

The Autonomy of Modernist Literary Works of Art Proposing for a Re-Reading of *Ulysses* with Adorno's Aesthetic Theory

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Why Adorno?

In retrospect, Marxist criticism has already established itself as a distinctive discipline in Joyce Studies. By following the doctrine that literary works of art ought to be understood in relation to historical and social reality, Marxist scholars provide a distinct socio-historical insight in understanding Joyce's novels—particularly *Ulysses*. In Marx's idea, art is a distinct part of human labor infused with human purposes rather than a mere “copy” or “reflection” of the reality (Lunn 10). When it comes to literature, the main aesthetic issue for Marx is the relation of basic human values to the values of art. Studying this relation, Marx suggests, will reveal the alienation in society as well as the class conditioning of artistic values, and people will become more aware of the threats of capitalism in society. Even when art increasingly comes under the influence of all-powerful capitalism

and is deprived of the halo (or *aura* for Benjamin) which it once possessed in the pre-capitalist age, genuine works of art—far from ordinary commodities—have the advantage of being produced and consumed “in relative autonomy” (Lunn 17).

Western Marxists, such as Georg Lukács, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor Adorno, though radically different in perspective, all expand Marx’s concern for artworks (especially literature) under the impact of transformation driven by capitalism in their production and consumption. In response to the advanced capitalist society in the twentieth century, Adorno and his colleagues developed a critical theory that is later called (by the others) The Frankfurt School, aiming at examining as well as exposing the problems in the intricate interrelation between culture and capitalism. What distinguishes Adorno’s critical theory from other Marxists is his attentive devotion to evaluating modern culture and modernist works of art in relation to the society. Interestingly, however, genuine works of art for Adorno are the ones that do not, nor need to, directly address social reality. In Adorno’s point of view, only the literary works that do not realistically represent or directly address the reality are able to detach themselves from the conformist bourgeois values and thus capable of bringing out a critique. In this sense, it is not surprising to see that Adorno supports the modernist aesthetics of “distancing.” Adorno further postulates that great literature is “autonomous” because it negates the reality which it relates to while more popular art, by contrast, obediently complies with the economic system that shapes them. While Lukács and other Marxist critics attack modernist novels as “decadent” embodiments of late capitalist society and evidence of the writers’ inability to depict reality, condemning Joyce’s novels as containing “petty bourgeois content” and depictions of the sordid inner life of a trivial individual, Adorno argues that art does not simply reflect the social system but acts within that reality as both “an irritant” and “the negative knowledge of the actual world” (*AP* 160).

In the articles collected in *Aesthetics and Politics* as well as his other writings, Adorno particularly admires James Joyce’s novels and his modernist aesthetics, upon which Adorno unfortunately has very little chance to fully elaborate.

Postulating a possible trajectory of studying Joyce in the light of Adorno's critical theory, Franco Moretti in "The Long Goodbye: *Ulysses* and the End of Late Capitalism" parallels Adorno's ideas of enlightenment with Joyce's *Ulysses*, and Moretti's paralleling strategy indeed provides an insightful understanding of *Ulysses* in terms of the potentially "enlightened" character of Odysseus. A few years later, Moretti in *Modern Epic* further applies Adorno's cultural criticism along with his philosophy of music to investigating the artistic value of Joyce's *Ulysses* and the social significance of its narrative strategy. A reading of James Joyce's *Ulysses* according to Adorno's aesthetic theory can be more sufficiently elaborated when we examine Adorno's response to other Marxists concerning the issue of art's "autonomy" and then read the text with his aesthetic statements in mind. While there have been many theoretical works focusing on clarifying the purport of Adorno's aesthetic theory, still, reevaluating Adorno's "modernist" aesthetic theory with a close textual analysis (which will be the focus of my next research project) is certainly more than necessary in rendering James Joyce's *Ulysses* a new understanding in the aspects of aesthetics, politics, and its relation to the society. It may be argued that a study of modernist aesthetics is in our age at best anachronistic, when we consider that almost all modernist literary techniques (*montage*, fragmentary narratives, stream of consciousness, to name only a few) have been extracted from "difficult" modernist literary works and incorporated into the mass culture, lessening their once revolutionary effects of "shock." It is precisely the fact that modernist aesthetics and literary techniques are now taken for granted that we need to re-contextualize their significance, to study more closely what kinds of social situation they address in order to re-appreciate their aesthetic potentials. This essay attempts to evaluate Adorno's comments on modernist works of art according to his aesthetic theory exemplified in his essays and debates with/against other Western Marxists. By examining Adorno's aesthetic theory, in which the autonomy of art occupies an indispensable importance, we can better understand the socio-political significance and the aesthetic value of Joyce's *Ulysses*.

The Artistic Truth and the Autonomy of Art

Adorno views art as a social labor involving a continual dialectic between artistic materials and practices, and his understanding of advanced capitalism leads him to attribute great social significance to autonomous art. Similar to Marx's idea, Adorno takes literature as a unique type of production that can make manifest social truth (Zuidervaart xxii), and Adorno's critical theory involves a methodological close reading of literary works for the purpose of exposing social conflicts, uncovering problems inherent in them, and eliciting "a sociohistorical truth that might not have been intended by the artist" (Zuidervaart 5). In fact, by developing Marx's idea that art serves a potential emancipatory function for the mass, Adorno postulates that the autonomous status of modernist literary works of art endows on themselves an emancipatory function driven by their truth content (*Wahrheitsgehalt*). It is in this sense that transcendence over the suppressive capitalist society is rendered possible.

For Adorno, truth content makes art eloquent because in art there is an exclusive kind of imitation (mimesis) of an objective but "negative" expression: "through expression art closes itself off to being-for-another, which always threatens to engulf it, and [...] this is art's mimetic consummation. Its expression is the antithesis of expressing something" (Adorno, *AT* 147). The ideal of art is mimesis, which negates to become a mere copy of the artist soul or a photograph of the artist's situation. In other words, art in its very negativity does not directly imitate the social circumstances and refuse to be taken as such. Adorno then refers to Joyce's "new art" by arguing that Joyce puts the discursive language "out of action, or at least [subordinates] it to formal categories" to the extent that the linguistic construction becomes unrecognizable in his novels, and hence the communicative function of language is transformed into a mimetic one (*AT* 147). To exemplify, Zuidervaart suggests that Adorno values the modernist works of art on account of "[its] form of non-discursive knowledge and impractical praxis in a society where rational praxis has become irrational." With such non-discursive and impractical

knowledge, artistic import (*Gehalt*) of authentic works of art can provide “a formal liberation from oppressive social structure” and possess “an indirect but transformative political impact” (Zuidervaart xxii).

For Adorno, art's autonomy and its growing independence from society are essential in disclosing to the bourgeois reader the freedom that was bound within the social structure (Adorno, *AT* 295). Being autonomous for art means to be free from religious, political, and other social functions that society ascribes to it; in a highly capitalist society where everything tends to be commoditized, however, art is integrated more completely than ever before. Adorno is certainly aware of the predicament art faces in commodity culture, and he proposes that by its autonomous status, a social character of art that is most evident in the novel form, art fully performs an emancipatory function.

Adorno argues that “art becomes social only by being autonomous and opposed to society. Art is social not because of its mode of production in a commodity culture nor “of the social derivation of its thematic material.” For Adorno, what is social in art is not its manifest opinions but “imminent movement against society” (*AT* 297), namely, its asociality. By crystallizing itself as something unique, the work of art “criticizes society by merely existing” rather than complying with social norms and being qualified as socially useful (Adorno, *AT* 296). It is precisely art's “asociality” that serves its determinate negative function in a society and becomes its social legitimation. With its refusing gesture toward society, Adorno argues, autonomous art by being “functionless” makes itself as a vehicle of ideology and gives rise to art's fetish character. The credo *l'art pour l'art* which helps culminate modernist aesthetics promotes a fetish by claiming that a pure artwork is self-sufficient. This fetish character of “pure art,” for Adorno, posits that artworks could be “independent from the conditions of its material production and therefore as being intrinsically superior and beyond the primordial guilt of the separation of physical and spiritual labor” (Adorno, *AT* 297). Far from being to blame, art's guilt of being fetish does not disqualify art, for its truth content is predicated on their fetish character. On the other hand, if art does not function as a fetish, then it will

be serving the principle of heteronomy, namely, the principle of exchange that is the counterpart of fetishism. In the principle of exchange, the oppressive political hegemony is masked, and only the works of art that do not submit to that principle can act freely from this domination; in Adorno's words, "only what is useless can stand in for the stunted use value" (*AT* 298).

Adorno's *Modernist* Aesthetics

Adorno's philosophy and aesthetic theory can be traced back to his personal experiences. Unable to bear with the propagandist arts and fleeing from the Nazis persecution in Germany, Adorno exiles to the United States only to witness a similar one-dimensional mass culture permeated by commercialism. In this context, Adorno's critique of mass culture is very similar—if not directly inherited from—modernist critique of the bourgeois value in the early twentieth century. For Adorno, the works of art that best exemplify the transcendental value are modernist ones. In articles such as "Reconciliation under Duress" (*AP* 158), Adorno embraces the modernist aesthetics, arguing that real art needs not to reflect society in a progressive social realistic sense but rather to seek to distance itself and to estrange reality. By breaking up with convention and implementing new techniques, Adorno argues, real art also prevents itself from being consumed by the mainstream bourgeois readership.

Adorno's aesthetic theory can be best elucidated by positioning his arguments and defense for modernist literature in the aesthetic debates among the other Western Marxists, especially when James Joyce's novels are concerned. Lukács in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* attacks modernism, arguing that no matter how structurally epic James Joyce's *Ulysses* is, the novel is itself essentially static. Furthermore, its failure of perceiving human existence as part of a dynamic historical environment infects the whole contemporary modernism. Lukács argues that modernist preoccupations of formal experiment in literature in fact stem from

the individualism developed along with capitalism. For Lukács, literature has a great social mission of presenting progressive development of the masses' own experiences: through the mediation of realist literature, "the soul of the masses is made receptive for an understanding of the great, progressive and democratic epochs of human history" (Lukács, *AP* 56). The mass can never learn anything from avant-garde literature such as Joyce's precisely because they are devoid of reality and do not provide a reassurance that "the road to progress was inevitably proceeding in spite of capitalist 'decay'" (Lunn 142).

Based on the idea that authentic art is autonomous, Adorno claims that modernist literature is more genuinely realistic in the sense that it provides "negative knowledge" of socio-historical reality (*NL1* 225). While for Lukács modernist novels such as Joyce's simply reinforce our historical angst and offer no progressive perspective, Adorno argues that modernist novels—in addition to being technically progressive—"abandon a realism that only aids the façade in its work of camouflage by reproducing it." By choosing alienation as their true subject matter, modernist literature simply refuses to reproduce a totalizing and coherent reality that is in effect illusory (*NL1* 32).

Against Lukács's charge that modernist writers only concern "an 'ontological,' timeless view of man as an isolated and atomized being" (Lunn 272), Adorno in "Reconciliation under Duress" argues that modernist novels such as Joyce's show how "loneliness is socially mediated and so possesses a significant historical content" (*AP* 158). While Lukács claims in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* that for modernist writers "'man' means the individual who has always existed, who is essentially solitary, asocial and incapable of entering into relationships with other human beings" (19), Adorno replies that all such modernist descriptions of men do *not* derive from a mere interest in the unchanging essence of man's lonely and derelict existence but "from a sense of modernity" (*AP* 159). Adorno argues that the modern solitary consciousness can transcend itself "by revealing itself in works of art as the hidden truth common to all men" rather than presenting a symptom that Lukács despises so much. The presentation of the truth common to all men,

Adorno argues, gives power to the works of Joyce; in other words, “this is why they excite us so much more than works that simply depict the world in narrative form” (*AP* 166).

Adorno argues that in Joyce’s novels man is represented as a product of history rather than a timeless image which Lukács imposes on the modernist novels. All Joyce’s Irish folklores, Adorno suggests, are not manifested to universally invoke a mythology beyond the world but to mythologize it (*NL1* 223). In Adorno’s opinion, Lukács demands art to provide knowledge that is concrete and materialistic rather than as something irrational. Following the insistence on the artistic truth content, Adorno contends that art does *not* provide knowledge by merely reflecting the world like a photograph or “from a particular perspective” but by “revealing whatever is veiled by the empirical form assumed by reality, and this is possible only by virtue of art’s own autonomous status.” For Adorno, art’s autonomous status lies in its negation to become a mere reflection of the empirical world. Thus, even “the suggestion that the world is unknowable” can become a moment of knowledge in Joyce’s novels which Lukács so indefatigably castigates (*AP* 162).

Reading *Ulysses* with Adorno

Adorno finds the nineteenth-century realist narrative no longer appropriate in the advanced capitalist society; only the fragmentation of personality and the refusal to give any fixed standpoint—such as Joyce’s *Ulysses*—will help disclose the self-estrangement, suffering, and impotence of any individual in the twentieth century. The plain portrait of individual striving in the traditional realistic storytelling that Lukács approves so much of only masks the contemporary inhumanity and falsely suggests to the reader that every individual is still independent and impact as a social whole. Adorno states that modernist novels, unlike nineteenth-century realism, through the disjointed interruption and multiple perspectives in narration “illuminate [...] the disintegration of individual

subjectivity,” reveal the power by those powerless characters, and reconstruct the individual whole that had been shattered (Lunn 272).

Lunn categorizes the characteristics of modernist literature as being “aesthetic self-conscious,” “simultaneous,” “ambiguous,” and “dehumanizing.” Simplistic as Lunn’s classification may seem at the first glance, those categories do provide a starting point to understand the context and the value of modernist novels according to Adorno’s aesthetic theory. For being aesthetic self-conscious, Joyce’s *Ulysses* portrays Stephen Dedalus’s rather obscure and anachronistic artistic judgments and quotes his aesthetically immature poems, drawing attention to the problems in the very process of writing and thus elevating the novel not only as an artistic piece but also an “objective expression” of the social truth for an artist. By juxtaposing past and present events in character’s mind rather than narrating sequentially, Joyce also accomplishes the sense of simultaneity which makes the novel seem to exist within an open-ended and “continuous present” instead of happening in a single day; for Bloom (but certainly not for Joyce), every day passes like the very ordinary day on 16 June 1904. As being ambiguous and paradoxical, *Ulysses* never provides a fixed point of view: the narrating position changes from one character to another (from Gerty to Bloom as in “Nausicaa”) and from chapter to chapter (from focusing on Bloom and his mind in the first three chapters of Part II to focusing objectively on every men in the newspaper office in “Aeolus”). In the refusal of providing a stable point of view, Joyce not only presents a better “objective truth” but also opposes to the bourgeois norms and reader’s expectation. As provocative as the “dehumanizing” character of modernism may seem, in Joyce’s *Ulysses* characters are never portrayed as a “coherent, definable and well-structured entity” but “a psychic battlefield, or an insoluble puzzle, or the occasion for a flow of perceptions and sensations” (Howe 34). Indeed, throughout the novel reader becomes acquainted to the many-sidedness of characters. To take only Bloom for example: he is no mere petty-bourgeois Jewish advertising agent but also a world lover by sympathizing in his *agape* with animals and human beings. Apart from his trauma of losing a son, he also suffers from Molly’s

adulterous affair but in the meantime enjoys his secret pen-pal relationship.

In his famous essay “The Long Goodbye: *Ulysses* and the End of Liberal Capitalism,” Franco Moretti examines Joyce’s *Ulysses* by paralleling Adorno’s critique of enlightenment and Bloom’s character in terms of the mythical method Joyce employs in the novel. Moretti argues that Joyce does not merely intend to condemn the Irish society so much as to criticize a more capitalist and decadent British culture and to further develop this critique, posing it to a universal bourgeois value. No other Marxist or novelist than Joyce was able to “perceive the end of the liberal century with such intelligence or with such fury,” as Moretti boldly claims (*STW* 189). Moretti then connects Joyce and Adorno through the myth of Ulysses and proposes that in order to understand modernist literature, one must examine the mythical method by which the author gives significance to the “immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary society.” But Joyce goes further than that: while in the work of T. S. Eliot there is a clear distinction of myth and history, Joyce treats the two as complementary that neutralize each other. Comparing to the mythical structure of Eliot, Moretti argues, myth is not what *Ulysses* is based on but precisely what it avoids, just as Odysseus “triumphs over [myth] and relegates it to the past” in the view of Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Moretti, *STW* 192). From a perspective that is very similar to Adorno’s, Moretti suggests that Bloom’s advertising practice is indispensable in the world of *Ulysses* when the relation between supply and demand is unbalanced. Unlike the role of trade in Homer’s *Odyssey*, pointed out by Adorno, the very capitalist advertising does not confer any unity in *Ulysses*, thus Odysseus can no longer control his surrounding world and becomes Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses*.

As Patrick McGee points out in his *Joyce Beyond Marx*, Joyce’s *Ulysses*, viewed as a whole, presents itself as what Adorno would call “the absolute commodity, the commodity that calls attention to its own formation within the framework of commodity culture and thus discloses the determinations of that culture in the production of the aesthetic” (McGee 189). In fulfilling the liberationist potential of art and disclosing the operation of culture as general

writing, *Ulysses* proves itself as indeed a modernist autonomous work of art. With its autonomy, the novel self-reflexively explores its own conditions in a commodity society and extends its disclosive reading to the extent that culture, just like writing, is presented as an “iterable performance, the product of a technology that is always subject to adjustment and that always can be short-circuited” (McGee 190) like the Dublin central tram car system in “Aeolus.”

In his theoretical works on aesthetics, Adorno allocates sociopolitical importance for truth content and autonomous status in the modernist works of art; appreciating Adorno's aesthetics, Moretti proposes that what really renders *Ulysses* an autonomous work of art is its “objective function.” He then boldly proposes that “if Joyce were an Irish *writer*, comprehensible and containable without any loose threads within Irish culture, he would no longer be Joyce, and in this sense the city of *Ulysses* is also not real Dublin of the turn of the century but a “literary image *par excellence* of the modern metropolis.” Terry Eagleton in his discussion of the politics of *Ulysses* similarly argues that the centrality of the particular time and space in the novel in effect shows “how radically *contingent* any such place or time has now become” (my emphasis) (Eagleton, “Nationalism” 36). In inscribing Dublin such significance on the cosmopolitan map, Eagleton argues, Joyce gives his city a back-handed compliment. The very specificity of every single aspect of Dublin life ironically betrays their insignificance; it could be any other city in the modern Europe. By arguing this, the anti-imperialism aspect of *Ulysses* is by no means discredited, as Terry Eagleton eloquently shows. Still, this argument presents an insightful proposition which is closely connected to Adorno's aesthetic theory. As McGee points out, the Ireland under British colonization in Joyce's *Ulysses* is “transformed into a timeless present that transcends every historical specificity” to the extent that even the English language—in which the novel is written—is stripped off its colonizing effect and becomes “the neutral medium of a universal vision” (125). The autonomy of art in effect brings to *Ulysses* a historical transcendence that is by no means allowed to be neglected.

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