

Art and the Possibility of a Liberated Nature

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Abstract

In this article, I argue that Adorno's conception of a possible reconciliation with nature is neither one of complete synthesis, nor absolute alienation. The most elaborated formulations regarding the possibility of such a reconciliation, which would be tantamount to a liberated nature, are to be found in Adorno's aesthetics, and particularly in his discussion of the art-nature relation. The article engages Simon Hailwood's recent criticism of the concept of the Anthropocene and his discussion of Adorno's conception of the domination of nature. While I concur with Hailwood's insistence on the idea of "alienation from nature" in order to reach a more appropriate understanding of our current predicament, his analysis of Adorno's take on this idea is problematic. I conclude by discussing another recent work on our troubled relationship with nature. While more attentive to artistic expressions than Hailwood's work, Andreas Malm's *The Progress of This Storm* constitutes an inverted parallel to the former through its negligence of Adorno's contribution to the discussion of the human-nature dialectic.

Keywords

alienation from nature, the Anthropocene, domination of nature, natural beauty, aesthetics, reconciliation

1. Alienation from nature

To speak of alienation from nature may appear obsolete in a time when there seems to be a growing consensus that we have entered into the epoch of the Anthropocene, where everything there is of nature is affected by us humans. At first glance, the concept of the Anthropocene might also seem to chime well with for example Adorno's view in *Aesthetic Theory* about the tourist industry usurping the last remnant of so called pristine nature and selling it like a commodity among others.¹ Nevertheless, Adorno insists on the possibility of nature beyond domination – and the mode of preservation par excellence of such a possibility is art, and more specifically authentic artworks that reflect on their own alienation from nature.² Adorno argues that art is able both to express the condition that “we, humans, mankind, every individual finds themselves historically, and this state is precisely one of complete alienation [*vollkommenen Entfremdung*],” as well as to “give a voice to suppressed, mutilated nature, meaning the exact opposite of alienation.”³ It is precisely by reflecting on its own alienation from nature, that is, by articulating this alienation rather than claiming access to some kind of “pure nature,” that art is able to give voice to nature damaged by

¹ See T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, eds. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (London and New York: Continuum, 2002), 69; *Ästhetische Theorie*, in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7 (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2003) (Hereafter: GS 7), 108.

² Cf. Kate Soper, “Passing Glories and Romantic Retrievals: Avant-garde Nostalgia and Hedonist Renewal,” in *Ecocritical Theory: New European Approaches*, eds. Axel Goodbody and Kate Rigby (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 17–29.

³ T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetics (1958/59)*, trans. Wieland Hoban, ed. Eberhard Ortland (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), 77–78 [translation altered]; *Ästhetik (1958/59)* in *Nachgelassene Schriften*, div. IV, vol. 3 (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2009), 126.

mastery and alienation, and thus simultaneously to the possibility of a nature beyond this condition, something which “has not yet been domesticated.”⁴

A recent attempt to rethink the concept of alienation in the epoch of the Anthropocene is Simon Hailwood's *Alienation and Nature in Environmental Philosophy*. As the title indicates, Hailwood's focus is not the art–nature relation, which in the end turns out to be a pity (I will come back to this), but I do agree with his critique of the concept of the Anthropocene, namely that it involves the belief that the contemporary “environmental crisis is one of *uncontrolled* impact” on the Earth and that it thus entails a wish for increased mastery over nature.⁵ Hailwood is right to insist on sticking with the idea of alienation from nature in order to reach a more appropriate understanding of our current predicament. One of the main reasons for holding on to the concept of alienation is precisely that it manages to preserve the idea of nature *beyond domination*, something which is not the case with the concept of the Anthropocene, which risks a totalizing view of nature as always already under our command.

In the introduction to the book, Hailwood attempts to ward off potential critique by considering a set of problems involved in the idea of alienation from nature. There is of course the danger of a reductive view suggesting the simple antidote of a diffuse “oneness” with nature involving, as Hailwood writes, “naive romanticism and irrational nostalgia.”⁶

⁴ *Ibid.*, 40; *Ästhetik*, 66.

⁵ Simon Hailwood, *Alienation and Nature in Environmental Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 6.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

However, as for example Kate Soper recently has pointed out, such naivety and irrationalism is not what characterizes the more sophisticated Romanticism of for example poets like Keats and Wordsworth. Soper rightly notes that what links Adorno's conception of the art-nature relation to Romanticism is precisely the attempt to express the beyondness of nature (what Adorno sometimes calls nature's "more," as we will see below) while at the same time admitting that this dimension cannot be glimpsed, except through mediation.⁷

Another risk that Hailwood addresses is that all talk of alienation from nature might be nonsensical, since as human beings we are, as he puts it, "one evolved species among others" and thus *everything* we do is part of nature.⁸ And if we do not grant this and instead see human reason as the opposite of nature, we end up with a dualism that makes any talk of alienation from nature pointless, because if humans and nature ultimately are complete opposites there is no use in attempting to overcome this.⁹

Despite the risks involved, Hailwood nevertheless insists on keeping the concept of alienation from nature, claiming that it can be "justified, useful and important" provided that we develop a pluralistic understanding of it.¹⁰

⁷ Soper, "Passing Glories and Romantic Retrievals: Avant-garde Nostalgia and Hedonist Renewal," esp. 19–23. For a philosopher-poet like Hölderlin, connected to early German Romanticism, poetry's reflection on its own alienation from nature, and the need to acknowledge nature, is also central. For a discussion on the affinity between Adorno and Hölderlin on this point, see Flodin, "The eloquence of something that has no language': Adorno on Hölderlin's Late Poetry," *Adorno Studies* 2, no. 1 (2018): 1–27.

⁸ Hailwood, *Alienation and Nature in Environmental Philosophy*, 6.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

Among other things, this implies distinguishing between diverse senses of alienation and between different senses of nature, and also affirming some senses of alienation from nature. It is regarding this latter step that Hailwood claims to be differing from Adorno. My initial focus in this article will be on Hailwood's criticism of Adorno's concept of nature, because through it we are able to engage with what I believe is still a fruitful attempt to give voice to that which resists mastery, and thus to hold on to the possibility of a liberated nature.

2. Natural beauty and the resistance to domination

Despite finding Adorno's critique of the domination of nature valuable to a certain extent – because it also aims at a conception of nature *resisting domination* – Hailwood argues that Adorno holds the view that alienation from nature is "something to be overcome as much as possible."¹¹ Even if Hailwood does not explicitly connect Adorno's thinking to deep ecology, the wish to overcome alienation completely is something that he, in a previous chapter of the book, faults deep ecology for embracing.¹² However, despite sharing deep ecology's insistence on the need for a transformed relationship with nature in order to realize social liberation, Adorno's conception of nature can also, as Deborah Cook has shown in her book *Adorno on Nature*, be considered as a valuable source of criticism of the deep ecology position, especially its undialectical emphasis on unity and oneness.¹³ Adorno's goal is

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 136.

¹² *Ibid.*, 22–23.

¹³ Deborah Cook, *Adorno on Nature* (Durham: Acumen, 2011), 122–132. Hailwood only mentions Cook's Adornian criticism of deep ecology in a footnote and does not develop it, see *Alienation and Nature in Environmental Philosophy*, 132 note 10.

not the seamless unity of everything that exists, instead he insists on the possibility of a relationship with the rest of nature that manages to acknowledge both affinity *and* difference.

The other, but related, tenet of Hailwood's critique is his claim that Adorno's conception of non-identity amounts to the unknowability of natural objects or phenomena, and that this in fact harbors a latent wish for complete knowledge of the particular "in its total particularity."¹⁴ In his discussion of why such a conception of unknowability is not fruitful, Hailwood gives the example of a fox. Hailwood's claim is that the fox is more than what he terms "our landscaping" of it, in other words, the fox is more than our understanding of it merely in relation to our nature-dominating endeavours, which tend to reduce the fox to a "'pest', 'wily quarry' and so on."¹⁵

However, Adorno never claims non-identity as unknowability in the way Hailwood suggests, which in the case of the fox (or supposedly any other animal or natural entity) would amount to "a meaningless, inexplicable occurrence of shape and colours," according to Hailwood.¹⁶ Adorno's concept of non-identity does not amount to unknowability in this sense, but is instead an effort from inside conceptualization to convey a resistance to our attempts to reduce the natural object or non-human animal to human aims and definitions, a reduction which, as we saw above, Hailwood terms "landscaping."

If Hailwood had paid more attention to Adorno's discussion of nature and natural beauty in *Aesthetic Theory*, he would perhaps have come to a different conclusion, and seen that his own attempt to reach a productive understanding of a certain kind of alienation from nature is, in fact, not that far from Adorno's views. In his very brief remarks on aesthetics, however, Hailwood seems to believe that art and aesthetics always have to do merely with human purposes.¹⁷ But as Adorno emphasizes, what may at first seem as complete opposites, art and nature, are in fact dialectically mediated:

Wholly artificial, the artwork seems to be the opposite of what is not made, nature. As pure antitheses, however, each refers to the other: nature to the experience of a mediated and objectified world, the artwork to nature as the mediated plenipotentiary of immediacy. Therefore reflection on natural beauty is irrevocably requisite to the theory of art.¹⁸

No theory of art that attempts to live up to its name can do without a reflection on what is beyond the seemingly self-enclosed sphere of art. The connection between art and nature, or between art beauty and natural beauty, has of course been a constant theme in the history of aesthetics, and some kind of mimetic relation is often highlighted. Art is mimesis, if not of nature *per se*, then at least of what the beauty of nature seems to evoke, namely the idea of a meaningful unification of sensuous multiplicity. This way of

¹⁴ Hailwood, *Alienation and Nature in Environmental Philosophy*, 136.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 135.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Hailwood, *Alienation and Nature in Environmental Philosophy*, 81. Hailwood thus has a very Hegelian conception of aesthetics. Hailwood is otherwise quite critical of Hegel, especially of Hegel's understanding of nature in the *Philosophy of Right*, see *Alienation and Nature in Environmental Philosophy*, 169–177.

¹⁸ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 62; GS 7, 98.

relating art and nature to each other can also be seen as suggesting that the aesthetic comportment towards nature shows a way to acknowledge the possibility of a nature beyond human use and abuse.¹⁹ Adorno belongs to this tradition of aesthetics. Even if he is critical towards any direct appeal to nature's inherent purposiveness, he nevertheless finds in natural beauty, and its mediation in art, a hint of the possibility of a nature liberated from domination. In the section on Natural Beauty in *Aesthetic Theory* he writes:

The artwork, through and through θέσει, something human, is the plenipotentiary of φύσει, of what is not merely for the subject, of what, in Kantian terms, would be the thing itself. The identity of the artwork with the subject is as complete as the identity of nature with itself should some day be.²⁰

It is thus crucial for Adorno that the authentic artwork expresses something that it is *not* in itself, but for which it is a mediator, namely nature beyond domination. The mark of nature's resistance to domination is its beauty. Adorno draws on traditional mimetic theories of art, giving them a twist, in his claim that art is mimesis of "natural beauty in itself [*an sich*]" and not of beautiful natural objects or phenomena.²¹ In other words, art for Adorno is mimesis of what is essential in natural beauty. And that is natural beauty "more": "Nature is beautiful in that it appears to say more than it is. To wrest this more [*Mehr*] from that more's contingency, to gain control of

its semblance, to determine it as semblance [*Schein*] as well as to negate it as unreal: This is the idea of art."²² Let me try to elucidate what Adorno is getting at here: Snatching nature's more from contingency implies that when art imitates – not in the sense of copying, but in the sense of *making itself like* – natural beauty in itself, art mediates the transience of natural beauty in an enduring form: the artwork.²³ In this way, art objectifies nature's more – a more which shows the preponderance of nature, in other words, shows art's dependence on nature. Outside the sphere of art nature is not acknowledged in this way, but instead predominantly mastered, ravaged, and deformed. Thus, the more of natural beauty is *unreal* from the point of view of nature-dominating rationality, which in turn dominates current society and has very real consequences for concrete, living nature.²⁴ Adorno describes aesthetic objectivity as "the reflection of the being-in-itself of nature [*Widerschein des Ansichseins der Natur*]" and he claims that "[t]he being-in-itself to which artworks are devoted is not the imitation of something real but rather the anticipation of a being-in-itself that does not yet exist."²⁵

²² *Ibid.*, 78; GS 7, 122.

²³ See also *ibid.*, 73: "in art the evanescent is objectified and summoned to duration"; GS 7, 114.

²⁴ I have previously analyzed Adorno's conception of natural beauty focusing on the expression of suffering of nature and non-human animals involved in the experience of beauty, emphasizing how, for Adorno, the expression of suffering is simultaneously an expression of the wish for suffering to end, and thus pointing beyond suffering and domination. See Flodin, "Of Mice and Men: Adorno on Art and the Suffering of Animals," *Estetika: The Central European Journal of Aesthetics*, no. 2 (2011): 139–156 and "The Wor(l)d of the Animal: Adorno on Art's Expression of Suffering," *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, 3, no. 1 (2011), DOI: 10.3402/jac.v3i0.7987.

²⁵ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 77; GS 7, 120–121.

¹⁹ Andrew Bowie also considers the development of aesthetics as a response to the increasing exploitation and domination of nature. See Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: From Kant to Nietzsche*, 2nd. rev. ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), esp. 3–8.

²⁰ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 63; GS 7, 99.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 72 [translation altered]; GS 7, 113.

The unreality of nature's more, in other words, the not-yet existence of nature in itself, is something that the individual artwork must expose as precisely something that *does not yet exist*; and it does this through self-reflection, through breaking the artwork's illusion of being a closed unity. An artwork that fails to do this conceals the domination of nature, both its own and society's. Adorno is critical first and foremost of straightforward depictions of reconciliation and the view of integrative harmony as closure (*Geschlossenheit*) in traditional aesthetics, which turns aesthetic unity into what he calls the "triumph over the heterogenous."²⁶

It is through art's mediation or mimesis of natural beauty's more that we can experience the more of nature in a way that simultaneously reflects on the mediatory aspect of this experience. Our experience of nature is always mediated, but natural beauty resists the false mediation that turns its more into mere unreality. We thus experience natural beauty when natural objects or phenomena resist the anthropocentric attempt to turn them into exchangeable things and also resist the attempt to exhaust them conceptually. In other words, natural beauty is a resistance to reification both at the societal, objective, level and at the subjective level of thinking: "Natural beauty is the trace of the nonidentical in things under the spell of universal identity."²⁷ This resistance is the reason for both the persuasiveness and the enigmatic quality of natural beauty, a double character taken over by artworks in their mediation of natural beauty.²⁸ For Adorno, the nonidentical in things marks the possibility of a relationship to non-human nature that goes beyond epistemology qua categorization based on an abstract

common denominator; a relationship in which both affinities and differences between the human and the non-human would be properly acknowledged. "Utopia would be above identity and above contradiction; it would be a togetherness of diversity [*ein Miteinander des Verschiedenen*]," as he writes in *Negative Dialectics* when discussing "the ineradicable mimetic moment in all cognition [*Erkenntnis*] and all human praxis" which testifies to the affinity between subject and object, knower and known.²⁹ Through its preservation of "the mimetic stance," which as Adorno points out in the *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, hangs on "that element of identification *with* the thing itself [*Identifikation mit der Sache*] – as opposed to the identification *of* the thing itself [*Identifikation der Sache*],"³⁰ art is able to point towards the possibility of the utopian "togetherness of diversity," which is beyond the identification of nature as object of exploitation, and beyond regarding its otherness as a complete opposite of human existence.

"Togetherness of diversity" is, I want to claim, Adorno's way of understanding alienation from nature as something to be only partially overcome. It is quite different from the conception of unity *in* diversity (or "uniformity amidst variety") – which is the neo-classical (Adorno would argue: classicist) conception of beauty, claimed by for instance

²⁹ T. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 150 [translation altered]; *Negative Dialektik* in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 6, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2003) (hereafter GS 6), 153.

³⁰ T. W. Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), 92; *Vorlesung über Negative Dialektik: Fragmente zur Vorlesung 1965/66*, in: *Nachgelassene Schriften*, div. IV, vol. 16, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2007), 135.

²⁶ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 157; GS 7, 236.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 73; GS 7, 114.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 71; GS 7, 111.

Francis Hutcheson,³¹ as well as from the influential conception of cognitive synthesis proclaimed by Kant (*Einheit in der Mannigfaltigkeit*).³² In his lectures on metaphysics, Adorno argues that “the idea of unity in diversity [...] in the history of modern philosophy has been transposed into the notion of the ordering subject through which this unity is produced.”³³ This does not mean, however, that the concept of unity is to be completely debunked – its utopian aspect is salvaged by the artwork, that is, by the aesthetic unity. What characterizes the reconciliatory aspect of aesthetic unity, as Adorno conceives it in *Aesthetic Theory*, is precisely that its way of bringing together seems *not to be* enforced on diversity, that is, the manifold parts of the artwork, by an ordering subject or a governing idea. Instead “[t]he aesthetic unity of the multiplicitous [*Einheit des Mannigfaltigen*] appears as though it had done no violence but had been chosen by the multiplicitous itself. It is thus that unity [...] crosses over into reconciliation.”³⁴ So instead of the Kantian *Einheit in der Mannigfaltigkeit* of cognition, which implies an abstract unity of an equally abstract manifoldness, Adorno frames aesthetic

unity as *Einheit des Mannigfaltigen*, the concrete unity (the artwork) of the concrete manifold (the sensuous parts of the artwork) itself.³⁵ Of course, this reconciliatory aspect appears in Kant’s third Critique as well, where he claims that the artwork, or art product (*Kunstprodukt*) as he calls it, should look as if it was a free creation and that “the purposiveness in its form must still seem to be as free from all constraint by arbitrary rules as if it were *a mere product of nature*.”³⁶ However, the dualism between nature and humankind continues to reverberate in the third Critique as well, as when Kant claims that judgment and taste (the subjective side of art and aesthetics) are more important than genius (which he argues is a gift of nature),³⁷ or, most prominently perhaps, in the description of the dynamic sublime, where nature’s grandeur is subjugated by the supremacy of human reason, something Adorno does not fail to criticize.³⁸

³¹ See Francis Hutcheson, *An Inquiry Concerning Beauty, Order, Harmony, Design*, ed. Peter Kivy (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), 40 (section II, article III).

³² T. W. Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 34; *Metaphysik: Begriff und Probleme* (1965), in *Nachgelassene Schriften*, div. IV, vol. 14, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1998), 56. Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 210 [A77/B103]: “By **synthesis** in the most general sense [...] I understand the action of putting different representations together with each other and comprehending their manifoldness [*Mannigfaltigkeit*] in one cognition.”

³³ Adorno, *Metaphysics*, 34; *Metaphysik*, 56.

³⁴ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 134; GS 7, 202. See also Flodin, “Adorno and Schelling on the Art–Nature Relation,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 26, no. 1 (2018): 189.

³⁵ This implicit critique of Kant’s formalism can be compared to Adorno’s explicit critique of Hegel’s switch to “indeterminateness” (*Unbestimmtheit*) instead of “the indeterminate” (*das Unbestimmte*) in his *Logic*. See Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 60–63; *Vorlesung über Negative Dialektik*, 91–96. It is only through this “conceptual abstraction” (61; 94) that does not acknowledge “the non-conceptual, that which the concepts refer to” (62; 95) that Hegel is able to determine being qua indeterminateness as nothing. Adorno also here notes the advantage that art has over philosophy in commemorating the non-conceptual, see *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 62; *Vorlesung über Negative Dialektik*, 95. For Hegel’s crucial switch from “indeterminate” (*das Unbestimmte*) to “indeterminateness” (*Unbestimmtheit*), see G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. and ed. George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 74 [*G. W. F. Hegel: Gesammelte Werke*, Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, vol. 21, 85–86].

³⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 185 (§45) [*Akademie Ausgabe* vol. 5, 306]. My emphasis.

³⁷ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 197 (§50) [*Akademie Ausgabe* vol. 5, 319].

³⁸ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 144–145 (§28) [*Akademie Ausgabe* vol. 5, 260–261]. For Adorno’s critique, see for example *Aesthetic Theory*,

Adorno's conception of reconciliation with nature – hinted at in the reflective experience of natural beauty, mediated through the artwork's mimetic comportment which allows for the more of nature (its non-identity with subjective ordering) to come to expression in sensuous shape – is neither one of complete synthesis (seamless identity/unity), nor absolute alienation (absolute non-identity/diversity), but precisely a “togetherness of diversity.” It is an open, informal unity, as I have emphasized elsewhere.³⁹ Reading the artwork's reconciliatory aspect as consisting in *the semblance of a togetherness of diversity*, I think it is fair to claim that togetherness is a reciprocal way of relating that emphasizes an embodied, sensuous affinity allowing Others to remain themselves without being complete strangers. Granted, this is a semblance that the artwork has to expose as semblance, but it nonetheless holds on to the possibility of utopia.

Thus, Adorno's conception of non-identity does not amount to *absolute unknowability* as Hailwood claims, but instead indicates *determinate unknowability* (or determinate indeterminability, as one of the headings in the section on Natural Beauty in *Aesthetic Theory* is called).⁴⁰ This is an unknowability in relation to *specific* human attempts to reduce nature to its usefulness or uselessness from an anthropocentric point of view. It is a result of a determinate negation of the existing reductive views of non-human nature and non-human animals, like the fox, and does thus not lead to

a mystical *absolute* unknowability, but precisely to a *determinate* unknowability.

Adorno's conception of non-identity does not, then, harbor a secret wish to fully know the particular, as Hailwood claims, instead it implies precisely the same comportment that he seems to be after: a respect for the fox's irreducibility to “its role for us.” Not a complete alien, but “a beautiful alien [‘*Schöne Fremde*’]” as Adorno phrases it in *Negative Dialectics* with a reference to the Romantic poet Eichendorff, just before arguing that: “The reconciled condition would not annex the alien [*Fremde*] by means of philosophical imperialism, but would find its happiness [*Glück*] in the fact that the alien, in the proximity it is granted, remains what is distant and different, beyond the heterogeneous and beyond that which is one's own.”⁴¹ So in actuality, Hailwood would not have had to consult *Aesthetic Theory*, but would have found the view of the Other as sharing some characteristics with us and inhabiting the natural world alongside us, and simultaneously always escaping the human wish to completely exhaust its particularity, already in *Negative Dialectics*.

3. Non-identity and Utopia

The danger involved in emphasizing the utopian aspect that undeniably is there in Adorno's thinking is of course that the critical aspect is underplayed. Then we risk ending up with

276; GS 7, 410. I discuss this criticism of Adorno's further in Flodin, “Of Mice and Men,” esp. 143–144.

³⁹ Flodin, “Adorno and Schelling on the Art–Nature Relation.” See also Flodin, “The eloquence of something that has no language.”

⁴⁰ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 71 [translation altered]; GS 7, 113: “*Bestimmte Unbestimmbarkeit*.”

⁴¹ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 191 [translation altered]; GS 6, 192. For some reason, the passage on Eichendorff is omitted from the English translation. Alison Stone has noted that Adorno in his effort to include a certain degree of alienation in his concept of reconciliation is close to the Early German Romantics' comprehension of reconciliation. See Stone, “Alienation from Nature and Early German Romanticism,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 17, no. 1 (2014): 51.

Jane Bennett's conclusion that Adorno's "specific materialism" aims at "a set of practical techniques for training oneself to better detect and accept nonidentity."⁴² At first it seems somewhat strange that Bennett should include a rather lengthy discussion on Adorno's negative dialectics in the first chapter of *Vibrant Matter*, when she has already signalled in the preface that she "pursue[s] a materialism in the tradition of Democritus-Epicurus-Spinoza-Diderot-Deleuze more than Hegel-Marx-Adorno."⁴³ But Bennett wants to pay heed to Adorno as someone who "dares to affirm something like thing-power," at the same time as she faults him for not going far enough, for not venturing into a vital materialism, which is what she is proclaiming.⁴⁴ The problem with Bennett's account of Adorno is that it turns non-identity into a positive identity, a *thing-power*. Adorno strives for a thinking beyond identity-thinking, but he is not claiming, *pace* Bennett, that "conceptualization automatically obscures the inadequacy of its concepts."⁴⁵ In fact, Adorno holds on to the possibility of a conceptualization that would acknowledge its debt to what it conceptualizes. This is the very core of *Negative Dialectics*,

indeed of Adorno's whole thinking, which "strive[s], by way of the concept, to transcend the concept."⁴⁶ This effort amounts to taking the mimetic aspect of thinking, mentioned above, seriously. Bennett does not take into account the historical fact of obscurity, instead she hypostasizes it. She equals her concept of "thing-power" with Adorno's insistence on "the preponderance of the object" without acknowledging that such a preponderance is also of the falsifying and concealing kind, namely the priority that the objectivity of the capitalist world order has over, above and through the human subjects: "Despite the preponderance of the object, the thingness [*Dinghaftigkeit*] of the world is also semblance [*Schein*]. It misleads the subjects to ascribe the social relationship of their production to the things in themselves."⁴⁷ We cannot therefore abandon the demystifying aspect of negative dialectics. This of course needs to be bore in mind when considering the more of natural beauty as well; the passage on natural beauty as "the trace of the nonidentical in things" quoted above continues: "As long as this spell [of universal identity] prevails, the nonidentical has no positive existence."⁴⁸

It is to Adorno's advantage that he reflects on the way human beings through their domination of nature have ended up in a second nature of their own making, a second nature that has taken on a mask of natural objectivity despite being historically produced. And that this created thing – capitalist society – exercises real power over us all, human and non-human alike. A power that presents itself as if it was as unavoidable as a force of so called first nature, thus preventing

⁴² Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 14. "Specific materialism" is a quote from the standard English translation of *Negative Dialectics*, 203. Adorno's original phrasing is "das spezifisch Materialistische" (*Negative Dialektik*, 203), which is better rendered as "the specifically materialistic." In the passage, Adorno is writing about the somatic moment that is necessary in thinking (which is another version of acknowledging the non-conceptual conceptually) and how suffering points to the need of criticism and transformation of existing society. It is interesting to note how the standard translation here conceals Adorno's efforts to do justice to the non-conceptual, in a Hegelian move that, despite her outright dismissal of Hegel, actually fits Bennett's attempt very well. Hers is a materialism that turns into idealism, because of its lack of critical stance towards the existing order of things.

⁴³ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xiii.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴⁶ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 15; GS 6, 27.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 189 [translation altered]; GS 6, 190.

⁴⁸ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 73; GS 7, 114.

radical transformative praxis. Now perhaps more than ever it is necessary to reflect on the dialectic of nature and history:

The traditional antithesis of nature and history is true and false; true insofar as it expresses what has befallen the moment of nature [*Naturmoment*]; false, insofar as, by means of conceptual reconstruction, it apologetically repeats the concealment of history's natural growth [*Naturwüchsigkeit*] by history itself.⁴⁹

Nature and history have traditionally been regarded as antithetical, and this view indeed testifies to the historical reality of the domination of nature. But the division also conceals the emergence of history from nature. Nature considered as a static entity completely opposed to humankind, and history regarded as the quintessence of progress, is the false conception of nature projected onto it by a nature-dominating society and thought which have petrified into second nature and identity-thinking. It is precisely the treatment of nature as a stable and ever-renewable source of raw material for capitalist profit that has led us onto the path of environmental disaster and climate change. The remedy is of course not to just blur the borders between humans and the rest of nature, and use the rightful critique of human superiority as a way of escaping responsibility for human-induced destruction by claiming a levelling of all differences, in the mode of new materialism and (at least some strands of) posthumanism.⁵⁰ I do agree with Andreas Malm, who in his recent book *The Progress of This Storm* (2018), emphasizes the

importance of analytically separating between nature and human in order to acknowledge the very real consequences of human action on the rest of nature.⁵¹ But I also believe that Adorno's conception of nature has the advantage of acknowledging this at the same time as addressing that the domination of nature is made possible by a prior separation from and denigration of nature, that needs to be criticized in order to hold open the possibility for a nature beyond domination. I want to conclude this article with addressing the absence of Adorno's concept of nature in *The Progress of This Storm*, because it highlights something rather interesting that is reminiscent of Hailwood's criticism of Adorno.⁵² The connection turns on *a certain lack of aesthetic reflection*, or reflection on aesthetics.

Malm's negligence of Adorno's considerations of the human–nature dialectic apparently has to do with his faulty assessment that “Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer tended towards the view that destructive technology inhered in human nature.”⁵³ This is not the case in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which one might suspect is the work implicitly referred to in the previous quote, nor in other of Adorno's writings. Such ontological claims are vehemently eschewed by Horkheimer and Adorno, and in *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno even asserts that technology would be able to assist nature under

⁵¹ Andreas Malm, *The Progress of This Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World* (London and New York: Verso, 2018).

⁵² True, Malm affirmatively quotes Adorno from the lectures on “History and Freedom” on one occasion, but not regarding Adorno's conception of the relationship between humanity and nature, even though he would have found plenty on that subject matter in the lectures, but rather on progress (and again, not addressing how this is related to the nature–history dialectic for Adorno). See Malm, *The Progress of This Storm*, 230.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 210.

⁴⁹ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 358 [translation altered]; GS 6, 351.

⁵⁰ For a critique, see e.g. Zipporah Weisberg, “The Trouble with Posthumanism: Bacteria are People Too,” in *Critical Animal Studies: Thinking the Unthinkable*, ed. John Sorenson (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2014), 93–116.

different relations of production.⁵⁴ Malm’s criticism of Adorno and Horkheimer also seems hasty not least because he, in the passage right before his verdict, praises Engels for having seen that “attempts to subdue nature [...] precede the capitalist mode of production,”⁵⁵ which is precisely what Adorno and Horkheimer elaborate on in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Furthermore, Malm emphasizes that Francis Bacon, rather than Descartes, is to be regarded as “[t]he spiritual father” of the simultaneously metaphysical and most concretely implemented view of nature as subsumable object.⁵⁶ Anyone who has read *Dialectic of Enlightenment* knows that Bacon’s role in the development of nature-dominating reason is very much underlined by Adorno and Horkheimer, so much so that the opening essay, “The Concept of Enlightenment,” starts off with scrutinizing Bacon’s efforts to “establish man as the master of nature.”⁵⁷ That Adorno and Horkheimer’s work is rejected with one sentence (on false grounds) is perhaps not surprising, given that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is a heavily criticized and also misunderstood work.⁵⁸ Malm’s hasty dismissal of Adorno’s

comprehension of the human–nature dialectic nevertheless comes back to haunt his argument.

Unlike Hailwood, Malm is not altogether insensitive towards regarding art and aesthetics as important for grasping the dialectic of humanity and nature. Thus, Malm ends his penultimate chapter with an analysis of Joseph Conrad’s novel *Victory* (1915), and he even claims, in quite an Adornoesque manner one might add, that “if only negatively, Conrad here [in *Victory*] dramatizes the conditions for liberation.”⁵⁹ This is so because *Victory* tells the story of a coal company’s downfall on a tropical island, turning it into, in Malm’s words, “a fantasy about the denouement of the fossil economy.”⁶⁰ In the concluding chapter, Malm also writes of the need for “an affirmation of nature as something *other* than the commodity.”⁶¹ However – and here he is reminiscent of Hailwood – Malm fails to recognize the longstanding tradition of aesthetics, of which Adorno is an heir, that regards aesthetic comportment as precisely an alternative to the dominating approach to nature qua raw material, object and commodity.⁶² The under-analysis of the aesthetic approach is problematic, since Malm actually is quite dependent on aesthetics and

⁵⁴ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 68; GS 7, 107.

⁵⁵ Malm, *The Progress of This Storm*, 209.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 209.

⁵⁷ Max Horkheimer and T. W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 1. For a discussion of aesthetic perspectives that counter the Baconian effort, see Karl Axelsson and Camilla Flodin, “Contemplation or Manipulation? Aesthetic Perspectives on Nature and Animals from Shaftesbury to Bio-Art,” in *International Yearbook of Aesthetics*, vol. 19, ed. Zoltán Somhegyi (Santa Cruz, CA: International Association for Aesthetics, 2017), 29–41.

⁵⁸ Malm seems to be directly or indirectly influenced by Habermas’s classic dismissal of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s “blackest book,” which by concentrating on the dark side of enlightenment completely omits a “positive” concept of enlightenment, despite the outspoken ambition of the authors to invoke precisely this. See Jürgen Habermas, “Die Verschlingung von Mythos und Aufklärung: Bemerkungen zur *Dialektik der Aufklärung* – nach einer erneuten

Lektüre,” in *Mythos und Moderne: Begriff und Bild einer Rekonstruktion*, ed. Karl Heinz Bohrer (Frankfurt a./M.: Suhrkamp, 1983), 405. For a more nuanced reading of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, see e.g. Britta Scholze, *Kunst als Kritik: Adornos Weg aus der Dialektik* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2000), 55–96.

⁵⁹ Malm, *The Progress of This Storm*, 216.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 218.

⁶² See e.g. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 66; GS 7, 104. In “Adorno and Schelling on the Art–Nature Relation” I discuss the similarities between Adorno’s and Schelling’s ideas on the aesthetic approach to nature as more than an object for classification and consumption. See esp. 184. For an overview of the tradition of aesthetics that runs counter to the Baconian approach to nature as a thing to be mastered, see Axelsson and Flodin, “Contemplation or Manipulation?”

artistic representation. Not only does the Conrad novel, as mentioned, serve as a pointer to Malm's idea of a liberated nature, but throughout the book, he also returns to Ben Lerner's 2014 novel *10:04*.

Lerner's novel is set in New York City and the narrative takes place between two storms, the hurricanes Irene and Sandy (though the latter is never actually named), respectively. The novel is a piece of self-reflective fiction, in which the main character is struggling with his second book. Malm, however, keeps the form and content neatly apart, and only considers the latter, like when quoting from the protagonist's description of the extraordinary heat in October as an illustration of how climate change affects the apprehension of temporality; climate change being the result of past actions which we now quite literally feel on our skin.⁶³ Malm does not offer a consideration of *why* he appeals to a work of self-reflective fiction in order to strengthen his argument, along with the more expected references to scientific reports on climate change. Without a proper consideration of what role art and aesthetics has for Malm's arguments in his book, the attention given to Lerner's novel, and also to the one by Conrad, becomes a mere ornamental addition.⁶⁴ Throughout *The Progress of This Storm*, Malm wrestles with the need for theory when the warming condition seems to demand urgent

⁶³ Malm, *The Progress of This Storm*, 6.

⁶⁴ Malm has a short discussion of E. Ann Kaplan's *Climate Trauma: Foreseeing the Future in Dystopian Film and Fiction*, which deals with the trend of dystopian narratives that have become increasingly popular as the insight about climate change has dawned on us, but there is no reflection by Malm regarding if such narratives might have something in particular to contribute to the way we relate to nature and climate change, he rather treats them as part of "popular culture" which he seems to think immediately reflects the concerns of people (see *ibid.*, 10). It is unclear if he thinks of Lerner's novel as belonging to popular culture as well.

praxis, in a way reminiscent to how the protagonist in *10:04* wrestles with the need for literature – a second book by himself – in a world that is heating up and falling apart. In this warming world of ours, I would like to claim that the contemplative comportment demanded by artworks still holds a certain truth content, as a mode of resistance to dominating praxis, precisely as Adorno emphasized. Malm's repeated return to literary representations throughout his book bears witness to this, but he does not bring the importance of aesthetics to the level of reflection.⁶⁵ Concerning aesthetic reflection, Lerner's novel is vastly superior to Malm's theoretical work.

⁶⁵ To be fair, Malm does engage with literature's possible contribution to a critique of the warming condition in an earlier article called "This is the Hell that I have Heard of: Some Dialectical Images in Fossil Fuel Fiction," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 53, no. 2 (2017): 121–141. But although Malm draws on Benjamin (hence the use of "dialectical images" in the title; it should be noted that Benjamin also is the source of the title for Malm's 2018 book) he nonetheless comes across more like a late Lukács, demanding a realist *fossil fuel fiction* "broach[ing] the cause of the problem [of climate change]" (126), namely the burning of fossil fuels, and criticizing novels like Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) for not identifying the cause of the narrative's destroyed biosphere, while saluting precursors such as novellas *Men in the Sun* (1962), by Ghassan Kanafani, and *Typhoon* (1902), by Joseph Conrad. According to Malm these novellas offer premonitions of climate change and furthermore they rightly tie these premonitions to the use of fossil fuels (oil in the case of *Men in the Sun*, coal in the case of *Typhoon*). But causes and effects are the realm of science, not art. The standard to which Malm measures literary quality is an utterly external one. Thus, the problem of a lack of aesthetic reflection is present in this article as well, despite its more thorough engagement with literature. Malm is very clear about his wish for literature to adhere to vulgar Marxism: "As long as cli-fi [climate fiction] floats above the material base of the fossil economy, until it invents narrative techniques for connecting the dots – however far apart they may seem – it will have limited capacity for illuminating the causes of present and future heat, in the worst case even serving to naturalize it" (126). But Malm soon gives himself away; his standard is not one of literary quality, that is why he a few pages later is forced to admit that "Ben Lerner's *10:04* [is] surely one of the finest cli-fi novels yet written (although it is as silent on the cause as any other)" (129).

Conclusion

Is Lerner's *10:04* an authentic artwork in an Adornian sense? To answer this would demand a thorough analysis that cannot be given here. I can only offer some suggestions for why it would be possible to read it as such. *10:04* is a metafictional work that does not only reflect on its own emergence, it contains astute reflections on other artworks as well (both works of literature and visual art). Furthermore, it also acknowledges its own alienation from nature in a highly reflective way, as for example in the narrator's description of his experience of the sublime:

I breathed in the night air that was or was not laced with anachronistic blossoms and felt the small thrill I always felt to a lesser or greater degree when I looked at Manhattan's skyline and the innumerable illuminated windows and the liquid sapphire and ruby of traffic on the FDR Drive and the present absence of the towers. It was a thrill that only built space produced in me, never the natural world, and only when there was an incommensurability of scale – the human dimension of the windows tiny from such distance combining but not dissolving into the larger architecture of the skyline that was the expression, the material signature, of a collective person who didn't yet exist, a still uninhabited second person plural to whom all the arts, even in their more intimate registers, were nevertheless addressed. Only an urban experience of the sublime was available to me because only then was the greatness beyond calculation the intuition of community.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Ben Lerner, *10:04* (London: Granta, 2014), 108.

It is a different matter when views like these – reminiscent of Hailwood's belief that the arts concern only human matters – are expressed in a work of art than in an academic piece of writing like Hailwood's. It is much closer at hand to interpret the narrator's rejection of natural beauty or sublimity as in fact guarding the more of nature, in line with how Adorno argues is the case in Beckett's work, namely that "art must either eliminate from itself the nature with which it is concerned, or attack it."⁶⁷ Art cannot depict the realized, reconciled nature as if it existed, but has to present it in its socio-historical guise: as repressed. Nevertheless, the possibility of a transformed condition is indirectly expressed in the outright rejection of the natural sublime in *10:04*, in a way that can be compared to how for example *Endgame*, despite one of the characters even exclaiming "There's no more nature," still manages to express the possibility for things being otherwise.⁶⁸ And it can furthermore be argued that something of the reconciliatory quality that is characteristic of an aesthetic unity still remains even in a highly self-reflective work like *10:04*, whose fragmented parts are held together in a way that does not seem forced but freely chosen by the parts themselves.

⁶⁷ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 133; GS 7, 201.

⁶⁸ Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*, revised text (trans. by the author), in *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett*, vol. 2, ed. S. E. Gontarski (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 8. Cf. T. W. Adorno, "Trying to Understand *Endgame*," in *Notes to Literature* vol. 1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 245. "Versuch, das Endspiel zu verstehen," in *Noten zur Literatur, Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 11 (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2003), 285.

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