

**Catastrophe and History:
Adorno, the Anthropocene,
and Beethoven's Late Style**

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Abstract

This article develops a critique of the notion of the Anthropocene through the lens of Adorno's reading of Beethoven's late style. The popularisation of the term Anthropocene has been accompanied by the emergence of two seemingly opposed discourses: one response could be characterised in terms of a Promethean faith in science, and the other as a turn towards new materialism. While the differences between those two approaches could hardly appear greater, they converge at their margins: both operate on the assumption that the Anthropocene signifies a nature-culture continuum. It is at this point that Adorno's work, and, in particular, his thinking on aesthetics can make an important intervention. For Adorno, the recognition of the historical truth of the distinction between history and nature is the driving force of critique, the comportment of which Adorno regards as most clearly expressed in artworks, in particular, in music. I read Adorno's interpretation of Beethoven's late works as a contrasting response to a situation that is pervaded by the experience of finitude. In lending form to transience, the compositions of the late Beethoven, as seen through Adorno's eyes, attain exemplary status for a dialectical rethinking of nature and history: While Beethoven's compositions of the middle period let history retreat beyond the semblance of reconciled nature, his late style, in turn, makes explicit the historical nature of what has been "naturalised" by the semblance of the reconciled whole. It is precisely in its commitment to negativity that Beethoven's late style becomes instructive to us in a time of crisis.

Keywords

natural history, allegory, Beethoven, late style, Anthropocene, new materialism, critique

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ALLES WIRD UFER WARTET AUF DAS MEER

Heiner Müller, Anatomie Titus Fall of Rome

If we believe certain trends in popular culture and the humanities, we have entered the time of the Anthropocene: the beginning of the end of human and natural history as we know it. In short, the uncertain times of late modernity have given way to the time of certain catastrophe. Whether or not one regards this particular conceptualisation of the present as accurate or helpful – and I will show in this article that it is rather problematic – in a time of (continuous) crisis, we could do worse than consulting an eminently modern thinker, whom Edward Said once deemed a “catastrophic commentator on the present”: Theodor Adorno.¹

The contribution that Adorno’s thinking can afford us at the present moment might defy the expectations which are commonly directed at “environmental criticism” or “ecological thought.” Adorno’s concern is not “nature” in an unmediated sense, nor the “environment”, understood as an ontological web of nature-culture complexes; rather, the arena of critique is always second nature, or, to put it with Lukács: the world of convention. As Adorno writes in *Aesthetic Theory*, “[w]hat appears untamed in nature and remote from history, belongs – polemically speaking – to a historical phase in which the social

¹ Edward Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature against the Grain* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 14.

web is so densely woven that the living fear death by suffocation.”² If we seek to distil from Adorno’s thought some kind of positive message as to how to deal with the threat of climate change or environmental depredation, we will look in vain. Rather, to think with Adorno at a time of crisis is to engage in self-reflection: that is, to investigate the intricate and often unconscious ways in which present forms of thought and agency participate in and reinforce the very web of domination that they seek to escape.

Adorno responds in his writings with almost seismographic sensitivity to the perennial catastrophe of modernity in the only way he regards permissible or, indeed, possible: for him, as for Kant, the critical path alone is still open.³ In this spirit, I will present a critique of what I identify as the two major tendencies that form the backbone of Anthropocene discourses: a Promethean faith in science, on the one hand, and emerging forms of new materialism, on the other. With reference to Adorno’s work, I show that, in eliminating the dialectic between nature and history in favour of theorisations of nature-history continua, both approaches leave critical thought and agency in a *cul-de-sac*. I will then explore Adorno’s interpretation of the late Beethoven – another authority on catastrophes – to show how the consciousness of transience that motivates “late style” sets into motion a critical comportment along the lines of a natural historical critique. If Beethoven’s compositions did indeed

² T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2004), 65.

³ See T.W. Adorno, ‘Why Still Philosophy?’, in T.W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 7.

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form a horizon towards which Adorno's thinking stretches itself – and the philosopher leaves little doubt on this issue – we might not only find a more fruitful model for dealing with “catastrophes” in his interpretation of the work of the latter, but, in passing, also shed some light on the relationship between critique and aesthetics in Adorno's work.

1. Anthropocene Catastrophes

1.1 The Dawn of Meaning

In his key text on the Anthropocene, “The Climate of History”, Dipesh Chakrabarty characterises the proposed epoch as “a shared catastrophe that we have all fallen into.”⁴ The Anthropocene allegedly represents a neutral geological hypothesis – in Latour's words, “it's the brainchild of stern, earnest and sun-tanned geologists who, until recently, had been wholly unconcerned by the tours and detours of the humanities”⁵ – yet, as a sign of radical finitude it already taints the air of scientific neutrality in which it is clothed. Indeed, the term does not only stand for the actuality of human-induced environmental disaster, but also for the anticipation of future radical destruction. “Politics, theology and nature [...],” Latour claims, “are all pointing to, if not the End, at least to a radical change of horizon.”⁶ Anthropocene discourses – in popular culture, science and the humanities alike – play out in a force field which is held open by a profound sense of futurelessness

and the dread of the ultimate insignificance of existence, on the one end, and its antidote, a longing for meaning and continuity, on the other. The present proliferation of Sci-Fi narratives in popular culture might give a first intimation of this: the Anthropocene imagination “crawls with narratives of survival,” as Evan Calder Williams notes.⁷ If the theatre of the Anthropocene is the future, then perhaps precisely for the reason that it seems no longer guaranteed. Today, one is told, “we” are all standing at the “dawn of the Anthropocene epoch”⁸ and we are heading for disaster.

The Anthropocene, as its name already indicates, problematises this “we.” Its author, it is proposed, is the human species itself. “[I]t is being claimed that humans are a force of nature in a geological sense,” writes Chakrabarty.⁹ The anthropocentrism of the claim that human beings have become a force of nature, is set off against a widespread concern for the disenfranchised and vulnerable human individual. The individual subject is conceptualised as being at the mercy of those indiscriminate and overpowering forces that its collective body unleashes. “[W]e have now become playthings of planetary forces,” William Connolly asserts.¹⁰ The human species as a force of nature threatens to devour its young: the fragile individual is not identical with the global whole, which it helps to maintain and over which it has no control. On the milky way to finitude, the Anthropocene is

⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35 (Winter 2009): 218.

⁵ Bruno Latour, “Facing Gaia: Six Lectures on Natural Religion,” version 2013, *Bruno Latour*, accessed 06.03.18, <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/downloads/GIFFORD-ASSEMBLED.pdf>, 76.

⁶ Latour, 98.

⁷ Evan Calder Williams cit. in Robert Macfarlane, “Generation Anthropocene: How humans have altered the planet forever,” *The Guardian*, April 1, 2016.

⁸ Martin Rees cit. in Damian Carrington, “The Anthropocene epoch: scientists declare dawn on human-influenced age,” *The Guardian*, August 29, 2016.

⁹ Chakrabarty, 207.

¹⁰ William Connolly, *Facing the Planetary: Entangled Humanism and the Politics of Swarming* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 7.

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marked by what one could call, with reference to Adorno, a geological nexus of complicity (*Schuldzusammenhang*) in which everyone and no one is responsible, and from which exit is as utopian as its scenario dystopian. Human beings have “stumbled into” the Anthropocene, as Chakrabarty attests, and they will be propelled into it deeper and deeper.¹¹

I want to suggest that current Anthropocene discourses might owe their somewhat startling popularity not only to an increasing awareness of environmental depredation but also to a wider absence that they are employed to cover: to a looming sense of disenfranchised agency in late capitalist societies and to a gnawing sense that all there is might actually be all there is, the Anthropocene answers as a geological totality which, scientific proof permitted, has at least the certainty of its innermost destructiveness inscribed into its very composition. In this sense, Latour’s stern, earnest and sun-tanned archaeologists might not be digging into all that neutral ground.¹² Rather, one is tempted to suggest, the proposed adoption of the Anthropocene onto the geological timeline signifies a longing to shelter the precarious forms of contemporary existence under the comforting wing of scientific certainty. The notion of geologic time – which is

¹¹ Chakrabarty, 217. For a critique of the “indiscriminate” and anthropocentric nature of some theorisations of the Anthropocene see, for instance, Daniel Hartley, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, and the Problem of Culture,” in *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?*, ed. Jason W. Moore (Oakland: PM Press, 2016), 154–165.

¹² In this context, it is also worth pointing out the entwinement of the notion of the Anthropocene with geo-engineering from the very start. Paul Crutzen, who, together with his colleague Eugene Stroermer, successfully introduced the name Anthropocene to describe the current epoch, dedicates his research to this matter. See, for instance, Paul Crutzen, “Albedo enhancement by stratospheric sulfur injections: A contribution to resolve a policy dilemma,” *Climatic Change* 77, no. 3 (2006): 211–219.

defined by the *Encyclopædia Britannica* as “[t]he extensive interval of time occupied by the geologic history of Earth. It extends from about 4.6 billion years ago (corresponding to Earth’s initial formation) to the present day. It is, in effect, that segment of Earth history that is represented by and recorded in rock strata”¹³ – stipulates both reassurance and transcendence. As a potential segment on the geological timeline, the epoch of the Anthropocene anchors the shifting grounds of late modernity in the undoubtable presence of matter – or, better, rock strata – on the one hand, while entrusting them, transformed into a unit of abstract time, to a temporal order beyond the bounds of human history, on the other.

Thus wedged between a magnitude of 4.6 billion years that preceded it and a future that spells its fall, human and natural history appear tainted with an inconsequentiality that is not only to be mourned. “The universe is expanding,” says little Alvy in *Annie Hall*, so what’s the point of doing one’s homework? Yet, the dissolution or, perhaps, absolution of history and its ills in the sweet oblivion of deep time, has as its flipside in the rather pompous question of how present civilization will be remembered. The search for markers to formalise the Anthropocene as a new epoch from the perspective of future archaeologists – with the admittedly unflattering contenders of mass extinction, waste levels, or chicken skeletons as “key fossil evidence” – leads the way. “But despite the countless billions killed to feed humanity’s seemingly insatiable appetite for its mild flesh,” writes Damian Carrington in a *Guardian* article on chicken fossils as prime

¹³ “Geologic time,” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 9 September, 2015, accessed 23.01.2018, academic.eb.com/levels/collegiate/article/geologic-time/36466.

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criteria for the Anthropocene, “the domestic chicken looks set to be granted immortality.”¹⁴ The gratitude of the innumerable billions of killed chicken must be boundless.¹⁵

If we thus read the proposed declaration of the Anthropocene as a geologic epoch symptomatically or allegorically, that is, not just in light of what it refers to, but also with regards to what it expresses about the present time, it is revealed as a phenomenon that oscillates between a longing for ultimate and solid grounds, for what is really real, and for a bigger story that would redeem the ambiguities of the present moment. As a figure of absence, then, the Anthropocene signifies perhaps the difficulty or, the impossibility of profoundly making sense of present experiences and to a certain paralysis that might befall the individual when faced with the day-to-day realities of global capitalism and with the prospect of environmental disaster – coupled with the knowledge that taking the bike to work or recycling one’s milk cartons might not quite be enough to get a handle on things. What I have sketched here in rather polemical words, I believe, points to what Adorno would call a crisis of meaning: a moment when experience, understanding, and agency are running up against their limits and when it is felt that the current critical vocabulary can no longer adequately express what is at stake or help making sense of it. In light of a lack of meaningful forms of engagement in the present, then, the Anthropocene promises – to appropriate a passage from *Negative Dialectics* – to let at the very least “the

¹⁴ Damian Carrington, “How the domestic chicken rose to define the Anthropocene,” *The Guardian*, August 31, 2016.

¹⁵ For an astute critique of these kinds of dynamics in Anthropocene discourses, see Eileen Crist, “On the Poverty of Our Nomenclature,” in Jason W. Moore, 14–33.

disturbed and damaged course of the world” appear commensurable “with the sense of its sheer senselessness and blindness.”¹⁶ In other words, does the intention to announce the epoch of the Anthropocene, the age of catastrophe, not testify to a desire for a meta-narrative that takes the place of a catastrophic lack of meaningful experience and effective agency and into which the sum of human actions can be smoothly integrated? As we shall see, the longing for integration into a bigger story is an endeavour that most theorists of the Anthropocene share. By sealing off the space of critique in the process, however, as I will show later on when discussing Adorno’s reflections on Beethoven, this urge for integration is problematic.

1.2 Heading forward: History without Nature or Nature without History

The popularisation of the term Anthropocene has been accompanied by the emergence of two seemingly opposed discourses. While both broadly endorse the basic diagnoses for which it stands, they respond to it in rather different ways: one answer could be characterised in terms of a Promethean faith in science and the other as a turn towards new materialism.¹⁷

¹⁶ T. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973), 403–4. The original quote reads as follows: “As in Kafka’s writings, the disturbed and damaged course of the world is incommensurable also with the sense of its sheer senselessness and blindness[.]”

¹⁷ In using the term “Prometheanism”, I follow T.J. Demos, who remarks on the “New-Prometheans” in his book *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017), 26; in using the term “new materialism”, I follow William Connolly, who invokes the notion to designate broadly the direction of thought that ranges from object orientated ontology over immanent naturalism to posthumanism (William E. Connolly, “The ‘New

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The Promethean position, broadly speaking, argues for the expansion and development of technological powers and, thus, adheres to the prospect of greater and more efficient domination of nature – primarily through geo-engineering. Prometheanism, in other words, seeks to exploit and develop the potential of the human species *qua* force of nature. New materialism, in contrast, aspires to re-think the relationship between human beings and the environment in terms of a de-centring of the human and, thus, places its faith in the recognition of affinities between human and non-human processes. While the differences between those two discursive camps – based on the respective re-centring or de-centring of the *anthropos* against the cypher of its limitations – could hardly be greater, they converge in one crucial point: in a foregrounding of what one could call “faith” over “history.” Put differently, both of these approaches have in common a structural tendency to answer to anthropocenic finitude by prioritising theorisations of agency and possibility over a commitment to negative critique.

This tendency goes hand in hand with the key assertion for which the name of the Anthropocene stands: namely, as Chakrabarty puts it, “the collapse of the age-old humanist distinction between natural history and human history.”¹⁸ Latour makes an even stronger assertion in his “Gifford

Materialism’ and the Fragility of Things,” *Millennium - Journal of International Studies* 41, no. 3 (2013): 399–412, 399). While I am aware that there are differences between new materialist accounts, the basic points addressed in the following are shared by most of them. I am also aware that not all of these theorists embrace the term “Anthropocene” or embrace it uncritically (see, for instance, Connolly’s more recent book, *Facing the Planetary*, 32; or Crist, 14–33). Yet, the problematisation of the present in terms of environmental depredation and concern remains a common denominator.

¹⁸ Chakrabarty, 201.

Lectures”: “ [...] the Anthropocene does not close this Divide [of nature and history]: it *ignores* it entirely [emphasis added].”¹⁹ In fact, for Prometheans and new materialists alike, the empirical evidence of the Anthropocene testifies to a nature-culture *continuum*. From the perspective of Prometheanism, this continuum developed historically and legitimises at present more comprehensive and speedy interventions into the environment. After all, if everything is shaped already by human influence – that is, if history has indeed conquered or absorbed nature – the task is merely to own up to and develop human potential, to optimise technology and, with it, to administer nature.²⁰ “An exciting, but also difficult and daunting task lies ahead of the global research and engineering community,” write Crutzen and Stoermer, namely, “to guide mankind towards global, sustainable, environmental management.”²¹ For Prometheanism, nature and history form an unproblematic antithesis, which allegedly can, will or has been resolved by the subject of history *qua* force of nature.

The Promethean vision that history is in full control of nature is countered by the new materialist vision that the domination of nature might be overcome by the assimilation of history to what is traditionally called nature. According to this view, the Anthropocene, understood as a global natural-historical disequilibrium which implicates the “human sphere”

¹⁹ Latour, 78.

²⁰ “But it is too late to leave them alone, given the pace at which we are losing corals,” said van Oppen, who said the broad aim is to speed up natural evolutionary processes. ‘I don’t have any problem with that. We have already intervened in the marine environment tremendously and there is no part where we cannot see human influence.’ Damian Carrington, “New lab-bred super corals could help avert global reef wipeout,” *The Guardian*, December 23, 2017.

²¹ Crutzen and Stoermer cit. in Chakrabarty, 211.

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as much as its environment, urges re-theorisations of ontologies, subjectivities and agencies in order to foreground a crucial interconnectedness of humans and their environment. Thus, new materialist approaches can be understood as answering to the Promethean take on the dissolution of the nature-history distinction as reconciled by the subject of history with a widening of notions of agency or subjectivity as to breathe life into a hitherto passive conception of matter, body, and the environment. In other words, new materialism seeks to reinscribe what is conventionally called history into nature in order to assign non-human processes and entities their supposedly rightful place in the order of the universe. The reconciliation of nature and history in the subject of history that Prometheanism offers, is answered by a tendency within some radical strands of new materialism to get rid of history altogether and to rewrite past and present in terms of Gaia stories or, what Latour calls, geostory.²² After all, history, as Donna Haraway asserts, “is the sort of story human exceptionalists tell.”²³

Anthropocene discourses, whether of the Promethean or new materialist variant, thus seem to derive part of their legitimacy from the claim that the Anthropocene crucially inaugurates a *new* era in light of which allegedly *old* concepts – such as the distinction between nature and history – have lost their validity, will be overcome or are revealed as (having always been) inadequate. However, forgotten in the twilight of deep time, blinded by the promise of technological transcendence or swiped aside by Gaian tentacles, are the lessons from the more recent history of philosophy and, with

²² Latour, 73.

²³ Donna J. Haraway, “Staying with the Trouble: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene,” in Jason W. Moore, 34–77, 52.

it, from the philosophy of history. The claim that the distinction between human and natural history can or indeed must be challenged is not as new as some theorists of the Anthropocene seem to insist; in fact, it has been a key concern for a wide range of thinkers from the 19th to the 21st century and it finds perhaps its most compelling development in Adorno’s work. Indeed, it is hardly an exaggeration to call the dialectical re-thinking of the relationship between nature and history constitutive for Adorno’s notion of critique.²⁴ In contrast to many thinkers of the Anthropocene, who base their respective proposals on the fact that there *is* a nature-history continuum and that, *therefore*, thought and agency must be construed and enabled in such a way as to control or affirm it, historico-philosophical accounts, such as Adorno’s, crucially recognise the historical truth of the established binary. For Adorno, the nature–history dualism is neither simply given, nor is it completely arbitrary; rather, it has attained historical reality and, as such, it must be the starting point for reflection. As he puts it in *Negative Dialectics*: “The traditional antithesis of nature and history is both true and false; true insofar as it expresses what happened to the natural element; false insofar as it apologetically repeats conceptually the concealment of history’s natural growth [*Naturwüchsigkeit*] by history itself.”²⁵

²⁴ As Adorno puts it in his lectures on *History and Freedom*: “That then is the programme – if I may call it that – that philosophy would have to postulate for the relation of nature to history. If I may repeat myself here: because I believe that this programme is constitutive for all attempts to interpret the philosophy of history, or indeed philosophy in general, I think that the attempt should be made to behold all nature, and whatever regards itself as nature, as history” (T. W. Adorno, *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964–1965*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 124).

²⁵ *Negative Dialectics*, 358 (translation modified); see *Negative Dialektik, Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 6, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970, hereafter *GS*), 351.

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On the terms of its own discourses, the anthropocenic catastrophe presses for solutions. The choice presents itself as between the new materialist option: to liberate the environment from the domination of the human species, or the Promethean option: to liberate the human species from the domination of nature. From an Adorno-inspired perspective, however, both seemingly contrarious responses form two sides of the same coin. The conceptual morphing of nature and history that both approaches share, leads to a situation in which all cats are grey, or, better, *immergleich*. While the Promethean position reinforces what, according to the above citation, is false about the distinction between nature and history, new materialism disregards what is true about it. In ignoring history's constitutive dependency on nature, Prometheanism unreflectively repeats the logic of the domination of nature (*Naturbeherrschung*) – which, if we agree with Adorno, set the course for the present predicament – while depriving us of the critical means to think beyond it. While Adorno's position might at first glance appear closer to the new materialist approach than to the Promethean, it is equally resistant to the key commitments of the former: “The ontologist's claim that we have now moved beyond the divergence of nature and history does not hold water,” as he puts it in *History and Freedom* in the context of a discussion of the notion of historicity, “[t]he historicity abstracted from actual historical processes passes unscathed the thorn that bears the true guilt for the antithesis of nature and history, which itself ought not to be ontologized.”²⁶ The same could be said for the ahistorical ontology to which new materialism is committed. The new materialist emphasis on going beyond the nature-history binary in favour of stories and practices that

can celebrate the plurality and diversity of peaceful species co-existence is trapped, despite assertions to the contrary, within a fetishising of immediacy, which from the perspective of critical theory, appears no less problematic than the promises of Prometheanism.²⁷ The exercise of “hope [as] a way of dreaming up possible futures,” the “[a]ppreciation of the fragility of things,” or the desire for “[i]ntegration within an organism, an ecosystem, a bioregion, a family, or a community [...] within which gifts of wellness can flow,” which some of its representatives suggest as antidotes to the Anthropocene catastrophe, appears as reminiscent of the familiar capitalist mantras of wholeness, wellbeing and mindfulness, just as, so far, any integration into society, organisms, families and communities, has always also born traces of oppression.²⁸ Inasmuch as new materialism seeks to get rid of history in order to assimilate to what is truly given, it makes itself complicit with the very phenomenon it seeks to critique. That Adorno might not be an overly useful ally for new materialist discourses, as Haraway observes, has thus little to do with his “resolute secularism”, which according to her, leaves him unable to “really listen to the squids, the bacteria, and angry old women of Terra/Gaia.”²⁹ In fact, if anything, the not-at-all-resolute secularist Adorno knew a great deal about listening.

²⁶ *History and Freedom*, 123.

²⁷ Of course, the cookie really crumbles on an epistemological level: the claim, put forward by some of the more speculative representatives of new materialism, that it is possible to know things in themselves, appears, from a critical theory perspective, unconsciously to repeat the gesture of Promethean domination of nature. The cognizing subject of speculative ontology comes to resemble the subject of history qua force of nature. However, this point would have to be developed in more detail and include a more careful engagement with the theoretical underpinnings of certain new materialist approaches and this exceeds the scope of the current paper.

²⁸ Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 192; Connolly, “The New Materialism,” 403; Crist, 27.

²⁹ Haraway, 73-74 (Endnote 50).

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But he also knew that if philosophy does not want to be marginalised either as a footnote to science or as a mere supplier of solace and spirituality, it must do what it does best: question its very presuppositions without hastily proceeding to positivity. If the affirmation of what exists or what *should* exist beyond its dominant historical articulation conceals the negativity that emerges in the historical reality of the non-coincidence of nature and history, what is foreclosed is not only the ability to reflect on the open contradictions and latent currents of late capitalist reality, but crucially also on the complicity of theory in them. Despite the best of intentions – after all, much of new materialism is critical of capitalism, and even Prometheanism is critical of the status quo – an ethos of “being critical” blesses new ontologies, theorisations of vibrant matters or novel subjectivities, and the development of lab-bred super corals alike.

The present moment, like any other, is owed a critical perspective that does not eschew “the thorn that bears the real guilt for the antithesis of nature and history,” but that takes it into its reflections as its driving force. Hence, I propose to divert our attention from the Promethean and new materialist interest in geological and ontological rock strata to the rock strata of convention within which both theoretical approaches are embedded. I want to explore Adorno’s interpretation of Beethoven’s late style as a model for this kind of approach. Admittedly, the connection between Adorno’s thoughts on Beethoven and the notion of the Anthropocene and its discourses might not be immediately obvious. Yet, it is precisely with reference to art and aesthetics that Adorno’s dialectical rethinking of nature and history, which is so crucial to his notion of critique, comes into focus. Indeed, as I seek to show, Adorno’s interpretation of Beethoven’s late style allows

us to carve out the crucial modes of comportment in and through which Adorno’s natural-historical critique unfolds. As he wrote in his early lecture on “The Idea of Natural-History”: “The concept [of natural-history] did not fall from heaven. Rather it has its binding identity in the context of historico-philosophical work on particular material, till now above all on aesthetic material.”³⁰ If Adorno’s approach to natural-history was developed with reference to historico-philosophical work on aesthetic material – namely, Benjamin’s account on *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama* and Lukács’s *Theory of the Novel* – it is not surprising that, in his own work, it attains its most precise and compelling articulation in his writings on art and aesthetics, as well as in the aesthetic dimensions of his writing. Indeed, as Adorno claimed in his late lectures on *History and Freedom*, “artistic experience” provides a “peculiar key” to philosophy, which can be thought of in terms of “a particular reference to the experience of aesthetic formations [*Gebilde*] that purport to be meaningful and which provide both a model of meaning [*Sinn*] that must be explored and of the crisis of meaning.”³¹

2. The Catastrophe of Late Style

2.1 The Dusk of Meaning: Transience or the Experience of Aging

³⁰ T. W. Adorno, “The Idea of Natural-History,” in *Things Beyond Resemblance*, ed. and trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 252–269, 260.

³¹ Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 125 (translation modified); see *Zur Lehre von der Geschichte und der Freiheit, Nachgelassene Schriften*, div. IV: Vorlesungen, vol. 13, ed. Theodor Adorno Archiv (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2006, hereafter *NS*), 180.

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Adorno closes his fragment on Beethoven's late style with the following words: "In the history of art, late works are the catastrophes."³² While the "catastrophe" captured by the concept of the Anthropocene attests to a sentiment of radical finitude, which takes the form of a declaration of a *new* geological epoch, the "catastrophe" of Beethoven's late works expresses the *decay* of the musical language of tonality in a probing of its historical conditions of possibility.³³ While late style is thus also motivated by a sense of finitude and testifies to a crisis of meaning, in contrast to the future-orientated paradigm of the Anthropocene, it registers this experience in terms of a consciousness of aging or, in Benjamin's term, of transience (*Vergänglichkeit*). The former looks ahead, the latter looks back. As we shall see, it is the experience of transience that generates the critical force of late style.

"If you really want to get to the bottom of the problem of late style," Adorno remarks in a radio discussion with Hans Mayer, "you always have to understand late style as [...] the colliding of the experience of aging with completely different historical situations."³⁴ This experience of aging, for Adorno, is not or, at least not primarily, a biographical question; rather, the event of Beethoven's late style can be understood as a response to the aging of tonality, the particular "form of life," in Hans Mayer's words, which the composer had made his own

³² T. W. Adorno, "Beethoven's Late Style," in *Beethoven*, 123–126, 126.

³³ I discuss Adorno's interpretation of Beethoven's late works also in an article on the relationship between late style and Adorno's 'Meditations on Metaphysics' (Antonia Hofstätter, "Adorno's 'Meditations on Metaphysics' and Beethoven's Late Style," *Zeitschrift für Kritische Theorie* 45/46 (Autumn 2018): 96–117).

³⁴ T.W. Adorno and Hans Mayer, "Über Spätstil in Musik und Literatur: Ein Rundfunkgespräch," *Frankfurter Adorno Blätter*, no. 7 (1996): 135–145, 138 (my translation).

and which had become old and lost its force.³⁵ In the process of its "universal enforcement," as Adorno puts it, the language of tonality got worn out, so to speak: "through the way music is formed, its precondition is raised to a result. Clearly, an experience which can be repeated rebels against this. The precondition raised to a result is sedimented as material. It thereby ceases to constitute the problem of music: one already knows all about it."³⁶ No longer capable of bearing the intentions and expressive urges of subjectivity, harmony takes on "something mask-like or husk-like. It becomes a convention, keeping things upright, but largely drained of substance."³⁷ The aging of the tonal language, the withering away of its substance to the extent that it can no longer express what needs expressing, is registered by the late Beethoven: his "faith" into the expressive possibilities of the tonal paradigm is shattered and "this shattering," Adorno contends, "becomes a productive force."³⁸ From these remarks we might already begin to understand a "crisis of meaning" not as a call for more of the same, as in Prometheanism, or as a longing for interconnectedness and wellbeing, as in new materialism, but in terms of a possibility to be seized: a moment of rebellion against a given form of life.

Crucially, Beethoven's rebellion takes the form of a self-reflection – a putting into question of the principle that governs his artistic production. In the integral works, for which the pieces of the composer's middle period are exemplary, the particular gains significance in its progressive mediation into a totality, which, in turn, becomes eloquent in

³⁵ Adorno and Mayer, "Rundfunk," 136 (my translation).

³⁶ Adorno, *Beethoven*, 156 [311].

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Adorno and Mayer, "Rundfunk," 139 (my translation).

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the composition of its parts: in the comprehensive mediation of universal and particular, the work attains the semblance of reconciled nature. Yet, in seeking to reconcile subject and object through the force of the subject, the form of Beethoven's middle period also somewhat anticipates the logic of Prometheanism (albeit, crucially, in the sphere of art). However, the impulse that underlies this endeavour is not alien to new materialism either: namely, to realise "with human means [...] the language of what is not human."³⁹ Yet, the reconciliation of nature which the integral artwork promises is always also false: it is *only* semblance. As a historical product, the classical artwork does not only promise reconciliation, but is complicit in the domination of nature: the balance of subject and object, which the work affirms in its eloquence, overrides the autonomy of the particular and presents "in corporal form [...] as reconciled what is not reconciled."⁴⁰ What is speculatively asserted both by Prometheanism and new materialism as a real possibility, then, is precisely what, according to Adorno, sets Beethoven's late style into motion. It takes the form of a revolt: "the revolt of one of the most powerful classicistic artists against the deception implicit in the principle of his own work."⁴¹

2.2 Allegory and Natural-History

Animating the particular in the dynamic flow of the totality, the compositions of the middle Beethoven can perhaps be described as standing in the service of life; yet, the law of form of Beethoven's late works, in contrast,

is manifest [...] precisely in reflection on death. If the legitimacy of art is abolished before death's reality, then death can certainly not be assimilated by the work of art as its "subject." It is imposed on creatures alone, and not on their constructions, and thus has always appeared in art in a refracted form: as allegory.⁴²

In Beethoven's late style, then, the experience of transience or finitude is not expressed *in* the artwork, but the artwork expresses the latter *as* allegory. "Allegory" is our clue, inviting us not only to trace the significant influence of Benjamin on Adorno's work – a task, which unfortunately exceeds the scope of this article – but also to relate Adorno's reflections on Beethoven to his thinking on natural-history. An allegory is not only a literary form that expresses itself *within* language, but it is also always itself an expression *of* language.⁴³ Transience is inscribed into the allegorical form, inasmuch as the latter reveals the elusive anteriority of what is signified, or, in Bettine Menke's words, "the withdrawal [*Entzug*] that representation always is."⁴⁴ In repudiating the reconciliation of image and meaning, signifier and signified – as it is laid claim to by symbolic presentation – allegory exposes the sign in its enigmatic abstraction.⁴⁵ Yet, the relationship between sign and

³⁹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 78.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 298.

⁴² Adorno, "Late Style," 125.

⁴³ See Bettine Menke, *Sprachfiguren: Name–Allegorie–Bild nach Walter Benjamin*, Korrigierte Neuauflage (Weimar: Verlag und Datenbank für Geisteswissenschaften, 2001), 207.

⁴⁴ Bettine Menke, "Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels," in *Benjamin Handbuch: Leben–Werk–Wirkung*, ed. Burkhardt Lindner (Stuttgart and Weimar: J.B. Metzler, 2006), 219.

⁴⁵ For a discussion of the relationship between symbol and allegory, besides Benjamin's treatment thereof in his book on the German tragic drama (see Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, transl. John Osborne (London: Verso, 2003), in particular 159–167), see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., rev. transl. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London:

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signified in the allegorical sphere, as Adorno maintains in his lecture on natural-history, is “not accidental signification,” but it finds expression as a “historical relationship.”⁴⁶ In urging to see history as nature and nature as history, Adorno thus utilises the logic of allegory for his critical-interpretative perspective of natural-history.

“Meaning” [*Bedeutung*] means that the elements of nature and history are not fused with each other, rather they break apart and interweave at the same time in such a fashion that the natural appears as a sign for history and history, where it seems to be most historical, appears as a sign for nature. All being [...] transforms itself into allegory; in these terms allegory is no longer merely a category of art history.⁴⁷

To see all nature as history means not only to recognise the transience of creaturely life, a temporality shared by history, but also to attend to the death inscribed in the constitution of meaning: inasmuch as nature is legible as nature, it is already mediated by cognition and signification, that is, by history. Transience reveals the perishing of nature in history and, in this way, it is the condition of possibility of its remembrance. In turn, to see all history as nature is to shed off the appearance of permanence, of nature, from “the world of conventions” and to present it as transient and historical: “whenever ‘second nature’ appears, when the world of convention approaches, it can be deciphered in that its

meaning is shown to be precisely its transience.”⁴⁸ Transience lets conventions appear *as* conventions – in Lukács’s words, as “a petrified estranged complex of meaning [...] a charnel-house of rotten interiorities”⁴⁹ – the meaning of which is no longer self-evident. They demand interpretation and critique.

2.3 The Rocks of Convention

“For radical natural-historical thought [...],” as Adorno claims in the 1934 lecture, “everything existing transforms itself into ruins and fragments, into just such a charnel house where meaning is discovered, in which nature and history interweave [...]”⁵⁰ The late Beethoven, as he becomes legible through Adorno’s eyes, appears as a natural-historical thinker or, rather, composer, *par excellence*, apprehending and responding to the decay of tonal forms in a process of radical self-reflection.

In his fragment on Beethoven, Adorno thus directs his interpretative gaze to the relationship between subjectivity and conventions in the late works. While the middle Beethoven, “absorbed the traditional trappings into his subjective dynamic by forming latent middle voices, by rhythm, tension or whatever other means, transforming them in keeping with his intention,” in the works of the late

Continuum, 2004), 61–70; and Paul de Man, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd rev. ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 187–228.

⁴⁶ Adorno, “Natural-History,” 263 (translation modified); see “Die Idee der Naturgeschichte” in *GS* vol. 1 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1973), 345–365, 358.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 264 (translation modified); see “Naturgeschichte,” 360.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 262.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 265. Translation modified.

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Beethoven “conventional formulae and phraseology are scattered [*eingesprengt*].”⁵¹ The late works

are full of decorative trills, cadences and fiorituras. The convention is often made visible in unconcealed, untransformed bareness [...] The last of the Bagatelles has introductory and closing bars like the distressed prelude to an aria in an opera – all this in the midst of the hardest rock strata of the multi-vocal landscape, or the most restrained impulses of a secluded lyricism.⁵²

In exposing the conventions of the tonal language, Adorno maintains, Beethoven boldly draws the consequences from a situation in which language and subjectivity have run up against their limits. If his compositions of the middle period let history retreat beyond nature in the process of lending voice to it, late style, in turn, foregrounds transience as its condition of possibility: by making the conventional substratum of the tonal language visible, it lets history appear in place of nature. Hence the *inorganic* form of the late works. Conventions can only become meaningful by way of being integrated into a totality, by appearing or, better, disappearing, as necessary moments of the expressive totality; “scattered” and laid bare, however, they punctuate the totality and expose the antagonism between subject and object, history and nature. Appearing as the historically mediated elements they are, as allegories, they artfully put into question the right of art.

⁵¹ Adorno, “Late Style,” 124 (translation modified); see T. W. Adorno, *Beethoven: Philosophie der Musik, NS*, div. 1: Fragment gebliebene Schriften (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2004), 182.

⁵² Ibid., 124–125.

In renouncing integration, the late works are allied with negativity. In the caesuras, “the abrupt breaking off,” that, according to Adorno, “characterise the late Beethoven more than any other feature,”⁵³ lies thus the crux of late style:

Only then is the next fragment added [...] colluding for better or worse with what has gone before; for a secret is shared between them, and can be exorcized only by the figure they form together. This illuminates the contradiction whereby the very late Beethoven is called both subjective and objective. The fragmented landscape is objective, while the light in which alone it glows is subjective. He does not bring about their harmonious synthesis. As a dissociative force he tears them apart in time, perhaps in order to preserve them for the eternal.⁵⁴

When the work falls silent, the tonal language is laid bare and transience breaks the spell of reconciliation. Meaning is no longer conjured by the work in the coming together of its parts to form an integral whole; rather, the hope for reconciliation may emerge only where it is emphatically denied: in the spaces of transience, the expressionless caesuras, the work protests its innermost semblance character.⁵⁵ In its dissociation this music repudiates its claim

⁵³ Ibid., 126.

⁵⁴ Adorno, “Late Style,” 126.

⁵⁵ Benjamin grasps the moment of the expressionless (*das Ausdruckslose*) as the counterpart to semblance, as the moment in which the life within the artwork is spellbound and separated from life as such: “what arrests this semblance, spellbinds its movement, and interrupts the harmony is the expressionless. [...] The expressionless is the critical violence which, while unable to separate semblance from the essence in art, presents them from mingling” (Walter Benjamin, “Goethe’s Elective Affinities”, in Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol.1, 1913–1926, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael Jennings (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press, 1996), 340).

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to a place beyond history and opens up the hope which unreflected semblance otherwise stifles: that in the remembrance of nature through history, nature may, perhaps, return.⁵⁶

If a catastrophe brings closure to a drama, the catastrophe of late style signifies the end of the possibility of integration and with it, perhaps, the possibility of closure: “Far beyond any individual oeuvre, [late] style has exemplary force: that of the historical suspension of aesthetic harmony altogether.”⁵⁷ It is thus not unlike what Adorno refers to in his lectures on *History and Freedom* as “the transition from philosophy to critique,” which

signifies something like a secularisation of melancholy. [...] [I]f you read the phenomena of history as the cyphers of their own transience or their own natural deterioration [*Naturverfallenheit*], they will also always be determined in their own negativity. This moment of negativity is the critical element of philosophy.⁵⁸

For Adorno, late art and, in particular, late music are models for critique inasmuch as they self-consciously admit to their semblance character. It thus heightens the self-reflective element that pertains to the sphere of art *per se*. “Nor need we be astonished,” as he writes in these lectures, “that the sphere of art, which is remarkable for the fact that in it objects that have been created should present themselves as purely

immediate, as being, should have declared itself to be the realm of semblance, while reality, where we find the same encapsulation of the production process as in art, fails to acknowledge its own status as semblance.”⁵⁹ It is by virtue of the convergence of aesthetic and social semblance as the concealment of history in second nature that Beethoven’s late style becomes instructive to us in a time of crisis.

3. To Think Like Beethoven: Negativity and Possibility

Adorno’s interpretation of Beethoven’s late style suggests a contrasting kind of comportment to what we have encountered with reference to the notion of the Anthropocene. Unlike theorisations of the Anthropocene, which seek to affirm a nature-culture continuum as the grounds on which to advance into a new dawn, late style labours in the dusk of the present “where the elements of nature and history are not fused with each other, rather they break apart and interweave at the same time in such a fashion that the natural appears as a sign for history and history, where it seems to be most historical, appears as a sign for nature,” as Adorno puts it in the citation above.⁶⁰ While new materialism seeks to reveal and utilise the vibrancy and agency of what is regarded as dead or inorganic matter and while Prometheanism promises to animate what is dead by imbuing it retroactively with a privileged meaning (remember the lucky chicken), Beethoven’s late works seek to shed off the semblance of life, the guise of nature, to reveal the conventional or historical character of its material. Inasmuch as the work is thus revealed as predicated

⁵⁶ For the link between utopia and remembrance in the context of Adorno’s thinking on art and aesthetics, see, for instance, *Aesthetic Theory*, 134–135.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 110.

⁵⁸ Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 134 (translation modified); see *Geschichte und Freiheit*, 188–189.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 137. Translation modified. See *Geschichte und Freiheit*, 192–193.

⁶⁰ Adorno, “Natural-History,” 264.

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on death, that is, on an aspect of domination that penetrates also into the innermost core of cognition (*Erkenntnis*), nature is lent voice as that which awaits in silence.

What, then, one might ask, may we hope for? In light of what appears as urgent and real as can be – apparently, real is when it hurts – there emerges a tendency to marginalise questions of interpretation and critique and to press ahead, armed with the necessity if not for action, then at least for a positive order of the given. Prometheanism, in its most extreme form, places its hope in the powers of the human species qua force of nature to manufacture transcendence, which may ultimately culminate in the proposed colonisation of space by “potentially immortal” entities, as the former director of the British Royal Society declares;⁶¹ new materialism, in contrast, places its hope in the possibility of, in Timothy Morton’s words, “letting become more susceptible”⁶² to what is down to earth, in order to create the conditions for peaceful future species co-existence. Put succinctly, while Prometheanism believes in the sublation of the nature–history distinction in the end of history, new materialism recommends, in Connolly’s words, the “smudging” of this binary in creative processes.⁶³ Yet, in as much as neither vision is able to address and attend to the deathly petrification that pertains beyond the veil of semblance of nature in human and environmental processes alike, hope remains at best an empty

phrase and at worst an ideological instrument. The paradigm of the Anthropocene catastrophe offers us a choice between disastrous pessimism or two kinds of naïve optimism and, hence, in any case, despair.

Perhaps, then, the question that ought to concern critical theory today is not what to hope for, but, rather, whether we may hope at all. The answer is neither “yes” nor “no.” The answer, “if such is possible,” to appropriate a sentence from Adorno’s philosophy of music, “does not lie in contemplation, but in interpretation,” and one might want to add: in natural-historical interpretation.⁶⁴ Indeed, what Beethoven’s late style has shown us is that the articulation of negativity as the denial of reconciliation also carries the seed of hope. If the late Beethoven sought to expose the semblance of nature as a product of history, then this critical procedure, in turn, sets free the semblance or the possibility that “nature” may return. This, as the following passage from *History and Freedom*, makes clear, is transposed onto the level of critique:

We might say [...] that the negativity of natural history – which always discovers what phenomena used to be, what they have become and, at the same time, what they might have been – retains the *possible* life of phenomena as opposed to their actual existence. [...] Interpretation in fact means to become conscious of the traces of what points beyond mere existence – by dint of critique, that is to say, by virtue of an insight into transience, and into the shortcomings and fallibility of mere existence.⁶⁵

⁶¹ “The dawn of the Anthropocene epoch would [...] mark a one-off transformation from a natural world to one where humans jumpstart the transition to electronic (and potentially immortal) entities, that transcend our limitations and eventually spread their influence far beyond the Earth” (Martin Reese cit. in Carrington, “The Anthropocene Epoch”).

⁶² Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Co-Existence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 129.

⁶³ Connolly, “The New Materialism,” 409.

⁶⁴ T. W. Adorno, “On the Contemporary Relationship between Philosophy and Music,” in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert, trans. Susan H. Gillespie (Berkeley: University of California Press), 135–136, 139.

⁶⁵ Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 138.

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In strictly negative thinking, then, critique and aesthetics coincide in the moment in which “possibility” is set free by the shattering of immediacy through the reflection of semblance, that is, in the remembrance of history in nature and of nature in history. Precisely this is *Selbstbesinnung*, the philosophical gesture of self-reflection, whose refusal to participate in the social nexus of complicity in which it is nevertheless forced to participate, takes the form of the remembrance of nature. “Actually, we are no longer a piece of nature from the moment that we recognise that we are a piece of nature,” as Adorno puts it in his lectures on moral philosophy, “and through this insight the ego rids itself from the blind pursuit of natural ends and transforms into something else.”⁶⁶ In as much as critique comports itself as a movement of remembrance and not as the mere reproduction of what exists, it gains a moment of autonomy and breaks the spell of the ever-same. If the current state of affairs may be characterised by a sense of paralysis, the critical reflection of semblance answers as the opening up of possibility – to the semblance of what “finally would be different,” *was endlich anders wäre* – as that which is not absorbed by mere existence. The asceticism of critique, its melancholic refusal of affirmation, thus converges with philosophy’s claim to happiness (*Glücksanspruch*) to which interpretation responds:⁶⁷ that “phenomena [...] in their most concrete form, the form in which they have all the colourfulness that children desire [...] always *mean* something different from what they simply are.”⁶⁸

⁶⁶ T. W. Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000) 103–4 (translation modified); see T. W. Adorno, *Probleme der Moralphilosophie*, NS, div. IV: Vorlesungen (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag), 154.

⁶⁷ See also Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 392.

⁶⁸ Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 138.

This might sound like a rather modest answer to a big question. Yet, open to critical praxis today, inasmuch as it wants to remain both *critical* and a *practice*, are perhaps precisely these kind of modest contributions. As Adorno puts it, “[i]f society’s nexus of complicity [*Schuldzusammenhang*, A.H.] and with it the prospect for catastrophe has become truly total [...] then there is nothing to oppose it other than what denounces that nexus of blindness [*Verblendungszusammenhang*, A.H.], rather than each in its own fashion participating in it.”⁶⁹ Rather than seeking to reconcile a crisis of meaning in a geological totality or in narratives of continuity and affinity, which ultimately reinforce the nexus of blindness from which they presume to escape, it is the task of critique to shatter and to set in motion that which presents itself as necessary in the open procedure of natural-historical interpretation. It is in the “breaks that belie identity,” as Adorno writes in *Negative Dialectics*, that “what exists is still pervaded by the ever broken promises of otherness.”⁷⁰

⁶⁹ T. W. Adorno, “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis,” in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 259–278, 268.

⁷⁰ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 404 (translation modified); see *Negative Dialektik*, 396.

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