to the historically given state of aesthetic material instead of in a relationship of determinate negation. Instead of achieving the latter, Stravinsky regresses in an "archaic" fashion and subjects himself in this way to an "infantile decomposition": "It is the contrast to the idea of the rational total organization of the work, the contrast to the 'indifference' of the material dimensions towards each other in the work, which reveal the reactionary nature of the compositional procedures of Stravinsky and Hindemith. And to be sure, these procedures are technically reactionary, regardless of the position in society of these two composers." <sup>46</sup> In contrast, Schönberg's production makes an aesthetically stringent experience possible because it is part of a continuum of a history of progress in comprehensive rational organization, which Adorno sees as beginning with Beethoven. He grounds his positive judgment of the stringency of aesthetic experience of Schönberg's works by assessing the technically analyzed aesthetic contexts in terms of the criterion of integrability in a history of progress whose last stage, for the time being, is Schönberg.

Adorno's suggested criterion for that which can be aesthetically stringently experienced, namely, insertability in a process of aesthetic progress, is meant to be objective without being reductionist: it cannot be grounded solely upon a technical analysis that points to features and structures, since it is always possible for a work to be good (stringently experienceable) and yet not possess a specific technical feature. For this reason, when examined more closely, Adorno's view actually grounds the judgment of a work on the assessment of the relationship of its technique to the state of the aesthetic material (as a progressive or regressive relation). Adorno has to show this judgment is objective, however, if he does not want to fail at the central task of his progress model of aesthetic evaluation, that is, to provide an objective criterion for judging the value of art works.

The questionability of this objectivity claim, even in a nonreductionist version, is made evident by the various debates about Adorno's aesthetic evaluations. Merely the problems connected to Adorno's criticism of several developments in modern music show this. The discussion that it produced—which explicitly involved only the question of the appropriateness of individual evaluations made by Adorno and not the correctness of the evaluative criterion itself—shows that his criterion of progress is, at the very least, ambiguous.<sup>47</sup> What Adorno criticizes in the name of aesthetic progress as regressive can also base its claim to aesthetically stringent experienceability on a *different* conception of the genuine progress of musical rationalization. Thus we have here two expectations of stringency, *each* of which lays claim to aesthetic progress and suspects the other of being regressive. Precisely the criterion that is supposed to establish evaluations in unambiguous fashion multiplies in number and lets the question of evaluation reappear on a second level: Which sort of aesthetic progress do we or should we want?<sup>48</sup> The criterion that Adorno recommends for resolving the controversy over aesthetic stringency—precisely because it is not reductionist—involves him in a new controversy about the proper explication of the concept of aesthetic progress that, in turn, was developed as the criterion of aesthetic stringency. The progress model could only serve as a solution to the problem of aesthetic evaluation at the cost of a naturalist misunderstanding: that the question of what aesthetic progress is is itself not a question of evaluation, but of objective description.

The dispute about aesthetic evaluation that Adorno sought to decide on the basis of the criterion of aesthetic progress is therefore replicated in the dispute about the substantive interpretation of the concept of aesthetic progress; it is transformed into a controversy about the criteria themselves.<sup>49</sup> The question whether certain works of modern music are regressive or progressive shifts to the question of the criterion of aesthetic progress, which itself can only be defined against the backdrop of a general concept of progress. The controversy surrounding the stringency of a context of aesthetic experience turns initially into a dispute about the desirable shape of aesthetic progress, a dispute which cannot be resolved independently of nonaesthetic normative claims.

The inevitable outcome of this dispute—accounting for aesthetic evaluations in terms of nonaesthetic ones—does not only apply to Adorno's progress model, but generally to any attempt to provide aesthetic evaluations with the more than plausible evidence, namely with substantiating evidence, of standards of stringency. For these standards themselves cannot be distinguished from alternative solutions in any way except through their link to nonaesthetic, normative premises.<sup>50</sup> And Adorno in no way conceals this: concepts—such as subjectivity, spontaneity, and meaning(fulness) and their counterterms of depersonalization, ritual, and schizophrenia—that he introduces to explain his conception of progress could not even be understood without reference to their nonaesthetic use, let alone be characterized as a valid norm of aesthetic evaluation.

Admittedly, Adorno pays a high price for linking the aesthetic standard of stringency to nonaesthetic norms: a regression below the level of the critique made by the aesthetics of negativity of the hermeneutic equation of aesthetic experience with understanding. This is shown in an exemplary manner in his critique of Stravinsky: his evaluation of Stravinsky as aesthetically reactionary finds support only in a general conception of progress that relates what is aesthetically reactionary to a historico-philosophical model. And this operation only finds a point of reference if it characterizes the object of aesthetic experience in such a way that it is related to nonaesthetic meaning (which can then be judged in terms of a general conception of progress) in terms of understanding, and thus in terms of recognition. That aesthetic evaluation that is grounded objectively by means of its reference to stringency standards refers to nonaesthetic normative preferences results in the repetition of the same mistaken conclusion that hermeneutics fell prey to: that nonaesthetic elements of meaning can be recognized in aesthetic contexts. For this reason, in his "*Reflexionen über Musikkritik*," Adorno calls aesthetic evaluation, which can only be grounded in terms of nonaesthetic normative premises, a "higher form of criticism": it no longer draws its evidence solely from the phenomenon of aesthetic experience, since it no longer judges simply the stringency of aesthetic experience, but rather the value of the "intellectual (*geistige*) situation" as whose "objectification" works of art should be conceived, neglecting the negativity of their experience.<sup>51</sup>

Now if every aesthetic judgment has to refer to nonaesthetic normative preferences, then it does not appear possible for there to be a judgment simply on the basis of the stringency of aesthetic experience. For there seem to be only two choices: We can judge the stringency of an aesthetic experience and, in doing so, refer to nonaesthetically grounded norms; on the other hand, we can forgo any reference to nonaesthetic criteria. If we choose the latter, however, we can never provide reasons for our evaluative references to aesthetic experiences, but can only base them on subjective preferences. Adorno does not furnish any convincing solution to this dilemma, but he does bring into view a third option, beyond the alternatives of a "higher form of critique" and an uncritical predilection, which he only vaguely terms "immanent critique." The dilemma of an aesthetic evaluation caught between these two options is resolved once the idea of the objective grounding of aesthetic value judgments is abandoned. The higher form of critique is premised on the assumption that the evaluations implicit in all interpretive speech should be made explicit in aesthetic judgments, and moreover that they should be raised above the uncertain foundations of interpretive conclusions. By being explicated in terms of value judgments, the evaluations of the stringency of an aesthetic experience immanent in all interpretive speech are supposed to be better grounded. Thus the higher form of critique characterizes interpretive speech as only implicitly evaluative since such speech provides its evaluations only in anticipation of an explicit and better grounded value judgment.<sup>52</sup> In contrast, immanent critique does not term interpretive speech implicitly evaluative because it anticipates an objectively justifiable value judgment, but rather because it echoes a preceding evaluation. The explicit aesthetic judgment of the stringency of a context of aesthetic experience does not relate that which is demonstrated interpretively to a given criterion; what it does instead is reiterate that evaluation that we always undertake ourselves in the process of aesthetic experience. Immanent critique does not refrain from giving any reasons as is the case in the expression of purely subjective preferences; nevertheless, it seeks more than merely plausible evidence for its evaluations not in nonaesthetically normative stringency standards, but in the prior enactment of aesthetic experience.

Although immanent critique distinguishes the functions of aesthetic evaluation from those of interpretation, it equates them in the grounding relation it holds to aesthetic experience. For in this relation to aesthetic experience, the same holds for the evaluative demonstration of the stringency of an aesthetic experience as does for the interpretive determination of the elements and contexts of this experience (or of the object of this experience): the ultimate authority for both is the *fact* that an object can be experienced in the manner in which they indicate, that is, in the interpretively shown manner and with the evaluatively cited stringency. The same holds for the dispute over aesthetic evaluations as for the dispute over aesthetic interpretations: those interpretations and those evaluations are right that are in the position to express or provide instruction about an aesthetic experience of an object of the kind and stringency they indicate. Not only the specific contents (the "what") of interpretive determinations of aesthetic experience but also the "fact of"<sup>53</sup> the evaluatively formulated stringency of an aesthetic experience proves its appropriateness through the fact that we experience aesthetically in precisely the manner in which we express interpretively and evaluatively. If aesthetic experience is supposed to do more than just certify what we conclude by way of aesthetic interpretation, if it is also supposed to certify the evaluatively pronounced fact of its stringency, then aesthetic experience itself has to be an experience of its own stringency. Aesthetic experience is itself evaluative: self-evaluation enacted experientially. The judgments of immanent critique only express that self-evaluation of the stringency of aesthetic experience that we enact experientially.

How can we achieve a more precise understanding of this thesis, arrived at by way of an examination of the sense and of the means of accounting for aesthetic judgments, that the aesthetic experience to which we evaluatively attribute or deny stringency enacts its own evaluation itself and thus grounds the aesthetic value judgments in which the aesthetically experienced "self-evaluation" becomes explicit according to its own validity? How is aesthetic experience constituted if it is not only the grounding basis of aesthetic interpretations, but in addition the basis qua event of aesthetic evaluations? Georg Lukács attempts to do justice to this fact by defining aesthetic experience in an intentionally paradoxical manner "[as a process of] direct normative experience (*normatives Erlebnis*). "<sup>54</sup> The unique character of aesthetic experience that is intended becomes clear if one compares it to the relationship between experience and judgment in moral evaluation:

A process of direct experience most intimately linked to the norm is also found in ethics, indeed actually proceeds from the latter as an "analogy of a fact"; however, this direct experience of "respect" is nothing more than the precondition of ethically normative conduct. Conduct itself must be detached from any proximity to direct experience in order to be able to correspond to the norm. Here, by contrast [in the case of aesthetic experience and evaluation], direct experience is the mode of normative conduct itself, the norm is fulfilled within it, and in it the specific quality of aesthetic validity is expressed. <sup>55</sup>

The definition of aesthetic experience as a process of direct normative experience attributes to it a quasi-reflective act of self-evaluation. Self-evaluation can only occur within the medium of aesthetic experience in an experiential manner, though, and not as a reflection that results in detachment: the stringency of an aesthetic experience is itself one of the "facts" that we experience aesthetically. This fact has to be so constituted that it only appears if we experience something in an aesthetically stringent manner. According to Adorno, it is the appearance of the stringency of aesthetic experience as a "thing of a second order." <sup>56</sup> Aesthetic experience is a process of direct normative experience because it experiences facts that can only be discovered by an enactment of aesthetic experience that is evaluated to be stringent. This appearance of stringency is a second-level fact: not something that precedes experience, but an objectified manifestation of the stringency of this experience; it is only released by the stringency of aesthetic experience.

This reflex of the stringency of this experience, normatively "lived or directly experienced" (*erlebt*) in aesthetic experience, thus befits those aesthetic objects and only those that we term "aesthetically good" on the basis of the stringency of their experience. For this reason, I propose, in keeping with the tradition of aesthetics, calling this curious fact the "beauty" of aesthetic objects. Beauty is the second-order feature of an object that befits it only due to a stringent experience of aesthetic negativity, because beauty is nothing but the objectified reflex of the stringency of this experience. To understand how the process of aesthetic experience experiences its own stringency in objectified form as direct normative experience, we have to ask what the quality of beauty consists in. I will take up this question at greater length in the following section. Nonetheless, one of its defining features can already be provided by taking a look at the tradition of aesthetics.

The "higher form" of critique and "immanent" critique are two different models for grounding aesthetic evaluations. They also generate two different conceptions of beauty, which in turn correspond to two separate lines of aesthetic tradition. The higher form of critique links the beauty of an art work to the value its contents open to understanding: "The more excellent art works become in this sense, the deeper the inner truth of their contents and conception." <sup>57</sup> The normative dignity of what is signified in art works, in turn, cannot be judged—which is something already implicated by the reiterative moment of aesthetic understanding—independently of its reference to nonaesthetic normative preferences. The beauty of an art work is, in this tradition, identical to the value of its contents (which admittedly can only be presented in a sensuously mediated way), and these contents can only be assessed in reference to nonaesthetic norms, be it that the art work properly represents the nonaesthetic or be it that it properly designs it. Adorno, however, considers such a linking of the beautiful to the correctness of its understandable contents, regardless of how this correctness is defined, as one of the "devastation[s] caused by idealist aesthetics." <sup>58</sup> He rejects these devastations by orienting (though not identifying) the concept of the (artistically) beautiful that immanent critique develops in terms of the conception that Hegel's aesthetics explicitly excludes (and not just in passing): <sup>59</sup> that of the naturally beautiful. The orientation of the artistically beautiful toward the naturally beautiful precisely in the terms in which Hegel rejects this option separates the artistically beautiful from the correctness of contents ascertainable by recognition-based understanding. Accordingly, it is not the sensuous representation that is pervaded by—yet, emancipates itself from—correct and understandable contents that is beautiful. This is just as in the case of the naturally beautiful whose inadequacy Hegel finds in the fact that its sensuous side does not turn itself completely into the vessel of its ideational contents, but remains instead independent vis-à-vis these contents. The paradigm of the naturally beautiful leads Adorno to a concept of the (artistically) beautiful that refers to the direct experience of an irreducibly independent sensuousness that only emerges through the stringent negation of all efforts to appropriate it. <sup>60</sup>

Before returning in the next section to this conception of beauty, one last look at the conception of aesthetic judgment with which it is linked is required. The predicate of aesthetic judgment, "aesthetically good," is in an extensional sense identical in meaning with the predicate of the direct normative experience, "aesthetically beautiful." Its meaning differs, however, in terms of intension. We use the expression "aesthetically beautiful" in assessing an aesthetic object insofar as our direct normative experience of it involves that second-order fact that arises only as a reflex of the stringency of its experience of aesthetic negativity. We use the expression "aesthetically good" in judging an aesthetic object insofar as we evaluatively determine that the aesthetic experience of it can be stringently enacted. I termed the two levels of evaluation, direct normative experience and aesthetic judgment, as "implicit" (in experience) and "explicit" (in an act of judgment) above. I have also already indicated that the relationship of the implicit to the explicit cannot be understood as that of immediacy and reflection or as that of anticipation and actualization (*Einlösung*).<sup>61</sup>

If one misunderstands the relation between direct normative experience and aesthetic judgment in the first sense, as that of immediacy and reflection, a false conception of direct normative experience results. Such experience is not an immediate or unmediated evaluation prior to or at the beginning of an aesthetic experience, but stands instead, quasi-reflectively, at its end. Implicit evaluation in direct normative experience is reflective in the same sense as explicit evaluation in aesthetic judgment is insofar as it is also oriented toward the stringency of the enactment of aesthetic experience. If direct normative experience stood at the beginning of aesthetic experience, it could in no way be oriented toward precisely this experience. For this reason, the object of direct normative experience, stringency objectified as beauty, is also not an inherent, unmediated trait of the aesthetic object.

But the relation of direct normative experience to aesthetic judgment can no more be understood in the second sense as one of anticipation and fulfillment than it can as one of immediacy and reflection. Direct normative experience is not an anticipation of aesthetic judgment for the simple reason that it cannot be assimilated or encompassed by aesthetic judgment. Aesthetic judgment does not redeem the validity claims of direct normative experience, claims that are only implicitly raised because they can only be implicitly formulated. Quite the contrary. The validity of aesthetic judgment, like that of interpretive speech, depends on its ability to have an aesthetic experience in the way it characterizes this experience. In other words, in our aesthetic experience we undergo precisely that direct normative experience that implicitly assesses the stringency of the validity that explicit aesthetic judgment gives expression to. The contingency of the validity (in the last instance) of aesthetic judgment on direct normative experience in no way disputes the corrective function of the explicative transformation of direct normative experience into aesthetic judgments. Thus, by means of such explication, we can subject our direct normative experience to a test in which we employ interpretive analysis to investigate the quality of the context of individual steps of aesthetic experience. Of course, this does not represent a direct test of the stringency of an experiential context, but only an indirect one. The interpretive retracing of the specific contents of a context of aesthetic experience can contribute to an indirect test of the direct experience of the fact of its stringency, because it describes aesthetic contexts in such a way that, against the backdrop of our previous aesthetic experiences, judgments appear more or less plausible. A more substantiated account or grounding of explicit aesthetic judgments, though, cannot be sensibly expected from interpretive statements if these are judgments of "immanent critique" that have to manage without criteria. If aesthetic judgments, however, cannot lay claim to a more substantiated account, then they and their interpretive versions do not have the function of assimilating (*einholen*) what direct normative experience anticipates by providing an account of it; instead they either support or undermine its evidence. Accordingly, what Adorno writes about the relation of aesthetic experience to interpretation also holds for the relation between direct normative experience and aesthetic judgment:

Beauty lends itself increasingly to analysis. The analysis of beauty in turn enriches spontaneity which is a hidden but necessary moment of analysis. Faced with the beautiful, analytical reflection restores the temps *durée* through the medium of its antithesis.



Analysis terminates in a beauty as it would have to appear to a perception both perfect and lost to the world. [62](#)

## 4.3 The Aesthetic Image

It is possible to offer a more exact definition of direct normative experience and of its object, if we take one more look at the systematic point at which it is introduced (see chap. 4.1). The question of aesthetic evaluation is inherently raised in interpretive speech without the latter being able to answer it on its own. Interpretive speech has to be implicitly evaluative in both of the ways in which it shows the blindness of aesthetic interpretation. For only in this way is it capable of giving expression to an aesthetic experience that it judges with regard to the stringency that defines it as specifically aesthetic. By showing the blindness of interpretation by means of the configurative discontinuity of (some) of its sentences, it at the same time makes an evaluative claim about the aesthetic stringency of the context of a particular experience. The evaluation implicit to interpretive speech takes on a different shape in each of the two types of configurative discontinuity. The difference can be explained in terms of the grounding relationship that connects the two: the second type of discontinuity (between interpretation and the naming of aesthetic strategies) is more fundamental than the first type (the demonstration of undecidability). For this reason, the evaluative moment of the first type first becomes clear in its relation to the second type. Nevertheless, anyone who overlooks the evaluative aspect of the first type misunderstands it. Its claim—that it is not possible to decide between the two interpretive options it cites or that the relation between the interpretation and further sentences is discontinuous—is not descriptive, but (implicitly) evaluative. The possibility of constructing a meaningful relationship between two interpretations cannot be excluded on the basis of the establishment of fact, but only on the basis of evaluation. The claim of the undecidability of interpretations is at the same time an evaluation of the stringency of aesthetic experience. For undecidability prevails between two interpretations only if they can be understood as moments of a process of aesthetically stringently experienced negativity.

The evaluative moment of the first type of configurative discontinuity becomes manifest in the second type. In the latter, we designate those aesthetic strategies that lead us to the alternative interpretations that we characterized as undecidable in the first type of configurative discontinuity. On the other hand, to understand the configurative discontinuity of interpretive speech is to co-enact the implicit evaluation of the stringency of the process of aesthetic experience. The seemingly descriptive conclusion that traces a given interpretation back to the aesthetic strategy out of which it arises and in the experience of which it dissolves is, properly understood, the evaluative conclusion of a stringently enactable aesthetic experience. Sentences about the strategies of an aesthetic object stand in a relationship of discontinuity to the interpretation related to this object only if they are understood implicitly in an evaluative sense and not purely descriptively. Contrary to the misunderstanding of interpretive speech as descriptive, only the recognition of the evaluative moment, which resides in the proof of interpretive blindness as an achievement of aesthetic insight, can ensure the relation to aesthetic experience. Interpretive sentences, by representing their relation as configuratively discontinuous and thereby demonstrating the blindness of individual interpretations, at the same time evaluate the experiential occurrence to which they only in this way succeed in pointing. For the first type of configurative discontinuity, this implicitly evaluative moment articulates itself in the claim that an interpretation and one further sentence is discontinuous; in the second type, on the other hand, it manifests itself in the configurative discontinuity between interpretation and aesthetic strategy. Thus if the sentences in which we designate the aesthetic strategy have to be understood as implicitly evaluative, this means, in view of the explanations of the previous section, that they give expression to the direct normative experience of beauty.

Which consequences for the more exact definition of direct normative experience and of its object, beauty, can now be drawn from the fact that they find their expression in the interpretively discontinuous status of sentences about aesthetic strategies? The configurative discontinuity of interpretive speech allows us to relate the interpretively undertaken formations of meaning to that process of aesthetic experience in which they

arise and dissolve. In this way, such speech gives expression to an experience in whose aesthetically stringent enactment interpretations are negated not from without, but through their own processuality. In statements (that are also evaluative) about aesthetic strategies we relate to an aesthetic object in such a way that it gets caught up in the perspective of a stringent experience of negativity and thus in a double role: it becomes responsible for the formation and, *at the same time*, the subversion of interpretations, that is, understanding. The interpretively discontinuous statements with which we designate the strategies of an aesthetic object are the expression of the direct normative experience of its beauty insofar as they refer to the aesthetic object as the ground <sup>63</sup> of a stringent experience of negativity. The aesthetic object is the ground of an experience of aesthetic negativity only insofar as it shows itself to be that which is alien (*das Fremde*) to attempts at understanding *in these very attempts at understanding it*. By releasing or unleashing—in the aesthetic enactment of attempts at understanding—the processuality of such efforts and thus negating them, we generate the object of our attempts at understanding as the ground of both the formation and subversion of understanding. Thus what we term "beautiful" is an object that appears as both the ground and the abyss of understanding.

By explaining the beautiful object as the ground of the two-dimensional enactment of aesthetic negativity, we have shown *the location* of direct normative experience of the beautiful to be within the context of aesthetic experience. This says nothing about *its structure*, though. The reflections on the relation between aesthetic negativity and beauty, however, contain several indications about the way in which the direct, normative experience of the beautiful is constituted. The direction in which they point becomes clear if we return to Adorno's formulation of the "thing of a second order." To this point, we have primarily considered the way in which the beautiful object is a "thing of a second order,"—namely in the sense that beauty is a feature granted objects only as a result of the stringent experience of negativity directed at them. In addition, though, it has been seen that a beautiful object is also a "thing of a second order." That object that we experience as the foundation of both attempts at and subversions of understanding is—because it blocks being understood as a sign—a thing; at the same time, though—because it obstructs its understanding only in a self-generated and thus necessary effort at understanding—it is also a "thing of a second order." In this way, the beautiful object as a thing of a second order distinguishes itself on two fronts: as an object that denies understanding it is clearly not a sign; but just as clearly it is not simply a thing. For according to the customary model of what it is to be a thing with certain graspable qualities, the beautiful object would be considered not only something that cannot be understood, but also something we cannot even try to understand: "It is not quite yet a sign, in the sense in which we understand sign, but is no longer a thing, which we conceive only as opposed to the sign." <sup>64</sup>

How then can the beautiful object be more precisely defined as a "thing of a second order" in its twofold distinctiveness vis-à-vis understandable signs, on the one hand, and describable things, on the other? To answer this question, I will take up a reference in Adorno, made all the more striking in that it refers to Heidegger. One of the few contexts in which Adorno makes positive reference to Heidegger involves the way the latter underscored the "thinglike" character of the work of art. <sup>65</sup> This alludes to Heidegger's reflections on the relationship of thing and art and especially his discussion of the "earthy character" of the work of art. <sup>66</sup> Heidegger speaks of "earth" as a counterconcept to that of "world"—initially in the dimension of aesthetic meaning. Thus, according to Heidegger, the Greek temple presents a world only in its twofold reference to the earth: the latter is seen in the temple, on the one hand, as its supporting "native ground," <sup>67</sup> and, on the other, as that which the world—conceived as the totality of all meaningful relations—can never completely encompass. The relevant aspect of Heidegger's concept of the "earth," however, is not its substantive quality as a moment of aesthetic meaning; more important is how the work of art represents its dual aesthetic meaning (world-earth). The only possible way to represent the earth aesthetically is to "place it here, to give it a physical position, to establish it at a given position (*herstellen*)"; <sup>68</sup> "In setting up a world, the work sets forth the earth. This setting forth must be thought here in the strict sense of the word. The work moves the earth itself into the open region of a world and keeps it there. *The work lets the earth be an earth.*" <sup>69</sup> The aesthetic object represents the earth by establishing or placing *itself* as earth, by becoming "earthy": "This setting forth of the earth is achieved by the work as it sets itself back into the earth." <sup>70</sup> The work of art is this "setting-itself-back-into- the-earth" insofar as it is "always a self-secluding element" <sup>71</sup>

given any aesthetic understanding aimed at capturing its meaning. In this way, Heidegger uses the term "earth" to designate the second-order thinglike nature of the aesthetic that only in its enactment denies understanding.

Heidegger's introduction of the concept of earth thus adds nothing new to the definition of the beautiful developed to this point—as both a ground and abyss of understanding that closes itself off ("secludes itself") from understanding. Nevertheless, his processual definition of earth as a process of establishing, placing, setting forth, which at the same time is a setting back of an understandable sign into its unemcompassable ground, does draw attention to two aspects that can sharpen our picture of the aesthetic object that is experienced as beautiful.

First, the "earthy character" of the art work is only one moment of its "occurrence" in which it "withdraws" from the openness of understanding. <sup>72</sup>A process of withdrawal from the openness of understanding, however, must be in continuous reference to this openness. The work as earth is not something removed from every reference to meaning and every attempt at understanding so much as it is something that shows itself as a withdrawal from all meaning and understanding. This suggestion is Heidegger's answer to how one can more precisely grasp that which appears as self-secluding, as closing itself off, which defines that which is "thinglike in the work" <sup>73</sup>in contradistinction to the *being* of every nonaesthetic thing, which neither requires nor awaits understanding. Heidegger describes the process of appearance of the self-secluding or self-closing in terms of the temporal metaphor of the event: more than a mere thing, the self-secluding art work manifests itself, it appears, because it shows itself in the fact of its self-closing.

Second, Heidegger defines the earthlike quality of the work as the result of a process of "setting out or establishment" (*herstellen*). Here he understands "establishment" above all as the placing (of something in a particular spot) and distinguishes the aesthetic placing or establishment of the earth as something self-secluding from the process of producing a "tool." <sup>74</sup>The difference between the two processes of production lies in their respective relationships to their material:

Because it is determined by usefulness and serviceability, the tool takes into its service the stuff which it is made of, the material. In fabricating a tool—e.g., an ax—stone is used, and used up. It disappears into usefulness. ... By contrast, the temple-work, in setting up a world, does not cause the material to disappear, but rather causes it to come forth for the very first time and to come into the open region of the work's world. The rock comes to bear and rest and so first becomes rock; metals come to glitter and shimmer, colors to glow, tones to sing, the word to say. <sup>75</sup>

Even in Heidegger's redefinition of the concept of *Herstellung*, which no longer means production, it still makes sense to talk of material. Here, though, what is meant is not material produced but material signified (since Heidegger includes signs in his category of "materials made for use," i.e., the category of the tools). The aesthetic production of the self-secluding or self-closing can be grasped as a nonconsumptive relation to the material of signification (it does not "use these materials up"); aesthetic production of the self-secluding or self-closing is a "setting back" into the aesthetic material, outside of its function as mere material or vehicle: "The rift must set itself back into the gravity of stone, the mute hardness of wood, the dark glow of colors." <sup>76</sup>

Thus Heidegger's concept of the earth defines the aesthetic "thing of a second order"—the beautiful object that is both the foundation (the grounding) and the abyss of understanding—in two senses: as something that shows itself to be closed to understanding only in the attempt at understanding and as the aesthetic redemption of the material. Now these are the same two aspects that characterize the concept of the aesthetic image in Adorno—the aspects with which he designates the status that an object achieves from the perspective of a stringent experience of negativity. It is first the "apparition" or "sudden appearance or manifestation" of that which removes itself or escapes from understanding and second, the mimetic doubling of the aesthetic object, thereby freed from its services as the material of understanding.

Adorno describes the object of direct normative experience, the beautiful, in the concept of the aesthetic image. For Adorno the aesthetic image serves to mark the twofold distinction of the beautiful both from the understandable sign and from the nonunderstandable and only describable or explainable thing. This double distinction seems trivial; its relevance becomes evident, though, in terms of two conventional explanations of the aesthetic experience of the incomprehensible that have also left their traces in Adorno's Aesthetic Theory. They initially share a premise: the location of the aesthetic object outside the realm of customary understanding. In the first of these two attempted definitions, this is explained in terms of the transsemantic meaning of the aesthetic object; in the second, on the basis of its asemantic impact. The first model accordingly conceives of aesthetic experience as the medium of intuitive knowledge; the second conceives of it as the occurrence of a deep-seated physiological effect. The (modern <sup>77</sup>) originator of the first version is Schopenhauer; that of the second is Nietzsche. Almost every effort to stress the incomprehensibility of the aesthetic object in opposition to hermeneutics follows one of these two models. Adorno follows them both, although with a strong preference for the former.

The first model takes as its point of orientation Schopenhauer's definition of aesthetic contemplation as a form of nonrational knowledge. Here, the beautiful becomes the "representative" of "ideas." <sup>78</sup> Schopenhauer defines the aesthetic object in terms of the content of its meaning, which it succeeds in representing in a unique fashion. Nonetheless, it is not an understandable sign; for the content of its meaning is not due to any relation to an act of understanding, but is the result of an intuitive grasping, of "losing oneself" in the object. Thus the beautiful object is not the representative of ideas insofar as we understand it, but only insofar as we make ourselves the "clear mirror" of the object. Schopenhauer, however, abstains from giving a more precise analysis of aesthetic contemplation; he takes a few halting steps in this direction, which he then abandons in favor of a definition of the content apprehended in the act of contemplation. In place of the claim that the incomprehensible aesthetic object is the "thing-in-itself," we find in Schopenhauer the metaphysical thesis that it represents the "thing-in-itself." Adorno's Aesthetic Theory adheres to this equation of aesthetic incomprehensibility and intuitively recognized transsemantic meaning in its theological metaphor, which, in conjunction with an ontological concept of the naturally beautiful, relates art to the idea of "a language of things." <sup>79</sup>

The second of these two inadequate models of the aesthetically incomprehensible object criticizes the representationism of the first as "romantic" (Nietzsche). It therefore refrains from any definition of the content of the aesthetically incomprehensible object (regardless of how such content might be conceived) in favor of the analysis of its effect. It focuses on the direct psychic experience (Erleben) triggered by art works, and, in its most radical version in Nietzsche, directly on a stratum of bodily reflexes. It defines the incomprehensible aesthetic object in terms of the effects that the objects leave behind in the experiencer, without grounding these effects themselves in an understanding of meaning. This is precisely what constitutes the relationship between the definition of the aesthetic object in the aesthetic of effects and the theorem of incomprehensibility: the produced effects are not the contents of a process of understanding; instead, they are causally linked to the incomprehensible aesthetic object that triggers them. <sup>80</sup> This reduces the aesthetic object to a stimulus, to a describable thing or event. Though this model does not play any explicit role in Aesthetic Theory, it is alluded to in the use of such terms borrowed from the aesthetics of effects as "shudder," "shock," and "tremor." <sup>81</sup>

Even though Aesthetic Theory makes use of motifs from both models, it cannot be tied to either of the two. Adorno describes the incomprehensible aesthetic object neither as an epiphany of a completely inaccessible meaning nor as solely a thing that generates causal reactions. Instead, as is so often the case, Adorno understands the contrast of two opposing positions as a process of mutual correction; as so often in Adorno, however, the result of this corrective process is left out and needs to be included in the analysis.

Adorno carries out his corrections of the first definition of the incomprehensible object, whose meaning is inaccessible to understanding, by means of a critical analysis of the theological-mystical metaphors especially favored by this century's avant-garde in their description of the experience of the beautiful. <sup>82</sup> Adorno does not simply reject them;

instead, he seeks to identify that feature of the direct normative experience of the beautiful that is manifested in distorted form in these metaphors. The starting point of this critique is the critique of the concept of the sublime, which describes art works as instances of "an infinity of the present."<sup>83</sup> Art works can never be "images of being-for-itself (*Ansichsein*)" in a literal sense: "The semblance that it [the art work] proclaims does not transform works of art literally into epiphanies, no matter how difficult it may be for genuine aesthetic experience not to believe that the absolute is present in authentic works of art."<sup>84</sup> If they are not literally epiphanies of an absolute, then it needs to be explained to what extent they can be called epiphanies at all. Adorno does not simply reject the concept of the incomprehensible object as the epiphany of a mystical meaning; he also retains this concept by detaching it from its positive content. This transformed concept of epiphany no longer describes the relation between the art work and its only intuitively suspected contents; it now describes the status of the incomprehensible, beautiful object itself. It is not that something appears to us in the work of art, but rather it is the art work that appears (to us). In this context, fireworks become paradigmatic for Adorno of what the aesthetic object is in the process of appearance: "Fireworks are apparitions *par excellence*. They are an empirical appearance free of the burden of empirical being in general, which is that it has duration: they are a sign of heaven and yet artifactual; they are both a writing on the wall, rising and fading away in short order, and yet not a writing that has any meaning we can make sense of."<sup>85</sup>

The accurate core of the identification of the incomprehensible object with the appearance of an inaccessible content of meaning consists in the fact that the beautiful is itself an appearance insofar as it is in the process of appearing. The true basis for the false appearance that the beautiful is the image of a thing in itself resides in the fact that the beautiful object itself is not, but appears. The attribution of a transsemantic meaning is only the reified expression of the "unlimited depth that is behind the picture."<sup>86</sup> As a result, the beautiful is never completely present. And since as a rule we interpret that which is not present as a thing as a representative indication of the presence of an Other, it may seem plausible to interpret the absence in the beautiful itself on this view as a sign of an only intuitively recognizable, transsemantic content. Nevertheless, the aesthetic image that is itself conceived of as appearing contradicts this alternative: the beautiful as something appearing is never completely present, but it is still not a representative indication (of something else).

Adorno's modification of the second model of the aesthetically incomprehensible, which describes it as an asemantic effect, also provides insight into this very structure of the beautiful. Adorno's correction corresponds to the self-made modifications of the original model found in those theories of asemantic effect—in Karl Heinz Bohrer and Jean-François Lyotard—that start from Nietzsche. Bohrer overcomes an approach that is based solely on the "mechanics of sensual effect"<sup>87</sup> by binding those reactions that are initially analyzed as phenomena of direct psychic experience and that are produced by the beautiful to the structure of the process of aesthetic appearance, a structure that he explains in terms of Nietzsche's theory of semblance. In the same way, Lyotard relates the aesthetic effects initially described by means of Klossowski's concept of intensity to the occurrence of aesthetic representation itself, whose structure he grasps in terms of a modified concept of the sublime.<sup>88</sup>

Adorno already expressed the fundamental point of this modification of theories of asemantic effect in his critique of the concept of "aesthetic feeling": "Aesthetic feeling is not aroused feeling. What may be called feeling in aesthetic experience is wonderment in the face of what we behold (more than what it would really depend on), of being overwhelmed in the face of the nonconceptual that is nonetheless determinate, not the arousal of subjective emotion. Aesthetic feeling is oriented to the object; it is the feeling of the object, not some reflex in the viewer."<sup>89</sup> Adorno's criticism is directed at a concept of asemantic effect that reduces the incomprehensible aesthetic object to a mere stimulus by construing aesthetic effect as a mere reflex. If the concepts of an aesthetics of effects, such as *shudder*, *shock*, and *shine* are appropriate at all, they are so only in the structural definition of the beautiful as something appearing. Aesthetic effects are not triggered by a describable or explainable thing, but instead are tied to the aesthetically orchestrated appearance of the thinglike moment occurring in the work itself. The aesthetic object does not have the cited asemantic effects insofar as it appears incomprehensible as would a

mere thing, but only insofar as it appears as something incomprehensible, as a "thing of a second order," in the course and consequence of an experience of aesthetic negativity. Thus, properly understood, aesthetic effect is not due to the work of art as a trigger of reflexes, but is instead a consequence of the experience of the process of "reification" immanent to works of art, by means of which "they [participate] in the other, in the thinglike, instead of imitating it." <sup>90</sup> Just because the work of art "virtually [becomes] a thing among things, to something that we do not know what it is," <sup>91</sup> does not make it the thinglike producer of aesthetic effects itself.

The two modifications that Adorno makes to the opposing alternatives for defining the beautiful—as the site of transsemantic meaning and as the trigger of asemantic effect—intersect in one concept: that of the "permanence-granted" and "objectified" <sup>92</sup> appearance (in the aesthetic image) of the object as ground and abyss of attempts at aesthetic understanding, that is, as beautiful: "Aside from the expressive elements which are widely dispersed over the work, the most fertile instant of objectification occurs when art works are suddenly crystallized into appearance. Works of art surpass the world of things by acquiring a thinghood of their own, i.e., their artificial objectification. They begin to speak when thing and appearance are kindled." <sup>93</sup> The description of the aesthetically incomprehensible as medium for transsemantic meaning is correct in pointing to the self-surpassing quality of art works, to their being "more than something that appears" (Adorno); the description of the aesthetically incomprehensible as the trigger of asemantic effects, on the other hand, is right in its criticism that the experience of the self-surpassing quality of art works as they appear cannot be the intuitive cognition of a removed meaning. Conversely, the conception of effect is right in stressing the asemantic character of the aesthetically incomprehensible; the conception of meaning, though, is right in emphasizing that this asemantic character does not imply a describable thinghood of the aesthetic. Adorno's concept of the aesthetic image combines both of the legitimate traits of the aesthetically incomprehensible or unintelligible object *qua* something beautiful, without falling prey to the false reifications of either model: the beautiful is a self-surpassing of the object, but without positing (*positivieren*) this surpassing in terms of an increased meaning; and the beautiful is an incomprehensible thing, but without detaching its presence as a thing from the process of its constitution, from its "reification" at the hands of aesthetic negativity. In this way, the image is neither merely a thinglike presence nor a surpassing of the thinglike in the presence of a meaning. The beautiful conceived as image is instead the affirmative form of a hesitation between thing and sign, a hesitation that is withstood. It is the aesthetic object insofar as it appears as thing—or it is the thing in the moment of its appearance: "At the moment when they [works of art] congeal into an image externalizing their inner substance, the outer shell that surrounds this internal substance gets blown away. Thus, while apparition is responsible for the fact that works of art become images, it also destroys that image quality." <sup>94</sup>

The beautiful becomes an image when the incomprehensible object is neither the bearer of a manifest meaning nor a well-balanced object, but rather itself appears. The "fall into the image" (Blanchot) occurs momentarily or suddenly <sup>95</sup>—but not because it occurs for us as something surprising, shocking, or sudden like an explosion, but because the occurrence of becoming an image as the appearance of the incomprehensible is inextricably tied to a location in time in aesthetic experience. The beautiful is a momentary phenomenon not because it did not exist before this moment and then disappeared after it, but because in structural terms it cannot be separated from the moment at which it is experienced in the process of aesthetic experience. Suddenness does not define the subjective time directly experienced (*erlebt*), but the immanent temporality of the process of aesthetic experience.

The beautiful, which we experience as the grounding and abyss of our efforts at aesthetic understanding, is neither a thing nor a superseding sign, but rather, as image, the sudden appearance of the art work in its incomprehensibility. "Image" is thus the definition of the status generated in the experience of stringent aesthetic negativity achieved by that which we seek to understand in aesthetic terms. The negative processuality of aesthetic experience thus has to be described at the same time as aesthetic "reification" (Adorno), as the production of a beautiful object as a thing of a second order. An initial explanation of the logic of such production was already provided by our brief, preliminary look at Heidegger's concept of earth:

the production of the aesthetic object as earth means nothing but giving prominence in a nonconsumptive fashion to the material out of which it is made. Aesthetic reification cannot be described solely as the appearance of the incomprehensible; it must also be described as a transfiguration of the material of an aesthetic object. The law of this transfiguration is, however, not use and transformation of the material, but its release and doubling. In passing through the experience of aesthetic negativity, the aesthetic material "is drawn into the image": "Aesthetic behavior is the ability to see more in things than they are. It is the gaze that transforms that which is into imagery." <sup>96</sup> The production of the aesthetic thing as second order through its aesthetically stringent experience of negativity is, at the same time, a transformation of the material of the aesthetic object. If the latter is identified via recognition at the outset of aesthetic experience (cf. section 2.2), it shifts, in the subversion of those identification-based efforts at understanding, from the identified bearers of meaning into images released from their identifications: "The image developed in language becomes forgetful of its own meaning in order to draw language itself into the image." <sup>97</sup>

In the object that is experienced as beautiful from the perspective of the experience of aesthetic negativity, material discards its recognition-based identifications. Its aesthetic transfiguration frees it of its ascribed "worldly" identity and makes it "similar" to itself. In this similarity, art is "the world all over again" in which everything remains the way it is with "a trifling, minuscule change." <sup>98</sup> The aesthetic transformation that occurs in the passage through the aesthetic negation of understanding changes nothing materially; the minuscule difference to which it subjects the material in its recognition-based identity is a change of location, not of contents. The aesthetic object that we experience in the subversion of our understanding as a thing of second order is thus no longer the same as the one we encounter in nonaesthetic understanding, because it has been alienated from its place, neutralized vis-à-vis its context. <sup>99</sup> The aesthetically doubled is no longer in the same place at which it was—as aesthetically doubled it is no longer at any specific place. Releasing doubling is—in the return from the effort at making the elements of the aesthetic object into the material of the understanding of a second order—at the same time the shift of these elements into an empty space in which they lose the very contexts and references that ensure their nonaesthetic identity. Through the experience of aesthetic negativity, the material of the beautiful object is freed from its function as bearer of meaning and achieves a superabundance that cannot be assimilated or encompassed by any form of understanding. In the beautiful object, aesthetic material has escaped from its externally secured identity and becomes a doubling in which it resembles itself: "The beautiful demands perhaps the slavish imitation of what is indefinable in things." <sup>100</sup> The aesthetic reification, the "fall into the image," which only occurs in the process of stringent aesthetic negativity, brings about, at the same time, the redemption of the material. Aesthetic experience, in which signs are made into elements of a beautiful object, is the (only) medium which unleashes signs from their meanings without allowing them to regress into their pure thingness.

# II

## An Aesthetic Critique of Reason

### 5

#### Aesthetic Sovereignty

The stringent experience of aesthetic negativity is at the same time the experience of the beautiful. With this conclusion Part I ended, thus reinforcing the thesis with which it began: that a "stereoscopic reading" ( Wellmer) of Adorno provides a definition of aesthetic negativity that does not undermine but actually satisfies the basic conditions that the modern postulate of autonomy imposes on aesthetics. The suggested concept of aesthetic negativity turns out to be an explication rather than an undermining of aesthetic autonomy, since it enables one to reconstruct the evaluation of aesthetic objects (as beautiful) in contradistinction to all nonaesthetic modes of judgment. Instead of being heteronomous itself, the aesthetics of negativity actually uncovers the "latent heteronomy" of its opponent, hermeneutic aesthetics. At the same time, it admittedly cannot be overlooked that the recommended explanation limits the power of aesthetic negativity to the narrow province of aesthetic experience. If the direct experience ( *Erlebnis*) of the beautiful can be defined as the self-evaluation of the stringency of the experience of aesthetic negativity, then, conversely, it follows that every stringent subversion of understanding assesses the object of the negated effort at understanding as beautiful. This however means that the negativity in aesthetic experience cannot be detached from that perspective on objects in which they are assessed as beautiful or ugly. This correlation between aesthetic negativity and beauty also entails that the processual negation of automatic understanding can only exist in the aesthetic sphere. Processes of automatic understanding unrelated to aesthetic experience are left unaffected. Inasmuch as we judge its objects as true or false or good or bad, automatic understanding cannot be aesthetically negated. Thus if the concept of aesthetic negativity is explained as in Part I in such a way that it obeys the basic conditions of the modern postulate of aesthetic autonomy, its validity is then restricted to the distinctly aesthetic perspective on understanding or its objects; in other words, its validity is limited to an aesthetic sphere of value distinct from other spheres.

This consequence of the arguments advanced in Part I marks the point at which Derrida's deconstructive theory of the text, which up until this point had served to support the argument, parts ways with the aesthetics of negativity. The latter necessarily considers the experience of aesthetic negativity to be limited to a special aesthetic mode of experience or aesthetic type of discourse. Since it is identical with the judgment of objects in terms of the specifically aesthetic value of the beautiful, the aesthetically experienced negativity of understanding cannot compete with automatic enactments of understanding that involve other kinds of evaluation (such as of the true, the good, or the useful). Precisely in its unrestrained negativity, aesthetic experience becomes one mode of experience or discourse among or alongside others. Derrida's deconstructive theory of the text bears a twofold relationship to this concept of aesthetic experience: though it is in agreement with its structural descriptions of the logic of aesthetic experience, it criticizes the way it is functionally situated. According to the critique brought forth by deconstructive theory, the aesthetics of negativity betrays its own insights into the logic of negativity by remaining aesthetics. A rift emerges between the status of the *aesthetics* of negativity and its substantive theses as an aesthetics of *negativity*, a rift that deconstructive theory seeks to mend.

The protest that can be derived from Derrida's theory of the text against the complete restriction of aesthetic negativity to the actual enactment of its experience is in no way implausible. This objection gains its force from a tension that threatens to rip apart the aesthetics of negativity from within: On the one hand, aesthetic experience is a processual



negation of any automatic understanding that seeks to present itself to aesthetic experience as meaning formation in the aesthetic object. On the other hand, the scope and validity of this negation is restricted to the enactment of aesthetic experience. Derrida's objection is thus directed at a version of the aesthetics of negativity that seems to force on us the idea of both a total *and* a limited experience of negativity. This version puts forth a negativity vis-à-vis an automatic understanding that is carried out in all discourses, but restricts this negativity to arising from only one discourse; it presents a negation that, by negating the automatic realization of understanding, applies to the functioning of all discourses, but which is itself supposed to be conceived only as one discourse among others.

Derrida's concept of text starts from this discontent. For an approach that demands that we accept an experience of negativity that negates all nonaesthetic discourses *in* the experiencing of the aesthetic, but claims that this experience is completely irrelevant *for* these nonaesthetic discourses since the validity of this experience is limited to the actual enactment of aesthetic experience, seems problematic. But Derrida has expanded this criticism far beyond its primary contents into a general critique of all aesthetics as the subjugation ("making servile") of the potentialities of negativity. The limitation of the validity of aesthetically experienced negativity that the aesthetics of negativity seeks to implement appears to be the handicap that burdens all aesthetics *qua* aesthetics. According to this interpretation, the aesthetics of negativity is the most radical approach to aesthetics we can achieve, insofar as it brings to the fore the discourse-subverting logic of aesthetic experience; at the same time, as an aesthetic, it remains within the limits that have been inviolably drawn for this philosophical discipline. It too continues to fulfill the task that Derrida believes aesthetics was invented for—it neutralizes by recognizing:

It has been thought that Plato simply condemned play. And by the same token the art of *mimesis* which is only a type of play. But in all questions involving play and its "opposite," the "logic" will necessarily be baffling. Play and art are lost by Plato as he saves them.... Plato does speak very well of play. He speaks in praise of it. But he praises play 'in the best sense of the word,' if this can be said without eliminating play beneath the reassuring silliness of such a precaution. The best sense of play is play that is supervised and contained within the safeguards of ethics and politics. <sup>1</sup>

The marginalization of aesthetic experience, especially of one whose negativity has already been recognized, is for Derrida nothing less than the complicity of traditional aesthetics with "metaphysics," <sup>2</sup> that is, in Derrida's usage, with that approach to our discourses that reconstructs (and reenacts) their successful functioning. For this reason, Derrida designates the "recognition" of art in aesthetics as its subjugation ("making it servile") into one form of discourse among others, which robs it of its ability to disrupt other discourses. Using an expression from Bataille, <sup>3</sup> Derrida calls that concept of art "servile" that degrades it into a limited form of discourse among others in opposition to its "sovereign" contents. In contrast, art is "sovereign" because it overcomes the "desire for meaning" that defines our nonaesthetic discourses. To view art in its sovereignty is not to avoid and repress the "risk of being meaningless" <sup>4</sup> that it calls into view, but to accept and preserve it. It is servile to repress; it is sovereign to endure this danger, this risk. The restriction of the validity and scope of aesthetic negativity to the enactment of aesthetic experience results in Derrida's verdict that it renders art servile, because at the very moment that it recognizes art's negative potential it cheats it out of its sovereignty. The philosophical discipline of aesthetics and the approaches whose program it formulates rob art of its threatening status, not by banishing it, but by recognizing it as a particular discourse. In contrast, the sovereign enactment of aesthetic negativity is characterized by the fact that it develops the foundations of art as a threat to our meaning-producing discourses. The sovereign enactment of aesthetic experience breaks open the boundaries of its validity and asserts its validity for nonaesthetic discourses as well.

Derrida's reproach of the servility of a purely "aesthetic" approach to the processual negativity of art is grounded in the stabilizing effect that its limitation to the aesthetic realm has on automatic understanding and, in this way, on the functioning of our nonaesthetic discourses. Any purely aesthetic approach is not merely neutral but servile because it represents indirect confirmation of the successful functioning of those nonaesthetic discourses for whose sake it limits the powers of aesthetic negativity. If it is

true, as Derrida claims, that any approach to our nonaesthetic discourses that is oriented toward their successful functioning in the production and distribution of meaning has to assume the form of a metaphysical theory (see chapter 6), then the complicity of all aesthetics with metaphysics is manifested in the limitation of the validity of aesthetic experience. Derrida argues that any view of aesthetic negativity that distinguishes it from other modes of experience results from its metaphysical distortion.<sup>5</sup>

From his analysis of the servile form of aesthetic experience, Derrida conversely concludes that aesthetic experience will only become sovereign if it overcomes the restriction of the validity of the processual negation of all automatic understanding. The sovereign sense of the aesthetic subversion of all understanding implies going beyond the marginalized status of the aesthetic as merely one discourse among others. Art becomes sovereign if the experience of *its* negativity at the same time uncovers the hidden negativity *also* found not in art, but rather in functioning discourse.

[T]his sovereign speech is not *another* discourse, another chain unwound alongside significative discourse. There is only one discourse, it is significative, and here one cannot get around Hegel. The poetic or the ecstatic is that *in every discourse* which can open itself up to the absolute loss of its sense, to the (non-)base of the sacred, of nonmeaning, of unknowledge or of play, to the swoon from which it is reawakened by a throw of the dice.<sup>6</sup>

The redemption of the sovereign potential of art is in its overcoming of the servile form to which it was damned by an "aesthetic" reading that was subject to a "desire for meaning." Art becomes sovereign on a different, no longer aesthetic reading. This latter interpretation signifies an enactment of aesthetic negativity that detaches it from the occurrence of aesthetic experience and finds traces of it even in nonaesthetic discourses.

Derrida calls this kind of reading of the aesthetic "textual"; it transforms aesthetic signs into texts. It can only do this, though, by also transforming nonaesthetic discourses into texts. According to Derrida, reading the aesthetic sign as text always also means bringing its processual negation vis-à-vis nonaesthetic discourses into force in such a way that their successful functioning is undermined in that they themselves become texts. The textual reading can never be restricted to one type of discourse; to view *one* discourse as text is to view *all* discourses as texts. On the sovereign reading of the aesthetic, a reading that is no longer aesthetic but textual in nature, aesthetic and nonaesthetic discourses become "genres" of a general text. This reading depotentializes the structural difference between discourse types to the relative difference between "literary genre[s]"<sup>7</sup> of one general text.

The explanation of Derrida's concept of text in terms of the program of a transcendence of aesthetics that regains the sovereignty of art allows us to give an initial characterization of the relationship between the aesthetics of negativity and deconstruction: Both agree about the structural description of the process of aesthetic experience. Both describe it as the enactment of that negation in which efforts at understanding undermine themselves by depotentializing every aesthetic meaning back into the pure material of signifying selections: "'Literature' also indicates—practically—the beyond of everything: the 'operation' is the inscription that transforms the whole into a part requiring completion or supplementation. This type of supplementarity opens the 'literary game' in which, along with 'literature,' the figure of the author finally disappears."<sup>8</sup> But the aesthetics of negativity and deconstruction stand in strict opposition to each other in their respective definitions of the validity of the aesthetic experience of negativity. The aesthetics of negativity limits the validity of the aesthetically experienced to its actual enactment, in which we view objects in the perspective of their specifically aesthetic value, in terms of the beautiful. The subversion of the patterns of nonaesthetic understanding can only be stringently enacted in an aesthetic discourse that is distinct from other discourses. In this context, aesthetic experience is only sovereign insofar as we consider it capable of transforming everything into text, of discovering in everything that negativity which—according to the aesthetics of negativity—is only experienceable within the bounds of aesthetic experience.<sup>9</sup>

The tension in the above model of the aesthetics of negativity represents the starting point of Derrida's generalization of the aesthetic experience of negativity. This tension becomes apparent if the concept of aesthetic experience includes information about its purpose and

function. What sense is an experience of the subversion of automatic understanding, on which all of our nonaesthetic discourses are based, supposed to have, if this experience at the same time confesses to having solely aesthetic validity? For in this way the experience is retracted into the closed realm of the aesthetic, and that which it negates internally is stabilized externally given the partial character of its validity. Derrida views this problem as a manifestation of the servile ethos of aesthetic theory and claims that there is no reason for restricting the validity of the subversion of all automatic understanding to the aesthetic enactment of this experience. Instead, the experience of negativity that seems to be restricted to the aesthetic realm can take on universal validity, separate from any dependency on the actual enactment of aesthetic experience. This occurs in the transformation of an aesthetic reading into a textual one. The key concepts in Derrida's philosophy can be explained in terms of this effort to articulate and ground the nonaesthetic sense of negativity, initially considered to be experienced only aesthetically. These concepts conform to the project of providing a theoretical reconstruction of that which aesthetic experience has already shown how to do. <sup>10</sup> Derrida's deconstructive terms, such as "différance" and "dissémination," originate in this process of generalization, which Derrida then systematizes in the concept of textual reading: they are structures of aesthetic experience with generalized validity.

In the next chapter I will examine this program in greater depth. What interests me here is whether Derrida's call to develop the sovereign contents of aesthetic negativity is based on an intuition that can be grounded independently of such far-reaching consequences. I have already pointed out that, given the preceding analyses of the aesthetics of negativity, one can hardly dismiss the suspicion of the irresolvable tensions they are subject to. For the idea of an aesthetic experience that negates everything internally only to stabilize it externally on the basis of its particularity seems absurd. And this is the insight that Derrida's concept of aesthetic sovereignty plays upon. The suspicion of absurdity leads to the articulation of the demand not to limit the negativity of the aesthetic to its actual aesthetic enactment, but to grant it instead a relevance that points beyond the confines of the aesthetic sphere to nonaesthetic discourses as well.

If one understands the call for aesthetic sovereignty as a call for nonaesthetic relevance, it gains a singular status among the positions discussed up to this point: it is not yet the far-reaching assertion of deconstruction, that the aesthetic negativity found in the process of textual reading has validity beyond the province of aesthetic experience. Nonetheless, it exceeds the limits of the approach to aesthetic negativity that seeks to seal this process off from everything outside it. The "neither-nor" of the sovereignty of the aesthetic conceived in terms of its nonaesthetic relevance can be more precisely explained in terms of the distinction between the "implications" and "consequences" <sup>11</sup> of aesthetic negativity: Derrida's concept of the textual (and no longer aesthetic) reading understands the sovereignty demand of aesthetic negativity to imply a negation (or deconstruction) of nonaesthetic discourses as well. By contrast, the idea of aesthetic sovereignty in Adorno can be understood to mean that the aesthetic experience of negativity results in the aesthetic subversion of automatic understanding, an (aesthetic) approach that also applies to nonaesthetic discourses. In this sense, he or she enacts a sovereign aesthetic experience who gains a new picture of nonaesthetic discourses as a result of passing through this experience. Moreover, this new picture is not limited to the automatic understanding that nonaesthetic discourses provide as the material and starting point of aesthetic experience; it is also an alternative picture of nonaesthetic discourses that make no reference to aesthetic experience.

The sovereign enactment of aesthetic experience transforms the preaesthetic way of viewing nonaesthetic discourses into a postaesthetic one. Though this latter point of view stands in opposition to its preaesthetic predecessor, it is not implied in aesthetic experience, but is produced by it. For this reason, it does not rest on an improper extension of the range of validity of aesthetic experience, as does Derrida's textual reading; instead, it is due solely to the circumstance that even aesthetic experience enacted within its particular realm of validity has consequences for one's picture of nonaesthetic discourses. The contrasting conceptions of the sovereignty or relevance postulate of the experience of aesthetic negativity—the *implications* it contains in Derrida and the *consequences* it produces in Adorno—also differ in the undermining or recognition of the autonomy of the aesthetic: Derrida "expands" aesthetically experienced

and thus only particularly valid negativity to apply to the basic principle of nonaesthetic modes of experience or discourses as well. He conceives of aesthetic negativity as a general structure not bound by the autonomous logic of aesthetic experience and which, in its transformation of the aesthetic to a textual reading, subjects aesthetic experience—with the particular validity of its autonomy—to a heteronomous recasting: <sup>12</sup> it is supposed to provide insight into the negativity of all automatically enacted understanding, and, accordingly, of all discourses. In contrast, Adorno focuses on the consequences that aesthetic negativity has—even though and only because—it follows its own autonomous logic.

The next two chapters will explicate the way one has to conceive of the consequences for the image and self-understanding of our nonaesthetic discourses that can be ascribed to the sovereignly enacted aesthetic experience of negativity, even if the latter is not totalized in a heteronomous manner. In this chapter, I only wish to make a few points about the sovereign enactment of aesthetic experience. What does it mean to enact an aesthetic experience in a sovereign manner if it does not mean expanding its nonaesthetic consequences to implications? But, if it does mean the latter, how does it avoid cancelling out its implications entirely?

*In the Aesthetic Theory, Adorno designates that experience in which aesthetic negativity radically transforms the picture of nonaesthetic discourses the enigmatic character of art. <sup>13</sup> Art works become enigmatic when we neither reenact them purely immanently nor view them externally as one discourse among many, but instead, allow these two perspectives to clash with one another. In the experience of the enigmatic character of art the question arises of the meaning that something which has just been experienced aesthetically has for our nonaesthetic modes of experience and discourses. How can an experience come into being in which we examine the consequences of aesthetic negativity for nonaesthetic discourses, even though the sense and validity of the latter are based on the success of our automatic understanding of them? Adorno does not limit himself to the readily available answer that this is merely the expression of the need for consistency and coherence among the diverse modes of experience. <sup>14</sup> He instead seeks to explain the question of the relationship as the consequence of the adequate enactment of the experience of aesthetic negativity: "The latter [the enigmatic character] poses a constant threat to the experience of art works, suddenly surfacing just at the point when a person thinks he has grasped a certain work completely. This keeps alive the seriousness of the works of art." <sup>15</sup>*

Thus Adorno answers the question of the definition of the sovereign enactment of aesthetic experience that has nonaesthetic consequences by pointing to the "seriousness" of the aesthetic. The precise meaning of this formulation remains unexplained in Adorno. It can be provided, though, by construing the concept of "seriousness" in an aesthetic sense as a countermodel to that of aesthetic relief (or compensation). Adorno's thesis then reads: anyone who takes art seriously does not experience it for the sake of relief; the consequences of the aesthetic, seriously taken, are not relief or compensation. If one takes Adorno's demand to take the aesthetic seriously as a counterposition to the theory of aesthetic relief, this first of all changes the sense of the opposition between servile and sovereign art. Derrida equated this opposition with that between aesthetic immanence and textual totalization. The distinction between the sovereign and servile shape of aesthetic experience first makes sense, however, in terms of the description of the consequences that the enactment of aesthetic experience has precisely in view of the particularity of its validity. This is exactly the point at which Kant placed the concept of interest *in* disinterested pleasure rather than *against* such pleasure: "Abundant proof has been given above to show that the judgment of taste by which something is declared beautiful must have no interest as its determining ground. But it does not follow from this that *after* it has once been posited as a pure aesthetic judgment, an interest cannot then enter into combination with it." <sup>16</sup> The internal reconstruction of the logic of our aesthetic experience—attempted in Part I—can (and must) refrain from any determination of an interest in the consequences of aesthetic experience that possesses logical priority over this experience. This reconstruction can (and must) be supplemented, however, by an examination of the consequences of aesthetic experience and of the interest directed toward them—to be undertaken later in Part II—without recasting these consequences in a heteronomous fashion.

Let us now turn to the contrast between the sovereignty postulate and a description of the effects of aesthetic experience as relief, release, or compensation. "Relief" and "compensation" are the terms that Arnold Gehlen and Odo Marquard respectively employ in opposition to Adorno's thesis that the experience of aesthetic negativity, immanently enacted in all its stringency, especially as an autonomous experience, results in the radical transformation of the image of nonaesthetic discourses and, in this way, in their destabilization. In contrast, the relief or compensation model argues that aesthetic experience actually has a stabilizing rather than a destabilizing effect on nonaesthetic discourses. Gehlen describes the relieving effect of a work of art that refrains from any inflated meaning in the following way:

This is precisely the way it succeeds in providing relief for consciousness. For, as Ernst Jünger says, the State weighs upon us like a mountain range; like atmospheric pressure, social pressure is so immense that it enters into our own condition. Society—a society in which democracy is connected with organization and practical dogmatism—no longer provides space for fantastic and extreme appetites, for generous acts of foolishness, artificial paradises, for the raptures of splendid isolation, and the carefreeness of sturdy natures. Accordingly, it is precisely in thoroughly bureaucratized societies that a desire arises for outsiders and nonconformists; the public loves it when this [type of life] is shown to be achievable. And only in art (and in literature) can degrees of freedom and acts of reflective alertness and of libertinism be called to mind that could not be accommodated in any way in public life; art becomes a space of fascination and desire, a place of permissiveness and for catching one's breath precisely because it no longer contains any "existential" appeals. It becomes the site for excursions in consciousness that have been banished everywhere else. It is impossible for art, just as it is for everyone, to intervene creatively, as one calls it, in the social; in this way it receives its peculiarly free-floating, postulatory character—which is the first impression one has upon entering an exhibition of new pictures. It too is the demonic, small, and assiduous dwarf for whom you have to keep a door open in every house. <sup>17</sup>

The relief or compensation model described in this way is the appropriate backdrop against which to explain the concept of aesthetic sovereignty because, in spite of its opposition to Adorno, it shares a decisive premise with the aesthetics of negativity: it defines art as relief not because art is subordinate to heteronomous, nonaesthetic needs, but because of the marginalized status with which the aesthetic contented itself after coming to terms with the particular validity of its rationalized form. The only art that offers relief—as Gehlen, following Nietzsche and Weber, concludes—is a "private" or "intimate" art (Weber) that renounces an interventionary social role; the only art that is compensatory—as Marquard concludes in opposition to utopian or historico-philosophical overburdenings of the aesthetic—is an art that no longer claims to be a redemptive "total compensation," but only an alleviating "partial compensation." <sup>18</sup> In its very autonomy that emancipates it from nonaesthetic ends (and which also marginalizes it), though, art is structurally incompatible with nonaesthetic practices and discourses. Only that which suspends the validity of the phenomenon from which one seeks relief or compensation can truly provide relief or compensation. Just as the occurrence of aesthetic experience makes no claim to having any external validity for the nonaesthetic, it also does not assume the validity of the nonaesthetic within the aesthetic realm, but instead suspends it there. Even if neither Gehlen nor Marquard themselves analyze the immanent suspicion of the validity of the nonaesthetic in aesthetic experience, <sup>19</sup> they nonetheless recognize the structure of aesthetic experience in the way they formulate the question of the nonaesthetic consequences or functions of this experience.

By answering the following question, we can get a more precise idea of the opposition between Adorno's concept of the seriousness of aesthetic negativity and the relief or compensation model of Gehlen and Marquard: On the basis of which premises are the nonaesthetic consequences of aesthetic experience described in one case as having stabilizing (alleviating or compensatory) effects on nonaesthetic discourses and as having destabilizing effects in the other? The answer I would like to propose and whose theses I will ground in the course of Part II is as follows: aesthetic experience has stabilizing consequences—is compensatory or alleviating—if it is conceived of having its particular place or realm; in contrast, if aesthetic experience is conceived as being *potentially ubiquitous*, it has destabilizing consequences—is subversive. In these terms, it is possible

to reformulate the opposition between the sovereign and servile enactment of aesthetic experience: he or she who from the outset limits the enactment of the experience of aesthetic negativity to a particular place or realm and thus places it alongside nonaesthetic discourses (and practices) enacts it servilely; in contrast, he or she who enacts the experience of aesthetic negativity in any place or realm and thus releases its destabilizing consequences for nonaesthetic discourses (and practices) enacts it in a sovereign fashion.

Initially it seems impossible to decide between these two conceptions, for both are in the position to give good reasons for suspecting the other of subjecting aesthetic autonomy to a heteronomous recasting. For in opposing the sovereign enactment of aesthetic negativity to all forms of external limitation, do we not raise the status of aesthetic experience into the realm of cognition of the real truth about the nonaesthetic? And, on the other hand, in imposing external limitations on aesthetic experience, do we not subject it to nonaesthetic demands for stability? Grounds for these mutual suspicions can be found on both sides: if one reads Marquard's explanations from the perspective of Adorno, it turns out that his external limitation of aesthetic experience depends on the latter's subjection to pre-given, nonaesthetic needs and functions. Marquard speaks of the "replica status" of autonomous art, which explains such art in terms of pre-aesthetically perceivable "deficiencies"; it is the "redemption" of lost opportunities and its paradigm is leisure time or "vacation."<sup>20</sup> Conversely, if Adorno's concept of the seriousness of aesthetic negativity is read from the perspective of Gehlen, the freedom from external limitation found in the sovereign enactment of aesthetic experience still seems to depend on the exaggerated enhancement of the status of art into a medium of superior knowledge of the laws of nonaesthetic discourses.<sup>21</sup>

Even though there are grounds for the mutual accusations of heteronomy, each side misses the decisive point: neither description of the consequences of aesthetic experience, as stabilizing or as destabilizing, contradicts the autonomy of aesthetic experience. But if their opposition cannot be conceived as that between the autonomy and heteronomy of the aesthetic—as each side claims—then the question arises: what problem is really being discussed?

This problem comes into view if one takes up Gehlen's more precise explanation (instead of Marquard's rather vague one) of the condition for art's ability to provide relief from the nonaesthetic: the external limitation of aesthetic experience. Aesthetic experience can only provide such relief if it maintains the character of the "noneveryday or extraordinary" (Gehlen) in a twofold sense, by suspending the validity of the everyday from which it is supposed to provide relief while at the same time existing alongside this realm within a clearly marked-off sphere. This limitation of aesthetic experience alongside that whose validity it suspends and from which it offers relief follows for Gehlen from another condition that the aesthetic must meet to be at all experienceable and enactable, or more generally, useful, for subjects. For to be experienceable and not "unduly burdensome," the aesthetic, which is supposed to provide relief from the institutionally structured, "completely controlled world," must itself be institutionally formed or at least quasi-institutionally organized. For only then are "mental energies" opened for "truly personal, singular, and newly inventable dispositions," that is, only if they are based on an institutional "bedrock of internal and external habits": "energy reserves" are stored only in institutions, from which subjects need to draw if they are to avoid "uncertainty" and "loss of structure" (*Entformung*).<sup>22</sup> The external limitation of aesthetic experience that the relief thesis postulates in opposition to Adorno's sovereignty model is grounded, in Gehlen, on a reflection on the conditions of the possibility of subjective participation in the aesthetic. The "energies" of aesthetic experience are available to us only insofar as they are connected to institutions in their differentiated forms; for this reason, the enactment of aesthetic experience is—temporally and spatially—restricted, since it is structured in terms of participation in an institution.

To what extent is it true, however, that an institutional status of the aesthetic defines the condition of possibility for participating in its "energies"? Gehlen does not deny that it is possible to take part in the aesthetic in a noninstitutional sense; he only disputes the desirability of such an option, since such participation is not possible in any *sustainable sense*. In support of this thesis, Gehlen sketches a scenario of crises that would result if aesthetic "disinhibitions" were developed and appropriated without an institutional basis.<sup>23</sup>

Such consequences are part of the "chaos" and "boundless disorientation" which, in Gehlen's view, any subjectivity must fall prey to, if it cuts itself off from its institutional "energy reserves" and declares itself to be the sole vehicle of its enactment. In this way, Gehlen himself points to the condition under which the external limitation of aesthetic experience, which alone guarantees its alleviating impact, can be overcome and aesthetic experience can gain its sovereignty—namely, when participation in such an experience no longer occurs in institutions, but takes instead as its vehicle a subjectivity released from its institutional ties. This transposition of aesthetic experience from institutionally tied to liberated subjectivity is described by Gehlen in terms of the revolutionary break of the avant-garde: "Here it [art that considers itself revolutionary] replaces its entire system of reference, which very rarely occurs, and places art on a new basis: subjectivity (that is reflective or at least willing to reflect)." <sup>24</sup> What the institutional integration of aesthetic experience prevented is now possible for aesthetic subjectivity: experiences of aesthetic negativity that are not tied to specific times and places, but are unrestricted, that can be enacted in principle anytime and anywhere. According to Gehlen's depiction, aesthetic experience becomes potentially ubiquitous, if its possibility is no longer restricted to institutionally provided "energy reserves," but found rather in the individual competence of experiencing subjects.

Gehlen is not only simultaneously suspicious and clear-sighted in his description of the transposition of aesthetic experience: he also realizes that this sovereign, ubiquitous potential is implied by aesthetic experience insofar as it is conceived of as a rationalized, autonomous mode of experience. In its traditional form, the aesthetic only took on institutional shape under the pressure of nonaesthetic needs for permanence and stability. Accordingly, in its modern form, it can only assume institutional shape in the sense of an external and "secondary institutionalization of subjectivism":

Thus, for instance, in the fine arts of our times, the previous basic conditions of the entire branch of art have disappeared ... instead a veritable storm of ideas and inventions have been sparked, which has been bubbling for decades; every idea is subjective and thus outside of its inventor from purely coincidental and often striking attractiveness. And this entire dizzying world is held together and reinforced by a newly established institutional structure that did not exist fifty years ago; it is something like an intercontinental lodge that has set itself up between New York, Paris, and London, in which art dealers, *amateurs marchands*, museum directors, speculating collectors, exhibition entrepreneurs, art writers, publishers, and the like cooperate; it is an arousing milieu in which, literally, every human passion is given its chance. <sup>25</sup>

Thus even though (as Gehlen writes, "luckily") a secondary institutionalization of the aesthetic takes place that integrates and neutralizes the completely unbridled and liberating art of the avant-garde, there always remains the irrefutable possibility for subjectivity to set itself up as the instantiation of aesthetic experience and, in liberating this experience from its institutional restrictions, lend it potential ubiquity: secondary institutionalization is unstable per se and remains external to aesthetic experience. Gehlen has this danger, inseparably connected to the autonomy of aesthetic experience, constantly in mind; for him it takes the shape of the "intellectual or enlightener" who has no need for institutionally fixed rules. Gehlen himself emphasized just how little effect the secondary institutionalization of the aesthetic has on the subjective release of the energies of aesthetic experience: for he turns to the very subject whose "disinhibitions" just destroyed the relief-granting institutions and burdens it with the task of preventing that destruction. Gehlen's call for the subjective ideal of "asceticism" for "elites and 'creative minorities'" <sup>26</sup>—which according to his own conception must completely overburden the subject because it now makes it responsible for its own relief—contains the admission that institutionalization in general and thus that of the aesthetic in particular cannot provide permanent security against the disinhibitions of the subject.

The disinhibition or potential ubiquity of the aesthetic, which Gehlen described in terms of an aesthetic experience instantiated in a subject, defines, as its potential or possibility, its own autonomous form. Of course, its consequences or effects can no longer provide relief from the everyday world. The modes of experience that have been freed from their institutional localizations and placed in the hands of the subject act to destabilize rather than stabilize nonaesthetic discourses (and practices). Adorno's explanation of the sover

own enactment of the experience of aesthetic negativity as the "preservation of seriousness" as opposed to a provision of relief can be understood as an affirmation of an aesthetic experience no longer institutionally situated. In a debate with Gehlen, Adorno staunchly emphasized this standpoint of a freed and unsupported subjectivity. The postulate of aesthetic sovereignty is nothing but the aesthetic conclusion of Adorno's call, which is generally directed against Gehlen, to free human "potentialities" <sup>27</sup> from their institutional constraints. Thus, that aesthetic experience can be termed sovereign which is enacted, not in the restricted participation in institutions, but in a potential ubiquity not limited by any prior contextual positioning. As of yet, we have no more than an assumption, rather than proof, that the experience of aesthetic negativity in this situation of potential ubiquity has destabilizing consequences for the nonaesthetic without becoming heteronomous. And this can be made plausible in terms of Gehlen's description of the disinhibiting process of the aesthetic. It will be the task of subsequent chapters, however, to show the way in which these consequences should be conceived and how they are produced.

If we now return to the starting point of the discussion of the postulate of sovereignty with these results in mind, the decisive difference between Derrida's deconstruction and Adorno's aesthetics of negativity stands out more clearly. Derrida terms servile the experience of aesthetic negativity as particular in its validity and, in contrast, designates as sovereign the enactment of a process experienced as only aesthetic negativity, but which at the same time attributes nonaesthetic validity to this experience. Accordingly, the sovereign, aesthetic experience of negativity is always simultaneously a nonaesthetic cognition of negativity. In contrast, according to Adorno's analysis, validity-particular aesthetic experience is neither servile nor sovereign, but underdetermined. It first becomes servile if alleviating effects are ascribed to it and first becomes sovereign, in contrast, if destabilizing consequences are attributed to it. The opposition between aesthetic sovereignty and servility—demonstrated in the discussion of Gehlen's concept of relief—refers solely to a distinction between the restricted and the potentially ubiquitous enactment of aesthetic experience. The sovereign experience of aesthetic negativity thus does not entail nonaesthetic cognition; instead, such cognition arises out of the consciousness of the unrestricted enactability of aesthetic negativity, producing destabilizing interpretations of nonaesthetic discourses that could make no claim to validity without the prior experience of aesthetic negativity.

For this reason, the decisive antagonism between deconstruction and the aesthetics of negativity is found in their relationship to the "risk" ( Derrida) of aesthetic modernity. Aesthetic modernity takes on the risk of revealing contents of experience that negate automatic understanding, in the form of one special discourse among others. Derrida interprets this risk as a dispute between the servility and sovereignty of the negative contents. The only appropriate manner of dealing with the risk of aesthetic modernity thus lies in surmounting the attempted "banishment" of sovereign contents to which aesthetic negativity is subject in its validity-particular form, as art or poetry: "To avoid it, poetry must be 'accompanied by an affirmation of sovereignty....'" <sup>28</sup> Adorno, on the other hand, preserves this tension as the uncircumventable signature of aesthetic modernity; for him, the continued existence of that negative potential—which Derrida wants to develop into sovereign independence—depends on sustaining this form of modernity. Those contents that Derrida believes he is able to remove in unmarred sovereignty from the necessarily ambiguous configuration of aesthetic modernity are inseparably tied to the particularity of the aesthetically raised validity claim (which Derrida deems servile). Aesthetic experience only unfolds its subversive potential in its radical particularity; this potential would vaporize in any effort to generalize it.

The conflicting views in Adorno and Derrida of a possible, sovereign enactment of aesthetic negativity clearly imply different constructions of the relationship between the experience of aesthetic negativity and that mode of viewing nonaesthetic discourses which arises out of the sovereign enactment of this experience. In Derrida's theory of the text they coincide: sovereign aesthetic experience is nothing but the nonaesthetically valid insight into the negativity of all discourses. In contrast, in Adorno's aesthetics of negativity, the grounding relationship between this experience and our discourses is premised on the tension between them: sovereign aesthetic experience produces a postaesthetic



subversion of our discourses. The simultaneity of aesthetic and nonaesthetic experience in Derrida contrasts with their constitutive sequentiality in Adorno.

The preceding line of argument has not yet explained the conception of a "postaesthetic" way of looking at things. What it has done is defended this idea on two different fronts. Its first line of defense was developed against the polemics of deconstruction. These polemics articulate—by means of their critique of aesthetics as a servile program—the proper motif of discontent with the unresolved tension to which the purely immanent definition of the process of aesthetic experience falls prey. This motif was taken up by reflecting on the significance of the consequences of the experience of aesthetic negativity, without forcing this significance, however, into Derridean extremes. In this way, the discussion also took up the reservations of a purely immanent viewpoint, which considers anything that goes beyond such a viewpoint to be necessarily heteronomous,<sup>29</sup> since it subjects aesthetic experience either to contingent effects from outside the realm of aesthetics or to nonaesthetic validity claims. Neither of these conditions applies to those consequences that are produced solely by means of the internally consistent enactment of the experience of aesthetic negativity, though: these consequences are not contingent to aesthetic experience, since they can only be effected by aesthetic experiences; but they are also not heteronomous recastings of the aesthetic by nonaesthetic validity claims, since their occurrence is premised on the autonomy of the aesthetic.

I will now take a detour in the elucidation of the postaesthetic way of looking at things by first looking briefly at the manner in which Derrida raises the status of aesthetic experience into a nonaesthetic cognition of negativity (chapter 6). The problems Derrida faces in the effort to ground his argument form the backdrop for suggesting an alternative view (chapter 7).

## 6

# Problems in Grounding the Critique of Reason

The previous chapter, starting with Derrida's critique of a "merely" aesthetic way of looking at things, has shown that the significance of the consequences of the experience of aesthetic negativity for nonaesthetic discourses is connected to this experience itself. The process of aesthetic experience that has destabilizing effects on nonaesthetic discourses can be called "sovereign," using Bataille's term. For both Derrida and Adorno, that enactment of the experience of aesthetic negativity is sovereign that does not stabilize the functioning of our nonaesthetic discourses, but instead creates an image of them that grants validity to aesthetic negativity within them and for them. However, Derrida and Adorno provide different explanations of this sovereign aesthetic negativity and its effects on the process of nonaesthetic experience; in other words, they assign different meaning to this ability of aesthetic experience to reach beyond its confines. Derrida's concept of textual reading unites aesthetic and nonaesthetic experience in one and the same process. Their relation is one of logical implication. To experience something in an aesthetically sovereign way means to experience it through a processual negativity that possesses not only aesthetic but nonaesthetic validity as well. As a textual experience, the sovereign experience of aesthetic negativity is at the same time a nonaesthetically valid cognition of our discourses. In contrast, on Adorno's concept of an aesthetically produced, post-aesthetic way of looking at things, Derrida's aim (which it shares)—to articulate a negativity that initially seems to be reserved solely for aesthetic experience, though in a not exclusively aesthetic manner—can only be realized by holding that the validity of the experience of negativity is relative to the aesthetic sphere of value. A nonaesthetic way of looking at things that does justice to the negativity of aesthetic experience can only be conceived if one refrains from directly translating it (from the aesthetic to the nonaesthetic).

## 6.1 Deconstruction and "Différance"

As a first approximation of Derrida's concept of textual reading and its deconstructive transformation of discourses, it is helpful to glance at Richard Rorty's interpretation of these ideas. Rorty distinguishes between two possible uses of "deconstruction": an exaggerated and false one that opposes a deconstructive to a nondeconstructive (i.e., a "constructive") approach and a more modest and correct one that places deconstruction alongside the constructive approach. In other words, the contrast is between understanding deconstruction as a rival of other forms of describing discourses and understanding it as the result of a change in perspective that does not contradict the other, constructive view. Only the latter use of the concept of deconstruction makes sense to Rorty: "There is no topic—and in particular not that of the relation between sign and signified, language and world—on which Derrida holds a different view than that of any of the philosophers of language I have mentioned," <sup>1</sup> that is, that of the constructive theoreticians. Deconstruction is a secondary, "parasitic," or reactive <sup>2</sup> way of looking at discourses that does not contradict the primary, constructive way of doing so. Whereas the primary approach seeks to describe and give an account of the successful functioning of discourses, the deconstructive perspective on them achieves an external view. Such an external view necessarily imposes other requirements on the philosophy that articulates it: whereas an approach that reconstructs the validity of the functioning of discourses from an internal perspective has to proceed argumentatively, the deconstructive approach harbors "literary pretensions": it is, in the strong sense used by Derrida, "writing," or creative. The difference between the two styles, the argumentative and the creative, implies a different way of viewing the object, which Rorty formulates in the opposition between "normal" and "abnormal or revolutionary":

The important thing to notice is that the difference between the two forms of activity is not subject matter . . . but rather determined by normality or abnormality. Normality, in this sense, is accepting without question the stage-setting in the language which gives

demonstration (scientific or ostensive) its legitimacy. Revolutionary scientists need to write, as normal scientists do not. Revolutionary politicians need to write, as parliamentary politicians need not. Dialectical philosophers like Derrida need to write, as Kantian philosophers do not. <sup>3</sup>

The distinction between normal and abnormal (or revolutionary) discourses as modes of realizing constructive and deconstructive philosophy, respectively, provides the first link to aesthetic negativity. Constructive, argumentatively proceeding philosophy reconstructs from an internal perspective the always theory- and language-relative groundings of discourses; it views discourses in terms of their successful functioning, or their validity. Deconstructive, writing-based, or literarily proceeding philosophy, in contrast, describes from an external perspective the irreducible variety of possible discourses; in this way, rather than viewing discourses in terms of their validity- guaranteeing "convictions," it shifts its focus to the origin of conviction-saturated vocabulary, the validity of which our discourses presuppose. The deconstructive approach traces vocabulary- or conviction-relative "normal" discourses back to that act hidden within them in which the realm in which they function was first created; it projects normal discourses back into the revolutionary discourses that made them possible. In this way internally valid discourses turn into a multitude of emerging and disappearing texts: "The first tradition"—that of the constructive approach—"thinks of truth as a vertical relationship between representations and what is represented. The second tradition"—that of the deconstructive approach—"thinks of truth horizontally—as the culminating reinterpretation of our predecessor's reinterpretation.... This tradition does not ask how representations are related to nonrepresentations, but how representations can be seen as hanging together." <sup>4</sup> Rorty describes the deconstructive approach as the consequence of a historicist Hegelianism whose "belatedness and irony" forms a writing-based philosophy as "a new literary genre, a genre which exhibited the relativity of significance to choice of vocabulary, the bewildering variety of vocabularies from which we can choose, and the intrinsic instability of each." <sup>5</sup>

Is this brief sketch of Rorty's reformulation of Derrida's concept of deconstruction appropriate? More precisely, is it appropriate, to the task that the concept of deconstruction is supposed to fulfill in Derrida, that is, the clarification of the structure and possibility of a nonaesthetic approach to our discourses that is implicit in the sovereign enactment of aesthetic experience? A first answer might be that Rorty's model of deconstruction resembles aesthetic negativity in that it breaks with the conception of a grounding of the validity of discourses. Deconstruction explained in this way thus appears to satisfy the demand to translate aesthetic negativity into a nonaesthetic mode of cognition insofar as it—as does aesthetic experience—traces the claim to successful understanding back to that point at which its lack of grounding becomes visible. From the deconstructive perspective, taken in Rorty's sense, the question of the validity of a claim to understanding always leads one to the brink of an abyss: for on this approach, no understanding is successful, since no particular understanding can distinguish itself from any other; each is equally possible.

The apparent affinity between the concept of aesthetic experience according to the aesthetics of negativity and the deconstructive approach to discourses found in Rorty distorts, however, the structural difference separating the two. For Rorty limits his reformulation of Derrida's concept of deconstruction to the antifoundationalist dissolution of the ability to ground of our vocabulary. This insight into the relativity of valid discourses given their dependence on vocabularies that themselves cannot be grounded does not, however, aim at an immanent negativity of all validity per se, a negativity that would at least initially correspond structurally to aesthetic negativity. What it instead aims at is a break with the foundationalist "nostalgia" <sup>6</sup> that seeks to subject the processes of innovation themselves to a process of grounding. Thus the introduction (without grounding argument) of new vocabularies that the deconstructive approach has observed in no way conflicts with the validity of the discourses they make possible as reformulated in the constructive approach; the antifoundationalism of the deconstructive approach in its Rortian version is compatible with a conviction-relative, restricted validity of discourses. This version does not construe—as does aesthetic negativity—every discourse as a self-subversive process, but is instead only aimed at such use and understanding of discourses that makes foundational validity claims. This explains the peaceful coexistence of

deconstructive and constructive perspectives in Rorty. If these two approaches can coexist in this way, then it is clear that the reformulation of the concept of deconstruction in Rorty is not suited for describing that nonaesthetic approach to our discourses that grants nonaesthetic validity to the unsublatable negativity of the aesthetic.

This insight is accompanied by the outlines of an alternative interpretation. Derrida's concept of deconstruction distinguishes itself from Rorty's reformulation through its negativism: the deconstructive approach does not exist peaceably in its validity alongside its constructive counterpart; it stands in conflict with it. This presupposes that an experiential process links the deconstructive approach to the internal problems of its constructive counterpart. Derrida's concept of deconstruction, once it is recovered from Rorty's purely antifoundationalist interpretation, is thus unsublatably negative, since it claims that the constructive approach gets caught up in an internal crisis and thus itself collapses into a deconstructive or validity-subverting approach. Derridean deconstruction is negative *like* aesthetic experience, since it is grounded on that consequence that drives the internal reconstruction of the validity of discourses *into* the validity-subverting deconstruction of these discourses.

To successfully carry out the program of a deconstructive approach that contradicts its constructive counterpart, a concept of the successful functioning of discourses is required that discovers within itself that point at which it is transformed into failure, in order to show in this way that, in truth, it had always refuted itself: "The condition of possibility ... is simultaneously, once again, the condition of their impossibility, of the impossibility of their rigorous purity." <sup>7</sup> The deconstructive approach to discourses can only be convincing if it is itself linked to the internal problems of these discourses; and only in this way can it satisfy the demand of granting nonaesthetic validity to the radical negativity of the aesthetic. Thus, contrary to Rorty's interpretation, Derrida's concept of deconstruction aims at a description of the functioning of our discourses that represents an alternative to a theoretical reconstruction of their successful functioning and that contests this reconstruction's image of language. This is why Derrida, in his concept of deconstruction, claims the same structure for both the cognition of nonaesthetic negativity and the experience of aesthetic negativity. "Deconstruction" refers to an analysis of the functioning of language that, in analogy to the experience of aesthetic negativity, discovers *within* this functioning the seeds of its own downfall. Such an analysis has to show that an appropriate and complete description of the normal functioning of our discourses reveals moments that are simultaneously the necessary condition of successful functioning and an instantiation of legitimate objections against this functioning. Derrida attempts to substantiate this claim in terms of a theory of meaning that reflects the logic of the "iterability" of signs and what he calls their "supplementary" status.

Derrida's concept of the iterability of signs is found at the intersection of two opposing definitions: in the sense of repeatability, iterability is the condition for the successful functioning of signs; in the sense of transformability, it is the immanent moment of objection to the successful functioning of signs. In linking the concept of iterability to that of the sign, Derrida is aware that he is in agreement with basic and generally shared understandings in the philosophy of language. Signs are repeatable insofar as they can be sensibly used independently of the specific, concrete situations in which they are introduced. Because the iterability of a sign consists in its usability with the same meaning in different situations, Derrida describes it as the meshing of identity and difference: "Iterability supposes a minimal remainder (as well as a minimum of idealization) in order that the identity of the selfsame be repeatable and identifiable in, through, and even in view of its alteration. For the structure of iteration—and this is another of its decisive traits—implies both identity and difference." <sup>8</sup> This description, which in language-theoretical terms is till rather uncontroversial, is taken by Derrida as the basis for drawing some far-reaching consequences. He thus claims that the structural condition of repeatability that defines all signs contains a moment of change, which is claimed to be incompatible with conceiving of meaning as the identity of the occurrence of a sign: "Iteration in its 'purest' form—and it is always impure—contains in itself the discrepancy of a difference that constitutes it as iteration. The iterability of an element divides its own identity a priori." <sup>9</sup> If this holds, then just the analysis of the iterability of signs brings the program of the deconstructive cognition of negativity to its goal: iterability is, as repeatability, the uncircumventable condition of all functioning of signs; however, this

condition, in its changing moment, is at the same time an objection against the function it is burdened with: the condition of the possibility of the meaningful repetition of signs is, simultaneously, the condition of its impossibility. For the iterability of signs is the condition of both the possibility and impossibility of meaning, since it has to lay claim to the integration of two moments whose economy is necessarily in crisis. The concept of iterability requires us to conceive of an interplay between identity and difference for which we have, in Derrida's view, no integrating model.

Derrida has tried to ground this thesis of the opposition of the two moments of iterability, of identity and difference, in two ways: from the side of difference and from the side of identity. The first of these groundings starts with the moment of difference. It claims that in the iterability of signs a moment subversive to identity lodges itself, because the idea of the repeatability of signs implies the idea of an infinite difference that cannot be linked with any conception of identity in a shared economy. The infinite difference that repeatable signs are subject to provokes a "crisis of meaning," which represents a defining and thus essential possibility of the functioning of our language. This crisis is "not an accident, a factual and empirical anomaly of spoken language, but also the positive possibility and 'internal' structure of spoken language, from a certain outside." <sup>10</sup>

Derrida goes on to ground this proclivity for crisis that the identity or meaning of iterative signs has in terms of the constitutive *and* subversive role that contextual conditions have in determining the meaning of signs. Jonathan Culler summarized Derrida's central argument in this regard in the following way:

Our earlier formula, "meaning is context-bound, but context is boundless," helps us recall why both projects fail: meaning is context-bound, so intentions do not in fact suffice to determine meaning; context must be mobilized. But context is boundless, so accounts of context never provide full determinations of meaning. Against any set of formulations, one can imagine further possibilities of context, including the expansion of context produced by reinscription within a context of the description of it. <sup>11</sup>

According to Culler's interpretation, Derrida's thesis of the uncircumventable proclivity of language for crisis is grounded in the discrepancy between what one expects context to offer and what it can actually do, when properly viewed. The nonetheless unavoidable recourse to context in the determination of meaning thus results in a crisis for every effort to understand language, since what is supposed to generate definitiveness is itself boundless and thus the source of unanticipatable and uncontrollable difference.

Derrida thus grounds his general thesis—that via the iterability of signs a boundless difference is incorporated into signs which is incompatible with any concept of identity—on a special thesis. The latter states that the understanding of the meaning of signs (once we have taken leave of intentionalist concepts) can only operate in a context-bound manner, but that contexts cannot determine the meaning of signs since they are themselves boundless. This account, though, itself rests on a misunderstanding that Derrida falls into given his ambiguous talk of the structural insatiability or boundlessness of context. The boundlessness that meaning opens itself to in its context-boundedness is in no way *eo ipso* the boundlessness of a difference that is incompatible with any identity of meaning. Derrida himself understands his thesis that a "thousand possibilities will always remain open even if one understands something in this phrase that makes sense" <sup>12</sup> in an ambiguous fashion. On the one hand this statement means: every sign can be used in different and infinitely many contexts. This is exactly what defines the iterability of signs: their reusability in contexts that are not literally those in which they were first introduced (or in which they were used in an exemplary manner). The usability of signs in infinitely many contexts in itself, though, in no way contradicts the definitiveness of its use and meaning as defined by rules of language. The context becomes such an objection in the second interpretation that Derrida gives to its boundlessness. Derrida translates the first conclusion, that signs can be used in different and infinitely many contexts, into a second conclusion, that signs can be used in many and infinitely different contexts. The thesis of the infinite diversity of contexts in no way follows, though, from the thesis of an unlimited number of contexts. Derrida conflates one determination with the other: he concludes from the fact that the context-boundedness of signs permits them to be used in ever new ways that signs are subject to an unbounded diversity or difference. It does not however follow

from their usability in infinitely many contexts that they can be used in every possible sort of context. <sup>13</sup>

Similarly, in defining a second dimension of his concept of context, Derrida confuses an infinite multiplicity with an infinite diversity that subverts the identity of meaning. Whereas the first dimension (which was just described) refers to the horizontal boundlessness of the contexts of the many uses of a sign, the second dimension refers to the vertical boundlessness of the contexts of a single use of a sign. The context of just one use of a sign is in itself boundless or "insatiable" (Derrida) because it can be interpreted in infinitely different and deviant ways: "And there does not seem to be any upper limit on our ability to generate such deviant contexts." <sup>14</sup> In the second case of the boundlessness of context—in the vertical layering of the interpretive possibilities of the context—Derrida's equation of multiplicity with meaning-subverting diversity seems accurate: the many interpretations of context, each of which implies a different attribution of meaning, certainly may be completely different from one another. Nonetheless, even in the vertical dimension, the unbounded multiplicity of possible contexts and their interpretations does not by itself subvert the understanding of meaning and thus the identity of the sign. And this brings us to the decisive problem for Derrida's equation of the iterability of signs with the crisis of their meaning: Even in their infinite diversity, the many interpretations of contexts can only be understood as threats to every possible identity of the sign if one excludes from the very outset the possibility of deciding among these interpretations or reaching an understanding about them. Only if the fundamental possibility of diverse contextual interpretations is seen as an unmodifiable fact does this possibility force catastrophic effects on the concepts of the identity or the understanding of the meaning of signs. Derrida's assumption that the diversity of contextual interpretations per se subverts the identity of signs presupposes that our understanding of them consists in the monologic attribution of meaning on the basis of contextual interpretations that are always only coincidentally held in common.

In this way the second confusion of the possibility of contextboundlessness with the unmanageable crisis of meaning draws attention to the false premise that the first version already had to answer for: a one-dimensional understanding of the identity or meaning of signs. The infinite diversity of contextual interpretations in the second and vertical dimension only represents a threat to the identity of the sign if it is assumed that its identity cannot or must not be conceived of as the result of a process (of decision making or agreement). In the same way, the infinite multiplicity of contexts in the first and horizontal dimension only represents a threat to the identity of signs if it is assumed that their identity cannot be maintained in a multitude of contexts that are neither totally alike nor totally different, but instead show "family resemblances."

Derrida's attempt to conceive of the iterability of signs as the cause of a crisis in their meaning or identity can thus only be grounded in terms of the aspect of their difference—if illegitimate assumptions are made about signs' claim to identity. This leads us to look at the second variant used to ground Derrida's thesis. It starts not from the moment of difference but from the moment of identity in the iterability of signs and makes the following claim: even if difference in iterability is not necessarily subversive, nevertheless in its restricted form it is not compatible with the demand to conceive of the meaning of signs as the identity of (or in) its differential use. According to this version of the deconstructive theory of meaning, no sensible model exists for conceiving of the identity of meaning in such a way that does not exclude its moment of difference, regardless of how strong or weak this difference is taken to be. On this line of argument in Derrida, it is not that there is too much difference for every model of the identity of signs because this difference is necessarily boundless, but just the opposite: there is too little identity for any model of the difference of signs, because identity is necessarily restricted.

The thesis of the necessary exclusion of difference in the concept of identity is at the core of the antimetaphysical consequences that Derrida draws from his insight into the iterability of signs. If every sign is defined in its fundamental iterability through the interplay of identity and difference, then its meaning cannot be its identity with itself, understood as self-presence: "The structure of the remainder, implying alteration, renders all *absolute* permanence impossible." <sup>15</sup> In this way, the mere recognition of the uncircumventable structure of sign use implies the rejection of the traditionally

metaphysical models of understanding or cognition used to explicate its functioning. Because it can never be conceived of as presence, the processual constitution of the identity and meaning of signs in the course of the in principle infinite chain of their uses represents a metaphysically irresolvable problem. The failure of metaphysical models of identity in the face of the iterability of signs becomes for Derrida the prototype of a fundamental paradox. Thus the iterability of signs can provide the deconstructive approach its point of entry since it relates the difference-excluding or -marginalizing identity of signs to the difference that is incompatible with it. In the wake of his critique of metaphysics, Derrida claims that every identity- or meaning-based model of signs has to break down when confronted with difference. Derrida argues on two levels in support of this thesis: in his first effort to provide reasons for the incompatibility of identity with difference, he cites regularities of the *theoretical* exposition of identity and difference; in his second effort, he points to regularities in our own *use* of signs (in what is termed our "supplementary" sign use). It is this second line of argument that is relevant in our context. Nonetheless, let us take a quick look at the first effort, which refers to the structure of any possible theoretical elucidation of the interplay of identity and difference.

In providing critical proof of the inapplicability of all models of identity to the difference of iterative signs, Derrida refers above all to those theories that, at the decisive points of their arguments, reactivate metaphysical models, in the broadest sense of the term.

They do this to limit the difference in the iteration of signs, and so keep it compatible with the required identity on which any talk of meaning depends. Derrida's texts on Husserl and Searle present this critique. It is striking, though, that Derrida's criticism of theories in the philosophy of language is limited to a certain type of theory, and this circumscribes the systematic value of his argument. Nowhere did he explicitly attempt to critique the genuinely relevant solution offered by a postmetaphysical philosophy of language. This proposed solution consists in understanding the unification of identity and difference achieved in each iteration of signs not as the object of explicit knowledge, as is latently still done in the case of intentionalism, but as the yield of a certain ability or competence. <sup>16</sup> According to this view, the meaning of signs—about which Derrida rightly concludes is defined by both a moment of identity and one of difference—is not the result of theoretical but of practical operations. The aporias that according to Derrida form the relationship between identity and difference disappear, according to this counterthesis, if the understanding and use of signs is explained as a form of action rather than a form of cognition.

Derrida's disinterest in this proposal is based on his failure to grasp its decisive points. This becomes clear in his interpretation and critique of Austin's pragmatics of language, the very theory in which this proposal is worked out. <sup>17</sup> Derrida subjects to a test those categories spelled out by Austin that provide descriptions of the status of the rules or conventions of linguistic practice and that aim to describe the way they function. It is clear, though, from the outset that they will never pass this test, since they in no way seek to. Derrida attempts, in other words, to interpret Austin's terms as proposed solutions to a problem that they do claim not to solve, but to have gone beyond: he views the concepts that are supposed to reformulate the practically produced, integrative economy of identity and difference, that is, the comprehensibility of iterative signs, as if they described possible objects of an intentionally structured consciousness or knowledge. Once Austin's efforts are conceived as the attempt to redeem the ideal of an explicit knowledge of the meaning of signs, it is easy for Derrida to establish that the image Austin draws up of the interplay of identity and difference breaks down into its two oppositional poles. <sup>18</sup> However, Derrida does not draw the only conclusion permitted by his argument up to this point, namely, that the practice-oriented categories describe an interplay between identity and difference that cannot become the object of explicit knowledge. Instead, he makes the much stronger claim that these categories cannot satisfy their own requirement, namely, to provide an explanation of a unity of linguistic meanings that is pervaded by change. Derrida could have legitimately established only that the relationship between different uses of one sign is always underdetermined in comparison to an ideal of totalizing knowledge: it can never be completely translated into the unity of its reflective conceptualization. In contrast, it is ungrounded to make the farther-reaching conclusion that Derrida draws, that the unity of meaning thus necessarily always (and in every form) escapes us.

Thus the reach of Derrida's critique of Austin, in the form in which it is carried out, is limited: the critically intended comment that the meaning of signs cannot become the object of an explicit knowledge merely reproduces the fact that semiotic iterability is incompatible with traditional conceptions of consciousness. And this criticism remains harmless unless it can be shown that the test that Derrida subjects our language applications to not only confronts them with external criteria, but is an expression of a self-defining characteristic of them. Derrida, however, seeks to provide more than an indirect, nostalgically tinged confirmation of the rupture between the paradigm of (linguistic) competence and that of (theoretical) knowledge; he wants to show that the only sensible categories available to us that could explain the difference-pervaded identity of meaning—that is, those categories that describe this identity as one that is practically determined—fail to meet the legitimate and necessary requirement that this unity be the object of knowledge. To ground such a claim, an analysis of the functioning of signs is required that demonstrates that the critical test that Derrida carries out on Austin's categories is not a mere repetition of traditional philosophical concepts, but in fact makes recourse to our understanding of the way we use signs. This is the only way that Derrida can allay the suspicion that his critique of Austin's practice-oriented concepts reveals that he is merely the last believer in the "intellectualist legend." <sup>19</sup>

For this reason, in grounding his thesis that the identity of signs is incompatible with their simultaneous difference, Derrida moves to a second level. This level aims to explain the statement that the identity of signs is their presence in explicit knowledge, not in a theory-immanent sense, but as a characteristic of the very way in which we use signs. To accomplish this, however, the deconstructive description of our use of signs must be more than the merely critical analysis of alternative approaches in the philosophy of language—it must be directly accessible. This is the purpose behind Derrida's definition of signs as supplements: we understand every iterative sign in its use only as a supplement because we have always related it to a conception of its recognizable identity whose conditions, in its simultaneous alteration, it is unable to satisfy. Signs are supplements only in relation to a requirement that defines their identity, but which cannot be satisfied in the changing iteration of sign use, a requirement which is thus in this sense absolute. That they are supplements in relation to this requirement means that the requirement of the recognizable identity of signs can only be raised for each of its various uses so that it will, at the same time, not be met. Every instance of a sign is merely an unsatisfactory replacement of the identity made claim to. Insofar as these instances demand our explicit knowledge of the presence of meaning, every sign can be described as giving force to a moment of absence in the pure presence it makes claim to:

One cannot determine the center and exhaust totalization because the sign which replaces the center, which supplements it, taking the center's place in its absence—this sign is added, occurs as a surplus, as a *supplement*. The movement of signification adds something, which results in the fact that there is always more, but this addition is a floating one because it comes to perform a vicarious function, to supplement a lack on the part of the signified. <sup>20</sup>

If Derrida is right in thus claiming that iterative signs have always been just supplements of their own requirement of the explicitly known identity of meaning, then deconstruction has been successful in its reformulation of the aesthetics of negativity. If, more precisely, every sign can only be defined adequately as a supplement, then each is marked by a negativity that equals that of the aesthetic: every feature of its functioning—in its iterative use—is at the same time a feature of its failure, to satisfy its claim to explicitly known identity. Thus the sign *qua* supplement is characterized by an irremediable deficit; <sup>21</sup> every attempt to realize its identity makes use of that instance which undermines it. Sign use is a process of ruinous self- subversion.

Is this description, however, of the functioning of signs as supplements, resistant to the objections against Derrida entailed by a transposition of the basic concepts in the philosophy of language from those of knowledge to those of competence? Can this description defend itself against the accusation that it "is fed by the same rationalistic metaphysics that it claims to be destroying"? <sup>22</sup> Derrida's assertion that in our successful use and understanding of language we have to make absolute claims to the recognizability of the self-identity of the signs used is not as self-evident as he assumes. Let us then go



one step further in Derrida's argument; it leads to the concept of "différance" with which Derrida explains the concept of supplementarity:

Thus understood, what is supplementary is in reality *différance*, the operation of differing which at one and the same time both fissures and retards presence, submitting it simultaneously to primordial division and delay.... The supplementary difference vicariously stands in for presence due to its primordial self-deficiency. <sup>23</sup>

The concept of *différance* thus initially describes nothing more than the movement of supplementarity. As has been seen, it is defined by the infinite gulf between an absolute claim to presence and the unceasing but necessarily inadequate efforts to satisfy this claim. It has also been seen that—in terms of discussions in the theory of meaning—this description is not compelling: it is not obvious why—in using and understanding language—we *have to* make absolute claims to the reflective assembly of the identity or meaning of signs in consciousness. The concept of *différance*, though, not only doubles and reproduces this problem; by anchoring the semantic explanation of the absolute claim to presence in an explanation based on justification (grounding) and validity theory, it moreover points in the direction of its resolution. Derrida introduces the concept of *différance* in the context of Husserl's program of foundations grounding (*Letztbegründung*) and defines it there as "an interminable *delaying* (*différance*) of the theoretical foundation." <sup>24</sup> This conceptual definition indicates that the contents of supplementarity or *différance*, which were initially explained in terms of a theory of meaning, cannot be understood solely in terms of this theory. The justification for this definition is first found in Derrida in its connection to *différance* as the logic of the grounds of validity. Therefore, the thesis that Derrida's *différance* concept implies both in the context of a theory of meaning and in a theory of validity reads as follows: we can only understand why, in our linguistic practice, we have to claim that the identity of meanings must be subverted in a logic of *différance*, if we can determine (which is also impossible) the source of our ability to provide foundations for the validity of language use.

Derrida's assumption that the understanding of the meaning of iterative signs necessarily involves a claim to explicit knowledge of the presence of meaning finds its complement and justification in his further claim that ultimate, foundational claims have to be made for explicitly known meanings. The concept of presence links these two levels: according to it, we have to conceive of the meaning of a sign as the object of a transparent knowledge, because this is the only way to satisfy the strong grounding demands to which our use of signs is subject. The demand for presence in an explicit knowledge, which in Derrida's view we have to raise in our use of language, cannot be explained purely in terms of a theory of meaning. For if this demand is correctly understood, it is a demand for a knowledge that is entirely transparent and grounded. As such, its justification is found in Derrida's analysis of the logic of grounding, that is in his analysis of the grounding of validity claims. It is necessary to take a closer look at this analysis; in doing so, we will refer to the views of Adorno once again.

Derrida comments on the foundational nature of the concept of *différance* in his critique and development of programs in transcendental philosophy. *Grammatology* situates itself in a thoroughly ambivalent relationship to transcendental inquiry. On the one hand, it adheres to its efforts to determine ultimate foundational principles; concepts such as "arche-trace," "arche-writing," and so on bear witness to this proximity: "The parenthesizing of regions of experience or of the totality of natural experience must discover a field of transcendental experience." <sup>25</sup> On the other hand, it sees itself as "ultratranscendental," because it falls neither on the side of transcendental inquiry, as does naive objectivism, nor on the side of transcendental critique, as does phenomenology; instead it places itself beyond either. Thus *Grammatology* is committed to the undertaking of transcendental philosophy only insofar as it is possible as its radicalization and self-enlightenment. In the context of a rather casual reference to phenomenology in Bataille, Derrida sketches this relation in the following manner:

The transgression of meaning is not an access to the indeterminate *identity* of a nonmeaning, nor is it an access to the possibility of *maintaining* nonmeaning. Rather, we would have to speak of an *epoche* of the epoch of meaning, of a—written—putting between brackets that suspends the epoch of meaning: the opposite of a phenomenological *epoche*,

for the latter is carried out *in the name and in sight of* meaning. Phenomenological *epoche* is a reduction that pushes us back toward meaning. Sovereign transgression is a reduction of this reduction: not a reduction to meaning, but a reduction of meaning. <sup>26</sup>

Grammatological analysis is a metatheory of the transcendental, to which it takes on a twofold relation: it establishes both the necessity of transcendental analysis and the necessity of its failure. It can be called "ultratranscendental" since it drives a wedge between the starting point of transcendental inquiry and its traditional foundational achievement: grammatological theory shares the aim of transcendental philosophy, but disputes any success at this undertaking that can be given nonaporetic formulation.

If the strategic position of the grammatological or deconstructive approach is defined in relation to the systematic contents of transcendental philosophy, then a question arises regarding the implications for a theory of foundation. What assumption about the strength and structure of validity claims or about the way they can be adequately grounded underlies the thesis that they can only be adequately reconstructed in terms of a transcendental-philosophical analysis? Derrida understands the transcendental-philosophical enterprise as the specifically modern form of foundations grounding (*Letzbegründung*); this points to the antirealist or antiskeptical character of the way in which (transcendental-) philosophical inquiry after Husserl breaks with the historicism of the philosophy of *Weltanschauung*, and, after Derrida, breaks with structuralism:

*Now the Idea or the project which animates and unifies every determined historical structure, every Weltanschauung, is finite: on the basis of the structural description of a vision of the world one can account for everything except the infinite opening to truth, that is, philosophy. Moreover, it is always something like an opening which will frustrate the structuralist project. What I can never understand, in a structure, is that by means of which it is not closed.* <sup>27</sup>

*This infinite opening to truth that philosophy antirealistically asserts considers the transcendental-philosophical conception of ultimate grounding to be the conception of prephilosophical validity claims per se. It is no longer, as in pre-Critical metaphysics, the theoretical realization of an ultimate foundation that can only be accomplished philosophically, but rather the theoretical elucidation of the grounding of foundations assumed in validity claims themselves.* <sup>28</sup> *In contrast to pre-Critical philosophies of origin, transcendental-philosophical theories of the grounding of foundations no longer claim to put that which is prephilosophically only inadequately grounded on secure footing; what they claim instead is to demonstrate how that which is only seemingly relatively grounded, if properly understood, counts as valid even in a prephilosophical sense only because it has always taken part in the process of foundations grounding. Transcendental-philosophical theories of foundations grounding do not differ from the relativistic analyses of customary grounding procedures by outdoing them; rather, they differ by generating a different picture of their successful functioning. According to this picture, grounding procedures are not successful because they are in keeping with culturally and historically relative standards of grounding but because they satisfy necessary and formally characterizable conditions of any successful grounding. All of the apparently different grounding procedures produce validity only insofar as they take part in this "ideal" structure. Philosophical analysis directs its attention to the latter: it reconstructs the formal conditions that every successful, validity-guaranteeing grounding satisfies and justifies them in their completely universal character on the basis of an instantiation that is self-evident in itself.* <sup>29</sup>

Derrida discusses the transcendental-philosophical theory of foundations grounding in two steps, in keeping with his twofold relation to it: he seeks to show both the necessity and the impossibility of grounding foundations. The two aspects overlap in Derrida's use of the Idea in the Kantian sense to describe the "ideality" investigated by transcendental philosophy. "Ideality" is the status of formally definable, universal structures that have to be satisfied for a claim to be valid. Derrida's argument seeks to prove that validity-guaranteeing ideality cannot be conceived as anything other than the "Idea in the Kantian sense": "There is no *ideality* without there being an Idea in the Kantian sense at work, opening up the possibility of something indefinite, the infinity of a stipulated progression or the infinity of permissible repetitions." <sup>30</sup> In characterizing the status of the validity-

guaranteeing ideality as an Idea in the Kantian sense, the structure of *différance* reproduces itself initially as an interminable process of delay: "As the ideal is always thought by Husserl in the form of an Idea in the Kantian sense, [it] . . . is infinitely *deferred*... This *différance* is the difference between ideality and nonideality." <sup>31</sup> At the same time, though, the use of the Kantian concept of the Idea to define the status of that which *qua* *différance* is interminably delayed not only reproduces the structure of *différance*, but also asserts that this concept is necessary. By becoming an Idea, ideality is always delayed and in this way opens the movement of *différance*, while at the same time claiming to be unavoidable: the Idea arises out of a deeply rooted "requirement of reason." <sup>32</sup>

By explaining in this way the concept of *différance*, that is, the interminable delay of validity-guaranteeing ideality, in terms of its status as a Kantian Idea, Derrida thus claims not only to show that the requirements of *différance* cannot be satisfied, but also that *différance* is indispensable. Before we ask how this claim is grounded, though, we must first decide whether Derrida's use of the concept of the Idea is appropriate. The first thing that strikes one in this context is that Derrida does not introduce the Kantian concept of the Idea to the transcendental-philosophical programs of foundations grounding from without; they use it themselves in order to characterize the status of the ideal structure that guarantees validity. Derrida showed this to be the case for Husserl and, in an analogous procedure, Wellmer demonstrated this for Apel. <sup>33</sup> They follow the argumentative problems of various conceptions of foundations grounding until they, in recourse to the Kantian concept of the regulative Idea, have confessed and capitulate. The transcendental-philosophical theory of foundations grounding get caught up in problems that force it—in order to maintain its foundations-grounding claim—to bring into play the Kantian concept of the Idea, precisely that conception with which it admits to its own failure. Thus we first need to explain why Derrida and Wellmer are right in claiming that by using the Kantian concept of the Idea, foundations-grounding theory capitulates to its own problems. To what extent does it contradict the transcendental-philosophical program of foundations grounding to characterize the ideal structure (that it identifies as an uncircumventable condition of possibility for the satisfaction of validity claims) as a regulative principle or regulative Idea?

Kantian architectonics provides an answer to this question. In terms of its structure, the designation of the ideal validity-guaranteeing structure as an Idea moves it to the forefront of this structure and in so doing jeopardizes the grounding program of this structure. Regulative ideas or principles are, as transcendental principles of reason, of completely secondary status in terms of the analysis of the concept of validity. They do not serve—as they do once they are moved to a deeper or more prominent level in Husserl or Apel—the explication of the concept of the validity of individual cognitions; instead the regulative ideas in Kant *presuppose* the insight into the necessary condition of the validity of cognitions (provided in the *Transcendental Analytic*): "Reason presupposes the knowledge which is obtained by the understanding (*Verstand*) and which stands in immediate relation to experience, and seeks for the unity of this knowledge in accordance with ideas which go far beyond all possible experience." <sup>34</sup> The proper use of reason, as "a merely subordinate faculty," consists solely in its generation of regulative ideas—which are "perhaps more petition than postulate" <sup>35</sup>—ideas that produce a "general context" for the valid cognitions of understanding. Now if Husserl and Apel already term the ideal condition of possible validity a regulative principle, they are faced with a dilemma they can only free themselves from by abandoning their theoretical program: If it is genuinely possible to ground foundations, then that ideal structure, which was just described not as a constitutive principle but a regulative one, must be not merely a "problem for ... hypothetical use" but an "objective reality." <sup>36</sup> This, though, is nothing but a return to metaphysical thinking. <sup>37</sup> If, conversely, the ideal conditions of all possible validity are in fact only regulative ideas, this subverts the claim to foundations grounding itself. The conception of ideality as Idea shifts the reality of those conditions—without whose existence validity is impossible—into the infinite; in this way, this conception capitulates in the face of the claim (of the Kantian deduction) that our rules of grounding are not simply contingent regularities, but are instead absolutely general in character. In their use of the Kantian concept of the Idea, foundations-grounding theories entrust regulative principles with the task of explaining the concept of possible validity. By so doing, they must either proceed metaphysically by making these principles the objects of a possible cognition of reason, or they must relinquish the concept of nonconventional validity itself.

In the dilemma faced by foundations-grounding theories—characterizing the instance that is supposed to guarantee the grounds of foundations as a merely regulative principle—the concept of validity itself dissolves. In their use of the Kantian concept of the Idea, they claim on the one hand that we have to relate the validity of our cognitions to the grounds of their foundations in accordance with an ideal structure; on the other hand, they admit that this ideal structure may be understood only as a regulative principle rather than a constitutive one. By making these dual claims, they thus make—unless they want to argue in a crudely metaphysically manner—every grounding into an interminable task: they end up in an "interminable delay (différance) of grounding" (Derrida). For a theory of the possible satisfaction of validity claims, this means capitulation in the face of irresolvable difficulties.

In this way, the critique of foundations-grounding theory is a precise realization of the program of deconstruction. The latter sought to show that the condition of possibility of the functioning of discourses is at the same time the condition of their impossibility. And this in fact applies to the way in which the conception of foundations grounding presents this functioning: by allowing this functioning only in an ideal structure that is interminably delayed *qua* regulative idea, it at the same time divests it of its secure foundation. Why, however, can the grounding structure according to foundations-grounding theory (as it itself admits in its use of the concept of the regulative idea) only be conceived as an "unachievable ideal" (Derrida)? That the transcendental-philosophical conceptions considered here are taken to be committed to the aporetic use of the Kantian concept of the Idea is only the symptom of a problem that, as such, has yet to be clarified. Derrida's critique of Husserl and Wellmer's critique of Apel provide parallel answers to the question of the objective reason for conceiving of ideal structure as a regulative idea: each shows that the respective definitions of ideal structure in Husserl and Apel contradict uncircumventable conditions of the only medium in which they could be realized, namely, that of language. That which transcendental-philosophical theories of foundations grounding term an "obstacle" to ideal structure and seek to clear away proves to be for this critique as "originary (*gleichursprünglich*) as [its] conditions of possibility." <sup>38</sup> Derrida's analysis of the semantic theory of the *Logical Investigations* comes to a comparable result: the Husserlian marginalization of the dimension of the sign (*Anzeichen*) (and thus of, among other things, intersubjectivity) in the constitution of ideality at the same time divests this ideality of the condition of its possibility. Put another way: if Husserlian ideality, which is ultimately the structure of self-consciousness, is conceived in its only sensible form, namely as a linguistic structure, then it contradicts itself, since it centrally defines the functioning of language by means of moments that are not congruent with the ideal conditions of validity that the theory distinguishes.

Derrida's concept of deconstruction, developed with a critique of foundations-grounding theories as its guiding thread, thus shows that an unobliterated gap opens up between these theories' validity-guaranteeing ideal structure and the only medium in which it can be sensibly realized, namely, language. This gap opens because the functioning of language requires moments that cannot be completely transposed into formal and universal conditions of validity. It is apparent, however, that the same unanswerable problem for Derrida's explication in terms of a theory of meaning arises once again for this result of his explication of grounding or validity: is the irresolvable contradiction between the ideality of reason and the nonidealizable practice of language—which interminably delays the grounding of reason and is subject to the law of *différance*—a structural characteristic of the practice of our reason and language rather than only a problem of certain (traditional) theories?

In the next section I will discuss the definitive "yes" with which Derrida responds to this question of the understanding of reason as an unachievable ideal and thus of *différance*. Before doing so, though, we should perhaps briefly call to mind the interpretation that this entails for the concept of deconstruction. At the beginning of this chapter, I introduced the deconstructive approach as that approach which translates aesthetic negativity into the medium of nonaesthetic discourses by retracing its self-subversive logic (the interminable delay, the *différance*, of the achievements that constitute these discourses). I then distinguished between two possible groundings of this thesis, on the level of the meaning-theoretical explication, based on the iterability of signs: one that proceeds from the moment of difference and a second that starts with the moment of identity. Whereas no

convincing arguments can be found in Derrida for the first account, consideration of the second grounding leads from the meaning-theoretical to the grounding-theoretical explanation of *différance*. On the level of the grounding-theoretical explanation of *différance*, the possibility of a twofold justification repeats itself, which had already defined the meaning-theoretical level. And once again, only the second of two alternatives appears promising.

The two possibilities can be thought of as two conceptions of the gap between the ideality of reason and the features of linguistic practices that balk at any attempt at idealization. According to the first conception of their deconstructive generalization, regardless of how we might interpret the moment of idealization of reason and reason without any idealization that distinguishes it from mere certainties is inconceivable—it stands in contradiction to the sole medium of its reality, language. This first grounding of the deconstructive generalization of the movement of delay would thus have to show that language is fundamentally averse to reason (*vernunftfern*). The attempt to substantiate such an argument is found in Derrida only in the form of the explanation, already considered above, of the meaning-theoretical contents of *différance* in terms of the moment of difference in the repetition of signs: If its moment of difference actually were, as Derrida assumes, a break with any identity of sign, no matter how it is conceived, then linguistic practice itself would also be a subversion of understandable meaning and thus, at the same time, of reason: it would be a phenomenon averse to reason. Since this argument—at least in the version presented in Derrida—is not convincing as shown above, this first grounding of deconstruction in terms of the distance separating language from reason can not be made plausible, at least not solely on the basis of Derrida's arguments.

[39](#)

The second conception of the deconstructive generalization of the interminable delay discussed in foundations-grounding theory starts with the converse: regardless of how we might interpret the nonidealizable moment of language—and a language without such moments, for example, of certainty, is inconceivable—it stands in contradiction to the necessarily strong claims of reason to idealizability. This second variant would thus have to show that reason is detached from language in a principled way. It proceeds from the grounding of the meaning-theoretical version of *différance* in terms of the claim to identity in the repetition of signs, an identity compared to which, according to Derrida, all uses of signs are only supplementary or deficient replacements: the ideality of reason has the status of a regulative Idea in the Kantian sense. How can one ground this deconstructive thesis that reason, in a principled sense, surpasses language—the medium of its realization—and confronts it with absolute demands?

## 6.2 The Negative Dialectics of Reason

The previous discussion of the Derridean program ended with the question of whether the absolute ideality of reason, initially demonstrated only in terms of foundations-grounding theories, can claim a relevance for our practice that goes beyond such theories. Derrida claims such generalizability by adding a positive element to the critical one he developed in his deconstruction of foundations grounding. Deconstructive theory does not merely show that infinite claims cannot be satisfied, but also seeks to give an account of why they must be raised. In their use of the Idea in the Kantian sense in a context where a constitutive principle is required, foundations-grounding theories admit to a paradox that Derrida considers in a fundamental sense unavoidable. Accordingly, for Derrida, to raise validity claims is also to produce them in the face of an unattainable foundations grounding: "This meaning of truth, or of the pretension to truth, is the requirement of an absolute, infinite omnitemporality and universality, without limits of any kind. The Idea of truth, that is the Idea of philosophy or of science, is an infinite Idea, an Idea in the Kantian sense." [40](#) Derrida's agreement with foundations-grounding theories in their unintentionally self-destructive consequence involves their idea of an absolute truth insofar as this idea is unsatisfiable. According to Derrida, foundations-grounding theories are right in showing us—against their own intentions—that the claim to truth (or validity) is a "problem to which there is no solution." [41](#) Derrida disputes both the possibility of constructing a consistent theory of foundations grounding without violating the laws of the medium of reason, language, as well as the possibility of simply ridding ourselves of such theories.

Derrida neither opts with Wittgenstein (and the directions in philosophical thinking arising from his work) in dismissing foundations-grounding theories as nostalgic rudiments, nor, on the other hand, does he believe that the claim to foundations grounding can be satisfied. Instead, his reflections move toward a conception that stands at cross-purposes to both of these alternatives: instead of dismissing questions of foundations grounding, he insists they are unavoidable, and instead of maintaining the possibility of consistently satisfying the aims of such efforts, he emphasizes that such satisfaction is in principle unattainable.

In his polemic reception of the role assumed by the Kantian Idea in the argumentation of transcendental-philosophical theories of foundations grounding, Derrida produces an image of an irresolvable (and, in this sense, once again Kantian) dialectic of grounding concepts, and more generally of reason. Reason is dialectical because it is subject to a "logic of illusion" that Kant terms "natural and unavoidable."<sup>42</sup> In this view, we raise, on the one hand, infinitely many validity claims for our practices and discourses, whose satisfiability we have to assume if we hope to talk of validity in any suitable way. On the other hand, in the breakdown of validity claims that aim to ground foundations, we always repeat the experience that the assumption of their satisfiability is a "transcendental illusion," with the grounding of foundations itself being an interminable, unrealizable Idea. We are permitted to term this paradoxical constellation in Derrida dialectical in the Kantian sense, because it is irresolvable. Thus the image of reason as dialectical stands in sharp contradistinction to the consequences that a Wittgensteinian tradition draws from the failure of foundations-grounding theories.<sup>43</sup> The Wittgensteinian tradition interprets the necessity of their failure as an insight into the senselessness not just of the attempt to satisfy their claims, but of raising these claims in the first place. In contrast, the thesis of the dialectic of reason characterizes the "mistake" of raising unsatisfiable validity claims as an "illusion transcendente" (Derrida):

The transcendental dialectic will therefore content itself with exposing the illusion [*Schein*] of transcendent judgments, and at the same time taking precautions that we be not deceived by it. That the illusion should, like logical illusion, actually disappear and cease to be an illusion, is something which transcendental dialectic can never be in a position to achieve. For here we have to do with a *natural* and inevitable *illusion*, which rests on subjective principles, and foists them upon us as objective; whereas logical dialectic in its exposure of deceptive inferences has to do merely with an error in the following out of principles, or with an illusion artificially created in imitation of such inferences.<sup>44</sup>

Reason is dialectical because it makes mistakes it cannot learn from.

But why can it not learn from them? Why must it always fall prey to the same errors? In answering this question about the basis of the dialectic, Kant only speaks vaguely of its "deeply concealed sources in human reason."<sup>45</sup> This is not the case in Derrida, who provides a clear answer to this question; however, this gain in clarity is paid for with a loss in accuracy. He follows the transcendental-philosophical theories in their shifting the regulative Idea to a "deeper level," that is, in the way they link it to the concept of validity: any raising of validity claims implies the raising of claims to foundations grounding. Derrida thus grounds the necessity of the dialectic of reason by adopting the *petitio principii* of foundations-grounding theories. This principle claims that the meaning of all our claims to validity and grounding is defined solely by the possibility of grounding foundations. Wittgenstein showed paradigmatically, however, that this assumption does not hold by pointing to the certainty in every language-based validity claim, a certainty that neither needs nor can be given grounding. Does our exploration into the foundation-theoretical contents of the concept of *différance* in this way come upon the same dilemma that beset its meaning-theoretical contents? Does Derrida's entire effort to conceive of an unsublatable negativity in the concept of *différance* analogous to that of aesthetics fail because he must presume a claim to "presence," a claim whose necessity cannot be convincingly shown?

What is yet to be found is an account of why the raising of validity claims must be interpreted as the raising of foundations-grounding claims. Put in another way: to what extent is such a moment of unconditionality built into linguistically embodied reason, a moment that—as is the regulative Idea—is practically defined by its unsatisfiability in the

grounding procedure? Derrida is unable to answer this question. Whenever he even poses it, he avoids any real answer, providing only circular or traditionalist figures of thought. It is circular to ground foundations-grounding claims in terms of the experience of the failure of all grounding procedures, which, for its part, can only be characterized as a failure if one presupposes what it is supposed to ground, namely foundations-grounding claims. "By the movement of its derivation the emancipation of the sign constitutes retroactively the desire of presence"<sup>46</sup>—even though "derivation" already would have to be described as an undermining of the desire for presence, if it is to play the role of a retroactive grounding of the same desire for presence presupposed by Derrida's description of derivation. Conversely, it is traditionalistic to ground the equation of validity claims with foundations-grounding claims in terms of the continued relevance of metaphysical thinking. This traditionalism finds its expression in Derrida's historico-philosophical speculations according to which our philosophizing takes place at the margins of metaphysics. It is Derrida's thesis that, though we are able to close metaphysics as an epoch, we cannot end metaphysics *per se*; for in truth metaphysics has always already begun, and thus we can also never entirely leave it.<sup>47</sup> Metaphysics thus gains the status of an unavoidable consequence, whose expectations no one can completely evade. If it turns out, however, that the postmetaphysical future—whose very watchword ("exergue") is, in Derrida's view, not yet anticipatable—has, in truth, already begun to take shape, then Derrida's reading of the situation becomes a merely private dilemma. His philosophy may be located at the margins of metaphysics; this does not imply, though, that philosophy *per se* must remain so positioned.

Thus consideration of Derrida's concept of *différance*, which is supposed to translate the negativity of the aesthetic into the nonaesthetic, ends with an open question. A deconstructive view of discourses, which, as nonaesthetic cognition, points out the irresolvable negative dialectic of these discourses and discovers within them the subversive occurrence that we experience aesthetically, can only be grounded if discursive practice is marked by unconditional claims (to explicit knowledge of meaning, to absolute grounding). Can it in fact be shown that the desire for presence is built into the basic structures of discourses in such a way that they are subject to an irresolvable, negative dialectic? Since Derrida furnishes us with no answer to this question, I will now repose the question in terms of Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*. *Before doing so, we should first make certain that we are clear about the exact nature of the problem that Adorno and Derrida share.*

*Adorno terms the "Copernican turn," to whose development his critique of metaphysics and ontology is supposed to contribute, as "the turn to the Idea."<sup>48</sup> The Kantian concept of the Idea is used by Adorno to mark the status of "nonidentical" objects beyond the "identificatory" thinking approved of by traditional metaphysics: "[F]or once an object would be the nonidentical, freed from its subjective spell and to be grasped through its self-critique—if it is already at all and not instead that which Kant sketched with his concept of the Idea."<sup>49</sup> Adorno then explains the concept of the Idea initially in exactly the same way as Derrida, by relating it to the concept of the infinite or boundless: "Traditional philosophy thinks of itself as possessing an infinite object, and in that belief it becomes a finite, conclusive philosophy. A changed philosophy would have to cancel that claim, to cease persuading others and itself that it has the infinite at its disposal. Instead, if it were delicately understood, the changed philosophy itself would be infinite in the sense of scorning solidification in a body of enumerable theorems."<sup>50</sup> By marking the nonidentical as Idea, and the latter as infinite or boundless, Adorno secures the status of the Idea—as does Derrida—against two alternatives at the same time: first against relativist positions, which Adorno criticizes (as Derrida criticizes structuralism) by pointing to the unconditioned or infinite moment in discourses that take up the nonidentical.<sup>51</sup> But of greater importance is his second disassociation, in which he distinguishes his position from a metaphysical alternative. Adorno also calls the conflation of constitutive and regulative principles, of the conditioned and the unconditioned, the finite and the infinite, metaphysical. What he above all criticizes post-Kantian metaphysics for is thus that it once again distorts the "ontological need,"<sup>52</sup> which it rightly summons in opposition to Kant's restriction of valid cognition, by its "pre-Critical" assertion that it is possible to satisfy this need here and now: "The will not to accept evasions, the will to learn essential things from philosophy, is deformed by answers tailored to the [ontological] need, by answers that lie in twilight between the legitimate duty to provide bread, not stones, and the illegitimate conviction that there must be bread because it must be."<sup>53</sup>*

Adorno criticizes positions as metaphysical. They corrupt their own idea of irreducible infinitude through the "meager finiteness of their conceptual machinery" <sup>54</sup> which they project on phenomena in a distorting fashion—their own idea of irreducible infinitude. In trying to recreate this latter idea along the path started by the Kantian concept of the Idea, he gives force to the Enlightenment motif of mystical thought in the form of a critique of metaphysics: the strict separation of infinite claims from the limited powers of the concept. <sup>55</sup> In this way, Adorno brings the critical potential of the Idea in the Kantian sense, which strictly distinguishes between finite and infinite, into play against foundations grounding: the uncircumventable validity of the Kantian conception of the Idea as regulative principle or as infinite claim is grounded in the fact that conceptual cognition is structurally limited. Contrary to the conceptual resources of metaphysics, the "need" to which these concepts respond is always an infinite, unsatisfiable claim. Admittedly, by adopting the Critical distinction in metaphysics between infinite claims and finite resources, Adorno takes on the problem left unresolved in Derrida: the critical introduction of the concept of the Idea in the metaphysical conceptions of foundations grounding involves the danger of no longer questioning the necessity of the infinite claim directed at the Idea itself. Once we designate the objects of metaphysics as regulative Ideas, something that remained unclear in Kant seems to become clearer: why, outside of metaphysics, infinite claims still need to be raised at all, claims which coerce a reason which has merely finite means at its disposal into an irresolvable dialectic. If, with Derrida and Adorno, we only view the regulative Idea in the context in which it was first placed only as a corrective, that is, in the context of the formation of metaphysical theory, then the question of its origin seems to have already been answered: it is the claim to foundations grounding that moves metaphysical theories, and therefore underlies their thesis that any valid claim of cognition, properly understood, is a claim to the grounding of its foundations.

Thus the Derridean problem repeats itself in Adorno in a twofold sense: first, Adorno agrees that reason is defined by an irresolvable, negative dialectic, which stretches between reason's infinite claims and its finite means or resources. Moreover, though, the problematic nature of grounding this thesis is also repeated in Adorno: as in Derrida, who accounts for the infinite claims of reason in terms of the impossibility of ending the metaphysical tradition, in Adorno as well one finds a traditionalism that is not further justified. It is manifested in Adorno's efforts to interpret the validity and grounding claims of every cognition as themselves infinite claims: "For what we mean in the judgment is always the entity due to be judged *beyond* the particular that is included in the judgment"—thus as the nonidentical or Idea—"otherwise, according to its own intention, the judgment would be superfluous." <sup>56</sup> The thesis that "[n]onidentity is the secret *telos* of identification.... [i]t is the part that can be salvaged" <sup>57</sup> is either trivial or requires rather extensive grounding. Adorno, like Derrida, does not seem able to furnish such grounding without resorting to a traditionally idealistic analysis of the meaning of validity claims. For this reason, Adorno interprets such grounding either as the claim "not to put up with the *membra disiecta* of knowledge but to achieve the absolute," or as utopian anticipations, as "forms of unconscious social action against suffering." <sup>58</sup>

Adorno does more, however, than just repeat the problem of justifying the infinite, structurally unsatisfiable claims of reason, a problem we have already witnessed in Derrida. He also points to a direction in which this problem can be resolved, in which a grounding for the necessity of raising infinite claims—and thereby for the irresolvable dialectic of reason—can be found. Here, Adorno's reflections on the limits of a purely immanent critique become relevant. If the necessity of infinite claims is grounded solely on the basis of an immanent critique and construal of conceptual (finite) cognition, then it has to project onto its objects that which it seeks to read out of them, namely, infinite claims. Immanent critique can never show more than the inappropriateness of finite means for satisfying infinite ends. The necessity of infinite claims themselves escapes such a critique, though. We have just seen that Adorno not infrequently attempts to close this gap in the grounding of the immanent critique of reason by means of metaphysical biases. Nevertheless, Adorno is in no way unclear about this gap, and thus about the structural limitations of the process of immanent critique:

It requires an impetus from without.... Such an impetus is heresy to philosophy and most of all to Hegelian philosophy. Immanent critique has its limit in that ultimately the law of



the immanent context is identical to the blindness that would need to be gotten beyond. But this moment, alone the truly qualitative leap, occurs only in the enactment of that immanent dialectic that possesses the quality of transcending itself, not completely dissimilar to the transition from the Platonic dialectic to the Ideas existing in themselves (*ansichseiend*). <sup>59</sup>

The irresolvably negative dialectic of conceptual cognition, the necessity of its wanting something it cannot attain, is thus connected to an external perspective because only from such a perspective does the transcendent "wanting," the infinite claim of reason, show itself to be unavoidable. The moment that comes from without, without which the negative dialectic can neither be recognized nor justified, is then designated by Adorno in his emphatic concept of experience. <sup>60</sup>

Since both the shape and possibility of this experience in Adorno is anything but clear, I would like to start by sketching the topography of this arrangement of an immanent dialectic and an experience that comes from without. I see two versions of this topography in Adorno: the first interprets the "external" or "outside" character of this experience as coming from "above" conceptual cognition, and the second views it as coming from "below" this cognition. The first version grounds the negative dialectic teleologically, the second genealogically. The teleological grounding of the negative dialectic grounds the infinite claim of conceptual cognition by introducing the experience from without as the transrational satisfaction of this claim. Under the impression of the possibility of satisfying its infinite claims beyond itself, reason develops infinite claims to a positive "extension of the ratio," <sup>61</sup> which it is not capable of satisfying given its linguistic constitution. It is through these claims that reason becomes irresolvably dialectical. In contrast, the genealogical grounding of the negative dialectic grounds the infinite claim of conceptual cognition by introducing the experience from without as that of a prerational problem. Under the impression of this experience as one of a problem or crisis, reason necessarily develops infinite claims that are supposed to remedy the problem, but which also structurally overburden the powers of reason.

The teleological grounding of the negative dialectic on the basis of an experience of the transrational satisfaction of absolute claims is the "official" version of Adornian theory, which is reflected in a series of prominent remarks. Adorno suggests various conceptions for grasping the structure of a transrational satisfaction of absolute validity and knowledge claims. These divide into two groups. The first group of suggestions describes the experience as a utopia beyond the existing forms of cognition, the second describes it as an "atopia" beyond all cognition. The first version gets caught up in the aporia of being located beyond the existing forms of discursive knowledge but at the same time having to be in a comprehensible continuity with these forms. If, however, the cognitive utopia is now (partially) realizable, it can neither ground Adorno's thesis of the negative dialectic of all reason—for there would be no contradiction between its claims and means—nor can it escape the criticism that it reproduces metaphysical forms of thinking—for it would be conceived as the positive satisfaction of infinite claims. <sup>62</sup> If, conversely, Adorno relinquishes all continuity between the utopian mode of cognition and the existing one, then the utopian mode loses its claim to being a mode of cognition: it becomes an atopia beyond all cognition. Adorno's suggested formulations of the latter, however, come up against just as grave problems as do his version of cognitive utopia. One alternative is to describe it as theological experience; he can then conceive of it as the fulfillment of infinite claims and, in this sense, as the instantiation of the teleological grounding of a radically negative dialectic. This also means, though, that he no longer explains its structure nor its possibility. Another alternative is to make reference to an indisputably possible and already existing experience, such as aesthetic experience, to explain a transrational experience of fulfillment; but then he can no longer show why it can rightly be conceptualized as the experience of the fulfillment of the infinite claims of reason. <sup>63</sup>

The teleological grounding of the negative dialectic seeks to explain the infinite claims of reason in terms of the confrontation with an experience of the transrational fulfillment of absolute claims. On its basis, reason itself raises the demand, which it cannot satisfy, to incorporate this transrational experience within itself and to reiterate it. Adorno's efforts to conceive of an experience that encounters, beyond reason, the infinite claims of reason as satisfied, are either metaphysical (utopian cognition), empty (atopian cognition), or

theological or heteronomous (projections onto aesthetic experience). The teleological variant of the grounding of the negative dialectic of reason from without is thus unconvincing. For this reason, in the following chapter, I will turn to the elucidation of the genealogical grounding of the negative dialectic. In so doing, I will show how it resolves the grounding problem. The genealogical grounding posed irresolvable problems for Derrida, given his interpretation of the sovereign validity of aesthetic negativity as a kind of translation. Adorno's genealogical approach will be seen to succeed due to its constitutive rather than heteronomous recourse to the aesthetic experience of negativity.

# 7

## The Aesthetic Experience of Crisis

### 7.1 A Genealogical Critique of Reason

The reflections of the previous chapter on the grounding of a nonaesthetic approach to discourses that brings the structure of aesthetic negativity to bear on the nonaesthetic took the following course: The brief glance at Rorty showed that the only perspective on our discourses that can be described as taking aesthetic negativity seriously is the one that, in analogy to the aesthetic experience of negativity, discovers a self-subversive process in the functioning of discourses; the deconstructive approach has to emerge as the internal consequence of the aporias of the constructive approach. The discussion of Derrida's implementation of this program has shown, though, that the constructive approach need not get caught up in aporias at all. Rather, the assertion of an interminable deferral of understanding and grounding, both in Derrida and Adorno, is itself premised on the presumption of just such infinite claims. Both of them admit that their reconstruction of a self-subversion of discourses is constitutively based on subjecting them, from without but inescapably, to absolute claims. Until now, however, it has remained unclear how one can ground the necessity of raising such claims. If the historico-philosophical reflections in Derrida on the position of current philosophizing are discounted as unconvincing, there remain in Adorno only two variants for justifying the negative dialectic. The first, teleological in character, breaks down in the face of problems involving the explanation of a transrational experience. This failure of the teleological attempt at grounding can be seen in exemplary fashion in terms of its consequences for aesthetic theory. Adorno subjects aesthetic experience to the teleological model by describing this experience as the satisfaction of absolute claims. At the same time, *Negative Dialectics* recognizes that precisely these contents are not a quality of aesthetic experience as such, but are ascribed to it in its philosophical reconstruction. The "nonsemblance" (*Scheinlose*) that is promised in aesthetic semblance does not devolve on aesthetic experience but only on a philosophical "redemption of semblance."<sup>1</sup> Insofar as this redemption, however, as a philosophical one, can only happen in the conceptual medium *from which* aesthetic semblance is supposed to be saved, it once again loses precisely that transrational position from which, and only from which, it could contribute to the teleological grounding of the negative dialectic. Thus the teleological grounding is both aporetic and heteronomous: aporetic because the claimed transrational experience can only provide a ground if it is conceptually reformulated; heteronomous because it subordinates aesthetic experience to a function that is incompatible with its internal logic.

The genealogical version of the grounding of the negative dialectic solves both of the problems of its teleological counterpart at once: it achieves a nonaporetic explanation of the necessity of raising infinite claims and, in doing so, refers to the aesthetic experience of negativity without circumscribing its autonomous logic. The type of genealogical grounding that *Negative Dialectics* produces, though, still seeks to make its argument without reference to aesthetic experience. By taking up this model of genealogical grounding, we can retrace its steps to that point at which it is compelled to make recourse to the aesthetic experience of negativity in order to consistently carry out its line of argument.

A grounding of the negative dialectic can be termed "genealogical" if it focuses its attention not on the satisfaction of infinite claims, but on their genesis.<sup>2</sup> Here, Adorno argues that the raising of infinite claims is grounded in a fundamental experience of a crisis of reason. Our unrealizable desire for "presence"—for the explicit knowledge of the meaning of signs and of the grounds of the foundations of their use—arises from those problems of sign use and grounding that structurally overburden our customary practices. These problems do not consist in raising doubts about any given particular; they follow, instead, a logic of total disintegration (*Zerfall*).<sup>3</sup> Whereas we respond with particular grounding claims if any particular feature of our experience becomes problematic, in reaction to a total disintegration infinite claims emerge, which overburden our capacity for grounding. Unlike its teleological counterpart, the genealogical approach does not ask for positive instances of the possible satisfaction of such claims, but rather the structure of the crisis experience in response to which such claims must be raised. Adorno's thesis of a "disintegration of

language" that characterizes the situation of modernity—and Derrida's related talk of an irresolvable "crisis of reason" <sup>4</sup>—provide the grounds for their objection to the common view that we can abandon the necessary illusion of the satisfiability of absolute claims.

Adorno analyzes this crisis experience in the *"Meditations on Metaphysics"* with which he concludes *Negative Dialectics*. *Their core is formed by the tension and argumentative link between a "condition with nothing left to hold on to," <sup>5</sup> on the one hand, and the raising of infinite claims, on the other. The metaphysical impulse emerges, in its legitimate shape, only in the moment of the dissolution of the tropes of its satisfaction, "at the time of its fall." <sup>6</sup> The dissolution of metaphysics releases a critical, differentiating power: it distinguishes between the infinite claim of metaphysical thought and its false assertions of its satisfiability, assertions with which metaphysics betrays its own claim for the sake of the finite:*

*Willy-nilly, [metaphysics] played the part of a conceptual mediator between the unconditional spirit and the finite one; this is what intermittently kept making theology its enemy. Although dialectics allows us to think the absolute, the absolute as transmitted by dialectics remains in bondage to conditioned thinking. If Hegel's absolute was a secularization of the deity, it was still the deity's secularization; even as the totality of mind and spirit, that absolute remained chained to its finite human model. <sup>7</sup>*

*Only in the failure of the satisfaction of absolute claims asserted by metaphysics is the moment of truth of metaphysics unveiled, which consists in the raising of these claims as irresolvable claims.*

*Adorno's redemption of metaphysics precisely in its failure which grounds its infinite claim not despite, but because of its unsatisfiability—places the conventional relationship between metaphysics and modernity on its head. The modern occurrence of its fall does not mean a complete departure from the metaphysical, but quite the opposite, unveils and grounds for the first time its truth contents. For precisely the modern experience that makes metaphysics obsolete as the positive satisfaction of infinite claims, is "in solidarity" ( Adorno) with metaphysics, because it, for the first time, grounds the interminable claims of metaphysics in terms of the internally irresolvable crisis of finite cognition. In this way, metaphysics was forced to wait until the moment of its irreversible breakdown to legitimate itself for the first time. Modernity, which Adorno describes as the crisis of a finite reason put out on its own, is simultaneously the end and the grounding of metaphysics.*

The crisis experience, which is supposed to ground the raising of absolute claims, does not follow the logic of an immanent critique of finite discourses. As such it runs into precisely those grounding problems that it is supposed to solve: it would have to presuppose just those infinite claims whose genesis it was supposed to make comprehensible. In this way, it requires independent evidence for the crisis experience that grounds metaphysical claims. Adorno sees such evidence in the form of the modern experience of death. Thus the modern experience of death is characterized by its refusal to "integrate itself ... into culture." For this reason, it is the experience of the "cadaver," about which the christological "transfiguration into 'remains'" still deceives us. <sup>8</sup> As such, the modern experience of death stands in strict opposition to the various "metaphysics of death." <sup>9</sup> By the metaphysics of death, Adorno means not only theological interpretations of death, which found their final philosophical formulation in the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, <sup>10</sup> but any effort to give a meaning to death. *Adorno's critique applies to the idea that there could be any practice or viewpoint in our life that would be able to assimilate the experience of death in an uncompromised way: "No man who deals candidly and freely with the objects has a life sufficient to accomplish what every man's life potentially contains; life and death cleave asunder. The reflections that give death a meaning are as helpless as the tautological ones." <sup>11</sup>*

*Adorno views the experience of death, which is no longer sublated by any metaphysics, as an instance that robs our normal practices and discourses of the condition of possibility. To respond appropriately to this experience would be to fall into a "permanent state of panic," <sup>12</sup> which would make participation in those practices and discourses impossible—and this includes the assumption of the only standpoint from which validity claims can be raised and satisfied. In the face of the experience of death, our practices and discourses lose*

their validity. For this experience places us outside these practices and discourses, hindering us from assuming their internal or participant perspective. And it is only from this perspective that one can speak of that which is valid. In this sense, the experience of death is, at the same time, the experience of a crisis that our discourses and practices cannot resolve: this experience confronts them with an experience from without, an experience that comes from outside of them, that must shatter them, as finite processes, to pieces. To avoid the "constant state of panic" triggered by the experience of death and to "rebel" ( Adorno) against it thus is to encourage the resistance against this experience of radical devaluation and subversion. According to Adorno, we fight against the permanent state of panic by crediting our actions, speech, and grounding, all of which threaten to collapse in this panic, with the power to object, to resist. The only way to end the state of panic produced by the experience of death is to dispute its rights: by raising a validity claim for that which is affected by it, our finite discourses and practices, a validity claim that is no longer relative to a given perspective (that of the participant), but which is nonrelative, absolute. It does not follow, though, that just because these absolute claims are necessary that they can also be satisfied: "the unimaginable character of death does not protect thought from the unreliability of all metaphysical experience." <sup>13</sup>

Let us step back and consider this argument of Adorno's. It is first imperative to restrict one's view solely to the structure of the argument. Insofar as Adorno's *"Meditations on Metaphysics"* can be read as a treatise on the situation of metaphysics in modernity—and naturally it is not only that, but also a reflection on the situation of life and thought after Auschwitz—it is not decisive which particular empirical phenomenon is identified with the crisis experience it sketches. Adorno himself not infrequently equates it with the experience of death and suffering. <sup>14</sup> At the same time, though, he also asks whether "a condition with nothing left to hold on to would not be the only condition worthy of men." <sup>15</sup> Thus, for the question in terms of which I approach Adorno's *"Meditations on Metaphysics"* here, that is, the question of the structure of the genealogical grounding of the negative dialectic, it is not crucial which empirical experiences Adorno makes reference to. What is decisive, though, is whether one can give any kind of plausible explanation of the idea of an experience whose confrontation throws discourses into a crisis that they cannot overcome.

By being confronted by such a crisis experience from without, we are forced to raise infinite claims for our discourses which, however, they can never satisfy. With the conception of an experience of disintegration, which plunges the reason of finite discourses into a crisis that it can only overcome at the cost of an irresolvable dialectic, Adorno avoids the traditionalism of the appeal to infinite claims to knowledge and validity. The *"Meditations on Metaphysics"* promise a genealogy of these claims, which makes their necessity clear without claiming that they can be satisfied. For in Adorno the "desire for presence" is the unavoidable consequence of an experience of radical disintegration. Against death, we *have to* set the unfulfillable desire for "permanence" (meant as the Kantian Idea of immortality). <sup>16</sup> *Negative Dialectics* thus justifies metaphysics on the basis of its failure: as its positive fulfillments of absolute claims lose their credibility, that experience emerges from which metaphysics gains its imperishable right. This, though, in no way entails a posthumous justification for metaphysical systems. For at the same time they betray what has been their origin, by proclaiming the positive "existence of that which has been hopelessly done without." <sup>17</sup> Nor does the genealogical justification of metaphysical need refer to metaphysical systems of thought, whose negative-dialectical logic of disintegration, in contrast, first sets free this justificatory process. Rather, genealogy designates the prerational experience that leads to a crisis of the finite reason of our discourses, a crisis which can only be averted in the necessary illusion of satisfied absolute claims.

If this crisis experience is taken as the ground for those infinite claims whose satisfaction overburdens our discourses, then this experience must appear as more than just privately evident; it must appear necessary. Adorno attempts to prove its necessity by linking it to the experience of a phenomenon whose generality and unavoidability is beyond all doubt, the experience of death. Can, however, experiences such as that of death rightly be described as unmasterable crisis experiences for our discourses? Do they contain a perspective against which our discourses can only defend themselves by raising claims that are structurally impossible to satisfy? It appears to me—in contradiction to Adorno's

arguments in the "*Meditations on Metaphysics*"—that these questions have to be answered in the negative. This rejection of Adorno's genealogical grounding of the absolute, irresolvable claims of traditional metaphysics on the basis of the modern form of the experience of death applies to the status that Adorno gives to this experience and not to the genealogical argument itself. It applies to the way it is raised to an instance of a "total"<sup>18</sup> negativity. In other words, it applies to the construal of the experience of death as a problem that requires for its solution viewing that for which it is a problem as if it were absolutely grounded or at least could be.

When examined more closely, the experiences of disintegration cited by Adorno (as nonaesthetic experiences) are crushed between two alternatives. On one hand, they may be a problem *for* our discourses, a negation of their achievements, their capabilities. In this case, however, they would be at the same time partial and would not compel us to raise unsatisfiable claims to secure and ground reason. On the other hand, they may imply a *total* disintegration of our discourses. In this case, they would in truth not be an experience of the crisis of our discourses, a negation of their achievements, but the loss of their relevance. A few brief remarks on this twofold thesis may be in order.

First, any nonaesthetic experience of disintegration that is a problem for our discourses, a negation of their achievements, is partial. This follows alone from the understanding-based, potentially discursive character of all experience. Even the experience of the crisis of the achievements of our discourses is, as nonaesthetically enacted, understanding-based. The negation that can be experienced on the basis of understanding is restricted, though: it is a negation only of something determinate within the horizon of those that are not affected by it. Negations of this type are only sensible on the basis of a distinction between those objects at which they are rightly directed and those to which they do not apply. Thus they are always motivated operations and, in this way, meaningful processes that can be represented in meaningful speech, that is, in discourses. An experience that is a negation of discourses can, as an understandable and meaningful experience, only be that of a limited negation: of a negation that only involves something within our discourses and not their overall order or structure, since this negation is itself structurally and discursively representable. It follows from this that Adorno's idea of a nonaesthetic experience of the irresolvable crisis threatening our discourses, of the disintegration or negation of all their achievements, does not make sense: if this idea is taken to be valid for our discourses, it itself has to be discursively representable and, accordingly, can only be partial in character.

Second, any (nonaesthetic) experience of disintegration that is total is not a negation of the achievements of our discourses, but only a loss of their relevance for those experiencing them. This describes the plausible aspect of Adorno's argument that the experience of death represents a problem that cannot be mastered within the common interpretations of self and world found in our everyday life. This experience does not, however, negate our discourses; it just makes their achievements and groundings, their certainties and assumptions, meaningless. From the perspective of death, we are no longer those who participate and are interested in discourses. To consider this a problem for our discourses, though, presupposes that discourses must be able to ground not only their validity, but also their relevance for all nonparticipants. Making this assumption to ground the crises character of the experience of death once again presupposes the absolute claims whose unavoidability is supposed to be grounded on the basis of the experience of death. In rejecting the interpretation of the experience of death as "total negativity," it is therefore shown that one has to distinguish between two different regards in which the experience of death can be described as an irresolvable problem, as crisis, and as disintegration: it does not follow from the fact that it is a problem for our everyday interpretations of self and world that it also represents an irresolvable problem for the common grounding of the functioning and validity of our discourses and practices; the fact that it calls for metaphysics in the sense of an integrating context of meaning for human life does not imply that it also calls for metaphysics in the sense of an explication of the meaning of validity and of validity claims as absolute.<sup>19</sup> The experience of death is a problem for our participation in discourses, not for our discourses themselves.

The genealogical grounding of absolute claims and moreover of the negative, irresolvable dialectic of reason can only be convincing if it identifies a problem that can be designated

as "total negativity"—only if it plunges our discourses and practices into a crisis *from the outside*, but nonetheless a crisis *for them*. If this function proves too much for Adorno's candidate for it, the experience of death, it only seems reasonable to take up a remark of Adorno's that has been cited but not yet followed up: that the problem that can rightly be designated as total negativity involves an experience specifically modern in character.

## 7.2 The Danger of the Aesthetic

It has not yet proved possible to provide a reasonable explanation of the crisis experience outlined in *Negative Dialectics* that allegedly grounds the necessity of raising interminable claims and, in this way, grounds the negative, irresolvable dialectic of our discourses. This appears to make obsolete the whole enterprise of bringing aesthetic negativity to bear on our nonaesthetic approaches to our discourses. We have seen in terms of Derrida's concept of deconstruction how a first effort at ascribing to our discourses an unsublatable negativity that is based solely on immanent cognition of their functioning has failed. In truth, the supposedly immanently grounded cognition must presuppose certain defining features of our discourses, features for which it could not be demonstrated that they capture our understanding of our discourses. These defining features make infinite or absolute claims about our discourses, claims that cannot be satisfied and thus result in the failure, the disintegration of our discourses. A nonaesthetic cognition of negativity that is analogous to the aesthetic experience of negativity can thus only be conceived of if it can be shown that such infinite claims *must* be raised. The plausible notion of Adorno's "*Meditations on Metaphysics*" states in this context that the necessity of absolute claims can only be grounded on the experience of the crisis of our discourses. This crisis, though, cannot be produced immanently; the discourses are only plunged into crisis if they are confronted by problems that come from the outside, but nonetheless must be faced, problems they must respond to in order to secure their validity, with the (hybrid) postulate to satisfy infinite claims with their (in truth) merely finite powers or capabilities. This argument, which can be found in *Negative Dialectics* as a solution to the aporias of deconstruction, breaks down because Adorno's description of the experience of crisis as one of total negativity is unconvincing. Such an experience is impossible for us—within the medium of our nonaesthetic experiences. If it is to be possible as an experience, it has to submit to the laws that hold for all nonaesthetic experiences of negation. These laws state that, in the medium of nonaesthetic experience, we can only enact those operations of negation that possess the structure of a determinate negation. Against this background, the conception of a crisis experience as one of total negativity faces a dilemma: it claims there is content to an experience that is unexperienceable according to the laws of our experience; it asserts a total negation of our discourses while claiming that this total negation is discursively representable.

Thus the dilemma just sketched for a genealogical grounding of the negative dialectic only applies to Adorno's candidate for the prerational experience of crisis, the (postmetaphysical) experience of death. A way out of this difficulty is foreseeable, though, if we take a closer look at the question of which program breaks down in the face of which problem.

Even the previously considered version of the genealogical justification of the negative dialectic is defined by the methodological point of departure that was posited by Derrida's concept of deconstruction: the sovereign postulate of the aesthetic experience of negativity is to be understood as *implying* a nonaesthetically valid cognition of the negativity of all our discourses. According to this concept, that structure of negativity which I have initially described as defining aesthetic experience is also supposed to be the content of a nonaesthetic cognition. We have seen that modeling the nonaesthetic along the lines of the aesthetic experience of negativity cannot be consistently maintained; instead, it makes unjustified assumptions about the absolute character of knowledge and validity claims. Adorno's genealogical grounding of the necessity of raising infinite claims seeks to resolve the problem left open in Derrida by conceiving of the cognition of negativity that is analogous to the aesthetic experience of negativity in two stages, relating it to a presupposed experience of crisis. Here too, though, Adorno initially fails to move beyond the limits of the Derridean approach: he once again attempts to ground the cognition of negativity, which is *analogous to* the aesthetic experience of negativity,

*independently* of this latter mode of experience. For just as Derrida would like to translate the aesthetic experience of negativity into a nonaesthetic cognition, Adorno initially seeks to identify a nonaesthetic type of experience, modeled after the negativity that can only be experienced aesthetically. That which can be stringently experienced aesthetically, however, disappears in the effort to reproduce it in the nonaesthetic realm.

This conclusion applies only to the first of the two ways in which the postulate of sovereignty, outlined in chapter 5, is interpreted to grant nonaesthetic validity to aesthetically experienced negativity, namely, as a reproduction or translation, which is at the basis of Derrida's conception. In contrast, the second interpretation avoids this mistake from the outset: it designates the nonaesthetic cognition of negativity as the *consequence* of the aesthetic experience of negativity. According to this reading, that the aesthetic experience of negativity attains nonaesthetic validity means that this experience produces a nonaesthetic insight into the way our discourses function, an insight that is only possible in recourse to aesthetic experience. By describing the nonaesthetic insight into the negativity of discourses as *postaesthetic*, this interpretation underscores the fact that this insight is only possible in its dependence on aesthetic experience. If nonaesthetic cognition of negativity is conceived as *postaesthetic*, such cognition cannot be grounded solely on its own. In this sense, the aesthetic experience of negativity is logically prior to the nonaesthetic cognition of negativity, since the grounding of the latter is premised on the former. Aesthetic experience plays the role of an argument in the grounding of the nonaesthetic, as the *postaesthetic* cognition of negativity.

This second way of interpreting the claim of sovereignty—of granting nonaesthetic validity to aesthetic negativity—can be tested on the strength of its ability to resolve the problems encountered by the first interpretation. The question here is: can this second interpretation overcome the grounding problems of the first? Can the dilemma of the genealogical justification of the nonaesthetic cognition of negativity in Adorno be solved by recourse to the argumentative status of the aesthetic experience of negativity in grounding this nonaesthetic cognition of negativity? To be able to answer this question, the interpretation of sovereignty has to be addressed to precisely that point at which previous explanatory efforts reached an impasse: the genealogical grounding of the negative dialectic on a crisis experience in the face of which we raise infinite claims for our discourses that are unsatisfiable within these discourses. Thus it is not the case that the entire course of previous arguments for grounding a deconstructive or negative-dialectical cognition has been entirely flawed. Instead, it has brought us to a point at which an altered conception of the status of this cognition and its relation to the aesthetic experience of negativity may be able to produce a solution. This conception consists in the insight that the aesthetic experience of negativity assumes that part of the argument where we find, in Adorno's attempted genealogy of infinite claims, a nonaesthetic experience of crisis. We have seen that, in structural terms, no nonaesthetic experience of negativity is able to meet the demands of this role. The aesthetic experience of negativity, however, is not overburdened by this role. The error in the genealogical grounding of the negative dialectic in Adorno's "*Meditations on Metaphysics*" thus lies in the effort to conceive of an experience in nonaesthetic terms that in truth can only be conceived aesthetically. The restoration of its aesthetic character, on the other hand, safeguards Adorno's line of argument from such difficulties. Only with its help does the deconstructive or negative-dialectical approach to the "logic of disintegration" of our discourses attain a satisfactory grounding, because it reveals the genealogy of infinite claims: they arise out of the confrontation of our discourses with the aesthetic experience of negativity.

The question now is: to what extent is it possible and legitimate to place the aesthetic subversion of automatic understanding at this point in Adorno's argument of the genealogy of infinite claims, formerly held by the experience of crisis? This question requires a two-part answer: it has to show that the aesthetic experience of negativity will not suffer the fate of the nonaesthetic experience of disintegration, which plays a corresponding role in Adorno's "*Meditations on Metaphysics*": that is, that it will not be crushed by the dilemma of either being an only partial experience of negativity, or being a total experience which then is unable to negate our discourses. Let us now take up each of these alternatives in turn, to see whether they also apply to the aesthetic experience of negativity.



The argument, directed against the idea of a nonaesthetic total negativity, was that only a partial negation can be experienced in an understanding-based manner. This argument does not hold for aesthetic negativity. The first part of this book was devoted to showing this. Part I demonstrated in detail to what extent aesthetic experience is a processual negation of our discursively articulated pattern of understanding, which itself can no longer be encompassed by understanding and represented discursively. What is relevant here are the consequences that this internal description of aesthetic experience has for the question of the possibility of a total negation of our discourses. Such a total negation is impossible nonaesthetically, since it claims to oppose all discursively articulated meaning while being itself discursively representable: it promises an experiential content that cannot be experienced in terms of nonaesthetic understanding. This aporia does not arise for aesthetic experience: for the latter brings about the subversion of understanding-based experience itself. In the process of aesthetic experience, we enact a processual negation of all forms of (understanding-based) experience.

Even if it does not hold for aesthetic experience—as it does for its nonaesthetic counterpart—that its description as *total* negativity is self-contradictory, it still remains to be shown that, in contrast to the experience of death described by Adorno, it is truly a total *negation* of our discourses: the experience of a crisis that applies not only to the relevance of discourses but to their successful functioning. This raises the question whether the aesthetic experience of negativity assumes not only in structural terms the heritage of the nonaesthetically impossible idea of total negativity but is also able to do so in functional terms. The function of the experience of total negativity in Adorno's genealogy of the negative dialectic is that of a crisis of nonaesthetic discourses. In such an experience, nonaesthetic discourses are confronted with contents that impose themselves completely unavoidably, but at the same time place demands on those contents that they can in no way fulfill. Can the aesthetic experience of negativity, in spite of its particularity, meet the demands of this role and in this way help Adorno's genealogy of the negative dialectic achieve a nonaporetic formulation?

Whether the aesthetic experience of negativity can be conceived of as a crisis of nonaesthetic discourses can only be answered if we take a more careful look at the logic of the shift to an aesthetic attitude. The logic of this shift in attitude is determined by the changes that we subject something to by viewing it aesthetically. Duchamp's experiments have been exemplary in showing that the transfiguration of a nonaesthetic object into an aesthetic object does not necessarily leave any material traces, but instead, must solely be defined—if its elucidation is not to be oriented around a normatively truncated concept of art—in terms of the change in its status.<sup>20</sup> The definition of aesthetic transfiguration through concepts that target the status of an object rather than its features at the same time implies that the place of these concepts is to be found in aesthetic experience rather than in aesthetic production. For an object to attain aesthetic status, it does not require a specific production process nor can it be compelled to emerge out of such a process; by contrast, aesthetic status and the process of aesthetic experience are mutually implied by one another.

In Part I, I described the basic features of the aesthetic transfiguration of an object that define the shift to an aesthetic attitude: by taking on the standpoint of the aesthetic experience of an object, we first of all view it—and in this way initiate aesthetic experience as a (semiotically structured) representation. This even holds for those objects which themselves have no representational function in their nonaesthetic use: someone who is unable to perceive them as representations—if only of the objects that they are—will also be unable to experience them aesthetically. The materials of aesthetic experience are thus not the features of things, but instead the identifications of elements of representations. Second, aesthetic experience subjects its own identifications of representations to a negative process that proves to have two defining features: on the one hand, it grants independence to the representational medium vis-à-vis the functions in which we use representations nonaesthetically. The use and understanding of representations, in a nonaesthetic sense, brings about certain achievements (processes of identification, recognition, coordination of action, and so on) which then become impossible for these representations to produce when our automatic understanding of them is interminably deferred in the process of aesthetic experience. On the other hand, the representational media that have gained autonomy vis-à-vis their functions attain a

distancing and thereby deictic moment. The shift to an aesthetic attitude transfigures identified representations of objects that at the same time escape their nonaesthetically presupposed contexts in their break from automatic understanding and its achievements. In this way, aesthetic transfiguration distances us from the contexts in which we have always stood in our nonaesthetic, understanding-based use of representations.

In the shift to an aesthetic attitude, objects, which nonaesthetically function as representations, become strange, become estranged: they break with the achievements that arise from their nonaesthetic use and open up a distanced view of the contexts in which they bring about these achievements. In aesthetic transfiguration, the process of representation "escapes" from the "dynasty" of signification.<sup>21</sup> That a previously functioning representation undermines itself in the shift to an aesthetic attitude and, in doing so, escapes understanding, obviously cannot yet ground the farther-reaching thesis that this escape represents a problem, let alone an unmanageable crisis *for* our nonaesthetic treatment of representations, which are indeed, nonaesthetically, automatically understood and functioning representations. Quite the contrary: the break with nonaesthetic understanding first occurs only in and for aesthetic experience. For it to be possible to call the aesthetic experience of negativity a crisis for our discourses, proof is required that the two attitudes, the aesthetic and the nonaesthetic, do not simply coexist. The appearance of mere coexistence (of being juxtaposed and unrelated perspectives) disappears if one discovers in the shift to an aesthetic attitude even the seed of its generalization to a "stance" (*Haltung*).

The immanent tendency to generalize the shift to an aesthetic attitude to an aesthetic stance makes up part of the core of the modern reflection on aesthetic experience. It finds its exemplary expression in Kierkegaard's disapproving description of the aesthetic sphere. He characterizes the latter in terms of an unconditioned "passion of destruction." An experience that holds everything in a completely undecided "indifference" in which everything "could be different," which "always lives in the moment, but always only in a certain relativity," which drives reflection up to the excess of desperation, which has incorporated death within itself, and which is always next to, over, or under itself, but never within itself, devaluates the world into a mere "masquerade," into an array of images.<sup>22</sup> Kierkegaard describes the shift to an aesthetic attitude not as an isolated procedure, but as the constitution and expression of a general stance against discourses, which lets their validity disintegrate. It places us in an "extramundial"<sup>23</sup> position, for which everything that can be referred to as a means of ensuring and grounding the achievements that we entrust to our representations in nonaesthetic dealings becomes continuously subject to a process of devaluation. Only when the aesthetic attitude becomes a general stance does it become an experience of crisis for our discourses.

In Kierkegaard's description, the shift to an aesthetic attitude appears from the very outset as the formative principle of a stance that no longer stands alongside our nonaesthetic dealings with representations and their achievements, but rather that denies the validity of these representations and achievements. How can this relation of denial be explained without providing the aesthetic experience of negativity, in an unmediated way, with nonaesthetic validity claims? How can aesthetic experience be generalized without heteronomy? That each individual shift to an aesthetic attitude does not signify any break with the validity of our nonaesthetic discourses, even *within* these discourses themselves, is based on the fact that aesthetically experienced negations are not able to claim any nonaesthetic validity. Instead, as autonomous negations, they are necessarily particular in validity: they are unable to dispute the validity of nonaesthetic discourses. At the same time, though, Kierkegaard's description of the aesthetic stance implies that, though each shift does not signify a break with the validity of our nonaesthetic discourses *within* these discourses themselves, it does signify a break *from* their validity; thus, though it cannot refute them, it can subvert them. Thus an aesthetic stance has an inherently validity-subverting impact only because it generalizes the negative potential of aesthetic transfiguration. In Kierkegaard, this generalization appears as that of the aesthetic experience into aestheticism: it is the approach of the still only aesthetically experiencing aesthete that destroys the validities of this world.

The individual who *only* experiences aesthetically, nonetheless still experiences *aesthetically*; in other words, she or he does not claim that her or his aesthetic

experiences have the status of nonaesthetically valid cognition. The aesthetic stance, even as an aestheticizing stance, is not an approach that thus devalues all nonaesthetic discourses by representing a true insight into their principles. This generalization of the aesthetic transfiguration and its negative potential is not a heteronomous translation of the aesthetically valid into something that is also nonaesthetically valid, retracting the autonomy of the latter; on the contrary, it is based on aesthetic experience as autonomous. The generalization of the shift to an aesthetic attitude that the aesthetic stance undertakes, which does not violate its own autonomy, is based on nothing other than the constant possibility—which no power can limit—of shifting to an aesthetic attitude. We can view and experience our discourses aesthetically at any time: "Therefore, everything seen—every object, that is, plus the process of looking at it—is a Duchamp" (John Cage). <sup>24</sup> Admittedly, the aesthetic experience of negativity is both ontogenetically and philogenetically a recent achievement and is, in this sense, both in terms of function and validity, secondary to the nonaesthetic way of viewing, of approaching, our discourses. Therefore, in a precise sense, it is parasitical: it is dependent on nonaesthetic dealings with representations—but only in order to be able to dispute the functioning validity of nonaesthetic representations: it cannot set itself in the position of a "truer" cognition of their functioning. At the same time, though, as a secondary experience, it is always a possible subversion of our discourses in which the latter are not disputed, but in which their validity disintegrates. The aesthetic stance is based solely on the fact that we *can*, at any time, subject our nonaesthetic dealings with representations to an aesthetic transfiguration, thereby making them the object of a way of viewing things that subverts their validity. The generalization of the shift to an aesthetic attitude to an aesthetic stance is a possibility that arises from the differentiated shape of the aesthetic itself: "generality" in the sense that the constant possibility of its use, that is, as "potential ubiquity," defines its autonomous shape. It is by means of this generality of aesthetic experience that it becomes a "danger" <sup>25</sup> for nonaesthetic discourses; as always possible, it subverts their validity for themselves, without, however, disputing them in themselves.

For this reason, the aesthetic experience of negativity is a *total* negation of our discourses. For, in contrast with the nonaesthetic experience of negativity, it does not only negate individual discourses, but their basic principle as well, the success of automatic understanding. At the same time, it is a total *negation* of our discourses. For, in contrast with the experience of death, it applies not just to the relevance, but to the successful functioning of our discourses. A stance that subverts our nonaesthetic discourses only forms because the negative event of aesthetic transfiguration is always possible. Aesthetic experience first becomes potentially ubiquitous through the process of its modern differentiation. For by becoming differentiated from other realms of experience, it becomes sovereign vis-à-vis any pre-given fixations in the time, place, opportunity, object, or agent of its use. Aesthetic experience can no longer be defined by external pre-givens or placements, but only by its processual logic; aesthetic experience changes from participation in a specific institution to the assumption of a specific perspective, a specific point of view. <sup>26</sup> In the constitution of its specifically modern character through its differentiation from other experiential realms, aesthetic experience is thus subject to a two-directional process: on the one hand, it becomes more specific—it is one experiential perspective among others and does not form a continuous context with the latter which would then point to an encompassing totality. On the other hand, it becomes more general—no longer predefined by an all-encompassing totality, as a point of view on experience it is freed from the specific placement it was subject to within this context of totality.

I have now given a more precise explication of the generality that differentiated aesthetic experience gains, to distinguish it from any heteronomous inflation of aesthetic experience into a cognition that makes universal claims. I have designated this generality its (potential) ubiquity. The aesthetic perspective, no longer obligated to *any particular* predefined location within a totality, is thus potentially at *every* location. It is only *potentially* at every location, however, since the generality that it attains as a specific experience, in the sense of its ubiquity, does not mean the usurpation of a new totality. That it is (only) potentially at every location thus means, at the same time, that it need not be at every location simultaneously, but rather must be able to be at any given location. In this sense, the potential ubiquity of aesthetic experience is an inherent, noncontingent possibility of the differentiated aesthetic: it defines the modern character of

aesthetic experience, which has gained its own autonomy and is distinct from other experiences.

The constant possibility of assuming a shift in attitude to aesthetic negativity is not an objection to the nonaesthetic use of signs and representations, but it does let the latter disintegrate: it confronts the nonaesthetic use of signs with a crisis that the latter cannot manage in terms of its own rules. For it negates their necessary premise, the automatic understandability of signs, in such a way that no argument can reestablish it. Anyone who—*vis-à-vis* uses of signs whose achievements rightly lay claim to validity in a nonaesthetic sense—makes use of the unlimitable possibility of the aesthetic experience of negativity cannot be called to order, no matter how compelling the argument. For the shift to an aesthetic attitude does not dispute the validity claims raised for specific uses of signs on the basis of arguments. Instead, it attains a point of view from which the precondition of the raising and disputing of validity claims, that is, the automatic understanding of signs, is interminably deferred. Thus the constantly possible shift in attitude to the aesthetic is an unmanageable danger for the nonaesthetic treatment of signs because it denies their achievements in such a way that even proof of their validity leaves this attitude unmoved. For even the proof of the rational legitimacy of validity claims still must presuppose precisely that which the change to an aesthetic point of view denies: that signs are automatically understandable. As such, there is no argument that can refute, that can turn back the shattering of nonaesthetical validity that occurs in the shift to the aesthetic attitude. Thus, though the aesthetically generated negation of nonaesthetic discourses is deaf to reason-based arguments on behalf of their validity, it is not irrational. It is not a problem resolvable by reason, since it involves the preconditions of the rationality (*Vernunft*) and validity of sign use, namely, our automatic understanding of signs.

The danger that the potentially ubiquitous aesthetic experience of negativity represents for our nonaesthetic discourses can be reformulated, in terms of its grounding of the conception of the negative dialectic, in relation to Wittgenstein's rejection of foundations grounding and of situations of total doubt which give rise to claims of its possibility: Wittgenstein disputes the necessity of strong or infinite grounding claims by pointing out that there is no sensibly explicable situation of a total experience of negativity to which they can be traced (genealogically). There are no grounding problems that could only be resolved by grounding foundations. Thus there is no need for attempts at the latter, let alone for successful groundings of foundations. It is against precisely this claim that Adorno's conception of a crisis experience is aimed, a conception that poses problems for our nonaesthetic discourses that, in turn, cannot be resolved discursively. Wittgenstein's argument against this conception resembles the argument that Descartes directed earlier against madness: we do not need to take seriously the experience of total disintegration, "which outstrips the human imagination" ( Adorno), as one which is in the position to dispute the successful functioning of sign uses. The claim is, then, that we can exclude the experience of disintegration that Adorno has in mind as "insanity" or "madness" <sup>27</sup> from the realm of objections which our practices and discourses must overcome by means of rationally securing of their validity. Consequently, Wittgenstein's argument for exclusion reads: the experience of total negativity (asserted by Adorno) can be philosophically excluded because it is not a problem for our discourses. For if it were a problem for our discourses and their functioning, it would have to be formulizable in a discourse. Any problems or negations that themselves can be discursively formulated, however, are never total, but only particular. The idea of a total doubt, of a total negation is a paradox because it could only be a negation for our discourses in a larger version that is itself discursive, and thus the original doubt could not have been total. Problems and doubts either can be formulated discursively (as determinate negations) or they are, such as the experience of death or madness, experiences of disintegration that cannot claim the status of a genuine problem or doubt.

The aesthetic experience of negativity cannot be accounted for in terms of either of these two alternatives. This is why the arguments against those positions traditionally cited as paradigms of total negativity, that of the skeptic and that of the madman, do not have any impact on the proper explication of aesthetic negativity. The latter is not, as are the skeptic's doubts, something that in truth has always been an oppositional feature within the discursive order itself. Nor is it, like the experience of disintegration of the madman, outside this discursive order. The total negativity with which aesthetic experience confronts

us can neither be included within the discursive order, as can skeptical objections, nor be excluded, as can madness. Whereas the aesthetic experience of negativity is an unmanageable danger for our nonaesthetic discourses, the pretensions of skepticism and madness to being an experience of total negation of our discourses are self-contradictory. Madness is not a problem for our discourses because at the moment of its realization it loses its status as a possible experience and thus its powers of criticism; conversely, skeptical objections are not the total negation of our discourses because, insofar as they are penetrating as arguments, they must be formulated within the framework of the very discursive order that they claim to negate. The accuracy of the Wittgensteinian refutation of an experience of total negativity as an irresolvable crisis for our discourses consists in this dilemma, in which it necessarily gets caught in its nonaesthetic form: it is powerless since it is either no longer experienceable or already integrated into that which it doubts.

This dilemma, however, does not arise for the aesthetic experience of negativity. The danger that aesthetic negativity represents for our reason is, like madness, never translatable into discourse, but always assails discourses from the outside. Nevertheless, it is, as is skepticism, a crisis that cannot be excluded as a private aberration, but is instead well grounded. It is only capable of realizing the two features of madness and skepticism in a nonaporetic fashion because it cannot be legitimately excluded like madness nor included like skepticism: contrary to madness, it is an experience of total negativity that is a problem for our discourses; contrary to skepticism, it is a wellgrounded total negation, which nonetheless does not proceed argumentatively. The potentially ubiquitous and thus dangerous aesthetic experience of negativity differs from both nonaesthetic variants of a total negativity, both of which are self-contradictory. It is only able to do so, because it annuls a premise on which the rejection of skepticism and madness is based. This premise is the equation of problems *for* our discourses with problems that can be formulated *within* our discourses. This does not apply to the aesthetic experience of negativity: because it is potentially ubiquitous as the total negation of the automatic understanding on which every discourse is premised, it generates problems for our discourses from the outside, but which cannot be reformulated and resolved within these discourses.

Given this foundation, it is now possible to understand the extent to which the aesthetic experience of negativity generates the necessary semblance of satisfiable, absolute claims within rational discourses. The parasitic possibility of assuming an aesthetic stance toward all signs that are used in an immanently valid way provides a genealogical answer to the still open question as to why reason has to assume a negative-dialectical form—without, however, as in Adorno and Derrida, sharing the false claim of foundations-grounding theories that even our customary claims to validity have to be explained as foundations-grounding claims. The rationality of nonaesthetic discourses is subject to a negative dialectic because it responds to the danger of the potentially ubiquitous aesthetic experience of negativity with the presumption of satisfying absolute claims to meaning and grounding. The danger of the aesthetic experience of negativity, which disintegrates the successful functioning of rational discourses, can only be warded off if our rational discourses place unsatisfiable demands on their own achievements, their own powers. By way of a conclusion, let us take a more careful look at this self-imposed burdening of rational discourses in terms of the image such discourses make of themselves under the impression of the aesthetic experience of negativity.

It has been seen that the rationality of nonaesthetic discourses is not in the position to solve the problems created by the ever possible shift to an aesthetic mode of experience. The subversion of the implicitly valid achievements of sign use that occurs in the interminable deferral of our automatic understanding of them cannot be refuted by any rational grounding. And this is the case because aesthetic subversion affixes to a moment that cannot be overcome by reflective assurances, but remains presupposed by all such certainties: the automatic understanding of signs.

On the other hand, it is also indisputable that in using signs nonaesthetically we in no way act as if there were a fundamentally irresolvable crisis in the achievements that we ascribe to such uses of these signs and that we presume to be valid. On the contrary, we act as if our understanding of them and their validity are stable. This "dogmatism"<sup>28</sup> can be grounded in two ways: it is based either on a reifying shielding of nonaesthetic sign use from the constant possibility of aesthetic experience or on a stabilization that surpasses

aesthetic experience. The reifying shielding of nonaesthetic discourses from their aesthetic negation disputes the potential ubiquity of the latter and thus fails to recognize the modern differentiation of modes of experience that it is based on. If the latter is recognized, on the other hand, the only way to ward off the danger of the aesthetic experience of negativity is to declare nonaesthetic sign use to be stable or resistant to such experience. The presumption of this resistance forms the metaphysics immanent to our nonaesthetic sign use. The core theorem of this metaphysics states that the nonaesthetic use of signs can claim a validity for its achievements that is not affected by aesthetic subversion. The metaphysics immanent to discursive practice limits the danger of aesthetic experience by claiming a dignity for the achievements of its reason that is left untouched by aesthetic negativity. It appeals to a higher law of reason that refutes aesthetic negations.

If we call to mind once more the starting point of the aesthetic transfiguration of signs that subverts their nonaesthetic use, it becomes clear that the only higher law of reason that can refute aesthetic negativity can itself no longer be a law based on reason. Aesthetic negativity starts with the semiotic constitution of representations and consists in the interminable deferral of automatic understanding, that is, in the release of the material that is signified from its semantic references. For this reason, rational discourse and its ability to ground validity and secure understanding can only be immunized against the constant possibility of aesthetic negativity by claiming that the understanding and use of signs presupposed within these discourses is not constituted in such a way that allows it to be aesthetically deferred and the materiality of its signs to be released. To claim this, though, is to assume that such sign use and understanding is not semiotically constituted. The immanent metaphysics of nonaesthetic discourses claims, for itself, in its flight from aesthetic negativity, a transsemiotic ideality. What Derrida's concept of deconstruction presupposed but could not ground can be explained in terms of an "aesthetic genealogy": to be able to turn away aesthetic subversion, nonaesthetic discourses must rely on a no longer semiotically represented reason, that is, a reason detached from language. If, in other words, the achievements of nonaesthetic discourses could be conceived of in terms of a reason detached from language, they would in fact be resistant to aesthetic negativity: as transsemiotic, they would escape aesthetic negativity, since the latter starts with the understanding of semiotically constituted representations, which it interminably defers.

It is not difficult to recognize in this idea of a linguistically detached reason the absolute or infinite claims that Derrida's concept of deconstruction and Adorno's concept of negative dialectic presuppose as necessary illusion. This completes the program of a genealogy of these claims, which *Negative Dialectics* developed (but failed to realize): we must raise absolute claims to ascribe to nonaesthetic discourses resistance against aesthetic disintegration. Thus the conception of a negative dialectic of reason—between infinite claims and finite achievements—can only be grounded as a *consequence* of the effect that aesthetic experience has on the immanent way that nonaesthetic discourses see themselves. If, however, the autonomous aesthetic experience of negativity is a necessary premise of the grounding of this conception, this also means that the aesthetically analogous negativity of deconstruction or of the negative dialectic cannot be conceived of as a translation of the aesthetic, but only as its impact. In the medium of nonaesthetic cognition, one can only speak of a constant self-subversion that defines aesthetic experience in terms of a point of view that first takes shape as a consequence of aesthetic experience: a point of view that, in response to the aesthetic experience of negativity, assumes absolute claims for nonaesthetic discourses which their achievements always fail to satisfy, that is, never fulfill. Only the potential ubiquity of the aesthetic experience of negativity contorts the calm face with which rational discourses turn toward their immanent analysis into the (negative-) dialectical grimace of a reason that is forced to make excessive demands of itself to repulse aesthetic negativity.

## 8

# Romantic and Modern Aesthetics: The Place of Art in the "Philosophical Discourse of Modernity"

The previous chapter pointed out the difference between Derrida's and Adorno's grounding of a nonaesthetic cognition of negativity that develops aesthetic negativity in its sovereignty. While Derrida seeks to ground the negative point of view internally in the concept of deconstruction, Adorno conceptualizes this negative perspective in two stages. Derrida's project of directly translating the aesthetic experience of negativity into the nonaesthetic cognition of negativity via the concept of text has to fail; it is impossible to ground an aesthetic experience of negativity directly translated into the nonaesthetic. This problem comes to a head in the question of the origin and ground of those infinite claims without which it is impossible to speak of total negativity in a nonaesthetic sense. It has been shown that the problem of grounding the nonaesthetic cognition of negativity can only be solved by abandoning Derrida's assumption. Instead of understanding this cognition as the translation of the aesthetic experience of negativity, as Derrida does, one has to explicate it by recourse to the aesthetic cognition that precedes it. The nonaesthetic cognition of negativity that grants validity to aesthetic negativity has to differ structurally from the latter. Thus, when correctly understood, Adorno's argument has two stages: it distinguishes between the aesthetic experience of negativity and the nonaesthetic cognition of negativity, but goes on to relate them to each other. Adorno subscribes, *as does Derrida*, to the claim of modern aesthetic experience to have achieved a sovereign form, that is, to have generated a negative point of view that is not restricted to the narrow realm of aesthetic validity. *Unlike Derrida*, though, Adorno avoids conceiving of the sovereignty of the aesthetic experience of negativity as its surpassing of its realm of validity, that is, he avoids translating it into a higher form of nonaesthetic cognition.

Adorno's two-stage argument for grounding the nonaesthetic cognition of negativity ascribes to the aesthetic experience of negativity a role only it can fulfill in the genealogy of the infinite claims of reason. Moreover, the genealogical grounding of the negative dialectic ascribes to the aesthetic experience of negativity a function dictated by the grounding requirements of nonaesthetic approaches. In this way, it appears to resemble the teleological model for grounding the negative dialectic (see section 2.2). The teleological grounding of the negative dialectic undertakes a functional determination of the aesthetic that has "heteronomous" features (Bubner): it attributes qualities to aesthetic experience that are not inherent to its autonomous enactment, but are instead derived from a philosophical systematization. Thus it would appear that the functional placement of the aesthetic undertaken by the genealogical grounding of the negative dialectic is also heteronomous. In this way, the same suspicion is reawakened at the end of our discussion of the sovereignty of the aesthetic as was aroused at its outset: that every question about the nonaesthetic effects of aesthetic experience must lead either to only contingent answers or to the subjection of this experience to heteronomous aims. I would like to respond to this suspicion by again distinguishing more precisely the function of the aesthetic in teleological grounding (the satisfaction of infinite claims) from its function in genealogical grounding (the generation of infinite claims). This distinction coincides with that between a "romantic" and a "modern" aesthetic. Light can be thrown on the latter distinction by clarifying the scope and limits of the critique that Jürgen Habermas directs against those authors of the "philosophical discourse of modernity" who, like Nietzsche, Bataille, and Adorno, gain their understanding of the modern form of reason primarily from reference to aesthetic experience.

The central place of art in the theoretical conceptions of modernity of the cited authors appears, as it is reflected in the Habermasian presentation and critique, to be a structural overburdening of its achievements. <sup>1</sup> According to this critique, they grant art a function that none of the individual value spheres differentiated by the rationalization process of modernity can fulfill: such theories ground the superior status they grant aesthetic experience by describing it as a vehicle for solving problems; but, as only *one* of the

differentiated value spheres, aesthetic experience is overburdened because such a solution can only be located in the relationship among these spheres. This criticism, that the granting of nonaesthetic validity to aesthetic experience can only be conceived of as the usurpation of problem-solving capabilities that are completely beyond its powers, obviously contradicts the role described above, which aesthetic experience plays in the argument in support of a genealogical grounding of the negative dialectic. A closer look at the premises of Habermas's objection thus provides us with the renewed opportunity to determine more precisely the genealogical function of the aesthetic.

First, which problems, in Habermas's view, does this revalued art claim to solve? In his reading, these are problems that arise as consequences of the modern condition that is generated by the rationalization of the differentiated value spheres and types of experience. These repercussions can be described in two ways, each of which biases the argument toward a specific solution. Habermas distinguishes between an illegitimate and a legitimate description. The illegitimate description of the problem interprets the modern rationalization of discourses as the formation of "subjective" reason that betrays the driving aim—liberation by way of enlightenment underlying the development of this process. It does so by transforming the aim into a new form of domination, representing a regression back into myth: "The accusation is aimed against a reason grounded in the principle of subjectivity. And it states that this reason denounces and undermines all unconcealed forms of suppression and exploitation, of degradation and alienation, only to set up in their place the unassailable domination of rationality."<sup>2</sup> On this view, modern rationalization generates a subjective reason that falls into an irresolvable crisis: of always creating the opposite—domination and myth—of what it originally intended—freedom and enlightenment. Modern rationalization results in an aporia of subjective reason that it is unable to resolve.

For Habermas, this description of the problems connected to modern rationalization and its differentiation of value spheres is illegitimate because it contains an unexamined generalization: its concept of subjective reason identifies the (capitalistically) distorted form of rationalization with its substance; by doing so, it illegitimately concludes that this distorted self-image is equatable with reason as such. Thus by reproducing this fetishized conflation by taking the distorted reality of rationalization to be its universal form, because it is its natural form, the illegitimate formulation of the repercussions of rationalization closes off all *ways out* of the distortion of rationalization *from within itself*. The illegitimately generalized formulation, which makes a general principle out of a problem that only arises for the distorted form of rationalization, makes it impossible to perceive any aspects of rationalization resistant to this distortion.

By contrast, Habermas reaches an adequate description of the problems of modern rationalization by rescinding, in two senses, the illegitimate generalization that defines the critique of instrumental reason in particular in Horkheimer and Adorno.<sup>3</sup> First, he rescinds the reduction of modern rationalization to its merely cognitive- instrumental realm; in this reduction, the theory of subjective reason simply reproduces rather than unmasks its capitalistically produced distortion. Against this, Habermas argues that subjective reason is only grasped *qua* distortion, if it—in the sense of the concept of reification—is understood as the "one-sided" realization of rationalization, rather than as a necessary consequence of rationalization itself.<sup>4</sup> "Subjective reason" (Horkheimer and Adorno) and "reification" (Lukács) thus represent two alternative models of false rationalization: whereas the model of subjective reason conceives generally of the false form of rationalization as the transformation of an Enlightenment-based rationalization into myth, the model of reification understands it, in a much more differentiated fashion, as the transformation of the ("rationalizing") increase of the autonomy of all value spheres into their subjection to only one of these spheres. Thus, according to the description provided by the thesis of reified enlightenment. Modern rationalization results in an aporia of subjective reason that it is unable to resolve.

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The second correction that Habermas seeks to make also involves the concept of reification that the first correction relied on to rectify the shortcomings of the concept of subjective reason. Habermas's transformation of the "critique of instrumental [reason] into a critique of functionalist reason" implies, at the same time, a reformulation of what was intended by the concept of reification: reification is now understood as the autonomization of differentiated subsystems vis-à-vis the lifeworld in which they are interlinked.<sup>5</sup> Even the concept of reification fails to adequately describe the repercussions of rationalization, since its explication of the encroachment of instrumental-cognitive rationalization on other dimensions represents a model that is both too broad and too narrow: it is too broad since it combines heterogeneous moments in its concept of the cognitive-instrumental; it includes not only success-oriented action and truth-oriented cognition, but also the autonomous differentiation of subsystems, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, differentiation retained in the process of the rationalization of the lifeworld. This renders the theorem of reification indifferent to the distinction between processes of autonomization of the differentiated that result in a "pathological deformation of the communicative infrastructure of the lifeworld,"<sup>6</sup> and those that do not because they have been retained within the rationalized lifeworld. The theorem of reification is also too narrow, however, since it describes the problematic repercussions of rationalizing differentiation exclusively as the colonization of the lifeworld by autonomized subsystems and overlooks the cultural impoverishment of this lifeworld by subsystems that have broken away from it.<sup>7</sup> Habermas's second correction reformulates the repercussions of a deformed rationalization no longer as solely the predominance of the cognitive-instrumental dimension of rationality, but also—in a sense that is both broader and narrower—as the uncontrolled autonomization of the differentiated vis-à-vis a lifeworld or an everyday practice that is "wholly reliant upon the interplay of cognitive with moral-practical and aesthetic-expressive elements."<sup>8</sup>

The legitimate and illegitimate descriptions of the problems generated by the rationalization processes of modernization also point to two different models of problem solving. The legitimate version of the problems of the distorted form of rationalization corrects its illegitimate counterpart, which describes these problems as aporias of reason itself. In doing so, the former version also corrects the image that reason, which is oriented around the paradigm of consciousness, creates of itself: that of reason located in the reflection of the monological subject on itself. <sup>9</sup> Irresolvable aporias, such as those asserted by the illegitimate version of the problems of modern rationalization, are only irresolvable given the premise of a constricted concept of reason. Conversely, the legitimate, nonaporetic description of the problem implies a perspective of an expanded conception of reason in which these problems can be resolved. It points to the fact that the time has come to replace the limited notion of subjective reason: as some of the last remaining followers of a subjective conception of reason, we are at the same time among the first adherents to a communicative conception of reason. This is why Habermas views the aporias of reason described in the illegitimate explications of the problems of modern rationalization—that is, of a reason trapped between subjectification and reification, between pretended generality and contingent finitude, between positing and dereliction (*Geworfenheit*) <sup>10</sup>—as a "symptom of exhaustion," though admittedly as a symptom of exhaustion that is restricted to *one* paradigm in the self-thematization of reason, so that a new paradigm announces itself in the destruction of the old: "The paradigm of the philosophy of consciousness is exhausted. If this is so, the symptoms of exhaustion should dissolve with the transition to the paradigm of mutual understanding." <sup>11</sup> Thus the new paradigm of reason as mutual understanding that emerges has to prove its capacity to solve the problems that, in terms of the concept of subjective reason, could only be formulated as aporias.

In contrast, the illegitimate description of the problem provided by the latter concept makes such a solution impossible. By understanding the aporias of a restricted conception of reason as those of any and all models of reason, it removes any possibility of being able to solve this problem within the medium of reason. The errors it commits in its description of the problem compel it to expect to find this solution in experiential models that themselves can no longer be elucidated in terms of reason. The false description of the problems of rationalization has to lead to "[i]nsufficiently complex incursions" <sup>12</sup> into the modern formation of experiential modes.

Habermas terms such insufficiently complex incursions "mythical" or "remythicizing." These are conceptions that describe the differentiated functioning of our practices and discourses as irredeemably aporetic according to the following line of reasoning: they subject this functioning to the laws of subjective reason, in order to then postulate, beyond the contradiction-scarred form of this reason, a form of experience that, as transrational, is not subject to its problems. In this way, the concept of remythicization does not refer to the style and substance of the asserted alternatives to subjective reason, but to their structure and function. Remythicizing conceptions "dedifferentiate" because they do not expect the solution to the problems of a subjectively conceived reason to emerge from a different description of the modern interplay of its forms, but from "basic concepts that render consistent with one another categories that are no longer compatible in the modern understanding of the world." <sup>13</sup> In Habermas's view, one of these remythicizing conceptions is represented by the overly high reassessment of aesthetic experience, an overassessment that ranges from its primeval image, Nietzsche's concept of the Dionysian, to Adorno's "aesthetically certified, residual faith in a deranged reason that has been expelled from the domains of philosophy and become, literally, utopian": <sup>14</sup> the aesthetic resolves the presumed aporias of modern rationalization because it is a "realm of phenomena in which subject-centered reason can be opened up to its other." <sup>15</sup> The role of the aesthetic called for here can be termed remythicizing because it can help in solving the aporias of modern reason only in a form in which it itself takes part in the very structures of this reason that were declared to be aporetic. The aesthetic experience that has been released to follow its own inner logic—which the cited theories of modernity believe capable of providing a way out of the aporias of modern rationalization—is itself a result of the rationalization from which it is supposed to provide an escape. <sup>16</sup> For this reason, the theories of Nietzsche and Adorno, which, in Habermas's view, construe art as the solver of the aporias of subjective reason, are only able to do so under the presumption of a paradoxical operation: they make descriptive recourse to an aesthetic experience in its

modern, differentiated form in order to then raise it functionally to the status of an instance that escapes the modern process of differentiation.

There is thus a correspondence between the illegitimate description of the problem and the overburdening of aesthetic experience with the ability to solve this problem. Only because the cited theories attribute the aporias of subjective reason to each and every modern conception of reason are they forced to declare aesthetic experience, which itself is only possible given the modern rationalization described as aporetic, as that which relieves the latter of its problems. Aesthetic experience takes on the impossible role of a remythifying problem-solver because the problems it is posed are misunderstood as internally, absolutely irresolvable aporias of subjective reason.

Habermas's critique of the conception in the philosophical discourse of modernity that remythifies by declaring the aesthetic to be an instance of the solution to inaccurately described problems of modernity is quite convincing. Nevertheless, its understanding of the motives behind the specifically modern enhancement of the status of the aesthetic from Nietzsche to Adorno is wide of the mark. In these theories, aesthetic experience is given not only a special role, but a prominent one vis-à-vis the reason of nonaesthetic discourses. And this is not because it surpasses the differentiated modern form of reason as the solution to its problems, but because it confronts reason with an irresolvable problem. Habermas fails to recognize this peculiar turn in the modern enhancement of the value of the aesthetic because he lets himself be deceived, in his critique of the functions with which art is supposedly burdened, by the remnants of a romantic conception of art. One can term "romantic" (in Nietzsche's sense) the functional positioning of aesthetic experience beyond and as a solution to the aporias of modern reason, as exemplified in the conclusion of Schelling's *System des transzendentalen Idealismus*. *In familiar passages, Schelling calls art the "only true and eternal organ and document of philosophy," because it develops that power "whereby we are able to think and to couple together even what is contradictory—and its name is imagination."* <sup>17</sup> *In the advance or "return of science to poetry," whose "intermediary medium" is the "new mythology," we overcome the contradictions in the "ultimate ground of all harmony between subjective and objective." As indisputable as Habermas's critique is of this romantic conception of an aesthetic solution to the aporias of reason, it is just as wrong to mistake Adorno's genuinely modern aesthetic thought for this romantic approach. Habermas's critique does not apply to Adorno's aesthetics insofar as the latter describes the differentiated aesthetic experience of negativity, in its sovereignty, as a danger for the interplay of the dimensions of reason; Habermas's objections instead only hold for those remnants of the romantic model, which admittedly can still be found in Adorno's aesthetics.*

*The opposition between romantic and modern aesthetics is most clearly manifested in the different ways in which they define the function of aesthetic experience. The romantic definition of this function describes art teleologically as a transrational activity that solves problems of nonaesthetic discourses that are logically prior to art and that are analyzable independently of art; in contrast, on the modern conception of art in Adorno, art is the catalyst of problems that cannot even arise or be conceived of without aesthetic experience. Art does not solve problems that can be diagnosed preaesthetically, but instead confronts nonaesthetic practices and discourses with the experience of crisis in the face of which they become aporetic—or in the specific sense used above, dialectic. Just as aesthetic experience is not a problem-solving mechanism in Adorno, the aporias to which it refers are also not logically prior to it. Once one breaks the spell of romantic aesthetics, it becomes clear that aesthetic experience is not premised on the alleged aporetic character of the nonaesthetic, but that, just the reverse, the formulation of this problem itself presupposes aesthetic experience: that our functioning discourses reveal an inherent, irresolvable aporia is the result of the sovereignly enacted aesthetic experience of negativity. But this removes the premises of Habermas's romanticism-based critique: first, the aporetic character of the functioning of discourses and practices developed in Adorno is not an illegitimate description of the problem. It emerges given the basis of aesthetic negativity, that is, as a postaesthetic way of viewing things. Second, art does not usurp the role of problem-solving mechanism in Adorno. Instead, it generates a means of viewing or approaching nonaesthetic discourses that uncovers irresolvable problems in the latter.*

The difference between a romantic and a modern enhancement of aesthetic experience introduces a distinction into those theories that define the aesthetic as the critique of reason, a distinction that also distinguishes Adorno from Derrida. Derrida's false development of the correct intuition of the nonaesthetic validity, or sovereignty, of aesthetic negativity is a form of "reverse romanticism": it equates aesthetic experience with a cognition of negativity that goes beyond the way nonaesthetic discourses understand themselves and their own practices. The experience of negativity, which is only possible as an aesthetic experience, becomes for him a cognition that is removed from the laws of nonaesthetic discourses, but that reports on the innermost functioning of these discourses. I have shown above how Derrida's concept of the text transforms aesthetic experience into an experience that is removed from modern differentiation and in this way turns it into an, as it were, "dedifferentiated" cognition. <sup>18</sup> According to Habermas's critique, the aesthetic experience that has become textual is—as is the romantic conception—a remythicizing flight from the differentiation of modes of cognition and representation. Derrida's program represents a *reversal* of romanticism, however, insofar as it no longer characterizes aesthetic experience as the medium of reconciliation, but as that of interminable deferral, or of an unsublatable process of negation. Nevertheless, the difference between Derrida and romanticism only applies to the contents of this experience and not to its status.

Moreover, it has also been shown that Adorno's interpretation of the postulate of aesthetic sovereignty escapes the romantic schema. He does not conceive of the effect of aesthetic negativity on nonaesthetic practices and discourses as their being surpassed by an absolutely incommensurable cognition. Thus Adorno does not raise the status of aesthetic experience vis-à-vis nonaesthetic discourses because it embodies, as it does in Derrida, a unique cognition of their irresolvable negative dialectic, but because it leads to an approach that contradicts the preaesthetic way in which these discourses viewed themselves. In recognizing this, Adorno's modern enhancement of the status of aesthetic experience avoids the romantic inflation of its claim to validity that Derrida must make. It does so, though, without lessening the tension that exists between aesthetic experience and the other differentiated, autonomous dimensions of reason.

The specifically modern enhancement of the aesthetic vis-à-vis the nonaesthetic thus underscores the irreducible tension between the two—though admittedly no longer the romantic tension between an irresolvable aporia and a dedifferentiated solution. The special status granted the aesthetic in Adorno vis-à-vis the other dimensions of differentiated reason does not remove it from differentiation: in its rationalized form, that is, in its own inherent form that follows the logic of an unsublatable negativity, aesthetic experience produces a (postaesthetic) approach to nonaesthetic practices and discourses that throws their immanently formed reflexive understanding into crisis, a crisis which they appear to be able to resolve only by recourse to dedifferentiated models of reason. Accordingly, the enhancement of the value of the aesthetic in Adorno is only properly understood if one conceives of it not as an undercutting or surpassing of the differentiation of the dimensions of reason, but as a countermodel to the *relationship* between these differentiated dimensions in which, according to Habermas, the problematic repercussions of their modern rationalization can be solved. For if the problems of differentiated reason are defined as the autonomization of their dimensions in the twofold sense of reification and impoverishment of the lifeworld, then it seems reasonable to search for the solution to the problems of modern rationalization in an integration of that which has been differentiated, which at the same time does not curtail the potential achieved through differentiation:

Thus it makes sense to ask whether the critique of the incomplete character of the rationalization that appears as reification does not suggest taking a complementary relation between cognitive-instrumental rationality, on the one hand, and moral-practical and aesthetic-practical on the other, as a standard that is inherent in the unabridged concept of practice, that is to say, in communicative action itself. <sup>19</sup>

Habermas describes the integration of the differentiated as the communicative rationality of the lifeworld that brings that which has become autonomous back into a nontotalizable "interplay." <sup>20</sup>

What I have provisionally called Adorno's analysis of the modern differentiation of the aesthetic achieves clearer contours against the backdrop of the idea of the interplay of the dimensions of reason. A no longer romantically conceived enhancement of the value of the aesthetic does not attribute to it any superior abilities vis-à-vis the other dimensions of reason, but rather an ability that is incompatible with these dimensions. Enhancing the value of the aesthetic on the basis of arguments involving its modern character thus also disputes any claim that aesthetic experience, now released to pursue its own internal logic, can ever be brought back into a lifeworld-based integration, into an interplay with the other differentiated dimensions of reason. The relation of the differentiated aesthetic to the other dimensions of reason cannot take the form of an interplay within the communicative rationality of the lifeworld because its total negativity cannot be set in a relation of coexistence, let alone of coordination with nonaesthetic discourses. Its ubiquitous potential represents instead the penetration of an irresolvable crisis.

This explanation of the meaning of the enhancement of the status of the aesthetic in Adorno also answers the question of why the distinction is often overlooked between the modern functional definition of art—as crisis, or catalyst of problems—and its romantic counterpart—as reconciliation, or solver of problems. The failure to note this difference is based on the avoidance of the sovereignty of the aesthetic for the sake of the "recognition" (*Anerkennung*) of the aesthetic. "Recognition" and "sovereignty" mark two different ways of describing the role of aesthetic experience in the interplay of the differentiated modes of experience and representation. The recognized aesthetic experience is that experience which, coexisting alongside other experiential and representational modes, is presumed to possess a sense compatible with their successful functioning. Recognition is thus the mechanism that is supposed to solve the problem that is the shadow of the rationalized differentiation of the aesthetic, namely, its "split[ting] off from the hermeneutics of everyday communication," without giving up, nevertheless, the rationalization and autonomy achieved by differentiation, as in reductionistic models of "false" sublation (*Aufhebung*).<sup>21</sup> The critique of both a specialized splitting off and a false sublation of art projects, at the same time, the counterimage of "recoupling a rationalized culture with an everyday communication dependent on vital traditions"<sup>22</sup> that promises to reconcile difference and integration without deleterious consequences for either of them:

To be sure, artistic production would dry up, if it were not carried out in the form of a specialized treatment of autonomous problems, and if it were to cease to be the concern of experts who do not pay so much attention to exoteric questions ... But this sharp delineation, this exclusive concentration on one aspect of validity alone, and the exclusion of aspects of truth and justice, breaks down as soon as aesthetic experience is drawn into an individual life history and is absorbed into ordinary life.

The aesthetic experience then not only renews the interpretation of our needs in whose light we perceive the world. It permeates as well our cognitive significations and our normative expectations and changes the manner in which all these moments refer to one another.<sup>23</sup>

The view of aesthetic experience as recognized pays a high price, though. Part I outlined the costs of this strategy in terms of hermeneutic aesthetics, the first and most determined advocate of this position against the aestheticizing emphasis on the otherness of aesthetic experience: the recognition of the aesthetic entails the latently heteronomous reduction of aesthetic experience to understanding. Such understanding no longer stands opposed to the nonaesthetic discourses, but serves to supplement and correspond to them. If, however, any lifeworld recoupling is forced to divest aesthetic experience of its negative contents, this tears asunder the promised connection between autonomy and recognition. A recognition of the aesthetic that places it into an interplay with the other differentiated dimensions of reason entails reducing its autonomy, an autonomy that consists in processual and total negation.

The heteronomous truncation of aesthetic experience can only be avoided by returning to this experience its sovereignty. This cannot be done, however, by raising aesthetic experience to a form of cognition valid for the nonaesthetic as well; instead, it can only be achieved in the potentially ubiquitous reenactment of autonomous aesthetic negativity. Understood in this way, the experience of aesthetic negativity is sovereign—not because it

is a compatible dimension "in interplay," interacting with nonaesthetic practices and discourses—but because it is a disruptive crisis. Thus insight into the unavoidable heteronomy of the mere recognition of the aesthetic does not entail a purism that anxiously refrains from any definition of the aesthetic that places it within the differentiated reason of modernity. Instead, this insight opens one's view to those contents of the autonomous experience of aesthetic negativity which are sovereign vis-à-vis the nonaesthetic dimensions of reason because they cannot be recognized without being reduced. Aesthetic negativity, taken seriously in its sovereign enactment, is in no relationship of interplay with nonaesthetic reason but is instead in a relationship of interminable crisis.

# Notes

## Introduction

- [1.](#) I would like to express my thanks to Albrecht Wellmer and Martin Seel, Lutz Ellrich, Renate Lachmann, and Bettine Menke. They, along with Jürgen Habermas, provided me with many suggestions, and even more criticism.
- [2.](#) Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 152.
- [3.](#) Ibid.
- [4.](#) On the first variant, see Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*; idem, *Zur Kritik der idealistischen Ästhetik*. On the second variant, see Karl Heinz Bohrer, *Die gefährdete Phantasie oder: Surrealismus und Terror*; and Rüdiger Bubner, "Über einige Bedingungen gegenwärtiger Ästhetik."
- [5.](#) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 152f.

## Chapter 1

- [1.](#) Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 320f.
- [2.](#) On Adorno's Neomarxist heritage, see especially Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, chap. 3; idem, *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, chap. 3. On the much less recognized aestheticist legacy in Adorno, see his essays on George and Valéry in *Notes to Literature and his reflections on the concept of aesthetic semblance in Aesthetic Theory*, 116ff.
- [3.](#) This is particularly clear in the central dialectic of semblance and expression: Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 148ff.
- [4.](#) See Thomas Baumeister and Jens Kuhlenkamp, "Geschichtsphilosophie und philosophische Ästhetik"; Rüdiger Bubner, "Über einige Bedingungen gegenwärtiger Ästhetik," 50ff. Ästhetik," 50ff.; idem, "Kann Theorie ästhetisch werden? Zum Hauptmotiv der Philosophie Adornos."
- [5.](#) Albrecht Wellmer, "Truth, Semblance, Reconciliation," 35.
- [6.](#) See above all Hans Robert Jauss, "Negativität und ästhetische Erfahrung: Adornos Ästhetische Theorie in der Retrospektive"; idem, *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics, Part A: chaps. 2 and 3*. Cf. also Harald Weinrich, "Drei Thesen von der Heiterkeit der Kunst."
- [7.](#) Aristotle's *Poetics*, 47 (chap. 4, 1448b); on the history of this formulation in Kant (*Critique of Judgment*, sections 6, 48), Lessing (*Hamburger Dramaturgy*, No. 79), and Schiller ("Of the Cause of the Pleasure We Derive from Tragic Objects"), see Heinz-Dieter Weber, "Stella oder die Negation des Happy end."
- [8.](#) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 58, 163.
- [9.](#) Adorno, "Is Art Lighthearted?," *Notes to Literature, II*: 249.
- [10.](#) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 17; Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 103-106. Nietzsche, in turn, probably draws this formulation from Baudelaire, "Le peintre de la vie moderne," 550.
- [11.](#) Adorno, "Commitment," *Notes to Literature, II*: 91f.
- [12.](#) Weinrich, "Drei Thesen," 17.
- [13.](#) Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, 350 ("The Wanderer and His Shadow," No. 170). For a more comprehensive view, see the critique of Gehlen's concept of *Entlastung* (relief, release, "unburdening") presented in chapter 5 of Part II.

- [14.](#) Adorno, "Is Art Lighthearted?," *Notes to Literature, II*: 247.
- [15.](#) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 11ff.
- [16.](#) Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (Pluhar trans.), 52 (section 5, B 15). Cf. Eva Schaper, "The Pleasures of Taste"; see also JauB, *Kleine Apologie der ästhetischen Erfahrung*, 12f.
- [17.](#) Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 135; Adorno, "Resumé über Kulturindustrie" (GS 10). On Adorno's critique of the culture industry, cf. Wolfgang Sandner, "Populärmusik als somatisches Stimulans: Adornos Kritik der 'leichten Musik'"; Martin Seel, "Dialektik des Erhabenen: Kommentare zur 'ästhetischen Barbarei heute.'"
- [18.](#) *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 144. For a critique of a primarily moral assessment of the culture industry, see Umberto Eco, *Apocalypse Postponed*. In contrast, see also Adorno's positive estimation of Chaplin in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 137, as well as Adorno, "Zweimal Chaplin" (GS 10).
- [19.](#) *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 130ff.; cf. Adorno, "On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening," 285ff.
- [20.](#) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 386.
- [21.](#) Adorno, "Trying to Understand Endgame," *Notes to Literature, II*: 248; idem, "Is Art Lighthearted?" *Notes to Literature, II*: 253. On this concept of pleasure in aesthetic negativity, see also the connection of dissonance and pleasure in Adorno's "Musikalische Aphorismen" (GS 18), 21f., and in idem, *Aesthetic Theory*, 59; similarly, see Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*.
- [22.](#) Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft* B, 155.
- [23.](#) An indication though not yet a proof of this (see section 3.1) is the difficulty of unambiguously defining what an aesthetic term is, and thus also what an aesthetic quality is. This is seen in Frank Sibley ("Aesthetic Concepts") and Isabel Hungerland ("The Logic of Aesthetic Concepts").
- [24.](#) [TN: Hereafter, in the context of aesthetic experience, *Vollzug* is translated as "enactment" to stress the active, creative process the experiencer of the work of art is involved in in aesthetic experience. Outside this context, in more abstract usage, *Vollzug* is sometimes also rendered as "realization."]
- [25.](#) As formulated as the concluding thesis of Susan Sontag's essay, "Against Interpretation," 14.
- [26.](#) Adorno, "Notes to Kafka," 245f. On hermeneutic reflection in Adorno, see Norbert W. Bolz, *Geschichtsphilosophie des Ästhetischen: Hermeneutische Rekonstruktion der "Noten zur Literatur,"* esp. chap. 7.
- [27.](#) Cf. Gerhard Ebeling, "Geist und Buchstabe"; Karlfried Gründer, *Figur und Geschichte: Johann Georg Hamanns "Biblische Betrachtungen" als Ansatz einer Geschichtsphilosophie*, 93ff.
- [28.](#) On the contrast between literal (wörtlich) and spiritual interpretation, see Peter Szondi, *Introduction to Literary Hermeneutics, First Lecture*; on the critique of positivism, see idem, "Über philologische Erkenntnis"; and Barthes, *Critical Essays*, 249ff. ("The Two Criticisms").
- [29.](#) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 129.
- [30.](#) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 151f.; cf. *ibid.*, 313f.
- [31.](#) On these two aspects and their interrelationship in section 46 ff. of the *Critique of Judgment*, see Jens Kulenkampff, "Über Kants Bestimmung des Gehalts der Kunst."



- [32.](#) Kant, Critique of Judgment (tr. Pluhar), [182](#) (section 49, B [193](#)).
- [33.](#) Ibid., 186 (section 49, B 198f.).
- [34.](#) Ibid., 184 (section 49).
- [35.](#) F. Schiller, letter to J. G. Fichte from 23 June 1795, first draft, as cited in Fichte, Gesamtausgabe, Vol. 3, Part II: 329. The reference to this correspondence, which was triggered by Fichte's work, *Über Geist und Buchstabe in der Philosophie*, was found in Odo Marquard's article on "Geist," col. 185. See also the critique of Fichte's construct of the relation between spirit and letter in Adorno, "Valéry's Deviations," Notes to Literature, 159-160: "In doing so, Valéry the anti-idealist is by no means glorifying material things as the vehicle of the spirit à la Fichte, and thus debasing them once more."
- [36.](#) On this controversy, see chapter 3.
- [37.](#) On the way that hermeneutics takes up Kant here, which is still formulated in a very restrained manner in *Truth and Method* (49ff.), cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Intuition and Vividness," 164-170.
- [38.](#) The concept of expression used here corresponds to that in Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 85ff. "Expression" is there a special case of "exemplification," and exemplification consists in having an attribute and making reference to it (ibid., [53](#), [55](#)). Aesthetically expressed, and not just exemplified, are those attributes that a work of art possesses in a "metaphorical" rather than in a "literal" sense (cf. Goodman, "How Buildings Mean," 646), something which thus holds for an aesthetic object only in relation to its spirit.
- [39.](#) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 133, 174. Adorno adopts this conception from Walter Benjamin, *Der Begriff der Kunstskritik in der deutschen Romantik*, esp. 72ff.
- [40.](#) G. W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 51. The second moment in the concept of determinate negation is the relation to its sublation; for Hegel, the relation to sublation and the claim to grounding the determinate negation are indivisible. It is against precisely this connection, however, that Adorno directs his critique: Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 158ff. Cf. also Herbert Marcuse, "Zum Begriff der Negation in der Dialektik"; for a critical view of this, see Richard J. Bernstein, "Negativity: Theme and Variations."
- [41.](#) Nevertheless, the list is long of those authors who believe they have already demonstrated the negativity of aesthetic experience on the basis of opposition to traditional hermeneutics. A significant part of the French critique of hermeneutics suffers largely because of this overestimation. Cf. Philippe Forget (ed.), *Text und Interpretation*.
- [42.](#) Cf. Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 225-231.

## Chapter 2

- [1.](#) Cf. Adorno, "The Essay as Form," *Notes to Literature*, 12. On this, see Albrecht Wellmer: "Adorno, *Anwalt des Nicht-Identischen: Eine Einführung*."
- [2.](#) Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 79ff., 90ff.; Viktor Shklovsky, "The Resurrection of the Word"; idem, "Art as Technique."
- [3.](#) Cf. Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 75ff.
- [4.](#) Ibid., 104.
- [5.](#) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 254 [TN: translation modified].
- [6.](#) *Aesthetic Theory*, 263 [TN: translation modified].
- [7.](#) *Aesthetic Theory*, 253 [TN: translation modified]. One should not be deceived by the objectifying tone of such formulations: Adorno only speaks of the processual character of art works in relation to the processual experiencing of them. Cf. also Adorno, "Über einige Relationen zwischen Musik und Malerei," *GS* 19: 633: "Writing is an atemporal

image of the temporal. It is translated back into time in the same way in which it fixates the temporal: by the act of reading that it prescribes."

- [8.](#) For a critique of the (normative) deviation model in aesthetics, see, for example, H. Fricke, *Norm und Abweichung*, esp. chap. 3; see also the critique in W. Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 87-92.
- [9.](#) Roman Jakobson, "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," 367, in reference to Paul Valéry, *Rhumbs*, 211: "A poem: a long-drawn hesitation between sound and sense."
- [10.](#) Jakobson, "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," 372.
- [11.](#) Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 112.
- [12.](#) Ibid., 118.
- [13.](#) Accordingly, something like "concrete signifiers" (cf. J. J. Goux, "La Réduction du Matériel," 123) cannot exist, at least not in a nonaesthetic sense. Signifiers are not concrete things or materials; instead, they are selectively and functionally related to the dimension of meaning. On this, see Roman Jakobson, *Six Lectures on Sound and Meaning*, esp. chaps. 1-3.
- [14.](#) Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, 85.
- [15.](#) Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 113, 118.
- [16.](#) Ibid., 115.
- [17.](#) Ibid., 116.
- [18.](#) Ibid.
- [19.](#) Ibid., 120, 122.
- [20.](#) Günther Patzig, "Über den ontologischen Status von Kunstwerken," 124.
- [21.](#) Ibid., 126.
- [22.](#) Ibid., [124](#), [125](#). Cf. P. F. Strawson, "Aesthetic Appraisal and Works of Art," 183-185.
- [23.](#) Cf. Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 104ff.
- [24.](#) Ibid., 100.
- [25.](#) Goodman, naturally, also does not make this claim; *ibid.*, 225 ff.
- [26.](#) Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 90-91.
- [27.](#) Jean-François Lyotard, *Des Dispositifs pulsionnels*.
- [28.](#) Paul Valéry, *Aesthetics*, "The Opening Lecture in the Course on Poetics," 98ff.
- [29.](#) Martin Heidegger, "Holderlins Erde und Himmel," 153, and "Language," 198ff.
- [30.](#) Barthes, *Critical Essays*, 263 ("Literature and Signification"); cf. also [205](#) ff. ("The Imagination of the Sign").
- [31.](#) On this, cf. Julia Kristeva, *Semiotikè: Recherches pour une sémanalyse*, 185ff. ("Poésie et négativité").
- [32.](#) Franz Kafka, "On Parables," 11.

- [33.](#) Franz Kafka, "On the Tram." In *The Penal Colony. Stories and Short Pieces*, 35.
- [34.](#) On the terminology, cf. Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action, I*: 299.
- [35.](#) On these compensatory procedures, see Donald Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs."
- [36.](#) It is precisely this alternative that escapes aesthetic understanding, which is interminably deferred and fails thereby: "To produce incomprehensibility completely excludes creating any kind of nonsense, because nonsense is always comprehensible" (Gerhard Richter).
- [37.](#) Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, 414. Cf. Gottfried Gabriel, *Fiktion und Wahrheit*, 55. On the distinction between assertion and statement, see also the analogous distinction between *Sachverhalt* and *Sachlage* in Karlheinz Stierle, "Der Gebrauch der Negation in fiktionalen Texten," 236ff.
- [38.](#) On this concept, see Rudolf Haller, *Facta und Ficta: Studien zu ästhetischen Grundlagenfragen*, 45ff., 64ff.
- [39.](#) "It is also apparent from what has been mentioned that the function of the poet is not to speak of incidents which have come to be, but rather of incidents which might come to be, i.e., that are possible by virtue of either the likely or the necessary" (Aristotle, *Poetics*, 17 [chap. 9, 1451b]). Precisely this model, simply transferred from the ontological to the societal realm, is still found in Georg Lukács, "Art and Objective Truth," 34ff. On this model and its extension, cf. Hans Blumenberg, "'Nachahmung der Natur': Zur Vorgeschichte der Idee des schöpferischen Menschen."
- [40.](#) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 263 [TN: translation modified].
- [41.](#) Barthes, *Critical Essays*, 272 ("Literature and Signification").
- [42.](#) Maurice Blanchot, *Der Gesang der Sirenen*, 112.
- [43.](#) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 199 [TN: translation modified]. Following Bachtin, a more detailed explanation of this structure can be achieved in terms of the concepts of dialogicity and intertextuality. For a programmatic view, see Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue, Novel," and idem, *Semeiotikè*, 113ff. ("Pour une sémiologie des paragrammes"); Renate Lachmann, "Dialogizität und poetische Sprache."
- [44.](#) Cf. Wolfgang Iser, "Indeterminacy and the Reader's Response in Prose Fiction."
- [45.](#) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 391, 452. Cf. Paul Valéry, *The Art of Poetry*, 140ff. ("Concerning 'Cimétière marin'"), 153 ff. ("Commentaries on 'Charmes'").
- [46.](#) Odo Marquard, "The Question, To What Question Is Hermeneutics the Answer," 124 [TN: translation modified].
- [47.](#) Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*.
- [48.](#) Lurij Lotman, *The Structure of the Artistic Text*, 24. Cf. also the short overview in Bernd Brunnemeier, *Vieldeutigkeit und Rätselhaftigkeit*, 253ff.
- [49.](#) Hans Blumenberg, "Die essentielle Vieldeutigkeit des ästhetischen Gegenstandes," 178.
- [50.](#) On the thesis that deconstruction has aesthetic origins, see the comprehensive discussion in Part II, chapter 5 below. Cf. also Manfred Frank, *Was ist Neostrukturalismus?*, 573ff.
- [51.](#) On the critique of the concept of negation, cf. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 233, 292, and *Positions*, 130f. In reference to Adorno, cf. J. F. Lyotard, "Adorno as the Devil." In contrast, see the critical development of Hegel's concept of negation in

Kristeva, who sets out a position close to that of Adorno: Kristeva, *La Révolution du Langage Poétique*, 101ff.

- [52.](#) Derrida, *Dissemination*, 253. On the following, also see *idem*, *Positions*, 61f.; *idem*, *Margins of Philosophy*, 316, 322, 330.
- [53.](#) Derrida, *Dissemination*, 56, 350.
- [54.](#) *Ibid.*, 334. On the following, see also the concept of aesthetic ambiguity in Hans-Georg Gadamer, "*Composition and Interpretation*."
- [55.](#) Derrida, *Dissemination*, 25; cf. *ibid*, 251. The concept of "dissémination" means nothing other than this: "It is this hermeneutic concept of polysemy that must be replaced by dissemination" (*ibid.*, [262](#)).
- [56.](#) *Ibid.*, 220.
- [57.](#) *Ibid.*, [243](#); cf. *ibid*, [252](#). On this concept of text, see Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 24, 65; *Positions*, 38; as a summary, also the clearly demarcated theses in Barthes, "*From Work to Text*."
- [58.](#) The immanent scientism of polysemy theory is documented (and thus already halfway overcome) in Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*.
- [59.](#) Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 73, 178, 289.
- [60.](#) Kristeva, *Semeiotikè*, 9 ("Le texte et sa science"). See also Blumenberg, "*Die essentielle Vieldeutigkeit des ästhetischen Gegenstandes*," 178f. (in reference to Valéry, "*Eupalinos or the Architect*"); Blumenberg, "*Sokrates und das 'objet ambigu': Paul Valéry's Auseinandersetzung mit der Tradition der Ontologie des ästhetischen Gegenstandes*."

## Chapter 3

- [1.](#) On the following, see the hermeneutic critique of semiology in Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 87ff.; *idem*, *The Conflict of Interpretations, Part I*. Cf. also Gadamer's critique of "aesthetic cultivation (*Bildung*)" in *Truth and Method*, 81-88. On the controversy between hermeneutics and structuralism, cf. Manfred Frank, *Das individuelle Allgemeine*.
- [2.](#) The following line of argument goes beyond that of the positions taken up in chapter 2. None of the latter has yet to provide a convincing critique of hermeneutics. In the case of deconstruction, this is due to its failure to realize that its semiological "*Verfremdung*" of hermeneutic processes can only be given an aesthetic grounding.
- [3.](#) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 212.
- [4.](#) Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, 77.
- [5.](#) *Ibid.*, 83; on the following, *ibid.*, 84-87.
- [6.](#) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 268.
- [7.](#) *Ibid.*, 244.
- [8.](#) *Ibid.*, [208](#), [244](#). For a convincing critique of Beardsley not based on a philosophy of history, see Frank Sibley, "*Aesthetic and Nonaesthetic*," part viii.
- [9.](#) "It is hardly a generalization based on a misuse of the philosophy of history to say that such divergent phenomena as the antiharmonistic gestures of Michelangelo, of the mature Rembrandt, of Beethoven at the very end are all attributable to the inner development of the concept of harmony and in the last analysis to its insufficiency, rather than to any subjective pain and suffering experienced by these artists. Dissonance is the truth about harmony.... The dismissal of the classical ideal is not a change of style, or a change of that murky something called outlook on life. It is instead caused by friction in harmony itself. Harmony presents something as actually

reconciled which is not.... The emancipation from harmony as an ideal has been an important aspect of the development of the truth content of art" ( Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 161). This is probably also directed against Wölfflin's use of the concept of dissonance in his interpretation of the mature, "manneristic" Michelangelo (cf. Heinrich Wölfflin, *Die klassische Kunst: Eine Einführung in die italienische Renaissance*, 59f., 209ff.).

- [10.](#) Friedrich Ast, *Grundlinien der Grammatik, Hermeneutik und Kritik*, section 75, reprinted in Hans-Georg Gadamer and G. Boehm (eds.), *Seminar: Philosophische Hermeneutik*, 116-117. Cf. also Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 291: "The anticipation of meaning in which the whole is envisaged becomes actual understanding when the parts that are determined by the whole themselves also determine this whole."
- [11.](#) Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 469.
- [12.](#) Ibid., 293-294.
- [13.](#) On this correction of Beardsley, see also Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, 115ff.
- [14.](#) Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, 1:77-91; *idem*, "The Origin of the Work of Art," 152; Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 42ff.
- [15.](#) Cf. Joseph Margolis, *Art and Philosophy*, chap. 6; *idem*, "Prospects for a Science of Aesthetic Perception"; H. R. Jauß, "Literaturgeschichte als Provokation der Literaturwissenschaft," 164ff.
- [16.](#) Gadamer, "Aesthetics and Hermeneutics," 5; *idem*, *Truth and Method*, 157: "Aesthetics has to be absorbed into hermeneutics." For a critique, see Rudiger Bubner, "Über einige Bedingungen gegenwärtiger Ästhetik," 40ff. "Über einige Bedingungen gegenwärtiger Ästhetik," 40ff.; Peter C. Lang, *Hermeneutik, Ideologiekritik, Ästhetik: Über Gadamer und Adorno sowie Fragen einer aktuellen Ästhetik*, section 1.1.
- [17.](#) This conceptual usage is contrary to Gadamer's equation of the two terms in *Truth and Method*, 335-336; see, however, Martin Seel, *Die Kunst der Entzweiung: Zum Begriff der dsthetischen Rationalität*, 229ff.
- [18.](#) Gadamer, *Die Aktualität des Schönen: Kunst als Spiel, Symbol und Fest*, 44. On the concept of symbol, cf. *ibid.*, [41 ff.](#), [62 ff.](#)
- [19.](#) On the structure of this critique, cf. Albrecht Wellmer's discussion of deconstructive theories, "The Dialectic of Modernism and Postmodernism."
- [20.](#) Here, see the opposing definitions of the structure of aesthetic spirit put forth by hermeneutics and the aesthetics of negativity in chapter 1.
- [21.](#) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 85, 174, 312.
- [22.](#) Ibid., 264.
- [23.](#) G. Boehm, "Kunsterfahrung als Herausforderung der Ästhetik," [19](#); *idem*, "Das Werk als Prozeß." For a development of the concept of the reflective power of judgment, see also R. Bubner, "Zur Analyse ästhetischer Erfahrung."
- [24.](#) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 265. The way in which statements about aesthetic objects function as references to the way these objects are experienced aesthetically has been especially emphasized by analytic aesthetics in its critique of cognitivist misunderstandings of its propositions. Cf. Stuart Hampshire, "Logic and Appreciation"; Paul Ziff, "Reasons in Art Criticism." For greater detail, see sections 4.1 and 4.2 below.
- [25.](#) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 252.
- [26.](#) Instead of using "meaning" (*Sinn*) or "form," Adorno also often speaks of "spirit,"

"mediation," or "construction." In the following, I will hold to the terminology of "meaning" and "form."

- [27.](#) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 218, 382.
- [28.](#) Cf. Wellmer, "Truth, Semblance, Reconciliation," 15. Franz Koppe also seeks to provide an explication in the sense of the weak version of Adorno's thesis in his *Grundbegriffe der Asthetik*, 159, 172-173.
- [29.](#) Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 166-169.
- [30.](#) Ibid., 280.
- [31.](#) Ibid., [305](#). "To be historical means that knowledge of oneself can never be complete" (ibid., [285](#); cf. the chapter, "The Limitations of Reflective Philosophy," 341-346). On this, see Frank, *Das individuelle Allgemeine*, [34 ff.](#)
- [32.](#) Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 305.
- [33.](#) Ibid., 306.
- [34.](#) Ibid., 361. On the general structure of an understanding between projection and mere duplication, see Jean Starobinski, "Der Text und der Interpret," 38-39, 44ff.
- [35.](#) Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 114. Gadamer understands the concept of recognition (*Wiedererkennen*) as a reinterpretation of Aristotelian mimesis; see Gadamer, "Art and Imitation," 97ff. Cf. also Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*.
- [36.](#) Wellmer, "Truth, Semblance, Reconciliation," 25, 26.
- [37.](#) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 183.
- [38.](#) Ibid., 185.
- [39.](#) "Antisemitism is based on false projection. It is the opposite of genuine mimesis.... While mimesis makes itself similar to its environment, false projection makes the environment similar to it. Mimesis seeks to mold itself, taking the outer world as the model for the inner, making the alien into the familiar; false projection transposes an inner world ready to pounce into an external one and brands the most intimate one's foe" (Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 187). Here, see the concept of altercentric identification in Josef Früchtl, *Mimesis: Konstellation eines Zentralbegriffs bei Adorno*, 94ff.
- [40.](#) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 177, 182.
- [41.](#) Adorno, "Schwierigkeiten: II. In der Auffassung neuer Musik," GS 17: 290. The ability to perform mimesis is, as aesthetic differentiatedness, the countermodel to the regression of aesthetic experience that Adorno describes; see, for instance, Adorno, "Die Meisterschaft des Maestro," GS 16: 52ff. Cf. Hans-Hartmut Kappner, *Die Bildungstheorie Adornos als Theorie der Erfahrung von Kultur und Kunst*, 85ff.
- [42.](#) Adorno, "Zur Musikpädagogik," GS 14: 108. On the processual definition of aesthetic sensuousness (*Sinnlichkeit*), see Helmut Plessner's reflections in his "Zur Hermeneutik nichtsprachlichen Ausdrucks." Plessner, however, views the sense-based processuality of aesthetic meaning formation primarily as a characteristic of nonlinguistic art. Cf. also Adorno's parallel reflections in his "Fragment über Musik und Sprache," GS 16: 251ff.
- [43.](#) On the terminology, see Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 4ff., 16ff.
- [44.](#) G. Boehm, "Bildsinn und Sinnesorgane," 124.
- [45.](#) Gadamer, *Text and Interpretation*.
- [46.](#) Boehm, "Bildsinn und Sinnesorgane," 122ff. Cf. idem, "Zu einer Hermeneutik des Bildes," 449ff., 461ff.

- [47.](#) Kant, *Critique of Judgement* (tr. Meredith), [64](#) (section 12, B [37](#)), [143](#) (section 35, B [146](#)).
- [48.](#) Wellmer, "The Dialectic of Modernism and Postmodernism," 53.
- [49.](#) Cf. Bubner, "Über einige Bedingungen gegenwärtiger Ästhetik," 40ff. According to this reading, those hermeneutic positions are heteronomous that do not analyze art in terms of its autonomous logic of experience, but subject it instead to a function (usually that of privileged access to truth) predefined by problems faced by efforts at philosophical systematization. The heteronomy of hermeneutics that my critique is aimed at is of a more general nature: it involves not only the "substitutional functions of the aesthetic" (Bubner) which *some* hermeneutic aesthetics subject aesthetic understanding to. Instead, it involves the recasting of the process of aesthetic experience in keeping with the reiteration of the experience of nonaesthetic meaning, already found in the basic hermeneutic decision to conceive of aesthetic experience as understanding. This heteronomy can not be corrected "within" hermeneutics.
- [50.](#) Wellmer, "The Dialectic of Modernism and Postmodernism," 53.
- [51.](#) Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 489. *The primal image of such a concept of aesthetic language, which rejoins the fragmented pieces of the symbol, is Heidegger's model of a sublime (überbietenden) language. The latter does not only realize itself premised on interpretations of the world that remain implicit, as does every utterance, but it also places itself in a direct relationship to that which has always been premised. Cf. Martin Heidegger, "Vom Wesen der Wahrheit," 185ff.; see also the concept of "founding" (Stiftung) in "The Origin of the Work of Art," 199.*
- [52.](#) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 256. *See also the distinction between a hermeneutics of the unfolding of meaning and one of the reduction of meaning in Uwe Japp, Hermeneutik: Der theoretische Diskurs, die Literatur und die Konstruktion ihres Zusammenhangs in den philologischen Wissenschaften, 46. Japp fails to recognize, however, that what is involved here is the unfolding of the genesis of meaning in opposition to meaning and not an unfolding of ambiguity.*
- [53.](#) For this reason, the aesthetics of negativity is also not—unlike its "puristic" variant (see chapter 1)—an "aesthetic of withdrawal" (*entzugsästhetisch*): Seel, *Die Kunst der Entzweiung*, 46ff.

## Chapter 4

- [1.](#) Arnold Isenberg, "Critical Communication," 163.
- [2.](#) This conclusion does not contradict the argument that in many, and perhaps even in all cases, aesthetic objects are themselves interpretations (as argued by Harold Bloom in *A Map of Misreading*). This, however, naturally does not entail the conclusion that all interpretive speech is itself aesthetic. For examples of this mistaken conclusion in recent literary theory, see Cary Nelson, "The Paradox of Critical Language: A Polemical Speculation."
- [3.](#) Adorno, "The Essay as Form," *Notes to Literature*, 5. *Adorno refers to Georg Lukács, Die Seele und die Formen, 8ff. However, Lukács only speaks of the "essay as an art form" by at the same time distinguishing it "with conclusive nomological stringency from all other art forms."*
- [4.](#) Adorno, "The Essay as Form," *Notes to Literature*, 13.
- [5.](#) *Ibid.*, 16.
- [6.](#) *Ibid.*, 18.
- [7.](#) *Blindness and Insight* is the programmatic title of one of Paul de Man's collections of essays. The explanation for the title is found in the text in this collection entitled "The Rhetoric of Blindness: Jacques Derrida's Reading of Rousseau."
- [8.](#) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 154.
- [9.](#) Both modes are cited and employed by de Man in his "Semiology and Rhetoric."

Derrida's interpretive practice concentrates upon the first mode of demonstrating blindness, whereas Adorno's focuses on the second. Due to their onesidedness, misunderstandings about the logic of aesthetic interpretation arise in both authors' works. In the course of further arguments, I will come to speak about some of these misconceptions.

- [10.](#) This is the way in which Derrida more generally also designates the deconstructive procedure as such (see the transcript of discussions in Lyotard, *"Discussions, or Phrasing 'after Auschwitz,'"* 386-389). Cf. also Derrida's concept of undecidability in *Disseminations*, [220](#) - [221](#); on Blanchot, cf. Derrida, *"Living On."*
- [11.](#) Cf. Dolf Oehler, *"Charisma des Nicht-Identischen, Ohnmacht des Aparten."*
- [12.](#) Adorno, *Notes to Literature* 1: 69; 2: [197](#), [198](#), [184](#).
- [13.](#) *Ibid.*, 1: 68f.; 2: 185, 204.
- [14.](#) Adorno, *"Notes on Kafka,"* 252, 255 [TN: translation modified].
- [15.](#) In this sense, the interpretation of Kafka's texts as the expression of reification points to their strategy of treating signs like things (*ibid.*, [262](#)); the interpretation of the world of *The Trial*, for instance, as that of the totalized society, points to the text's strategy of a quasi-mythic network of connections (*ibid.*, [258](#)).
- [16.](#) Hans Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, 635.
- [17.](#) *Ibid.*
- [18.](#) *Ibid.*, 634.
- [19.](#) Jean Starobinski, *Portrait de l'artiste en saltimbanque*, 137.
- [20.](#) For a general discussion of this second possibility, cf. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*.
- [21.](#) On this conception and the following, see Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading, 3ff.*, and as an example, *idem, The Implied Reader, esp. 164ff.*
- [22.](#) Derrida, *Dissemination*, 330.
- [23.](#) de Man, *The Resistance to Theory*, 10. On painting as well, cf. Norman Bryson, *Word and Image: French Painting in the Ancien Regime*, chap. 1.
- [24.](#) Wittgenstein pointed this out in his *"Lectures on Aesthetics."*
- [25.](#) Adorno brings all of these resources together under the concept of "aesthetic technique." However, there is no clear definition in Adorno of the relationship of the latter to the "context of meaning" that has to be interpretively disclosed. On the ambiguous relationship between technique and interpretation in Adorno, see esp. Adorno, *"Music and Technique."*
- [26.](#) Cf. Barthes, *S/Z*, 3f.
- [27.](#) This connection is seen ex negativo in Frank Sibley's effort to secure the expressional reference of interpretive speech to aesthetic experience not in terms of its connection to aesthetic evaluation, but in terms of the peculiar ability upon which it is based, namely, taste ( Sibley, *"Aesthetic Concepts"*). For a corresponding critique of Sibley, see above all Ted Cohen, *"Aesthetic/Non-Aesthetic and the Concept of Taste,"* and Monroe C. Beardsley, *"What is an Aesthetic Quality?"*
- [28.](#) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 68ff.
- [29.](#) *Ibid.*, 78.
- [30.](#) *Ibid.*, 289.
- [31.](#) Cf. Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, section



26. On this truism of analytic aesthetics, see Kant's distinction between perfection and beauty ( *Critique of Judgment*, sections 15-16).

32. Beardsley, *Aesthetics*, 507.
33. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 74.
34. *Ibid.*, 79.
35. Beardsley, *Aesthetics*, 531. See also the definition of (aesthetic) value as the "ability of something to serve the achievement of a specific goal," in Jan Mukarovsky, *Kapitel aus der Ästhetik*, 36.
36. This is the—invalidly restricting—formulation found in Beardsley, "Critical Evaluation," 320.
37. Beardsley, *Aesthetics*, 529. On this and the following, see *ibid.*, 462ff. and *idem*, "The Discrimination of Aesthetic Enjoyment," 43ff.
38. Adorno, "Verständnis und Kritik," GS 19: 418.
39. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 270f.
40. *Ibid.*, 188, 210.
41. Adorno, "Reflexionen über Musikkritik," GS 19: 578f.
42. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 237
43. Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, 29ff. By localizing aesthetic progress in the dimension of material, i.e., in the conditions of stringently experienciable aesthetic production, Adorno avoids the traditional concept of aesthetic progress, which speaks of progress in aesthetic value itself. On this traditional concept, cf. E. H. Gombrich , *The Ideas of Progress and Their Impact on Art*, and Adorno's early move away from this model—drawing upon Max Weber—in "Reaktion und Fortschritt," GS 17: 133f. On the concept of aesthetic material, see also Heinz-Klaus Metzger, "Adorno und die Geschichte der musikalischen Avantgarde," and Hartmut Scheible, "Die Kunst im Garten Gethsemane: Ästhetik zwischen Konstruktion und Theologie," 357ff.
44. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 51f.
45. Adorno, "Über Tradition," GS 10: 318.
46. Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, 54; cf. *ibid.*, 160- 192.
47. As seen, for example, in the "Disput zwischen Th. W. Adorno und H.-K. Metzger" (now collected by Metzger, along with other writings on this dispute, in H.- K. Metzger, *Musik wozu: Literatur zu Noten*, 61ff.). Adorno's criticism is found in his *Philosophy of Modern Music*, 11ff., 67ff., and in his "The Aging of the New Music," *Telos* 77 ( 1988): 95-116.
48. Peter Bürger's metacritique of Adorno's progress-theory-based critique of realism leads to the same question, first in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 83ff., and now summarized in "Das Altern der Moderne." See also M. de la Fontaine, "Künstlerische Erfahrung bei Arnold Schönberg: Dialektik des musikalischen Materials."
49. One need only consider the Zurich literature controversy sparked by Emil Staiger 's lecture on "Literature and the Public." Karl Heinz Bohrer showed in his contribution to the debate ( "Nur ein Gleichnis") that the subject of Staiger's investigation was not the question of how certain works can be evaluated according to a commonly shared criterion, but how the criterion of aesthetic evaluation is itself to be defined.
50. This link is also stressed by Margolis, *Art and Philosophy*, 213ff.
51. Adorno, "Reflexionen über Musikkritik," GS 19: 578.
52. Cf. the concept of "confrontation" in Seel, *Die Kunst der Entzweiung*, 244ff.

- [53.](#) On this distinction between the "what" and "fact of" aesthetic experience, or between the "specific content" of aesthetic experience and the "this is art" experience it engenders, see Bohrer, *Suddenness: On the Moment of Aesthetic Appearance*, 25, 80.
- [54.](#) TN: In order to distinguish it from *Erfahrung* (which is rendered as "experience"), *Erlebnis* will be translated as "direct experience." "Lived experience," though perhaps somewhat clumsier, also conveys some of the meaning of *Erlebnis*.
- [55.](#) Georg Lukács, "*Die Subjekt-Objekt-Beziehung in der Ästhetik*," 98. On the paradox in the concept of "direct normative experience," see Oskar Becker, "*Von der Hinfälligkeit des Schönen und der Abenteuerlichkeit des Künstlers*," 27-29.
- [56.](#) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 146 [TN: translation modified].
- [57.](#) G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. 1, 74.
- [58.](#) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 92.
- [59.](#) Hegel's aesthetics does so in its very first argument, with which it "delimits aesthetics" to a "philosophy of art": "By adopting this expression we at once exclude the beauty of nature." Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. 1, 1; cf. *ibid.*, [123 ff.](#), [143 ff.](#)
- [60.](#) Adorno pointed this out in a radio address that was entitled, "not completely without irony," "*Schöne Stellen*" ("beautiful parts"; GS 18, 695ff.). The conception of beauty as the sensuous medium of representation that achieves its independence in a stringent experience also forms the systematic contents of the modern use of the sublime ("*Schöne Stellen*," 708) and of the archaic; cf. Adorno, "*Musikalische Aphorismen*," GS 18: 36.
- [61.](#) The explanation of the relation between the implicit and the explicit found in Bohrer is not completely free of both of these misconceptions; see Bohrer, *Suddenness*, 21-25.
- [62.](#) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 103.
- [63.](#) The beautiful as ground of aesthetic negativity is, because it cannot be encompassed by understanding, an "inexhaustible" or "excessive" ground ( Foucault, *Language, Countermemory, Practice*, 57; *idem*, *Dits et Écrits, I*: 536 ["*La pensée du dehors*"]) and thus an abyss, a lack of ground(ing).
- [64.](#) Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 189.
- [65.](#) Cf. Adorno, "*Die Kunst und die Künste*," GS 10: 445f.; *idem*, *Aesthetic Theory*, 146.
- [66.](#) Martin Heidegger, "*The Origin of the Work of Art*," 194.
- [67.](#) *Ibid.*, 168.
- [68.](#) TN: These are the literal meanings of the German word used by Heidegger, *herstellen*, which is conventionally used to mean "to produce, make, or establish." The following quote plays on these two meanings; in it, the English translators have rendered *herstellen* as "set[ting] forth."
- [69.](#) *Ibid.*, 172.
- [70.](#) *Ibid.*, 173.
- [71.](#) *Ibid.*, 188.
- [72.](#) *Ibid.*, 173, 177.
- [73.](#) *Ibid.*, 181.
- [74.](#) TN: The German word, *Zeug*, that Heidegger uses only specifically means "tool" in the compound *Werkzeug*. It actually has the more general meaning of some "thing or material made for use." It thus can include such items as clothing or linens. "Tool" serves the purposes of our context in the slightly modified translation of the following

- passage.
- [75.](#) Ibid., 171.
- [76.](#) Ibid., 188.
- [77.](#) The topoi of this theorem have themselves a long tradition. In Plato's *Phaedrus* (249d, 251b), the ungraspable quality of the beautiful is already accounted for (a) on the basis of its unique meaning ("a likeness of the beyond") and (b) on the basis of its unique effect ("a shudder of fever").
- [78.](#) Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, vol. 1, 236f. See also the explicit turn to Schopenhauer made by Oskar Becker (in his review of Gadamer) in response to Gadamer's criticism of the explanation of incomprehensibility as thingly existence (*dingliche Vorhandenheit*) in *Truth and Method* (95ff.); see Becker, "Die Fragwürdigkeit der Transzendierung der ästhetischen Dimension der Kunst."
- [79.](#) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 203. P. Pfaff ("Die ästhetische Antinomie 'auf dem gegenwärtigen Stand,'" 365ff.) considers this representationism the only option open to Adorno for conceiving of aesthetic incomprehensibility. On this aspect of the *Aesthetic Theory*, see Werner Brändle, *Die Rettung des Hoffnungslosen: Die theologischen Implikationen der Philosophie Theodor W. Adornos*, 149ff.; Günter Figal, *Th. W Adorno: Das Naturschöne als spekulative Gedankenfigur*; Peter Steinacker, "Verborgenheit als theologisches Motiv in der Ästhetik."
- [80.](#) See Heidegger's concluding remark on Nietzsche's physiology of art ( *Nietzsche*, vol. 1, 91): "art is delivered over to explanation in terms of natural science, relegated to an area of the science of facts."
- [81.](#) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 125, 347.
- [82.](#) Cf. Maurice Tuchman (ed.), *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890-1985*.
- [83.](#) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 282.
- [84.](#) Ibid., 152.
- [85.](#) Ibid., 120.
- [86.](#) Maurice Blanchot, *L'espace littéraire*, 26: "la profondeur illimitée qui est derrière l'image, profondeur non vivante, non maniable, présente absolument, quoique non donnée, où s'abîment les objets lorsqu'ils s'éloignent de leur sens, lorsqu'ils s'effondrent dans leur image."
- [87.](#) Bohrer, *Suddenness*, 128.
- [88.](#) One can observe in Lyotard, however, that the move away from the description of the aesthetically incomprehensible as asemantic effect moves him dangerously close to the first model of this object, namely, of an epiphany of an unarticulatable meaning. See Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde."
- [89.](#) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 236. Cf. *ibid.*, [25](#).
- [90.](#) Adorno, "Die Kunst und die Künste," GS 10: 450; on the concept of aesthetic reification, see *idem*, *Aesthetic Theory*, 89, 128.
- [91.](#) Adorno, " Die Kunst und die Künste," GS 10: 450.
- [92.](#) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 125.
- [93.](#) Ibid., 118.
- [94.](#) Ibid., 126.
- [95.](#) Ibid., 118.
- [96.](#) Ibid., 453.

- [97.](#) Adorno, "On Epic Naiveté," *Notes to Literature*, 28.
- [98.](#) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 200.
- [99.](#) Eagen Fink, "Vergegenwärtigung und Bild," 300f.: "To neutralize first means 'to leave open,' 'to put out of force,' 'to put in brackets,' 'to merely think without doing.' In this way, neutrality modification designates a modification of belief in experience of a singular kind: a belief in the modus of as-if." For a pointed conception of aesthetic neutralization, see Blanchot, *L'écriture littéraire*, 347.
- [100.](#) Paul Valéry, *Rhumbs*, 240.

## Chapter 5

- [1.](#) Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, 156. On this critique of aesthetics, see also Paul de Man, "The Resistance to Theory," 7ff.; and the synopsis in Alan Megill, *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida*, chap. 8 ("The Deconstruction of Art").
- [2.](#) Derrida, *Dissemination*, 183f.
- [3.](#) Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, vol. 3: *Sovereignty*, 414f. Derrida's objection is directed primarily against Sartre's concession to Bataille that the theoretically absurd concept of sovereignty can be justified in aesthetic terms; cf. Jean-Paul Sartre, "Un nouveau mystique," 160.
- [4.](#) Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 262; also *ibid.*, 74.
- [5.](#) Derrida, *Dissemination*, 187.
- [6.](#) Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 261.
- [7.](#) Derrida makes use of this formulation both for a philosophy transformed into a text (*Margins of Philosophy*, 293) and for an art subject no longer to an aesthetic reading, but instead, to a textual one (*Dissemination*, 3f., 243).
- [8.](#) Derrida, *Dissemination*, 56 (see sections 2.2, 2.3 above).
- [9.](#) For this reason, Derrida's concept of textual transformation also cannot be reduced to aesthetic phenomena. Even in its application to aesthetic texts, it does not draw on aesthetic potential alone. This is emphasized in the critique of the adaptation of Derrida found in literary science, in R. Gasché, "Deconstruction and Criticism."
- [10.](#) Derrida, *Positions*, 93f.
- [11.](#) See the analogous distinction between the relation of art to reconciliation in regard to the "being" of art, on the one hand, and this relation in regard to the "effect" of art, on the other in Albrecht Wellmer, "Truth, Semblance, Reconciliation," 22. Deconstructive theory itself fluctuates between the implication thesis and the consequence thesis. Cf. the more cautious remarks in Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Tropes"; and the ambiguous ones in Sarah Kofman, *Mélancolie de l'art*.
- [12.](#) On the concept of heteronomy, see section 3.2.
- [13.](#) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 182. On the concept of the enigmatic character of art, see also Konrad Fiedler, "Über den Ursprung der künstlerischen Tätigkeit," 259.
- [14.](#) Nevertheless, the legitimacy of this need appears irrefutable to me. It is practically impossible to conceive of a theory of aesthetic experience that does not admit some kind of comprehensible connection between this experience and forms of nonaesthetic recognition, speaking, and so on. There is something senseless about the idea of a type of experience that is not in any way related to other types of experience.
- [15.](#) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 182.

- [16.](#) Kant, *Critique of Judgement* (tr. Meredith), [154](#) (section 41, B 161f.; emphasis modified). On this concept of an interest in the aesthetic that complements rather than grounds immanent aesthetic experience, see Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 75, 375, 429.
- [17.](#) Arnold Gehlen, *Zeit-Bilder: Zur Soziologie und Ästhetik moderner Malerei*, 222f. Cf. idem, "Soziologischer Kommentar zur modernen Malerei," 314.
- [18.](#) Cf. Gehlen, *Anthropologische Forschung*, 128; on this, see Nietzsche, "What is left of art," in *Human, All Too Human*, I: 105, maxim 222 ("Art in the Age of Work"); Weber, "Vom inneren Beruf zur Wissenschaft," 338. Cf. also Marquard, "Kompensation: Überlegungen zu einer Verlaufsfigur geschichtlicher Prozesse," 353; idem, *Krise der Erwartung — Stunde der Erfahrung: Zur ästhetischen Kompensation des modernen Erfahrungsverlustes*, 32f.
- [19.](#) Gehlen, *Anthropologische Forschung*, 84ff.; Marquard, "Kompensation," 357; idem, "Kunst als Kompensation ihres Endes," 168.
- [20.](#) These formulations are according to Marquard, "Kunst als Kompensation ihres Endes," 164, 174, 180, 167. More generally, cf. Joachim Ritter, "Landschaft: Zur Funktion des Ästhetischen in der modernen Gesellschaft."
- [21.](#) See Gehlen, *Zeit-Bilder*, 133ff.
- [22.](#) Gehlen, *Anthropologische Forschung*, 72f.
- [23.](#) Ibid., 65f., 72ff., 123ff.
- [24.](#) Gehlen, *Zeit-Bilder*, 203.
- [25.](#) Gehlen, *Anthropologische Forschung*, 75f. On the secondary institutionalization of the aesthetic, see also idem, "Erörterung des Avantgardismus in der modernen Kunst," 88ff.
- [26.](#) Gehlen, *Anthropologische Forschung*, 67. On the difficulties of an institutionalization of the aesthetic, see also idem, "Konsum und Kultur," 12f. This difficulty is given a renewed and more precise analysis in Niklas Luhmann, "Ist Kunst codierbar?" 253ff. With his concept of style (*Zeit-Bilder*, 209), Gehlen also provides Luhmann with a key idea for the direction in which he then seeks a solution for this problem; see Luhmann, "Das Kunstwerk und die Selbstreproduktion der Kunst," 659.
- [27.](#) Adorno and Gehlen, "Ist die Soziologie eine Wissenschaft vom Menschen? Ein Streitgespräch," 247.
- [28.](#) Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 261.
- [29.](#) Cf. Rüdiger Bubner, "Über einige Bedingungen gegenwärtiger Ästhetik," 60.

## Chapter 6

- [1.](#) Richard Rorty, "Philosophy as a Kind of Writing: An Essay on Derrida," 105.
- [2.](#) Ibid., 108; cf. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 365f., 378ff.
- [3.](#) Rorty, "Philosophy as a Kind of Writing," 106.
- [4.](#) Ibid., 92.
- [5.](#) Rorty, "Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism," 148.
- [6.](#) Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 266.
- [7.](#) Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 328.
- [8.](#) Derrida, "Limited Inc abc ...," [190](#).

9. Ibid., 190; cf. *ibid.*, 246.
10. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 319.
11. Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*, 128; cf. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 317, 320-324.
12. Derrida, "*Limited Inc abc ...*," 201.
13. This, though, is the conclusion drawn in S. Pradhan, "*Minimalist Semantics: Davidson and Derrida on Meaning, Use, and Convention*," 75: "a sentence can be put to any use." Following Saul Kripke, Wellmer stresses the connection between rule adherence and correction; see Albrecht Wellmer, "*Intersubjectivity and Reason*."
14. John R. Searle, "*Literal Meaning*," 129; cf. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 320.
15. Derrida, "*Limited Inc abc ...*," 191 (emphasis added). Cf. also *idem*, "Form and Meaning: A Note on the Phenomenology of Language," *Margins of Philosophy*, 155-173.
16. The critical discussion of Derrida's theses, starting from Wittgenstein, pointed this out. Above all, see Wellmer, "*The Dialectic of Modernism and Postmodernism*," 68ff. Related criticisms are found in Charles Altieri, *Act and Quality*, chap. 1; Manfred Frank, "*Die Entropie der Sprache: Überlegungen zur Debatte Searle-Derrida*," 145ff.; Joseph Margolis, "*Vs ( Wittgenstein, Derrida)*." For an attempt to reconcile Derrida with this Wittgensteinian line of argumentation, see also E. Wright, "*Derrida, Searle, Contexts, Games, Riddles*."
17. Cf. Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context," *Margins of Philosophy*, 307-330.
18. *Ibid.*, 309, 317, 321.
19. Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, 32.
20. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 289.
21. *Ibid.*; cf. Derrida, *Dissemination*, 304.
22. Wellmer, "*The Dialectic of Modernism and Postmodernism*," 70. Cf. Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 408 n. 28.
23. Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena: And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, 88.
24. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 161.
25. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Cf. S. Watson, "*Regulations: Kant and Derrida at the End of Metaphysics*."
26. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 268.
27. *Ibid.*, 160. Cf. Edmund Husserl, "*Philosophy as Rigorous Science*," 129ff.
28. Here, see also Karl-Otto Apel's rejection of the critique made by Critical Rationalism in his "*The Problem of Philosophical Foundations Grounding in Light of a Transcendental Pragmatics of Language*."
29. On the distinction between these two steps, following Kant, see Habermas, "*Was heißt Universalpragmatik?*" 199f. On the program of transcendental-philosophical grounding, see also Apel, *Transformation der Philosophie*, 2: 311ff.
30. Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 58; on Derrida's reference to the Idea in the Kantian sense, cf. *Writing and Difference*, 120, 162, 167.
31. Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 99, 100.
32. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 307 (B 365).
33. On Husserl, see Manfred Frank, *Was ist Neostukturalismus?* 305ff. However, Husserl's

use of the concept of the Idea is in no way as clear as its use in, for instance, Apel, *Transformation der Philosophie*, 2: 353ff.

- [34.](#) Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 544f. (B 690, ...); on Apel, see Wellmer, "Ethics and Dialogue: Elements of Moral Judgment in Kant and Discourse Ethics," 168ff.
- [35.](#) Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 305, 307 (B 362, B 366).
- [36.](#) Ibid., 537 (B 678).
- [37.](#) Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 162; Wellmer, "Ethics and Dialogue," 177.
- [38.](#) Wellmer, "Ethics and Dialogue," 179. This corresponds to the status of what Wittgenstein terms the "hinges" ( *On Certainty*, pt. 341) of our speaking and grounding, the certainties. Since they can never be completely transposed into an ideal structure, they designate that moment of language that interminably delays this ideal structure forever.
- [39.](#) I would not like to give a definitive answer here, however, to the question of whether it is at all possible to form a convincing concept of language according to which language is in a principled sense distant from reason. What is certain is that Derrida's proposal seems unconvincing to me given the critique presented above. Further thoughts in this direction would have to pay heed to the fact that Derrida explains the laws of a reason-detached language as rhetorical rules and not as certainties (as does Rorty, for instance).
- [40.](#) Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 160.
- [41.](#) Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 319 (B 384).
- [42.](#) Ibid., 99, 300 (B 86, 355).
- [43.](#) Cf. Wellmer, "Metaphysik im Augenblick ihres Sturzes."
- [44.](#) Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 300 (B 355); cf. p. 327f. (B 397). On Derrida's use of the concept of "transcendental illusion," see *Positions*, 45 and *Dissemination*, 297.
- [45.](#) Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 307 (B 366). Cf. Dieter Henrich, *Fluchtlinien: Philosophische Essays*, 47ff.
- [46.](#) Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 69.
- [47.](#) Ibid., 4; cf. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 250. See also the thesis of the endlessness of metaphysics, with reference to Kant, in Heidegger, "A Dialogue on Language," 25.
- [48.](#) Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 67.
- [49.](#) Adorno, "Dialektische Epilegomena. Zu Subjekt und Objekt," GS 10: 752; cf. *Negative Dialectics*, 150.
- [50.](#) Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 13.
- [51.](#) Ibid., 34ff., 127f., 198.
- [52.](#) Ibid., 61ff.
- [53.](#) Ibid., 72.
- [54.](#) Ibid., 13, 24f.
- [55.](#) This is the meaning of his criticism that Heidegger avoids "theological risks" ( Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 77; cf. *ibid.*, [201](#) ). This connection of Kant's concept of an irresolvable problem or of an infinite task with theologically mystical ideas already played a defining role in Ernst Bloch's "inconstruable problem" ( *Geist der Utopie*,

343ff.) and in Walter Benjamin's "ideal of the problem" ("Goethes Wahlverwandschaften," 172f.).

- [56.](#) Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 153.
- [57.](#) *Ibid.*, 149.
- [58.](#) *Ibid.*, 20, 203.
- [59.](#) *Ibid.*, [147](#). See also Adorno, "Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft," GS 10: 23ff. On the problem of the immanent grounding of the dialectic, cf. A. Kulenkampff, *Antinomie und Dialektik: Zur Funktion des Widerspruchs in der Philosophie*, esp. 8f., 43. Derrida also does not overlook this moment that comes from without; cf. *Positions*, 15.
- [60.](#) Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 30ff.
- [61.](#) Adorno, "Dialektische Epilegomena: Zu Subjekt und Objekt," GS 10: 748.
- [62.](#) Cf. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 9, 61ff. This is one of the oldest and still neoKantian motifs in Adorno; here, see Adorno, *Der Begriff des Unbewußten in der transzendentalen Seelenlehre*, GS 1: 85ff. See the description of this aporia—which found its clearest expression in the "Finale" of *Minima Moralia*—in Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, I: 366ff. For instance, insofar as the configuration is meant to be a sensible model of cognition realizable here and now (here, cf. W. Bonß, "Empirie und Dechiffrierung von Wirklichkeit: Zur Methodologie bei Adorno"; Herbert Schnädelbach, "Dialektik als Vernunftskritik: Zur Konstruktion des Rationalen bei Adorno"), it can no longer count as the transrational satisfaction of infinite claims and thus as the grounding moment of a negative dialectic of reason.
- [63.](#) On the theological reading of the teleological grounding of the negative dialectic, see Michael Theunissen, "Negativität bei Adorno"; cf. also Werner Beierwaltes, *Identität und Differenz*, 269ff.; Norbert W. Bolz, "Erlösung als ob: Über einige gnostische Motive der Kritischen Theorie"; Wiebrecht Ries, "Die Rettung des Hoffnungslosen: Zur 'theologia occulta' in der Spätphilosophie Horkheimers und Adornos." On the critique of the aesthetic version (e.g., Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 14f., 162, 394f., 404f.), see Thomas Baumeister and Jens Kulenkampff, "Geschichtsphilosophie und philosophische Ästhetik"; Rudiger Bubner, "Kann Theorie ästhetisch werden? Zum Hauptmotiv der Philosophie Adornos," 119ff.

## Chapter 7

- [1.](#) Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 393, 405.
- [2.](#) In this context, I can only point to the proximity of this position to Foucault's critique of reason, which is already marked by the term "genealogical" grounding. Cf. Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in: *Language, Countermemory, Practice*.
- [3.](#) On this concept of disintegration, see Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, II: 131. In a note to the German edition of *Negative Dialectics* (*Negative Dialektik*, 409), Adorno calls the idea of total disintegration (*Zerfall*) "the oldest of his philosophical conceptions." *Disintegration is not critical negation: unity disintegrates into the many (Vielheit) (A. Schopenhauer, Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung, I: 277) or identity into diversity (Hegel, Science of Logic, 418ff.). Whereas in Adorno this "objective challenge ... in the face of which the lifeworld as a whole becomes problematic" (Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, II: 401), becomes the basic model of the modern experience of crisis, it assumes a rather marginal place in Habermas's analyses (see the typology of crisis phenomena, in *ibid.*, II: [143](#)): even in earthquakesize traumas "only a small segment of our background knowledge becomes uncertain" (*ibid.*, II: 400). On this concept of a crisis of the lifeworld, see Ulf Matthiesen, *Das Dickicht der Lebenswelt und die Theorie des kommunikativen**



*Handelns, chap. 8.*

- [4.](#) Adorno, *Thesen über die Sprache des Philosophen*, "GS 1: 368f.; Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 62f.
- [5.](#) Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 380.
- [6.](#) *Ibid.*, 408.
- [7.](#) *Ibid.*, 405.
- [8.](#) *Ibid.*, 366.
- [9.](#) *Ibid.*, 369.
- [10.](#) "Death, if that is what we want to call nonactuality, is of all things the most dreadful, and to hold fast what is dead requires the greatest strength" (Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 19). *On this and the following, see also Lyotard, "Discussions, or Phrasing 'after Auschwitz.'"*
- [11.](#) Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 369.
- [12.](#) *Ibid.*, 371.
- [13.](#) *Ibid.*, 371f.
- [14.](#) E.g., Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 21f.
- [15.](#) Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 380.
- [16.](#) *Ibid.*, 371.
- [17.](#) *Ibid.*, 372.
- [18.](#) I borrow this concept from Ludwig Feuerbach's "*Vorläufige Thesen zur Reformation der Philosophie*," 227. Feuerbach uses it to characterize the relationship of his philosophy to that of Hegel. In this way, the concept of total negation stands in a clearly polemical relation to "determinate" negation: total negation designates that way of setting one's philosophy apart from that of Hegel's that cannot be reintegrated into Hegelian discourse as its determinate negation.
- [19.](#) It seems to me that these two regards in which one can speak of problems that call for a metaphysical solution are also confused by Dieter Henrich. Henrich follows the genealogical program in grounding metaphysical thought as necessary on the basis of the "tensions and contradictions" that precede it, instead of positing this thought as pregiven (cf. Dieter Henrich, "*Was ist Metaphysik, was Moderne?*" 496; *idem, Fluchtlinien*, 23, 55f., 91f., 121, 177). Henrich interprets these tensions that ground metaphysics in two ways: on the one hand as "disconcerting phenomena" (*Fluchtlinien*, 91) that call for a comprehensive "context of meaning"; and, on the other, as "aporias" (*ibid.*, 90) of our groundings of validity that call for a grounding of foundations. The metaphysics that are required in each case to resolve these tensions, though, are quite different: the consoling provision of meaning versus a theory of foundations grounding. Cf. the critique of Henrich in Habermas, "*Metaphysics after Kant.*"
- [20.](#) On this concept of aesthetic transfiguration, see Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, esp. chaps. 1 and 6. *On this and the following, see also the concept of the "double" in Michel Foucault, Language, Countermemory, Practice*, 53-67; *idem, Dits et Écrits, I: 326-337* ("La prose d'Actéon"); *idem, This is No Pipe* ("The Seven Seals of Affirmation").
- [21.](#) Foucault, *Dits et Écrits, I: 520* ("La pensée du dehors"); cf. *idem, Language, Countermemory, Practice*, 38f.
- [22.](#) Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or, Part II (on the balance between the aesthetic and the ethical in the development of the personality)*, 155ff. In the "*Diapsalmata*,"

Kierkegaard described the connection between the aesthetic image and detachment of its viewer in the following way: "My sorrow is my baronial castle, which lies like an eagle's nest high up on the mountain peak among the clouds. No one can take it by storm. From it I swoop down into actuality and snatch my prey, but I do not stay down there. I bring my booty home, and this booty is a picture I weave into the tapestries of my castle. Then I live as one already dead. Everything I have experienced I immerse in a baptism of oblivion unto an eternity of recollection. Everything temporal and fortuitous is forgotten and blotted out. Then I sit like an old grayhaired man, pensive, and explain the pictures in a soft voice, almost whispering, and besides me sits a child, listening although he remembers everything before I tell it" (*Either/Or*, Part I, 42). See also Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Konstruktion des Ästhetischen*, GS 2: chaps. 2, 3.

- [23.](#) Emmanuel Levinas terms art an "existence sans monde." See his *De l'existence à l'existant*, 81ff.
- [24.](#) As quoted in Yves Arman, *Marcel Duchamp: Plays and Wins, Joue et Gagne*, 64.
- [25.](#) On the idea of the danger of the aesthetic, see above all Michel Leiris's introduction to *Manhood*: "Literature as Bullfight."
- [26.](#) Cf. Beardsley, "The Aesthetic Point of View," 18ff.
- [27.](#) Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, 71, 280.
- [28.](#) "Dogmatic" is how Apel describes the status of (ungroundable but presupposed) images of the world: *Transformation der Philosophie*, I: 132, 196.

## Chapter 8

- [1.](#) Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 87ff., 122ff.
- [2.](#) Ibid., 55f.
- [3.](#) Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, I: 345-399.
- [4.](#) Ibid., I: [74](#), II: 326. For the background for a nonreductionist concept of rationalization, see also the classification à la Weber in *ibid*, I: 158- [185](#).
- [5.](#) Ibid., II: 333, 355.
- [6.](#) Ibid., II: 375.
- [7.](#) Ibid., II: 327.
- [8.](#) Ibid., II: 326.
- [9.](#) Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 36.
- [10.](#) Ibid., 261-265.
- [11.](#) Ibid., 296.
- [12.](#) Ibid., 340.
- [13.](#) Ibid., [114](#); cf. *ibid.*, [67](#). On this concept of the mythical, see also Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, I: 49ff.
- [14.](#) Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 186; *ibid.*, 87.
- [15.](#) Ibid., 104; cf. Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, I: 384.
- [16.](#) Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 93f., 98, 128.
- [17.](#) F. W. J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, 231. (All quotes in the following are found in *ibid.*, [230](#) - [232](#)). See also the outline of the romantic conception of art as an instance of the "overcoming of the crisis of legitimation of analytic reason and of its

self-representation in public life" in Manfred Frank, "Die Dichtung als 'Neue Mythologie.'" The extent to which the romantic reflections on art, especially in Friedrich Schlegel, can actually be reduced to what is termed the "romantic" model here and whether they themselves do not in fact already develop "modern" elements that transcend this model have to remain open questions here. On this question, see the controversial views put forth in Karl Heinz Bohrer "Friedrich Schlegels Rede über die Mythologie"

Schlegels Rede über die Mythologie" and W. Preisendanz, "Zur Poetik der Romantik: Die Abkehr vom Grundsatz der Naturnachahmung," esp. 71ff.

- [18.](#) A series of remarks by Derrida on the relationship between aesthetic experience and the nonaesthetic, deconstructive process of cognition can easily be understood as a recapitulation of Schelling's definition of art as the "document and organ of philosophy." Thus Derrida considers aesthetic practice as a forerunner to deconstructive practice ( Derrida, *Positions*, 93f.) and writes that aesthetic experience "designate[s]" or "illustrates" a movement of "différance" (though "illustrates" is placed in quotation marks here) ( Derrida, *Dissemination*, 240, 245).
- [19.](#) Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action, I*: 363-364.
- [20.](#) On the concept of the interplay or balance of the dimensions of rationality, cf. *ibid.*, I: [73](#); II: [119](#) f., [310](#) ff., 326. On this, see Martin Seel, "The Two Meanings of Communicative Rationality."
- [21.](#) Habermas, "Modernity versus Postmodernity," 9; on the false programs of a "sublation of art," see *ibid.*, [9](#)- [11](#).
- [22.](#) Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action, II*: 356.
- [23.](#) Habermas, "Modernity versus Postmodernity," 12.

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