

Between Culture and Barbarism: Aesthetics, Politics and the
Redemptive Origins of Critical Theory, 1918-1969

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Dedicated to Walter Benjamin and all who perished in the Shoah.

Declaration:

This thesis is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the preface and specified in the text.

It is not substantially the same as any work that has already been submitted before for degree or other qualification except as declared in the preface and specified in the text.

It does not exceed the prescribed word limit of 80,000 words in accordance with the guidelines of the Faculty of History Degree Committee.

Abstract

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Focusing on a series of debates on aesthetics and politics, this dissertation represents the intellectual history of one unique mode of exchange between intellectuals from across the political spectrum in twentieth century German thought. Although commonly associated with liberal bourgeois and left-wing influences, such as Hegel, Marx, and Freud, the Critical Theory of those linked to the “Frankfurt School,” I argue, developed out of criticisms and engagements with an array of conservative German intellectuals, many directly affiliated with Nazism. The ideas of such thinkers and artists—in particular, Stefan George, Martin Heidegger, and Carl Schmitt—were not only critiqued by theorists like Adorno and Benjamin but were also often rescued in the very process of their criticism. Redemptive criticism was one of the modes that defined critical theorists engagement with these thinkers, in that they did not simply negate or affirm the thought of their conservative counterparts; rather, deploying their innovative mode of future-past oriented criticism they interacted with the ideas, aesthetics and politics of their political opponents redemptively, by rescuing the truth content of that which they criticized. This redemption or rescue of aesthetic ideas, however, was not simply a secular mode of critique, but included a politicizing messianic valence. For in rescuing the ideas of their interlocutors associated with the right, critical theorists evoked the latent messianic, utopian impulses—what they considered the truth content—of their political adversaries. Thus, by simultaneously criticizing and uplifting ostensibly unredeemable aesthetic ideas and currents, Critical Theory sought to redirect such ideas toward the historical movement of messianic redemption, understood in the secularized sense as the task of liberating humanity from oppressive historical cycles and thus transforming the world. Even when historical and philosophical accounts acknowledge the interaction of Critical Theory and intellectuals across

the political spectrum, it is often interpreted in dichotomous terms: either the critical theorists are shown to be profoundly influenced by and compatible with their conservative counterparts, particularly, Heidegger and Schmitt, or they are positioned as inextricably opposed to such thinkers on account of their ties to Nazism. This study therefore seeks to illuminate the history and complexity of the debates on aesthetics and politics in this period—which are often portrayed as exclusive to leftist or Marxist thought in Germany, as argued in Fredric Jameson’s edited collection *Aesthetics and Politics* and Eugene Lunn’s *Marxism and Modernism*—by placing them in a wider intellectual historical context that includes thinkers inhabiting a wide range of political and aesthetic positions. In representing the overlooked, often redemptive engagements of critical theorists and their conservative interlocutors, this dissertation seeks to reimagine the birth of Critical Theory and the intellectual-historical milieu in which it developed.

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Introduction

Redemptive Criticism, or the Confrontation of Aesthetics and Politics

*Humankind, which once, in Homer, was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, has now become one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached the point where it can experience its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure. Such is the aestheticizing of politics, as practiced by fascism. Communism replies by politicizing art.*¹

Walter Benjamin

I. Political Oppositions in Twentieth-Century German Thought

The history of German thought in the twentieth century cannot be grasped without recourse to the perplexing interaction of intellectuals often placed at opposite ends of the political spectrum. Although it took on many forms, covering an array of philosophical and theoretical categories, this interaction was most evident in the series of debates, criticisms, and engagements on aesthetics and politics.² Rather than conceiving of the interaction of ostensibly opposed intellectuals myopically as an essentially hostile engagement of antagonistic and incompatible political camps, this dissertation illustrates the dialectical character of such interactions. These interactions were dialectical in the sense that they did not involve a rigid opposition of two antagonistic political positions, but instead grew out of a thoughtful engagement and dialogue between intellectuals seemingly at odds with one another. In their development of a new, dialectical critique of the totality of society—what would come to be known as “Critical Theory”—left-wing thinkers such as Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, and Ernst Bloch did not interact with opposing figures simply to negate and critique “the opposition,” but rather to rescue and redeem the truth of their ideas and integrate the latter into their own thinking.³ In order to fill

¹ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn, in *Illuminations*, Ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 242.

² The redemptive interaction and critique investigated in my dissertation is, moreover, intertwined with aesthetics and politics to the extent that redemptive critique originated as a chiefly political critique of an aesthetic object.

³ Theodor Wiesengrund-Adorno was officially registered with this double surname at birth, at the request of his mother, Maria Calvelli-Adorno della Piana, a Corsican-Italian opera singer. See Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School*, trans. Michael Robertson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 66-67. He published using the name Wiesengrund-Adorno throughout the Weimar period and changed it to W. Adorno in the United States due to prejudice against Jews and German-Jewish refugees at the time. As Martin Jay recounts, Friedrich Pollock asked Adorno to remove

the void left by contemporary historical scholarship which positions right- and left-wing German intellectuals as inextricably opposed and incompatible given the turbulent political climate of Weimar and the ensuing horrors of Nazism, the following intellectual history aims to uncover oft-omitted redemptive critiques and interactions between thinkers on opposing ends of the political spectrum in this period—in particular, conservatives and radical nationalists associated with Nazism and the German right, such as Martin Heidegger, Carl Schmitt and Stefan George, on the one hand, and the critical theorists, such as Benjamin, Bloch, and Adorno, on the other.⁴ Uncovering the contours of this critique and interaction, then, entails reframing the intellectual, aesthetico-political history of this period insofar as such an interaction effectively dismantles the rigid opposition of right- and left-wing intellectuals in historical scholarship by demonstrating the complex intertwinement and cross-pollination of their ideas and circles. In reframing this period through juxtaposing these thinkers, this dissertation works to expand this intellectual history, emphasizing the reciprocal interaction of politically opposed thinkers.

As illustrated by their writings and personal correspondence, the often redemptive interaction of politically opposed intellectuals was most pronounced in the series of debates and exchanges on aesthetics and politics that developed in the Weimar Republic and continued into the Nazi period. Published in 1935—two years after Hitler’s rise to power in Germany—Benjamin’s influential aesthetico-political monograph *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* marks an impassioned response to the rise of fascism in Europe.⁶ In his conclusion to this work, Benjamin positions the realm of aesthetics as indissolubly bound up with that of the political. On the surface, he presents an ostensibly rigid dichotomy between the fascist glorification of war as an aesthetic phenomenon (what Benjamin calls the “aestheticizing of

his father’s Jewish surname, because “there were too many Jewish-sounding names on the Institut’s [sic] roster.” Despite his father’s conversion to Christianity Adorno’s (and other critical theorists) Jewish heritage solidified his status as an outsider in Weimar Germany, Britain and the United States. See Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute for the Social Research, 1923-1950* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 31-34.

⁴ Georg Lukács, who was an important influence on the development of the Frankfurt School’s Critical Theory, was also engaged with conservative thinkers, particularly, Schmitt. However, he is not included in this grouping of critical theorists since he did not dialectically redeem and rescue the ideas of his intellectual or political antagonists, nor was he directly involved in the Frankfurt School’s official institutional organizations, The Institute of Social Research and its publication, *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* (Journal of Social Research).

⁶ The second translation of the title is found in Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, Howard Eiland and Others (Cambridge, Ma.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008).

politics”) and the communist response of “politicizing art,” which Benjamin does not explicitly elucidate in the work itself.⁷ Complicating the exoteric interpretation which perceives an apparently reified opposition between fascist and communist modes of synthesizing aesthetics and politics, however, is the fraught historical-philosophical context of the discourse and theoretical debates in which this text is embedded. Even on the surface of the text alone, it is unclear if Benjamin means to align his aesthetic theory with the communist response of politicizing art, a response which echoes the works of his close friend and influence, the German poet and playwright, Bertolt Brecht. Despite Benjamin’s appreciation of Brecht’s *plumpes Denken* (“crude thinking”) on the politicization of art for the purposes of revolution, Benjamin’s thinking on the nexus of aesthetics and politics defied exoteric, unambiguous answers to the problem of locating an emancipatory response to the fascist aestheticizing of politics.⁸

As his 1919 doctoral dissertation, *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism*, demonstrates Benjamin’s conception of aesthetic criticism was profoundly influenced by the Romantic notion that “criticism is far less the judgment of a work of art than its consummation.”⁹ Expounding upon this Romantic notion that in effect “suspends the difference between criticism and poetry,” Benjamin presents the Romantic conception of art criticism as evoking the utopian-messianic possibilities contained in works of art: “Every critical understanding of an artistic entity is, as reflection in the entity, nothing other than a higher, self-actively originated degree of this entity’s consciousness. Such intensification of consciousness in criticism is in principle infinite; criticism is therefore the medium in which the restriction of the individual work refers methodically to the infinitude of art and finally is transformed into that infinitude.”¹⁰ For Benjamin, the Romantic criticism of a work of art, being its poetic continuation and consummation, propels the work of art into its “infinitude” by opening up the endless potentialities for reflection latent within it. This transformation of the work of art through its

⁷ Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, 242.

⁸ Walter Benjamin, “Brecht’s Threepenny Novel,” in *Understanding Brecht*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: Verso Books, 1998), 81. Benjamin’s appreciation of Brecht’s *plumpes Denken* was opposed by another close friend and interlocutor of Benjamin, Adorno, who critiqued the ostensibly undialectical vulgarization of dialectical criticism that inheres in Brecht’s politicization of theater and art more broadly. See Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 1970), 27.

⁹ Walter Benjamin, *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism*, in *Selected Writings: Volume 1, 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael Jennings (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 2003) 153.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 152-3.

critical-poetic consummation, for Benjamin, points to a historical movement toward the messianic-utopian transformation of the world, as he writes of this infinite movement:

It is a question, therefore, not of a progress into the void, a vague advance in writing ever-better poetry, but of a continually more comprehensive unfolding and enhancement of poetic forms. The temporal infinity in which this process takes place is likewise a medial and qualitative infinity. For this reason, progredibility [*Progedibilität*] is not at all what is understood by the modern term “progress”; it is not some merely relative connection of cultural stages to one another. Like the entire life of mankind, it is an infinite process of fulfillment, not a mere becoming. If nonetheless it cannot be denied that in these notions Romantic messianism is not at work in its full force, still they are not in contradiction with Schlegel’s fundamental stand on the ideology of progress.¹¹

In juxtaposing the progredibility (i.e., the ability to progress in contrast to the mythic ideology of consummated progress) of the infinite movement through the work of art with “the entire life of mankind” Benjamin in effect links his aesthetic theory to an inherently politicized, messianic philosophy of history, the latter of which he subsequently developed in his *Theses*.¹² Through evoking the infinite “progredibility” of an artwork and, thus, its messianic signaling toward the possibilities of humanity’s infinite progredibility as the transformation of social reality, Benjamin thereby unfolds a conception of criticism which politicizes and rescues the aesthetic. In this regard, it is the criticism of a work—which stands in a dialectical relation of reciprocal interaction (*Wechselwirkung*) with the work of art—that serves to politicize art by uncovering its utopian latencies.¹³

Like Benjamin, Adorno sought to evoke the utopian impulses of art. For Adorno, however, this critical rescue of the utopian possibilities of art was presented in a negative utopian manner that elevated utopia precisely through its absence or negation in the artwork. Adorno thus elevated the opacity and isolated abstraction of modernist aesthetics, in contrast with Brecht’s advancement of agitprop through the production of works that Adorno critiqued for being stuck in the very bourgeois rationalism which they explicitly opposed. In his posthumously

¹¹ Ibid., 168-9.

¹² This text was completed in 1940 and first published in 1950. It was written shortly before Benjamin’s death on September 26, 1940. Upon hearing that he would be sent back to Nazi-occupied France by the Spanish border police in Port Bou, Benjamin took his own life. See Hannah Arendt, introduction to Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 17-18, 267.

¹³ For more on messianic political ideas of Benjamin see chapter one below. For scholarship on the messianic politics of Benjamin, Bloch and their interlocutors, see Anson Rabinbach, “Between Enlightenment and Apocalypse: Benjamin, Bloch and Modern Jewish Messianism,” *New German Critique* 34 (winter 1985), 78-124; Ivan Boldyrev, *Ernst Bloch and His Contemporaries: Locating Utopian Messianism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014); Jacob Klapwijk, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Critical Theory and the Messianic Light* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2010).

published final work, *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), Adorno writes, “Any artwork that supposes it is in possession of its content is plainly naive in its rationalism; this may define the historically foreseeable limit of Brecht's work.”¹⁴ Opposing the mode of crude thinking characterized in Brecht’s work, Adorno argues that the truth content of an artwork lies not in its explicit resistance to human suffering in “an age of incomprehensible horror,” but rather in its refusal to rationally conceptualize and articulate this unrepresentable suffering.¹⁵ Expressing his critical stance toward the aesthetic in the aftermath of the horrors of fascism and World War II, Adorno writes:

Today it would be fitting to approach art, in Kantian fashion, as a given; whoever pleads its cause manufactures ideologies and makes art one of them. If thought is in any way to gain a relation to art it must be on the basis that something in reality, something back of the veil spun by the interplay of institutions and false needs, objectively demands art, and that it demands an art that speaks for what the veil hides. Though discursive knowledge is adequate to reality, and even to its irrationalities, which originate in its laws of motion, something in reality rebuffs rational knowledge. Suffering remains foreign to knowledge; though knowledge can subordinate it conceptually and provide means for its amelioration, knowledge can scarcely express it through its own means of experience without itself becoming irrational. Suffering conceptualized remains mute and inconsequential, as is obvious in post-Hitler Germany. In an age of incomprehensible horror, Hegel's principle, which Brecht adopted as his motto, that truth is concrete, can perhaps suffice only for art. Hegel's thesis that art is consciousness of plight has been confirmed beyond anything he could have envisioned.¹⁶

The imbrication of aesthetics and politics with the philosophy of history that Benjamin’s dissertation begins to theorize is here situated as central to the critique of the aesthetic. Art—which for Adorno continually redefines itself in relation to its historical moment—is thus critiqued as a consolatory, ideological phenomenon which only attempts to respond to the incomprehensible suffering of this world. The naïve affirmation of art as achieving this end thus constitutes the manufacture of ideology to the extent that it falsely imbues art with the reconciliatory force for rectifying the oppressed past of humanity. Insofar as it “remains foreign to knowledge,” the historical representation and expression of human suffering demands something that moves beyond the sphere of discursive knowledge and rational thought. In this light, Adorno explains the value of an aesthetics of opacity which necessitates the work of interpretation, not simply of the work of art, but of its interweaving with historical reality.

¹⁴ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 27.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Adorno goes on to claim that in “the negation of the absolute idea, content can no longer be identified with reason as it is postulated by idealism; content has become the critique of the omnipotence of reason, and it can therefore no longer be reasonable according to the norms set by discursive thought. The darkness of the absurd is the old darkness of the new. This darkness must be interpreted, not replaced by the clarity of meaning.”¹⁷ The content of a work, that is to say, its irreducible particularity and difference from the rest of reality, functions as “the critique of the omnipotence of reason,” of the claims to comprehending the totality of social reality—posited by Hegel and the German Idealist tradition as the absolute idea—to the extent that this content posits something which cannot be discursively articulated or thought. This inarticulable “something” is both the suffering Adorno writes of, as well as the expressionlessness of that which is nonidentical with or different from existing reality, the utopian possibilities of not-yet, as Adorno’s colleague and interlocutor, the German-Jewish Marxist philosopher, Ernst Bloch, frames in *The Spirit of Utopia* (1918)—which had a lasting influence on Adorno, Benjamin, and the development of the Frankfurt School’s Critical Theory.¹⁸

In Benjamin’s and Adorno’s aesthetics one finds a negative utopianism, which is negative precisely insofar as it lies in that which is unrepresentable and unspoken in a work of art, on one hand, and on account of its elicitation through the critical negation of art as ideology, on the other. Nonetheless, this negative utopianism constitutes a mode of redemptively criticizing not only art but also opposing intellectuals and ideas. Moreover, as Adorno’s protégé, Jürgen Habermas, contends in “Consciousness Raising or Redemptive Critique,” the *Aktualität* (actuality, contemporaneity, or currency) of Benjamin’s thought lies in his hermeneutics of “redemptive critique,” a critical method that seeks to dialectically evoke the lost utopian potentials of a cultural artifact through its critique.¹⁹ At the same time, however, Habermas positions Benjamin’s philosophy as indissolubly bound up with a “conservative revolutionary”

¹⁷ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 27.

¹⁸ Bloch wrote *The Spirit of Utopia* (published in German as *Geist der Utopie*) in 1915-16. It was published in 1918 and republished in 1923. The terms ‘Frankfurt School’ and ‘Critical Theory’ are used here to refer to the thought of those associated with the Institute of Social Research. In his account Rolf Wiggershaus, clarifies and complicates the framing of “Frankfurt School” as a school of thought. See discussion in section two below; see also Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School*, 3-10. For more on Bloch’s conception of utopia see Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, trans. Anthony Nassar (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

¹⁹ Jürgen Habermas, “Consciousness Raising or Redemptive Critique: The Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin,” *New German Critique*, No. 17, Special Walter Benjamin Issue (Spring 1979), 59.

mode of “redemptive critique” that is “bereft of implications for political action.”²⁰ He therefore situates Benjamin’s “redemptive critique” in opposition to the critique of ideology insofar as the former “behaves conservatively towards its objects” by directing itself toward the “mortification of the art work only to transpose what is worth knowing from the medium of the beautiful into that of the true and thereby to redeem it.”²¹ Habermas finally argues that Benjamin’s redemptive critique is politically conservative to the extent that it aims at the redemption of the utopian wish-images of the past latent in works of artistic expression in order to evoke the artwork’s truth content as an allegory of messianic redemption. For Habermas, then, the *Aktualität* of Benjamin’s redemptive hermeneutics lies in the transposition of the latter into a “theory of linguistic communication...[and] a materialist theory of social evolution” which rationalistically discards Benjamin’s outmoded utopian messianism.²² Citing two passages from Benjamin’s 1929 essay on Surrealism, Habermas provides an example of the dimension of Benjamin’s aesthetic theory that he seeks to retain in his own theory of communicative action:

To reclaim Benjamin's...[one] would have to consider together two Benjaminian propositions. I am thinking of the assertion: “that there is a sphere of human agreement that is non-violent to the extent that it is wholly inaccessible to violence: the true sphere of ‘mutual understanding’, language.” And I am thinking of the warning that belongs here: “Pessimism all along the line. Absolutely . . . but above all, mistrust, mistrust and again mistrust in all mutual understanding reached between classes, nations, individuals. And unlimited trust only in I.G. Farben and the peaceful perfection of the Luftwaffe.”²³

What remains pertinent in Benjamin’s redemptive hermeneutic, Habermas argues, is the linkage of the reconciliatory, intrinsically social possibilities of language with a critical philosophy of history that sees progress as the ongoing recurrence of catastrophe. Whereas Benjamin redemptively critiques the “ideology of progress” throughout his corpus, maintaining a critical philosophy of history which remains wedded to the messianic-utopian hope for transformed existence, Habermas—despite discarding Benjamin’s messianic utopianism—extends Benjamin’s critical recovery of the concept of progress in an effort to develop the “materialist theory of social evolution” and communicative actions that he conceived as sensible responses to the political situation of the 1970s.

²⁰ This citation is derived from an alternate translation of the same essay. My dissertation will employ both on account of the strengths and weaknesses of each. Jürgen Habermas, “Walter Benjamin: Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique,” in *On Walter Benjamin*, ed. Gary Smith (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 90.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 98-9.

²² Habermas, “Consciousness Raising or Redemptive Critique,” 59.

²³ *Ibid.*

Countering Habermas' account, in his 1971 work, *Marxism and Form*, Fredric Jameson situates the various transmutations of the "Marxist hermeneutic" engendered by Benjamin, Adorno, Bloch, Brecht, and Lukács, as still deeply relevant precisely because of their demonstrations of the ways that politics and aesthetics intersect. Noting the changes in the structures and modes of production of what he refers to as "postindustrial" capitalism, Jameson writes that "there is no tactical or political question which is not first and foremost theoretical, no form of action which is not inextricably entangled in the sticky cobwebs of the false and unreal culture itself, with its ideological mystification on every level."²⁴ As Jameson suggests, the Habermasian turn to language and theories of social evolution elides the still fundamental questions of political *praxis* (i.e., of how to transform social reality) that cannot be divorced from the latter's interpenetration of the aesthetic realm of culture and ideology. Discarding the redemptive hermeneutics which Habermas critiques in the thought of Benjamin thus creates a void in one's theory of society, insofar as this rejection situates the concerns of cultural criticism and ideology-critique as secondary to those of formulating a theory more directly addressing the social and political formation of society. In his analysis of Bloch's work, *The Principle of Hope*, Jameson describes the task of the cultural critic as oriented around a peculiar mode of hermeneutics. "For Bloch," he continues, "the world is an immense storehouse of figures, and the task of philosopher or critic becomes a hermeneutic one to the degree that he is called upon to pierce this 'incognito of every lived instant' and to decipher the dimly vibrating meaning beneath fables and the works, the experiences and the objects, which surrounding us seem to solicit our attention in some peculiarly personal fashion...object of such hermeneutic analysis are of course myth and art."²⁵ This hermeneutic uncovering of utopian impulses latent art and myth, which Bloch shared with his radical philosophical contemporaries, Jameson suggests, remains important today to the extent that art—and the sphere of culture more broadly—have become the new locus of ideology. Whereas Marx perceived the "opium of the people" in the form of religion, Bloch and his negative utopian interlocutors envisaged the consolatory effects of religion as increasingly permeating the sphere of culture, the latter of which encompasses a

²⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), xviii.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 145.

mythic repository of humanity's hopes and dreams for a better reality.²⁶ As such, for these thinkers, the reparative critique of culture, like that of religion, is key to the evocation of the socially transformative possibilities contained in these expression of the human spirit.

Jameson's account can be further developed by examining the ways that Critical Theory and its underlying redemptive mode of criticism manifested out of a reparative engagement with and transformation of intellectuals and ideas they opposed.²⁷ Moreover, Jameson's account can be expanded through an analysis of the specifically messianic, secularized theological conception of history that redemptive criticism involved. For rather than simply constituting a secular mode of criticism that rescues the object of critique, redemptive critique bears a messianic valence oriented around the task of negating (as ideologically and politically reactionary), transforming and redirecting ostensibly unredeemable ideas toward historical movement of messianic redemption or "cosmic repair,"²⁸ understood in secular, political terms as the rectification of the world through dissolution of all forms of oppression and injustice.²⁹ For Benjamin, Bloch, and

²⁶ It is in his 1844 introduction to his critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* that Marx presents religion in these terms. See Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'*, trans. Annette Jolin and Joseph O'Malley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 131.

²⁷ Habermas' claim is unsubstantiated insofar as Bloch's redemptive, hermeneutic fusion of messianism and Marxism influenced the development of the radical political movement of liberation theology in Latin America. Likewise, Benjamin's analogous synthesis of Marxism and messianism, in particular, his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," had a significant impact on the post-war radical left and student movements in West Germany. For more on Bloch's direct influence on liberation theology, see Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, trans. Caridad Inda, John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Books, 1973), 123-124; see also Robert C. Walton, "Jürgen Moltmann's Theology of Hope," in *On Liberation Theology*, ed. Ronald H. Nash (Milford: Mott Media, 1984), 139-186. For more on Benjamin's influence on the radical and student left in West Germany, see Irving Wolfarth, "Walter Benjamin and the Red Army Faction, Part One," *Radical Philosophy*, no. 152 (2008), 7-19.

²⁸ The conception of redemption or the messianic era as a 'cosmic repair' or rectification of the world originates in the Jewish theological and Kabbalistic sources that presents the messianic *telos* of history as an ongoing historical task or movement to "repair the world" (in Hebrew, *Tikkun Olam*). For more on the Jewish theological sources of messianic thought and the idea of 'comic restitution', see Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken, 1971), 1-141.

²⁹ The critical theorists of the Frankfurt School Hegelianized Marx's critique of religion by including a redemptive moment whereby the emancipatory impulses of and possibilities of religion are elevated and redeployed as part of the struggle for human liberation. In their thinking, Bloch, Benjamin, Adorno and likewise Erich Fromm (who is left out of this study as his work does not treat aesthetics and politics), present interconnected, secularized messianic conceptions of history. Secularizing the messianic idea in their conceptions of history, they reconceived ostensibly secular concepts like progress and utopia in messianic terms, as the collective human task of the rectification of the world through the clarification of consciousness. For more on the role of messianism in Critical Theory and the thought of Benjamin, Bloch, Adorno, and Fromm, see Joan Braune, *Erich Fromm's Revolutionary Hope: Prophetic Messianism as a Critical Theory of the Future* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2014); see also, Warren Goldstein, "Messianism and Marxism: Walter Benjamin and Ernst Bloch's Dialectical Theories of Secularization," *Critical Sociology* 27, no. 2 (March 2001), 246-81; Wayne Whitson Floyd, "Transcendence in the Light of Redemption: Adorno and the Legacy of Rosenzweig and Benjamin," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 61, no. 3 (1993), 539-51; Douglas Kellner and Harry O'Hara, "Utopia and Marxism in Ernst Bloch," *New German Critique*, no. 9 (1976), 11-34. For primary sources theorizing the secularization of messianism and infusion of the latter into ostensibly secular terms

Adorno, the originally messianic task of repairing or rectifying the world was inextricable from the project of transforming society and liberating humankind.³⁰ As Benjamin wrote in a fragment unpublished in his lifetime, “Marx’s idea of classless society secularized the idea of messianic time. And that was a good thing.”³¹ From the perspective of Benjamin and his fellow-travelers, however, it was not only ideology as expressed in vaguely theoretical elements of religion, art, and the culture industry which was to be critiqued and dialectically transformed; rather, the critical transformation and rescue of the utopian elements contained in the object of criticism extended to the thought of those associated with the radical right—even Nazism. The redemptive engagement with ostensibly unredeemable thinkers (on account of their politics), I argue, helped shape the aesthetico-political debates and developments of Critical Theory. It did so because it entailed a reparative transformation and refunctioning of the object of criticism, orienting the latter toward the secularized messianic project of human liberation and redemption. This transformation or redemptive critique in effect undoes the binary of left and right-wing thought, problematizing accounts that bifurcate this intellectual history into two rigidly defined poles.

The hermeneutics of redemption in the works of Adorno, Benjamin, and Bloch does not entail a naïve, affirmative reception of all aspects of culture. On the contrary, it is only through the negation of the specific, given expressions of human consciousness that their utopian kernel can be uncovered. In one of his last writings, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*,³² a work

such as utopia and progress, see Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, 165-278; see also, Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, 253-264; Theodor W. Adorno “Progress,” in *Can One Live After Auschwitz?*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and others (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 126-145.

³⁰ Bloch’s fusion of messianism and the secular political movement of socialism in his first major work, *Spirit of Utopia*, was instrumental to the development of Critical Theory, as Boldyrev argues in his study on Bloch’s utopian messianism and intellectual legacy. See Boldyrev, *Ernst Bloch and His Contemporaries*; see also references in footnote 26, above. Echoing Bloch’s synthesis of messianism and Marxism, in section of *The Arcades Project* where Benjamin elucidates his philosophy of history and theory of knowledge, he begins by quoting Marx’s conception of socialism as the fundamental task of clarifying consciousness to awaken humanity from its ideological dream-state: “The reform of consciousness consists solely in ... the awakening of the world from its dream about itself.” See Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland, Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), Convolute N, p. 456; see also, Karl Marx, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker (New York: Norton and Co., 1978), 11-12.

³¹ Walter Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings: Volume 4* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 401.

³² Benjamin gave this work the title, *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*. In the English edition of Benjamin’s *Selected Writings* this text is translated as “On the Concept of History,” see *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 4*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, trans. Harry Zohn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 389-400. It commonly referred to and published as *Theses on the Philosophy of History* in Zohn’s identical translation in *Illuminations*. See Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 253-265. Throughout my dissertation, I will use the term, “*Theses*” to refer to this text.

which monadically crystalizes a lifetime of critical reflection on the utopian potentials of social transformation in the context of recurrent catastrophe, Benjamin articulates a dialectical conception of culture that has now become widespread in media and literary studies:

Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures, and a historical materialist views them with cautious detachment. For without exception the cultural treasures he surveys have an origin which he cannot contemplate without horror. They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism [*Es ist niemals ein Dokument der Kultur, ohne zugleich ein solches der Barbarei zu sein*]. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another. A historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from it as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain.³³

Benjamin's formulation that "There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" encompasses his dialectical mode of critique, insofar as this conception evokes the ways that culture is simultaneously something to be treasured and yet is the product of barbarism. Although on the surface, Benjamin would appear to be posing a damning critique of culture that renders it not simply as ideology, but moreover, as a product of exploitation and human suffering, upon closer inspection one can begin to trace the utopian possibilities culled through the critical recovery of cultural artifacts. Benjamin's orientation of brushing "history against the grain" does not simply entail contemplating the cultural procession of the "victors of history" with horror. On the contrary, by pointing to the catastrophic origins and transmission of such artifacts, Benjamin demystifies them with the effect of locating the truth—the utopian impulse for a redeemed humanity—contained therein. Jameson interprets the interpenetration of culture and barbarism in Benjamin's *Theses* as reflecting the dialectic of ideology and utopia. He argues that "we must restore Benjamin's identification of culture and barbarism to its proper sequence, as the affirmation not merely of the Utopian dimension of ideological texts, but also and above all of the ideological dimension of all high culture."³⁴ In this account of Benjamin, what makes documents of culture barbaric is not simply their oppressive origins and

³³ Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 256-7. The translation I use is Harry Zohn's, however, with one slight revision: the change from "civilization" to "culture" in the formulation about culture and barbarism. This change reflects the original German and is thus more appropriate.

³⁴ Jameson, Fredrick. *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 289.

transmission, but also their inextricability with ideology as such. Despite or, rather, *because of* this ideological function, documents of culture contain invaluable utopian impulses without which they would lose all ideological force. Reversing Benjamin's proposition that "There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism," Jameson argues that "the effectively ideological is also, at the same time, necessarily Utopian."³⁵ In this regard, the criticisms aimed at aesthetic works, movements, and thinkers associated with fascism and the right, such as Heidegger, Schmitt, George and Wagner, were fundamentally redemptive insofar as they ultimately evoked the utopian truth content of the object of criticism.

My dissertation therefore draws on Jameson's dialectical conception of redemptive critique but applies this conception to the historian's understanding of the past and the ideas and relationships that shaped it. Seen through the dialectical lenses of redemptive critique and reciprocal interaction, the intellectual histories of twentieth century aesthetics and politics and the development of Critical Theory were not simply left-wing or Marxist phenomena—as Jameson argues—but involved a critique and constructive engagement with intellectuals associated with the German right and Nazism—particularly Schmitt, George, Heidegger, and Wagner.³⁶ Moving chronologically from the Weimar Republic to Adorno's death in 1969, each chapter of my dissertation therefore expands upon existing scholars to demonstrate the redemptive interactions between Critical Theory and these leading German intellectuals.

The first chapter illustrates how the Weimar debates on aesthetics and politics were not relegated to Critical Theory and Western Marxism, but also involved German conservative thinkers such as Schmitt. The first section introduces the intellectual historical context of the debates, focusing in particular on romantic anti-capitalism and the circle around Max Weber,

³⁵ Ibid., 276.

³⁶ After 1945, both Schmitt and Heidegger lost their academic posts as a result of their support for Nazism, with Schmitt being interned and interrogated by American forces to determine if he would stand trial in the Nuremberg Military Tribunals. Schmitt was first arrested by Soviet forces in April, 1945, after which he was released and then rearrested by the U.S. army in September, 1945, for his intellectual support of the Third Reich. He was held in U.S. internment camps until March, 1947, at which point he was taken to Nuremberg as a possible defendant. As Joseph Bendersky notes, this had a devastating impact on Schmitt's post-war reputation: "Although he was released in a matter of weeks without being charged, this episode has created further suspicion about Schmitt's role in the Third Reich." See Joseph W. Bendersky, "Carl Schmitt at Nuremberg," *Telos*, No. 72 (Summer, 1987), 91. In contrast to Schmitt, after the war, in French-occupied Freiburg, Heidegger was forced to account for his involvement with Nazism before an academic committee that ultimately removed him from his academic position and barred him from university teaching. At the conclusion of denazification procedure in 1949, Heidegger was eventually successful in his appeals and was able to resume lecturing by spring 1951 (Rüdiger Safranski, *Martin Heidegger: Between Good and Evil*, trans. Ewald Osers [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998], 373).

which included leading conservative and left-wing intellectuals, such as Schmitt, Bloch and Lukács. In the second and third sections, I turn to Schmitt's involvement in these debates, illustrating how his critique of political romanticism intersected with and influenced Lukács' realism. In the last section, I argue that Benjamin's critique and transformation of Schmitt's theory of sovereignty redeems this theory and illuminates Schmitt's thought in the process.

Chapter two analyzes the role that Stefan George and his circle played in the development of the debates on aesthetics and politics in Critical Theory. In the first section, I reconceive the relation of George and Critical Theory by demonstrating the specifically redemptive way in which Benjamin and Adorno engaged and critiqued George. In the second section, I invoke Heidegger's political conception of poetry to emphasize the political stakes and fascist possibilities of George's poetry. In the last section, I analyze George's mythic-political conception of politics and his important role in the debates on aesthetics and politics. In light of the reciprocal interaction of thinkers across the political spectrum in Germany in Weimar and its aftermath, chapter three places Heidegger's conception of art—as articulated in his Nietzsche lectures the 1930s and his influential work, "The Origin of the Work of Art"—in conversation with Benjamin's and Adorno's debate on aesthetics and politics during the 1930s. Placing these three thinkers in conversation with one another, does not only illuminate their respective conceptions of art and politics and the intellectual historical milieu that birthed them; it also locates Heidegger as an important interlocutor and intellectual counterforce against which Critical Theory situated itself. In the first section, I begin with a close analysis of Heidegger's conception of art, its political implications and associations with Nazism. In the second section, I juxtapose Heidegger's theory of art with Benjamin's and Adorno's aesthetico-political debate to show how placing these thinkers in conversation with one another clarifies their respective philosophies. Chapter three therefore seeks to rethink Heidegger's politics and his relationship with the Frankfurt School through emphasizing the interactions and correspondences between them. In chapter four, I reconceive Adorno's criticisms of leading representatives of the German aesthetic tradition, namely, Wagner and George. By analyzing Adorno's persistent engagement and redemptive critique of Wagner, George and by extension, this chapter shows how these two thinkers who were posthumously incorporated by the Nazis were also redeemed by and integrated into Adorno's aesthetic theories. In the first section, I introduce Adorno's critical method to show its dialectical, redemptive way of transforming the objects of criticism. In the

second section, I turn to Adorno's critique of Wagner, to show how he does not only negate—as his acerbic criticisms suggest—but also elevates Wagner as a paradigmatic representative of modern music. In the third section, I show how Adorno's sustained engagement with George throughout his career is characterized by his attempt to rescue George's poetry from oblivion and evoke its latent, utopian possibilities for the present. Chapter Four to this effect demonstrates how Wagner and George were instrumental to the development of Adorno's aesthetic theory, as he rescues their central aesthetic ideas in his sustained, critical engagement with them throughout his career.

II. *Dismantling the Historiography of Critical Theory*

In the years following the deaths of Max Horkheimer, Friedrich Pollock, Leo Lowenthal, Erich Fromm, Hebert Marcuse, Adorno, Bloch, and Benjamin, a great deal has been written about the intellectual history, contemporaneity (or lack thereof), and philosophical significance of the “Frankfurt School.”³⁷ Despite the insistence of many influential historians of the latter—namely, that the categorization of a disparate, heterogenous orbit of thinkers as an identifiable school of thought is, in many ways, a retroactive label applied by scholars—critics and readers nonetheless deploy the category of the “Frankfurt School” or The Institute of Social Research as a starting point and central orientation for their research. For instance, although he concedes that “it [is] advisable not to take the term ‘Frankfurt School’ too seriously,” in his unparalleled work, *The Frankfurt School*, Rolf Wiggershaus nonetheless deploys the notion of the “Frankfurt School” as a unifying, determinative frame for his analysis.³⁸ In *The Dialectical Imagination*, Martin Jay acknowledges the debates at hand in the development of “Critical Theory” and The Institute of Social Research while at the same time arguing for a coherent position that the Institute held regarding the questions and nature of cultural critique, aesthetics, and psychoanalysis.³⁹ For instance, toward the conclusion of his study, Jay argues that “as Edward

³⁷ Before delving into the historical reception of these thinkers, it is essential to first present a conception of “Critical Theory,” as it is articulated by Horkheimer, the figure who, more than any other of this group, was able to facilitate the interactive intellectual collaborations of these thinkers. Although by no means a definitive expression of Critical Theory, Horkheimer's essay, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” nonetheless presents a clear account of this mode of thought that constitutes a valuable starting point for its elucidation. In this essay, Horkheimer distinguishes Critical Theory from traditional theory on account of the former's commitment to the transformation of society. For more, see Max Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell and Others (New York: Continuum, 1972), 241.

³⁸ Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School*, 3.

³⁹ Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination*.

Shils has noted, one of the key factors promoting” the influence of the Frankfurt school “at least compared with more isolated figures such as Karl Mannheim, was its unbroken institutional continuity for almost a half century.”⁴⁰

By rearticulating and representing this constellation as a school, historians do not adequately attend to the ways that figures ostensibly peripheral or even philosophically and politically opposed to members of The Institute of Social Research were in effect deeply entwined with the discourses that constituted the latter. Put differently, thinkers who are typically positioned at the margins of the “Frankfurt School,” in particular, Bloch, Benjamin, and Georg Lukács were not only inextricably a part of the discourses and debates that shaped the “Frankfurt School,” but were in effect key to its development, persisting dynamism and actuality (i.e., a relation to concrete reality, viz. politics and historical change). Furthermore, those constituting the “Frankfurt School” were in thoughtful dialogue, both implicitly and explicitly, with thinkers often linked with National Socialism, such as Schmitt, Heidegger, Ludwig Klages, and various members of the circle around the poet Stefan George. The focus of existing scholarship on the Frankfurt School primarily on the Institute’s official members and their inner-circle—or what Wiggershaus explicitly refers to as “the Horkheimer Circle” —can be productively expanded through an broader historical-philosophical milieu and the complex political and intellectual climate out of which the Frankfurt school developed.⁴¹ This first problem contributes to a broader issue present in many such historical accounts, namely, the attempt to coherently identify, categorize, and reposition a group of thinkers, the majority of whom opposed categorization and philosophical identity as totalizing while moreover refusing to resolutely identify with any particular philosophical school, political program, or party. The critical, determinately negative opposition to totality and identity which characterized the thinking of Benjamin and Adorno in particular, cannot be reconciled with a totalizing or internally coherent conception of a school of thought, such as the “Frankfurt School.” Any attempt to frame such thinkers as members of a school—despite their formal affiliations with the Institute of Social Research—risks the reductive representation of their thought in terms completely alien to it, while further eliding the repressed, subterranean underside of the “Frankfurt School,” or, even, ignoring the missed opportunities, potentials, and discourses that did not conform to the political

⁴⁰ Ibid., 288.

⁴¹ Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School*, 64, 104-5, 124, 178, 291-2, 383.

and (so conceived) philosophical dictates of the Institute as set out by its directors or guiding intellectual influences (i.e., Adorno and Horkheimer).

Instead of attempting to frame and historically represent the Frankfurt School and the representatives of early twentieth century Critical Theory and German Marxist thought reductively, as a singular school, my dissertation is thematically oriented around the motif of philosophical discourse or dialogue, in general, and actual debates about the relationship of aesthetics and politics, in particular. The movement of Critical Theory within and through the Frankfurt School, I argue, is best understood not as a rigid paradigm of thought with a fixed group of official members, but rather as a constellation of interconnected theorists and philosophers who developed an interdisciplinary critique of society aimed at human liberation. Drawing on Susan Buck-Morss' illustration of Benjamin's central role in the development of Adorno's negative dialectical method and Critical Theory more broadly, I situate ostensibly marginal associates of the Frankfurt School, such as Bloch and Benjamin, as key representatives of Critical Theory and its mode of criticism.⁴² As my dissertation illustrates, this expanded conception of Critical Theory is supported by Adorno's deployment of the very modes of redemptive critique that are first introduced in the philosophies of Benjamin and Bloch.⁴³ Instead of attempting to write a revisionist account or counter-history of Frankfurt School Critical Theory, this investigation rethinks the ideas of those typically associated with the latter, precisely by placing them in conversation with a broader array of thinkers who were also philosophically reevaluating the relations of aesthetics and politics in the twentieth century. In this sense, the thinkers and ideas explored in juxtaposition with one another are conceived in terms of their political and philosophical currency in relation to their own histories and the present. In contrast to beginning with the institutional and—by extension—canonical notion of the Frankfurt School as a point of departure, my account of Critical Theory is oriented around the deeply unsettled dialogue of aesthetics and politics that took place between a group of thinkers who, despite political and ideological opposition, shared a common set of concerns about the role of aesthetics in society and vice versa. Critical Theory, I maintain, was not only shaped by the ideas of

⁴² See Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt Institute* (New York, The Free Press, 1977).

⁴³ As Bloch and Benjamin were over a decade older than Adorno, their early writings influenced the young Adorno. Bloch was born in 1885, Benjamin in 1892 and Adorno in 1903.

superficially marginal figures such as Benjamin, Lukács, and Bloch, it was born out of a critical engagement with intellectuals associated with the right, particularly, Schmitt, Heidegger, and George.

The debates about aesthetics and politics that occurred during the interwar years in Germany and the German-Jewish intellectual diaspora after the rise of fascism provide valuable insights into the historical-philosophical context of the development of Critical Theory, as conceived by members and interlocutors of the Frankfurt School and its official organizational framework, the Institute of Social Research. Moreover, these debates are central to understanding the origins and unsettled composition of Critical Theory insofar it developed through a sustained critical engagement with an array of intellectuals and artists across the political spectrum. These engagements demonstrate the extent to which the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School engendered a dialectical openness toward opposing thinkers and ideas. What united the group of thinkers who engaged in this dialogue was the commitment to formulating a dialectical Critical Theory of social reality and—beyond that—a redemptive, messianic impulse aimed at the rectification of the world. This rectification was characterized not only by the transformation of social conditions, but also by the more immediate task of awakening humanity’s collective spirit and longing for a better world. To accelerate this shift in human consciousness, critical theorists sought to dialectically redeem even that which they criticized, from the culture industry and avantgarde aesthetics to politically disparate intellectuals and currents.

In this regard, I draw on Gerhard Richter’s pioneering investigation, *Thought-Images: Frankfurt School Writers’ Reflections from Damaged Life*, by expanding his perspective of including often overlooked thinkers to include intellectuals associated with Nazism and German conservatism.⁴⁴ Drawing on the historical research of Jay and Wiggershaus, Richter posits that “the label ‘Frankfurt School’ was retroactively applied, beginning in the 1950s, to this group of thinkers and writers, all of whom were affiliated with the project of cultural critique that took the

⁴⁴ . In this work, in which the literary genre of thought-image [*Denkbild*] is brought to life through penetrating analyses of the aesthetico-political writings of Benjamin, Adorno, Siegfried Kracauer and Bloch, Richter makes explicit his intention to read these thinkers not simply as a group of philosophers and theorists, but moreover, “as writers,” through attending to the figurative and poetic dimensions of their works. See Gerhard Richter, *Thought-Images: Frankfurt School Writers’ Reflection from Damaged Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 2-3.

political, epistemological, and psychoanalytic insights of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud as seriously as the aesthetic, moral, and historical ones of Kant and Hegel.”⁴⁵ As his choice of authors to include in his study demonstrates, Richter’s conception of the “Frankfurt School” is far from a conventional account. In line with his divergence from more traditional histories of the Frankfurt School, Richter situates his study as reimagining the very notion of the idea of the school itself. He argues that remaining “faithful to its transformative aims as a school” is perhaps possible only insofar as the “Frankfurt School...no longer is a school...the school without school.”⁴⁶ Richter suggests that the taxonomic process of “designation,” of classifying the “Frankfurt School” as a school, has the effect of detracting from the latter’s perpetually changing “transformative thinking.”⁴⁷ In rethinking these writers through their collective engagement with a particular literary-philosophical form—rather than through their respective involvement in or belonging to the “Frankfurt School”—Richter’s study deviates from many of its predecessors to the effect of expressing a mode of representing this complex history without petrifying it into a static, homogenous account.⁴⁸

In addition to drawing on Richter’s work my dissertation expands Jameson’s presentation of Critical Theory in *Aesthetics and Politics*, a collection of essays and letters by Adorno, Benjamin, Bloch, Brecht, and Lukács. Jameson represents the thinking of these writers as a series of debates—still deeply relevant today—on the relations of aesthetics and politics.⁴⁹ As evidenced by his choice of authors to include in the collection, Jameson deviates from conventional historical accounts that narrowly represent the majority of these writers, namely, Benjamin, Adorno, and—to a lesser extent—Lukács and Bloch, as members and interlocutors of the “Frankfurt School.” In doing so, Jameson’s composition presents a fuller—albeit condensed and incomplete—picture of the debates and intellectual-historical milieu which shaped each of

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 3.

⁴⁷ Citing Jacques Derrida’s conception of paleonymy, the “maintenance of an *old name* in order to launch a new concept,” Richter deconstructs the “Frankfurt School” by retaining the label precisely through its repurposing as a paleonymy that opens up new modes of reconceiving this constellation of writers. See Gerhard Richter, *Thought-Images: Frankfurt School Writers’ Reflection from Damaged Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 1-8.

⁴⁸ Irrespective of the issues detected in Richter’s study however, it nonetheless evokes the contemporaneity and relevance of such writers’ cultural and aesthetic theories today while also gesturing at the crucial demand that their works be read and interpreted not simply as theoretical, but as literary and poetic. In these ways, Richter’s work constitutes a valuable forerunner and starting point for my dissertation.

⁴⁹ Adorno, Theodor W., Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin, Georg Lukács, and Bertolt Brecht., *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. Fredric Jameson (New York: Verso, 1977).

these writers and their ideas. Reading the collection of essays and letters contained in *Aesthetics and Politics* opens up an array of questions and concerns not only about the relation of aesthetics and politics, but also about the work and history of each of the thinkers included in the volume. The intellectual-historical context and philosophical commentary surrounding these illuminating debates was represented in this volume in a justifiably abbreviated form. The investigation and history of these debates and correspondences therefore constitute the principal objects of analysis of my dissertation. Grasping the contours of these debates, however, demands placing them in conversation with a wider constellation of texts, histories, and figures in which they were intricately enmeshed. For the aesthetic and political debates of those associated with the Frankfurt School developed historically out of the engagement and interaction of thinkers across the political spectrum.

Rather than understanding Critical Theory reductively, as opposed to such conservative figures, on one hand, or showing their mere affinity with each other, on the other, this dissertation aims to illustrate how Critical Theory developed through its often redemptive critical engagement with artists and intellectuals spanning the political spectrum in Weimar. Rather than simply reexamining the origins of Critical Theory, this dissertation reconceives its underlying modes of criticism and intellectual engagement.

III. Redeeming the Enemy: Critical Theory and its Interlocutors

The originators of Critical Theory rooted their thought and lifework in an unyielding commitment to human liberation. Inspired by the Marxian dictum that “philosophy hitherto has only interpreted the world; the task however is to change it,” critical theorists like Adorno and Benjamin sought to wield their critiques of aesthetic and cultural objects as forces of social transformation. To this effect the dialectical-critical function of Critical Theory functioned as a theoretical-political practice aimed at human liberation. Rather than seeking to transform society—in Marxist-Leninist fashion—through political revolution, however, the critical theorists emphasized the revolution in consciousness which precedes (and, in their view, forms the backbone of) utopian social-political transformations. Instead of focusing solely on the concrete political realm of political organizing or socioeconomic class struggles, this theory sought a clarification of consciousness which would break individuals out of the ideological confines of a mental conformity inculcated at every level of society’s cultural expression. Tasked

with resisting fascism—and at the same time working toward the realization of a concrete utopia—they aimed for a new social reality where the freedom of each individual could flourish within the collective by breaking out of the conformity and repressive tendencies imposed by the social order. For thinkers like Adorno, Bloch, and Benjamin, the clarification and reform of consciousness was essential to the realization of a new, utopian social reality. Marx’s idea that “The reform of consciousness consists solely in ... the awakening of the world from its dream about itself”—which Benjamin cites at the beginning of a key section (Convolute N) of his magnum opus, *The Arcades Project*—shaped the approach of redemptively critiquing a social whole through the analysis of its particular expression in concrete aesthetic objects and ideas.⁵⁰

In the late 1920s, as Nazism began solidifying its political rise with a number of electoral victories in the *Reichstag*, leftist intellectuals—many of whom were Jewish—became increasingly aware of the threat of fascism, and of Nazism in particular. In turn, left-wing and Marxist intellectuals and artists in Germany began to use their ideas and art to actively resist fascism. Benjamin and Adorno were preoccupied with intellectually resisting fascism not simply with the methods of Critical Theory, but with art as well. In contemporary society, many left-wing and liberal intellectuals and political activists are asking similar questions to those Adorno, Benjamin, and their interlocutors grappled with in their struggles against fascism. Their aesthetico-political writings theorized how to resist the fascist (and likewise capitalist and orthodox Communist) commodification of art as a tool of propaganda and social control. Their reflections and debates on aesthetics and politics aimed at discovering aesthetic modes capable of breaking the ideological grip and reification of an administered world. In a critical assessment of fascism and the conditions that facilitated its rise in Weimar Germany, Benjamin, in his “Artwork Essay,” demonstrates the ways in which fascism arises as an “aestheticization of politics,” an aestheticization apparent in the Futurist aestheticization of war, highly orchestrated rallies, and architecture, as well as the ubiquity of uniforms and the governing uniformity of fascist society (i.e., from fashion to and architecture). Against the backdrop of this aestheticization of politics, on one hand, and the commodifying instrumentalization of art as propaganda, on the other, Adorno and Benjamin elevated different aesthetic modes which resisted and negated the repressive, instrumental logic of identity (or sameness). For Benjamin

⁵⁰ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 456.

and Adorno, it is through this negative capacity that emancipatory works of art effectively express a utopian impulse for a redeemed, transformed world, resisting the conformity of the present and past. In this sense, the very process of critique disrupts the rigid boundary of artist and critic, as the critique elevates the redemptive capacity immanent in the artwork itself to actualize the utopian expression of the aesthetic object—a disintegrating remnant of the past that remains—in the present. Emancipatory art therefore simultaneously negates the past and present (i.e., society as a whole and its norms) in the course of evoking the redemptive, utopian elements latent in the aesthetic object.

Adorno's negative dialectical mode of criticism confronted the logic of identity, culminating in an aesthetic preference for art which is incommensurable with yet expressive of the irresolvable contradictions of society while remaining autonomous from the latter (for Adorno this was expressed most clearly in the works of Schönberg). In this respect, the fascist imposition of sameness and conformity—in other words, of identity thinking—adds another dimension to the aestheticization of politics of fascism, given its fundamentally aesthetic motifs of sameness, unity, and their retroactively guaranteed *telos* (in the fascist conception only) of national-ethnic identity. National Socialism was predicated on a concept of politics which was itself inextricable from the aesthetic, being firmly rooted in an aesthetic vision of the ideal political order in which aesthetic uniformity was enforced. Any art, images, people, or thinking which did not conform to the newly defined national identity was to be excised or destroyed.

In their writings, Adorno and Benjamin demonstrate the ways that art and aesthetic expression tend to disrupt identity thinking—insofar as they express something inimitable, incommensurable, and new, but moreover because they evade uniformity and sameness in the very process of creation and interpretation. The work of art or aesthetic symbol can continually be interpreted and reinterpreted in conflicting and contradictory ways, thus precluding any possibility of a stable (semiotic) identity or uniform meaning. For it is precisely the non-identical, the particular, unique aesthetic creation which breaks out of the conformity of the universal, whereupon the artwork (literary, musical, or visual) expresses the impulse for utopia through the negation of social orders of the past and present. Despite sharing a disdain for the identity-thinking and enforced conformity inherent in the liberal-bourgeois Weimar Republic

and—re-synthesized later—under fascism, Benjamin and Adorno debated the proper aesthetic response.

For Adorno, the abstract, inaccessible music of Schönberg, the approaches of the Second Viennese School, and the opaque writings of Beckett and Kafka were emancipatory aesthetic modes that countered the ideologically impelled social conformity and repetitive, popular culture of the masses. On the other hand, under the influence of his close friend and collaborator, Brecht, in his “Artwork Essay” Benjamin sought to redeem mass art and popular culture—that is, the new technological, media, and aesthetic forms of film, photography and radio—contrasting these new, potentially revolutionary, shocking, and avant-garde aesthetic forms with the elitist, isolated experience of traditional, auratic art.

The chief difference between the revolutionarily modern forms of technologically reproduced mass art and traditional art lies in Benjamin’s conception of the aura—which Benjamin defines as “the apparition of distance,” the uniqueness or authenticity of an object, in other words, the “here and now” which embeds and roots an object firmly within a tradition.⁵¹ The aura, in other words, represents the weight of tradition and the trace of the past that lingers on an object. The aura, for Benjamin, makes the object unapproachable by shrouding it in the mythic apparition or ghost of distance, understood not only physically and conceptually (in the sense of abstraction, which is predicated on the distancing of subject and object), but temporally as well. Indeed, as Christopher Long argues, the “unapproachability” that Benjamin theorizes through the concept of aura is “what gives the object its authority,” an authority that is “undermined” with the advent of photography which allows the public “to approach the unapproachable, to ‘pry the object from its shell.’”⁵² The modern technologically reproduced aesthetic forms of film and photography thus constitute a disintegration of the aura, Benjamin contends, insofar as they preclude the possibility of instantiating an intimate-yet-distanced, inherently cultic, or religious encounter with the here and now—which is precisely the work that “authentic,” inimitable works of art used to do. In demystifying art, stripping—or in Benjamin’s terms, “emancipating”—it of its cultic aura or veil of false authenticity, sacrality, and abstraction

⁵¹ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, and Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 285-286.

⁵² Christopher P. Long, “Art’s Fateful Hour: Benjamin, Heidegger, Art and Politics,” *New German Critique*, no. 83 (2001), 94.

from immediate perception, Benjamin positions modern mass art such as film and radio as having the capacity to shock the masses into revolutionary consciousness while at the same time constituting a radical democratization (popularization or massification) of the production, reception, and collectivized conception of art.⁵³ Countering Benjamin's affirmation of mass produced art, popular culture, and agitprop (albeit a form of agitprop unique to Brecht and his collaborators), Adorno pointed to the manifold ways that under the logic of identity-thinking, the economic forces of production in effect control and instrumentally deploy film and radio as effective means of inculcating a repetitive conformity and mass compliance with the status quo. Emphasizing the dialectical nature of his own perspective, Adorno contends that the decline of the aura—despite representing a radical break with the stultifying weight of tradition—also represented the loss and decay of experience in modern, administered life.

In this regard, as Lunn demonstrates in his work on the Benjamin-Adorno debate, Adorno redeems the object of his (and Benjamin's) critique—the aura, representing the embeddedness within tradition and the unique here and now of an object—without affirming it, as he “insists on a technical self-liquidation of the aura within the imminent dialectic of the artwork” (i.e., as expressed in the works of Schönberg, and to a lesser extent Beckett and Kafka, whose works show the subject's experience of the modern, fragmented, alienating world).⁵⁴

Building on existing scholarship, my dissertation represents the debates on aesthetics and politics (in Weimar and its aftermath) and development of Critical Theory by placing these debates and the critical theorists that engaged in them within the broader intellectual historical context of Germany in the twentieth century. Although Schmitt's and Heidegger's respective influences on the development of Critical Theory has been thoroughly investigated, scholars disagree on the nature of these relationships. Particularly, in Heidegger's case, there is considerable disagreement amongst scholars who investigate his interaction with various critical theorists.

In his study *Lukács and Heidegger*, the French philosopher Lucien Goldmann synthesizes the philosophies of these ostensibly opposed thinkers while arguing that key ideas in Lukács'

⁵³ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, eds, Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, and Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 285-286, 37-38.

⁵⁴ Eugene Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism: An Historical Study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 271.

philosophy—in particular, his pioneering theories of reification and totality—had influenced Heidegger’s phenomenology in *Sein und Zeit*.⁵⁵ Goldmann’s analysis points to important philosophical affinities between Lukács’ and Heidegger’s philosophy.⁵⁷ When considered alongside such affinities of Heidegger’s and Lukács’ philosophies, the latter’s substantial influence on Adorno, Benjamin, and their fellow travelers points to the extent to which the thinkers featured in Jameson’s historical representation of the twentieth century debates about aesthetics and politics were part of a broader intellectual milieu which included politically disparate thinkers—i.e., Heidegger, Schmitt, George, and Klages—who critiqued the political, cultural, and philosophical status quo in Weimar Germany. Although they may have arrived at radically divergent conclusions, these thinkers were linked not only in their critical orientation toward the liberal bourgeois establishment but— moreover and crucially—in their multivalent philosophical inheritance of and antagonism toward the Western philosophical and political traditions. A historical account of the debates about aesthetics and politics in Weimar thought, then, is expanded by including such conservative intellectuals, who not only shared many of the theoretical concerns of their leftist counterparts, but who were thoroughly enmeshed in the historical debates which characterize the latter, as evidenced by the numerous interactions and critiques—both explicit and implicit—of these seemingly opposed thinkers. Building upon recent scholarship on the relationship between those associated with the Frankfurt School and

⁵⁵ In Goldmann’s account, the Lukácsian critique of capitalist society and its intellectual reflection in the reigning philosophy in Germany at the time (i.e., neo-Kantianism) not only influenced Heidegger’s conception of inauthentic *Dasein*, but effectively paralleled Heidegger’s similarly Hegelian attack on the subject-object dichotomy characteristic of the Western philosophical tradition, in particular, of Neo-Kantianism. Goldmann argues that it was thus a critique that pivoted on the theory of reification Lukács’ inflection of the Marxian and Hegelian theories of alienation, or the process whereby historically dynamic processes and subjects are abstracted and reduced to static objects. See Lucien Goldmann, *Lukács and Heidegger: Toward a New Philosophy*, trans. William Boelhower (London: Routledge, 1977), 1-25.

⁵⁷ This was the case insofar as Lukács’ Hegelianized reconception of historical materialism, crystalized in his theory of reification, influenced the political critique of the aesthetic works in Adorno, Benjamin and Bloch. Lukács’ critique of reification entailed a philosophical insistence—shared to varying degrees by Hegel and Marx depending on how they are interpreted—on the perspective of the “totality” marked by the dialectical reciprocation of the subjective realm of consciousness and the empirical, objective world (i.e., of subject and object). His theory thus stood as a precursor to critiques of society that sought to reveal the dialectical imbrication of the material, political-economic sphere with that of the ideational (i.e., culture, religion, art, philosophy), despite Adorno and Benjamin’s critiques of the concepts of totality and identity (namely, of subject and object) that Lukács inherited from Hegel. For more on Lukács’ influence on the development of Critical Theory, see Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School*, 66-101. One issue with Goldmann’s account, Laurence Paul Hemming argues, is Goldmann’s assertion of Lukács having influenced Heidegger is “at the very best, wildly improbable, despite the recurrence of the [Lukácsian] phrase... ‘reification of consciousness’ twice in *Being and Time*.” See Laurence Paul Hemming, *Heidegger and Marx: a Productive Dialogue Over the Language of Humanism* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2013), 33-34.

thinkers such as Heidegger, Schmitt, and George, my dissertation therefore seeks to enrich our understanding of these relationships and the aesthetico-political theories of those involved by disrupting the boundaries which may have restricted critical engagements within the scope of the Frankfurt School and Critical Theory. In this regard, the originators of Critical Theory sought to rescue and revolutionize key ideas of their interlocutors through their criticism.

With respect to historical debates about aesthetics and politics in the Weimar and Nazi periods, juxtaposing and relating the thought of Heidegger, Schmitt, and George with the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School is essential to our modern understanding for three interconnected reasons. Firstly, these three thinkers with ties to National Socialism and the burgeoning philosophical movement of existentialism were historically influential on the development of Critical Theory—as Kennedy, Stauth, Turner, Agamben, and others have argued—thus necessitating their inclusion in any intellectual historical account of these debates.⁵⁸ Secondly, Heidegger, Schmitt, George, and Weber made important contributions to the Weimar debates about aesthetics and politics which highlighted the intensely political stakes of art and, conversely, the aesthetic dimensions of the political. This is the case insofar as Schmitt’s and George’s direct engagement with problematic aesthetics and politics were read, critiqued, and transformed by the pioneers of Critical Theory. Lastly, existing scholarship on the relationship of Frankfurt School Critical Theory and these thinkers—in particular, Heidegger and Schmitt—is fraught by widespread disagreement. Whereas scholars such as Agamben and Kennedy point to the lasting, often disavowed influence of Schmitt on those linked with the Frankfurt School, others such as Wolin, Jay, Alfons Söllner, and Ulrich Preuss have responded to Kennedy’s claims by arguing that her analysis misunderstands and overplays the extent and nature of Schmitt’s influence on the Frankfurt School.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ For more on Schmitt’s relationship with existentialism, see Richard Wolin, "Carl Schmitt, Political Existentialism, and the Total State," *Theory and Society*. 19, no. 4 (1990), 389-416.

⁵⁹ See Wolin "Carl Schmitt: The Conservative Revolutionary Habitus and the Aesthetics of Horror," 424-447; Martin Jay, "Reconciling the Irreconcilable? Rejoinder to Kennedy," *Telos*, no. 71 (Spring 1987), 67-80; Alfons Söllner, "Beyond Carl Schmitt: Political Theory in the Frankfurt School," *Telos*, no. 71 (Spring 1987), 81-96; Ulrich K. Preuss, "The Critique of German Liberalism: Reply to Kennedy," *Telos*, no. 71 (Spring 1987), 97-109.

Given the opacity of Heidegger's philosophy, the question of his influence on any left-wing contemporaries is even more difficult to establish, with the majority of scholars engaged in this field simply pointing to explicit affinities or differences between Heidegger, on one hand, and, Adorno, Marcuse, Lukács, Benjamin, and Bloch, on the other. Marcuse, who was a student of Heidegger before joining The Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt (similarly, Habermas studied under Heidegger before joining Adorno in Frankfurt), was perhaps most explicit about the connection between Heidegger and the work of Critical Theory, as evidenced by his posthumously published work (edited and forwarded by Wolin), *Heideggerian Marxism*, which sought to fuse Heidegger's existentialist phenomenology with a Frankfurt School approach to historical materialism.⁶⁰ Likewise, Goldmann's work illustrates evident parallels and concerns shared by Heidegger and the founders of Critical Theory. At the same time, however, the critical theorists and philosophers who might have otherwise appeared most intellectually proximate with Heidegger (i.e., in their shared repudiation of the traditional philosophical dichotomy of subject-object and in their attempt to forge a concrete, historical theory or philosophy that critically addresses society) such as Adorno, Benjamin, and Lukács, all explicitly critiqued Heidegger in their writings, perceiving the latter as a political and philosophical threat to their own theoretical and practical aims. While Lukács' 1952 attack on Nietzsche, Heidegger, and existentialism in *The Destruction of Reason*, as well as Adorno's polemical critiques of Heidegger and existentialism in his 1956 *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique or Jargon of Authenticity*, published a decade later, are relatively well-known, Benjamin's philosophical opposition to Heidegger took the form of a plan which never quite came to fruition.⁶¹ In a 1930 letter to his friend, Gershom Scholem, Benjamin wrote of his plan "to establish a very small critical reading circle, led by Brecht and myself, to destroy Heidegger."⁶² Despite these explicit attacks, scholars of Critical Theory have argued that there remains a clear affinity between Heidegger and these early critical theorists. Turning specifically to Heidegger's philosophical

⁶⁰ See Herbert Marcuse, *Heideggerian Marxism*, ed. Richard Wolin and John Abromeit (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2004).

⁶¹ I use the English translations for the sake maintaining consistency in the language of book titles throughout my dissertation. The citations below, however, refer to Adorno's works with their original German titles and publication dates. See Theodor W. Adorno, *Zur Metakritik der Erkenntnistheorie - Studien über Husserl und die phänomenologischen Antinomien* (Frankfurt: Surhkamp Verlag, 1963); *Jargon der Eigentlichkeit: Zur deutschen Ideologie* (Frankfurt: Surhkamp Verlag, 1964); Georg Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason* (New Delhi: Aakar Books, 2016).

⁶² Walter Benjamin, "Letter to Scholem," cited in Walter Benjamin, *Moscow Diary*, trans. Richard Sieburth, ed. Gary Smith (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 142.

relation with Adorno—who, despite possible inadequacies of historical glossing and grouping mechanisms—remains unparalleled as a philosophical representative of Critical Theory, Thomas McCarthy, Roger Foster, Fred Dallmayr, Hermann Mörchen, and many other scholars reinforce Goldman’s account by arguing that there are indeed numerous affinities between Heidegger’s and Adorno’s philosophies.⁶³ This discrepancy between the explicit arguments of Adorno and Lukács and the works of those who would place these thinkers in relation to Heidegger is symptomatic of the unsettled opacity of the difficult question of intellectual influence in the context of thinkers who consciously sought to disrupt conventional representations of ideas in the form and content of their texts. As is the case with the scholarship attending to Schmitt’s relationship with Critical Theory, then, the connection between Heidegger, Adorno, and other critical theorists remains an unsolved philosophical question which continues to be a locus of intellectual-historical debate and perplexity.

Such debates in German intellectual history and Critical Theory are reflective of a paradox which Kennedy lucidly articulates in the beginning of her essay: “What did some of the most prominent of Germany’s leading leftist social critics hope to find in the work of a man who, more than any other German intellectual with the possible exception of Heidegger, has been held accountable for the ideological destruction of the Weimar Republic?”⁶⁴ While Kennedy presents her own research on this question as successfully “dissolving” this paradox (i.e., by showing that left-wing intellectuals, such as Marcuse, Kirchheimer, and Neumann drew on Schmitt’s logics of critique insofar as they were also critical of liberalism and thus shared Schmitt’s anti-establishment views on the latter, which effectively presented liberalism in opposition to true democracy), the scholarship presented by her detractors points to the persistence of this paradox. The extent and nature of Schmitt’s—or for that matter, Heidegger’s or Klages’ influence on Critical Theory—is therefore unsettled, not simply with regards to the question of historical validity, but, more importantly, concerning the contradictory philosophical syntheses of thinkers situated at opposing ends of the political spectrum. Focusing on these relationships in the context

⁶³ See Thomas McCarthy, *Ideals and Illusions: On Reconstruction and Deconstruction in Contemporary Critical Theory* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 83-96; Roger Foster, “Adorno and Heidegger on Language and the Inexpressible,” *Continental Philosophy Review*, 40 (2007), 187-204; Hermann Mörchen, *Adorno und Heidegger: Untersuchung Einer Philosophischen Kommunikationsverweigerung* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta Verlag, 1981); Fred Dallmayr, “Adorno and Heidegger,” *Diacritics*, 19, no. 3/4 (1989), 82-100.

⁶⁴ See Kennedy, “Carl Schmitt and the Frankfurt School,” 39.

of the Weimar debates about aesthetics and politics leads to the possibility of understanding—rather than simply seeking to resolve—these ostensibly paradoxical, theoretical syntheses (i.e., of Heidegger, Schmitt, George, and Klages with Critical Theory) which have led to widespread disagreement in the ensuing secondary scholarship on this theme. The juxtaposition of these politically divergent thinkers—through presenting them as part of a historical conversation about aesthetics and politics—is grounded, on one hand, in the intricate history of their intellectual engagements and confrontations with one another in the politically and aesthetically explosive climate of Weimar Germany over the interwar years. Their thought is better understood through providing this crucial, often neglected intellectual-historical context and thereby illustrating the ways that they diverge and why. In placing the aesthetico-political theories proffered by leading conservative critics of the modern, liberal bourgeois worldview—Heidegger, Schmitt, George, and Klages—in conversation with the critical theories of Lukács, Bloch, Adorno, and Benjamin, my dissertation aims to represent an intellectual history about the politically charged, contentious reevaluation and criticism of art and aesthetics that shaped the radical intellectual milieu of Weimar Germany.⁶⁵

Adopting a dialectical perspective which integrates and synthesizes these opposing accounts, I argue that Adorno and his colleagues were not simply drawing on and in conversation with these conservative thinkers; rather, they actively saw these thinkers as a political threat and rivals and sought to critique them and thereby sublimate or transform their ideas. As William Winstead argues, Schmitt’s central opposition of friend-enemy is critiqued and powerfully transformed—to evoke its latent utopian function—in the thinking of the Frankfurt School.⁶⁶ Looking to

⁶⁵ Although it is not the aim of my dissertation to illustrate the historical impact these thinkers had on the aforementioned spheres of society, it is worth noting that the Frankfurt School’s ideas, particularly, those of Adorno and Marcuse, had a considerable impact on the student movements of the 1960s and the New Left in Europe and North America. On the other hand, Schmitt’s influence on contemporary political theory and politics is painstakingly illustrated in Agamben’s works, *Homo Sacer* and *The State of Exception*. Furthermore, Bloch’s influence on religion and politics is evidenced by his impact on the development of liberation theology in Latin America, and the entire field of theology more broadly. Likewise, the impact of thinkers, such as Adorno and Benjamin, on the development of cultural and literary theory, literature and art cannot be understated, as even during their lifetimes, they were engaged in prolonged dialogues with leading artists and writers (i.e., Alban Berg, Bertolt Brecht, Thomas Mann), in addition to being literary innovators in their own right.

⁶⁶ William Winstead, “The Utopian Function of the Enemy in the Thought of the Frankfurt School.” *Western Political Science Association 2010 Annual Meeting Paper* (May 2010), Retrieved from <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1580687>.

Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Winstead maintains that the Schmittian "concept of the enemy is subjected to a dialectic critique intent on disclosing the concept's ambiguous potential."⁶⁷ Through their analysis of anti-Semitism, Winstead writes, Adorno, and Horkheimer demonstrate that "under certain conditions the enemy is not only the enemy but is also, against all expectations, the friend...the one who is feared—the Jew—is not only feared, but also desired. And this desire, Adorno and Horkheimer insist, is Utopian through and through."⁶⁸ In "Heliotrope," a fragment in Adorno's later work, *Minima Moralia*, this latent utopian function of the feared-yet-desired Other, the strange outsider or enemy, is further developed as an opening for a new, emancipatory mode of social relation, that is, of a "transformed existence." Referring to this utopian "transformed existence," Adorno writes:

The yearning to plunge into unformed joy, into the pool of salamanders and storks that the child has learned painfully to subdue and block with the frightful image of the black man, the demon who wants to take him away – here he finds it again, without fear. Among those nearest to him, as their friend, appears the figure of all that is different. The soothsaying gypsy, let in by the front door, is absolved in the lady visitor and transfigured into a rescuing angel. From the joy of greatest proximity she removes the curse by wedding it to utmost distance. For this the child's whole being is waiting, and so too, later, must he be able to wait who does not forget what is best in childhood. Love counts the hours until the one when the guest steps over the threshold and imperceptibly restores life's washed out colors: "Here I am again/ Returned from the endless world."⁶⁹

The immature fear of the child—a child who bears close resemblances to the young Adorno—confronted by a strange outsider, the black man, who "appears [as] the figure of all that is different," that is, of the Other, and the nonidentical, is here presented as a terror of the unknown, reminiscent of the fears which riddle enlightenment in its quest to make everything known and identifiable (as Adorno and Horkheimer argue in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*). However, it is precisely the object of this fear, the unknown, expressionless, nonidentical-yet-typed Other which opens up the messianic-utopian possibility of a transformed existence, insofar as the latent potential of what is lies in that which is not-yet (to borrow from Bloch's terminology), in the open future of infinite potential that is utterly different from and nonidentical to the present (but can still be understood by present attendees). The strange other, first viewed with suspicion, as a threat and an enemy, is thus transfigured into a figure symbolizing the utopian possibility of a

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Verso, 2005), 177-78.

“transformed existence” where the fear and distance of the other becomes a love that dissolves the boundaries of self-other, identity-difference. In a similar vein, the transformative critique of Schmitt, Heidegger, and Klages is not merely philosophical but stands in relation to the object of criticism as a work of art, to the extent that such critiques are grounded in aesthetic and political concerns. As such, Adorno’s *Jargon of Authenticity* constitutes a critical treatment of how the literary and aesthetic representation of Heideggerian and existentialist philosophy is tied to a reactionary politics. Like Goldmann’s study of Heidegger and Lukács, moreover, Marcuse’s *Heideggerian Marxism* stands as an implicit Marxist transformation of Heideggerian ideas, highlighting the extent to which critical theorists critiqued, transformed and integrated ideas associated with German conservative thought into their own theories. As Schmitt’s post-war engagement with Benjamin’s conception of sovereignty in *Hamlet or Hecuba* (1956) makes explicit, however, the interaction of intellectuals associated as opposing ends of the political spectrum in twentieth century Germany was effectively a cross-pollination of ideas rather than an instance one group of thinkers influencing another.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Despite its post-war publication date, *Hamlet or Hecuba* is inextricably a part of the Weimar debates on aesthetics and politics insofar as it constitutes a response to Benjamin’s critical engagement with Schmitt in his *Trauerspielbuch*. The view that Schmitt’s later work—and even his earlier writings—were written as part of a prolonged intellectual engagement with Benjamin’s thought is presented in works by Taubes, Agamben, Samuel, David Bredekamp. Bredekamp, cites Schmitt’s 1973 correspondence with Hansjörg Viesel, in which he writes that that throughout the 1930s he had been consistently engaged with Benjamin, and moreover, that his 1938 work on Hobbes, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*, was “my attempt to respond to Benjamin by examining a great political symbol” (Bredekamp, “Walter Benjamin’s Esteem for Carl Schmitt,” 693). As Bredekamp maintains, it is difficult to interpret Schmitt engagement with Benjamin as merely opportunistic in light of an attentive reading of the appendix to *Hamlet or Hecuba*, the latter of which Schmitt dedicates to a thoughtful discussion of Benjamin’s *Trauerspielbuch*. In critiquing Benjamin’s conceptions of sovereignty and *Hamlet* in the second appendix *Hamlet or Hecuba*, Schmitt not only mentions the hitherto unpublished 1930 letter that Benjamin sent to him along with his *Trauerspielbuch*, but also notes that “Benjamin makes reference in his book to my definition of sovereignty,” going on to cite the exact pages in which he is referenced in Benjamin’s work (Carl Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba: The Incursion of Time into the Play*, trans. David Pan [Candor, NY: Telos Press Publishing, 2009], 62). As these references illustrate, Schmitt’s engagement with Benjamin’s marks a sincere attempt to grapple with the thought of an interlocutor whose ideas stood in reciprocal relation to his own—as they each referenced and critiqued the others work in their writings. For Schmitt’s positioning of *Hamlet or Hecuba* as a response to Benjamin’s *Trauerspielbuch* see Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba*, 59-65; see also David Pan, afterward in Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba*, 69-119; Carl Schmitt, “Schmitt to Viesel,” [April 4, 1973], cited in Horst Bredekamp, “Walter Benjamin’s Esteem for Carl Schmitt,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Carl Schmitt*, ed. Jens Meierhenrich and Oliver Simons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 68-69; Reinhard Mehring, “‘Geist ist das Vermögen, Diktatur auszuüben’: Carl Schmitts Marginalien zu Walter Benjamin,” *Benjamin-Studien* 2 (2010), 239–256; For more on Benjamin’s influence on Schmitt, see Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 51-64.

Chapter 1

The Weimar Debates Reconsidered: Realism, Modernism, and the Messianic Politics of Art

I. *The Romantic Anti-Capitalist Milieu of Weimar Culture*

The Weimar debates on aesthetics and politics had their philosophical-historical origins in the romantic anti-capitalist milieu in Wilhelmine Germany, particularly, in Heidelberg. This notion of “romantic anti-capitalism,” which Lukács coined in a 1931 essay, stands as a compelling characterization of the milieu of German—and European—thought of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the extent the impulses and premises of romantic anti-capitalism united a disparate array of thinkers. Despite irreconcilable political, theoretical and disciplinary differences, these thinkers shared a romantic critique of the existing capitalist order.¹ In his later work, *The Destruction of Reason*, Lukács defines romantic anti-capitalism as an inherently conservative reaction to and critique of capitalism, which sets the latter in opposition to an idealized past.² For Lukács, the romantic critique of capitalism is inherently conservative to the extent that its basis and orientation are founded on romanticized visions of the past, that is, of idyllic pre-capitalist societies. Despite the differences and disagreements characterizing the Weimar debates, romantic anti-capitalism often functioned as an intellectual common ground out of and through which disagreement and debate erupted across political divides.

The romantic anti-capitalist and avant-garde currents in Heidelberg in the early twentieth century, particularly, in the circle around Max Weber, were determinative for the later debates and theorizations on the relation of aesthetics and politics in the Weimar Republic and post-1933 German thought—insofar as the romantic anti-capitalist critiques of modernity, enlightenment and the liberal bourgeois capitalist status quo formed the foundation for later Marxist and conservative-revolutionary, as well as, fascist critiques of liberalism and modernity. Drawing on

¹ See Michael Löwy, "Naphta or Settembrini? Lukács and Romantic Anticapitalism," *New German Critique*, no. 42 (1987), 23.

² Although the publication of this work in the 1950s lies outside of the historical limits of this chapter, it is included here to the extent that it constitutes Lukács' retrospective critique and assessment of German intellectual history, in particular, of the Weimar and Wilhelmine periods. In this respect, Lukács' *The Destruction of Reason* stands as a valuable and intimate insight into the intellectual milieu in early twentieth century Germany and Central Europe, as envisaged and recollected by one of its leading thinkers.

the tradition of romantic anti-capitalism, these critiques of modernity were inextricably bound up with the critique and redemptive reevaluation of art and the category of aesthetics. Whereas the romantic critique of modernity developed out of their criticism of the reigning aesthetic philosophies and movements, twentieth-century thinkers—such as Lukács, Brecht, Schmitt, Benjamin, Bloch and Adorno—critiqued particular aesthetic modes (i.e., romanticism, expressionism, commodified art and popular culture, neoclassicism) as reflective—either naively or critically in the diagnostic sense—of the reified consciousness and ideology of liberal, bourgeois-capitalist modernity. Heidegger inherits and redevelops the romantic anti-capitalist in a different vein by aiming his critique at the philosophical category and conception of aesthetics, theorizing how this philosophical category reveals the problems brought about by modernity. These intersecting critiques of modernity are bound together not only by their shared critical orientation toward the present—that is, toward liberal, bourgeois capitalism and Enlightenment—but moreover, by the aesthetic character of their critiques.

As a critical wellspring of critique aimed at liberalism, bourgeois capitalism, and their aesthetic or cultural expressions, romantic anti-capitalist tendencies prevailed in leftist, conservative, and even liberal circles. However, perhaps most importantly, romantic anti-capitalism was widespread in intellectual circles whose members held contradictory and opposing political positions, such as the Sunday circle around Weber and, likewise, the George circle. Romanticism, as a philosophical and aesthetic tradition, moreover, uncovered new modes for reconceiving the position of art in society, particularly with reference to politics. In confronting capitalism as an essentially aesthetic movement, romantic anti-capitalism effectively opened up a radical mode of conceiving the relation of art and politics, in which the aesthetic becomes the vehicle and font not only of political critique, but of new, conflicting forms of politics, from anarcho-syndicalism and liberalism to nationalism and fascism. The contradictory political positions at the heart of the debates on aesthetics and politics in the twentieth century were linked in their romantic anti-capitalist dispositions. The ubiquity of romantic anti-capitalism in German intellectual life during this period, however, was rooted in an already entrenched tradition of romantic anti-capitalism in Germany. From the early nineteenth century to the turn of the century, numerous influential philosophers and intellectuals engaged with the

ideas and impulses of romantic anti-capitalism, leaving behind a rich tradition of romanticism and anti-capitalist critique for the coming generations.³

In his 1961 preface to *The Theory of the Novel*, Lukács positions romantic anti-capitalism as a central element of his work and its impact on Critical Theory: “The socio-philosophical basis of such theories is the philosophically as well as politically uncertain attitude of romantic anti-capitalism.”⁴ Complicating his earlier linkage of fascism and romantic anti-capitalism, here Lukács emphasizes his view that the latter is politically and philosophically “uncertain,” and therefore, ambivalent. Lukács makes this point in efforts of simultaneously critiquing and affirming his pre-Marxist yet anti-capitalist literary-philosophical work. Although, in his conclusion to the preface, Lukács ultimately criticizes the romantic anti-capitalist linkage of “a left ethic oriented toward radical revolution” and “right epistemology,” in other words, “a traditional-conventional exegesis of reality,” he nonetheless stresses the significant contributions of his early text: “So far as I am able to judge, *The Theory of the Novel* was the first German book in which a left ethic oriented towards radical revolution was coupled with a traditional-conventional exegesis of reality. From the 1920s onwards this view was to play an increasingly important role. We need only think of Ernst Bloch's *Der Geist der Utopie* (1918, 1925) and *Thomas Münzer als Theologe der Revolution*, of Walter Benjamin, even of the beginnings of Theodor Adorno.”⁵ Throughout his preface, Lukács writes of the defects at work in his text, evoking its “highly naive and totally unfounded utopianism—the hope that a natural life worthy of man can spring from the disintegration of capitalism and the destruction,” despite at the same time, pointing to its revolutionary political character as “not conservative but subversive in nature.”⁶ Notwithstanding his implicit affirmations of the potentially revolutionary nature of romantic anti-capitalism, Lukács disparages its recourse to abstract, unrealistic naivety and utopianism instead of realizing concrete, political diagnoses and solutions to the “contradictions” of capitalism (echoing Schmitt’s critique of romanticism as intrinsically opposed to concrete politics and decision in *Political Romanticism*). Pointing to Adorno and his own Romantic anti-capitalist phase, Lukács presents such modes of thought as absurd and ineffectually abstract: “A

³ See Robert Sayre and Michael Löwy, “Figures of Romantic Anti-Capitalism,” *New German Critique*, no. 32 (1984), 42-92.

⁴ Georg Lukács, *Theory of the Novel: A historico-philosophical essay on the forms of great epic literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1968), 19.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

considerable part of the leading German intelligentsia, including Adorno, have taken up residence in the 'Grand Hotel Abyss' which I described in connection with my critique of Schopenhauer as 'a beautiful hotel, equipped with every comfort, on the edge of an abyss, of nothingness, of absurdity.'⁷ Lukács' implicitly self-directed antipathy toward theoretical abstraction and fantastical escapism into unreality typical of the bourgeois German intelligentsia in the early twentieth century shows striking similarities with Schmitt's critique of political romanticism, the latter of which constitutes an analogously latent autocritique of the author's romantic anti-capitalist engagement with expressionism and avant-garde literature and aesthetics.⁸ In this regard, the publication of Lukács' first public expression of his opposition to romanticism, and by extension, romantic anti-capitalism, in his sympathetic review of Schmitt's *Political Romanticism* demonstrates not only the theoretical affinities of these two thinkers (both of whom actively engaged in concrete politics, Schmitt as "crown jurist of the Third Reich" and Lukács as a Commissar for Education and Culture in the fleeting Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919, and later, as a minister in the revolutionary government of the Hungarian revolution of 1956), but also the extent to which their respective turns toward concrete anti-liberal political engagement coincided with a repudiation of romanticism on political grounds (i.e., as abstracting, subjectifying, unrealistic and naively utopian).⁹ Incidentally, both Schmitt and Lukács evolve out of their romantic anti-capitalist and expressionist literary-theoretical positions in the course of arguing for realist aesthetics that in effect integrate the aesthetic and political domains. However, despite, and moreover, on account of their renunciation of their own previous aesthetico-political positions *vis-à-vis* romanticism, Schmitt's and Lukács' post-romantic works are ineluctably shaped by the widespread romantic anti-capitalism that Lukács positions as essential to understanding "the important ideologies of the 1920s and 1930s."¹⁰

Lukács' account of his own early intellectual development thus presents an image of an intellectual milieu in early twentieth century Heidelberg—and Germany more broadly—that is

⁷ Ibid., 22.

⁸ See Trevor Stark, "Complexio Oppositorum: Hugo Ball and Carl Schmitt," *OCTOBER* 146, Fall 2013, 45.

⁹ For more on Lukács' positive review of Schmitt, see Georg Lukács, "Carl Schmitt, *Politische Romantik*," (1928), in *Georg Lukács Werke*, vol 2: *Frühschriften II* (Berlin: Herman Luchterland, 1968), 695-696. For more the intellectual relationship and mutual influence of Lukács and Schmitt on one another, see John P. McCormick, *Carl Schmitt's Critique of Liberalism: Against Politics as Technology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 35-37.

¹⁰ Georg Lukács, *Theory of the Novel: A historico-philosophical essay on the forms of great epic literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1968), 22-23.

dominated by romantic anti-capitalist currents, not only in sociology and philosophy, but in the realm of literature as well, particularly, the works of Dostoyevsky. This framing of romantic anti-capitalism as a dominant ideological worldview of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is echoed in Löwy's study of Lukács, wherein the "Heidelberg circle" around Max Weber (which met from 1906-1918 at Weber's house)—a disparate group of leading German sociologists and intellectuals, including Tönnies, Alfred Weber, Werner Sombart, Georg Simmel, Arthur Salz, Ernst Troeltsch, Wilhelm Windelband, Paul Honigsheim, Emil Lask, Ernst Toller, Karl Jaspers, Friedrich Gundolf, Ernst Bloch, Lukács, and Schmitt—is characterized by its members' pervasive engagement with romantic anti-capitalism.¹¹ Supporting this romantic anti-capitalist characterization of the Heidelberg circle, and by extension, of dominant currents in German thought, Löwy cites Honigsheim's first-person account of the milieu in Heidelberg at the time:

Even before the war, from more than one quarter there had been a trend away from the bourgeois way of life, city culture, instrumental rationality, quantification, scientific specialization, and everything else then considered abhorrent phenomena.....Lukács and Bloch, Ehrenberg and Rozenzweig were part of this trend. This neoromanticism, if one may call it that, was connected to the older romanticism by means of many, if concealed, little streams of influence; we can cite only examples: Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and later Schelling, Constantin Franz ... and the Youth MovementNeo-romanticism in its various forms was also represented at Heidelberg.... and its adherents knew on whose door they should knock: Max Weber's door.¹²

Without explicitly articulating it, Honigsheim's account reveals the extent to which romantic anti-capitalism had taken hold of the German intelligentsia in early twentieth century.

Honigsheim's recollection of the romantic undercurrent that abounded in Heidelberg in the circle around Weber is instructive, moreover, in its portrayal of the interweaving critiques of bourgeois culture and society, rationalization and scientific specialization within the framework of romanticism and its opposition to capitalist society.

The historical phenomenon of romantic anti-capitalism illuminates the aesthetico-political debates of the period by uncovering a diagnosis of capitalism that was at once aesthetic, (being expressed primarily through works of poetry and literature) and politically ambivalent. Löwy's proposition that the "enigmatic ambiguity" and the contradictory nature of romantic anti-

¹¹ Michael Löwy, *Georg Lukács: From Romanticism to Bolshevism*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London: NLB, 1979), 37-38.

For more on Schmitt's involvement with the circle, see Stark, "Complexio Oppositorum," 43.

¹² Paul Honigsheim, *On Max Weber* (1968) cited in Michael Löwy, *Georg Lukács: From Romanticism to Bolshevism*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London: NLB, 1979), 38.

capitalism “is marvelously represented by the Leon Naphta character in Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*,” is revealing since Mann presents Naphta—a “communist Jesuit” with Jewish heritage often interpreted as a literary character partially inspired by Lukács or Bloch—as an intellectual whose monologue on freedom illustrated the double-edged political meaning and propensity of Romanticism.¹³ In the novel, Mann narrates Naphta’s lecture on freedom:

At any rate, we might take as the nucleus of his lecture the problem of freedom, which he treated in the sense of confusion. He spoke, among other matters, of the Romantic movement, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and its fascinating double meaning; pointing out how before it the conceptions of reaction and revolution went down, in so far as they were not incorporated in a new and higher one. For it was of course utterly absurd to try to associate the conception of revolution solely with progress and victoriously advancing enlightenment. The Romantic movement in Europe had been above all a movement of liberation...¹⁴

Through the figure of Naphta, Mann illustrates the precisely political contradiction—“of reaction and revolution”—at the center of romanticism, a contradiction invoked in Schmitt’s critique of the Romantics in *Political Romanticism* (1919). In writing that it would be “utterly absurd” to link “revolution solely with progress and victoriously advancing enlightenment,” Mann thereby presents the contradictory philosophical and aesthetic impetuses—namely, progress and enlightenment, on one hand, and “The romantic movement,” on the other—for revolution while depicting the romantic impetus as itself caught in a contradiction between revolution and reaction. Irrespective of the actual authorial historical or biographical inspiration for the character of Naphta, Mann’s own engagement with romantic anti-capitalism in his writings (despite his bourgeois, liberal leanings), and moreover, the central positioning of romanticism, notably, its contradictory, double political meaning in the life of Naphta reveals the extent to which politically ambivalent, revolutionary and reactionary currents of romantic anti-capitalism flourished in Weimar thought.

Despite its affinities with Schmitt’s critical conception of political romanticism, Mann’s literary account of the specifically political ambivalence and contradiction of romanticism diverges from Schmitt’s anti-romantic conception by locating romanticism as a philosophical

¹³ In an interview with Löwy, Bloch states that in his estimation the character Naphta “resembles Lukács more,” whereas his wife, Karola, noted that “When *The Magic Mountain* appeared, people generally thought that Naphta was a combination of certain traits of Lukács and Bloch.” See Ernst Bloch, Michael Lowy, and Vicki Williams Hill, “Interview with Ernst Bloch,” *New German Critique*, no. 9 (1976), 40.

¹⁴ Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, trans. H.T. Lowe-Porter (Exeter: Wheaton and Co., 1971), 694.

and aesthetic movement that was political in nature. In contrast to Schmitt, Mann maintained that the political ambivalence and double meaning of romanticism emphasizes rather than negates its political character. Beyond demonstrating the contradiction of political romanticism, emanating from romanticism's critique of capitalist society, Mann's account expresses a broader trend, namely, that the latent and explicit politicization at work in aesthetic movements (i.e., romanticism, realism, Dada, modernism) opens up aporia and contradiction rather than resolving into unified, stable political positions. This aporia is expressed not only at the level of political association and affiliation (i.e., Lukács and Bloch with communism, Schmitt and Heidegger, with conservatism and National Socialism) irrespective of one's aesthetic positions; the aporia of affixing political significance to the aesthetic lies within the relation of the two domains, determined by the tension—often understood in antithetical or oppositional terms—of the free floating, abstract category of the aesthetic and the concrete locus of the political.

II. The Realism-Modernism Debates

Although the avant-garde and modernist aesthetic movements which thrived in the Weimar Republic, such as Expressionism and dada, were born in the Wilhelmine Reich, it was in the new Republic that such movements were able to fully develop and fundamentally transform society. One of the key factors in the explosion of modernist aesthetic movements, notably, expressionism, Bauhaus, surrealism, and dada, throughout the Weimar period was the radically experimental, Democratic, liberal, and, above all, unstable political character of the Republic, opening up new possibilities for artists and writers previously eschewed by the institutions of the academic and cultural establishment—such as museums, universities, media companies and publishers. Despite its political shortcomings, the Weimar Republic brought about seismic political changes in German society by replacing a constitutional monarchy with a democratic republic granting all citizens (notional, nominal) equality before the law. Growing out of the chaos of Germany's defeat in the war and the ensuing November Revolution (1918-19), the republic constituted a middle ground between the political extremes of the conservative monarchists and the radical factions of the German socialist movement seeking to foment socialist revolution. Facing the successive establishment of socialist republics in Bavaria and the Spartacist Revolt in Berlin, the moderate wing of the German socialist movement, the SPD (Social Democratic Party) led by Friedrich Ebert, formed an alliance with the German military

leadership to prevent the possible reality of Germany becoming a socialist republic following the model of the Soviet Union. Despite the ultimate suppression of radical socialist uprisings by the liberal, social democratic leadership of the Weimar Republic, revolutionary idealism and the spirit of utopian political transformation shaped and inspired the early years of a republic which was ultimately the product of socialist revolution. The revolutionary, utopian spirit of the radically new animated the experimental avant-garde aesthetics and cultural movements that flourished in this period. This explosion in the domain of art—influenced by the radical political and cultural possibilities resulting from the fall of the Wilhelmine Reich and the subsequent socialist uprisings throughout Germany—was propelled and intensified by the neighboring Soviet Union, where socialist artists and revolutionaries excitedly embraced the utopian task of creating a completely new world out of the ashes of the old. The comprehensive dissolution of society brought about by First World War and the subsequent collapse of empires thus constituted a traumatic break with the past culminating in revolution and the radical possibilities of the new.

Giving expression to the inspiring force of the "socialist republic" to the East, in *The Spirit of Utopia*, Bloch writes, "Meanwhile the West with its millions of proletarians has not yet spoken; meanwhile there is a Marxist republic in Russia; meanwhile the eternal questions of our souls, of our religious conscience, still burn, undiminished, unbowed, their absolute claims unredeemed."¹⁵ In this work, in which the latent messianic, utopian spirit of transforming the world is explicitly evoked as the animating spiritual force of socialist revolution, Bloch articulates the sense in which Western and Central-European thinkers drew inspiration from the socialist experiment in Russia. The excitement created by the possibility of a complete transformation of society, of a socialist revolution in Germany and other parts of Western Europe, is palpably voiced in Bloch's conception of the "not yet," encompassing the utopian and revolutionary possibilities of the future, of the creation of a new world, the imagined world which really exists as a latent potentiality of the present. Speaking to the effects of the Soviet experiment on sympathetic Western artists and writers, Bloch maintains that the hitherto unexpressed revolutionary dreams and utopian impulses of the "millions of proletarians" of

¹⁵ Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, 2.

Western Europe are latent in “the darkness of the lived moment,” waiting to be drawn out and realized as a revolutionary, concrete utopia.¹⁶

Building his conceptions of the key role intellectuals and critics play in the provocation of socialist revolution, Bloch draws on Marx’s early conception of socialist theory as rooted solely in the “ruthless criticism of everything existing,” aimed not at the creation of a new utopian socialist dogma or doctrine of social reality, but at the “reform of consciousness” through its own self-reflection.¹⁷ Describing his program of reforming consciousness through “ruthless critique,” Marx wrote in his 1843 letter to the Young Hegelian, Arnold Ruge:

The reform of consciousness consists only in enabling the world to clarify its consciousness, in waking it from its dream about itself, in explaining to it the meaning of its own actions. Our whole task can consist only in putting religious and political questions into self-conscious human form—as is also the case in Feuerbach's criticism of religion.

Our motto must therefore be: Reform of consciousness not through dogmas, but through analyzing the mystical consciousness, the consciousness which is unclear to itself, whether it appears in religious or political form. Then it will transpire that the world has long been dreaming of something that it can acquire if only it becomes conscious of it...So, we can express the trend of our journal in one word: the work of our time to clarify to itself (critical philosophy) the meaning of its own struggle and its own desires.¹⁸

In Hegelian fashion, Marx contends that the struggle and universal historical movement toward humanity’s utopian dream of freedom consists in awakening in humanity the conscious awareness of this latent impulse—such that consciousness and rational self-reflection play central roles in the outward unfolding of freedom in history. Through critically deciphering the mystical consciousness, that is, the consciousness of religion—the reigning ideological force of Marx’s time—Marx argues, the world can thereby become conscious of its latent utopian desires and dreams for a transformed existence, dreams henceforth only articulated in mystical and theological form through religion and politics (e.g., through notions of redemption or freedom). Implicitly drawing on the Weberian conception of modernity as “the disenchantment of the world,” Bloch to this effect reconceives and adapts Marx’s conception of the reform of consciousness to the aesthetic domain. With the dissolution of imperial monarchies in Germany, Russia, and the

¹⁶ Ibid., 2-3.

¹⁷ Karl Marx, “For a Ruthless Criticism of Everything Existing,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1978), 14-15.

¹⁸ Ibid., 15.

Austro-Hungarian Empire, the religious institutions which were intimately interwoven with these regimes began to rapidly decline in influence. As the influence of institutional religion waned in the Weimar Republic and the USSR, consciousness was in turn expressed and shaped by art and popular culture. For Bloch, the mystical, false consciousness—in other words, ideology—that Marx had associated with religion, was now being articulated through aesthetic expressions, utopian impulses, dreams, and desires of modes which were to be redemptively uncovered and aroused through critique. In this sense, through uncovering the utopian impulse as the essential force underlying all human consciousness and self-expression, Bloch situates religion and art as different forms of humanity's waking dream consciousness, thereby transforming Marx's critique of religion into an aesthetic mode of critique. In this new form of aesthetic critique, the process of evoking the utopian impulses latent in the experience of the present is achieved through the critical interpretation, that is, the redemptive criticism, of the expression of humanity's waking dream in aesthetic form—i.e., in works of art and culture. Illustrating the objective of his work and, by extension, the task of the critic and intellectual in society, Bloch positions art and aesthetic expression as the modern repository of humanity's latent messianic-religious desire for utopia: "This book offers an introduction to our figure, our blossoming gathering: it already begins to ring out through our interpretation of a simple pitcher; then as the *a priori* latent theme of all the plastic arts, though it is really central to all the magic of music... Only in us does this light still burn, and we are beginning a fantastic journey toward it, a journey toward the interpretation of our waking dream, toward the implementation of the central concept of utopia. To find it, to find the right thing, for which it is worthy to live, to be organized, and to have time: that is why we go, why we cut new, metaphysically constitutive paths, summon what is not, build into the blue, and build ourselves into the blue, and there seek the true, the real, where the merely factual disappears—*incipit vita nova*."¹⁹ In concluding his introductory fragment titled *Objective* with the words "*incipit vita nova*" ("Thus begins a new life"), Bloch not only encapsulates the creative utopian impulse at the heart of his expressionistic philosophical work—the impulse to uplift humanity's dreams and desires for a transformed, new world (to be found and uncovered through the critical interpretation of aesthetic works and movements)—but reflects the utopian consciousness of revolutionary possibility and the creation of a new society that was awakened by the collapse of major European monarchies and the

¹⁹ Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, 3.

ensuing revolutions in Russia, Germany and Hungary. In this regard, throughout the Weimar period, complementing new developments in art—exemplified by movements such as dada, Surrealism, Bauhaus, Expressionism, Futurism, New objectivity, and the Soviet avant-garde — Bloch and other influential writers and intellectuals began developing competing philosophies and critical theories aimed at deciphering and evoking the social-political significance, and potential of the manifold forms of art and popular culture which were continuously springing up in this revolutionary period.²⁰

The aesthetic works, movements and critical theories giving expression to the spirit of the radical political upheavals in Germany and the neighboring USSR further reflected the divisions of these new republics—Soviet as well as Social Democratic. In the Weimar Republic, the political opposition of the conservative right and the revolutionary left was itself disrupted insofar as a republic was created and—at least initially—led by a socialist party. The ideas of conservative revolution and of a “revolution from the right,” advanced in Hans Freyer’s 1931 work, *Revolution von Rechts*, were formed by conservatives longing for a dissolution of the new social democratic republic in which those previously excluded and rejected by established cultural and social institutions—socialists, Jews, avant-garde artists, and radicals—were now playing a formative role in the cultural, artistic, and intellectual life of the republic.²¹ In this respect, as Peter Gay argues in *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider*, Freyer’s notion of a right-wing revolution presented a “striking novelty, the idea of a revolution not from its usual point of departure, the left, but from the right.”²² Interpreting Freyer’s work as representative of the widespread impulse—especially on the right—for wholeness and unity (in contrast to a fragmented, alienating, technological modernity), Gay argues that “Books spawned movements, which generally paraded before the public covered in deliberately incongruous labels—Conservative Revolution, Young Conservatism, National Bolshevism, Prussian Socialism—ostensibly responsible attempts to get away from traditional political terminology, actually testimony to [*sic*] a perverse pleasure in paradox and a deliberate, deadly assault on reason.”²³ In Gay’s account, those who presented themselves as having “outgrown or—a favorite word—

²⁰ New objectivity (*Neue Sachlichkeit*), was an aesthetic movement that arose in the 1920s in Germany, partially as a reaction to currents in Expressionism.

²¹ See Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1968), 70-81.

²² *Ibid.*, 80.

²³ *Ibid.*, 80-81.

‘overcome’ the traditional labels of liberal politics, ‘left’ and ‘right’,” typically became part of the right rather than the left.²⁴ Instead of conceiving of the right’s usage and promotion of traditionally left-wing ideas, such as revolution and socialism simply as a “testimony to [*sic*] a perverse pleasure in paradox and a deliberate, deadly assault on reason”—as Gay suggests—a closer analysis of the interaction between thinkers, artists and ideas on the right and left in the Weimar period reveals a complex relationship in which aesthetic and political impulses, ideas, and movements traverse and upend rigid political boundaries. Whereas traditionally, the right aligned itself with conservative values in every sphere of society from art to religion, in the Weimar period the right, no longer represented by the established order, sought a radical transformation of society to combat liberalism and modernity—a conservative revolution. Conversely, thinkers, such as Benjamin, Bloch, Adorno and Marcuse, drew on conservative thinkers, particularly, Schmitt and George, to the effect of refunctioning their ideas. As evidenced by the many affinities shared by Heidegger and Lukács—including those which Lucien Goldmann invokes in his study of the two— intersecting critiques of modernity, technology and alienation were shared by politically opposed thinkers and artists, leading to a crosspollination of ideas and aesthetic modes.²⁵

Despite presenting ‘the hunger for wholeness’ as a primarily reactionary, anti-modern phenomenon—referring to this ‘complex of feelings’ as “a great regression born from a great fear of modernity...awash with hate...a paranoid world filled with enemies: the dehumanizing machine, capitalist materialism, godless rationalism, rootless society, cosmopolitan Jews, and that great all-devouring monster, the city”—Gay nonetheless concedes to the difficulty in firmly tying this aesthetic and political impulse to the reactionary right.²⁶ Gay presents the “Weimar situation” as “nothing if not complicated,” one in which some of those who “hungered for connection and unity” were not in fact regressive and anti-modern: “a few...sought to satisfy their needs not through escape from but mastery of the world, not through denunciation but employment of the machine, not through irrationalism but reason, not through nihilism but

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ See Lucien Goldmann, *Lukács and Heidegger: Toward a New Philosophy*, trans. William Boelhower (London: Routledge, 1977).

²⁶ In his chapter titled, “The Hunger for Wholeness,” Gay documents the immense popularity of this impulse—the ‘complex of feelings’ in search of unity, home, nation and belonging—in right-wing intellectual and artistic circles in the Weimar Republic. At the same time, however, Gay also demonstrates the extent to which this impulse was prominent amongst a few radical and left-wing artists and movements, such as Bauhaus. See Gay, *Weimar Culture*, 95-97.

construction—and this last quite literally, for this modern and democratic philosophy was formulated in their writings and carried out in their buildings by architects.”²⁷ By pointing to Bauhaus, a community attempting to create an aesthetic and social unity, as a rare example of the non-regressive ‘hunger for wholeness’, Gay invokes the utopian potential of this political and aesthetic impulse. He cites the Bauhaus architect, Erich Mendelsohn’s attempt to dialectically unify and sublimate (*aufheben*) the oppositions of “analysis and dynamic, reason and unreason,” as an attempt to dialectically overcome the fear of modernity and fragmenting alienation, not through regressing to the old but by creating a new synthesis, a unity of the rational and irrational in the aesthetic work.²⁸ In a similar vein, the prominent architect, Walter Gropius, who founded the Bauhaus school in Weimar on April 12, 1919, placed unity at the center of his vision of art and society. For Gropius, modern architecture pursued unity and wholeness precisely through creating buildings that brought the social, the economic, and the aesthetic into a harmonious unity.²⁹ Instead of coupling the critique of alienated, technological modernity with a reactionary response, Gropius revealed the forward-looking utopian qualities latent in the ‘hunger for wholeness’ by calling for a sublation (of alienating mechanization and human autonomy) through the human mastery of the machine: “The standardization of the practical machinery of life implies no robotization of the individual, but, on the contrary, the unburdening of his existence from much unnecessary dead-weight so as to leave him freer to develop on a higher plane.”³⁰ By integrating the anti-modern critique of alienating mechanization into his new theory and practice of architecture, Gropius worked toward unifying the utopian impulse for wholeness and organic unity—an impulse undergirding the critiques of technology, mechanization, modernity and fragmentation—with modern technological developments, the latter of which appeared to have led to the disintegration and fragmentation that characterizes modernity. Citing Gropius’ *The New Architecture and the Bauhaus* (1965), and *Scope of Total Architecture* (1962), Gay presents the Bauhaus as a rare instance of the select “few” who sought wholeness and unity but were not “victims of regression”: “The Bauhaus, in sum, had been a true community which, ‘through the wholeness of its approach’, had ‘helped to restore architecture and design of today

²⁷ Ibid., 96-97.

²⁸ Ibid., 97.

²⁹ Ibid., 100.

³⁰ Walter Gropius, *The New Architecture and the Bauhaus* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1965), 90.

as a social art’; it had developed ‘total architecture.’”³¹ Understood as such, the Bauhaus is the exception rather than the rule concerning the trend of seeking wholeness and unity.

Though it accurately reveals the ways that nationalist and conservative movements deployed ‘the hunger for wholeness’ as a central vivifying element of their aesthetic and political programs, Gay’s account of the primarily regressive, reactionary character of this impulse—and likewise, the critique of technological modernity—can be broadened by illustrating the extent to which this impulse for wholeness, the desire for unity, animated radical, leftist, avant-garde and modernist political and aesthetic movements and schools of thought. Despite their differences in aesthetic values, Bloch’s *The Spirit of Utopia* and Lukács’ *Theory of the Novel* both uncover the essentially utopian quality of the impulse for unity, wholeness, home and belonging, particularly, as this impulse is evoked by the critic of the work of art. That Lukács’ *Theory of the Novel* seeks unity and wholeness—totality, in Lukács’ terms—is not surprising, given the central role of totality in Lukács’ philosophy and interpretation of literature and Marxism. However, given Bloch’s spirited embrace of Expressionism and abstract modernism in *The Spirit of Utopia* and his later writings, particularly those responding to Lukács’ realist critique of Expressionism in the 1930s (part of the ‘Expressionism-Realism debate’), it is not readily clear that this work would embrace the same impulse for wholeness and unity—particularly, in light of the abstract, alienating, subjective, and fragmentary qualities of the modernist and expressionist art that Bloch critically celebrates in his work. A closer analysis, however, reveals Bloch’s deeply Hegelian impulse for reconciliation, unity, and wholeness, voiced in the utopian, collective-universal spirit of the socialism at the heart of his first major philosophical work. The syncretic, reconciliatory impulse of this work, and likewise, of Bloch’s philosophy as a whole—exemplified by his harmonic synthesis of seemingly disparate aesthetic, political, religious, and philosophical currents, schools, and traditions, linking them all through the universalizing, collective human spirit of utopia—further attests to the unifying ‘hunger for wholeness’ that forms this unique work, itself a unity of expressionist and philosophical writing. Bloch’s *The Spirit of Utopia* is inextricably entwined with the conceptions of reconciliation and home, the latter of which he situates as the revolutionary *telos* of history, toward which humanity’s collective, not-yet-conscious dreams, aspirations, and desires for utopia strive. Writing in an expressionistic style,

³¹ Gay, *Weimar Culture*, 96-97.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 96-97, 101.

Bloch maintains that in its radically abstract and subjective, expressive qualities, the expressionist work of art moves beyond its own one-sided subjectivity, driven by its latent utopian impulse, “toward our true home”:

Rather, wherever any great, personally expressive work appears, it is only the will, the subject and its content, which is ultimately discernible in the means, the forms, the worthless, backgroundless ones; it is the authentic aspect of the abstraction, above the means and also above the reinforcement and the formally inferior object, it is the indicative seal or even the incipiently self-equivalent mystery of the We, the ideogram...Here the shaping subject has truly advanced into a "form," as its own deeper aggregate condition, which accordingly represents the inferior, the so to speak epistemological, the metaphysically solidifying skeletal part of the object-series itself, *of course still separated from actual life, content, and the profundity of the aesthetic sphere of meaning by a leap into self and truth, into the power of the seal and into expression, into the ideogram of revealed inwardness, of the figure of life, of humanity. It is the strange power of these times that one can hold the reins seemingly more loosely, or to be exact, more unconsciously, and yet steer toward our true home.*³²

Echoing the openings words of his work— “*I am. We Are. That is Enough. Now we have to begin.*”—Bloch positions the expressionist artwork as enacting the reconciliation of the universal and the particular, of the I and the We in its leap beyond subjectivity and abstraction, its heliotropic striving toward the good, toward the utopian *telos*, the realization of “our true home.”³³ Likewise, drawing on Bloch’s hermeneutic method of redemptive critique and the Brechtian estrangement (*Entfremdung*) effect, in his writings on Baudelaire, photography, Surrealism, and art in the age of mechanical reproduction, Benjamin theorizes the utopian, revolutionary possibilities of aesthetic effects like shock and alienation, effects which work dialectically to awaken a revolutionary-utopian consciousness in its audiences. Although they were written after the Weimar Period, Benjamin’s later historical-philosophical *Theses* go further by demonstrating the utopian impulse for reconciliation and unity at the center of his lifework. In his *Theses*, the latter of which crystalizes the central ideas of Benjamin’s philosophy, Benjamin locates the messianic concept of redemption as a historical reconciliation of humanity with itself and nature. Reconciling the forward-facing gaze of universal history and progress with the historicist attachment to tradition, Benjamin’s unifying conception of ‘weak messianism’ critically negates and invokes the utopian energies of the melancholic historicist impulse to

³² Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, 115.

³³ *Ibid.*, 1, 115.

restore the world to an original whole while also redemptively uplifting (*aufheben*) the universal-historical belief in the myth of progress.³⁴ Benjamin, Lukács, and Bloch, however, were not the only writers and theorists who engendered the impulse for wholeness and unity in their works—not simply as a counterpoint to particularity, fragmentation, modernity, and alienation, but as a utopian end in itself, the desire for a reconciled world—if we are to consider the reconciliatory, homecoming character of Bloch’s utopian interpretation of art, and, in particular, of modernist aesthetic movements such as Expressionism. In the context of the debates on Expressionism and realism of the late 1930s and the discrepancy between Lukács’ critique of expressionism and Bloch’s nuanced reading of the latter, the difficulties in attributing concrete political meanings to any of the aesthetic movements or works of the Weimar Republic—particularly those of a modernist or avant-garde disposition—abound.

The economic and political changes disrupting the rigid bifurcation of left and right (in particular, the advance of modern capitalism and technology, the liberal, social democratic character of the early Weimar Republic) were reflected not only in politics and philosophy, but in art as well, where modernist and radical aesthetic movements, such as Expressionism and Futurism, were aligned with right-wing and fascist politics by some members and promoters of these movements (i.e., Marinetti and Hanns Johst). This is not to say that Futurism or Expressionism were inherently fascist aesthetic movements—as Lukács acknowledges in his critique of Expressionism, “As an opposition from a confused anarchistic and bohemian standpoint, expressionism was naturally more or less vigorously directed against the political right. And many expressionists and other writers who stood close to them took up a more or less explicit left-wing position in politics.”—but rather that the abstract, indefinite aesthetic character of modernist and avant-garde art further undermined the positive attribution of political ideologies and programs to any given artwork or movement.³⁵ This abstraction, interiority, and interpretive opacity of modernist art, in particular, Expressionism, thus presented difficulties to those attempting to tie the movement to a concrete politics. Despite conceding that the Expressionist movement was ‘naturally’ opposed to the right, being composed primarily of left-wing writers and artists, Lukács forcefully critiques Expressionism for its abstracting and

³⁴ See Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 253-264.

³⁵ Georg Lukács, “Expressionism: Its Significance and its Decline (1934),” in *Essays on Realism*, ed. Rodney Livingstone, trans. David Fernbach (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), 87.

distorting effects, a tendency, he argues, which allows Expressionism to ‘collapse’ into fascism.³⁶ As he argues, “however honest the subjective intention behind this may well have been the abstract distortion of basic questions, and especially the abstract 'anti-middle-classness', was a tendency that, precisely because it separated the critique of middle-classness from both the economic understanding of the capitalist system and from adhesion to the liberation struggle of the proletariat, could easily collapse into its opposite extreme: into a critique of 'middle-classness' from the right, the same demagogic critique of capitalism to which fascism later owed at least part of its mass basis.”³⁷ In this regard, for Lukács the essential link between Expressionism and fascism lies not in the particular political affiliations of any of its practitioners or theorists, but in the underlying ideological affinities of these two movements: “What is important in this connection is more the fact that there are certain common ideological tendencies, than why, whether and to what degree various particular writers or ideologists of fascism began their career as expressionists (e.g., Hanns Johst).”³⁸ In Lukács’ account, as an abstract aesthetic movement which distorts the critique and representation of currently existing reality, Expressionism is “only one of the many tendencies in bourgeois ideology that grow later into fascism, and its role in the ideological preparation for fascism is no greater - if also no less - than that of many other simultaneous tendencies.”³⁹ From this realist socialist perspective, what makes Expressionism susceptible and useful to fascist ideology is precisely its free-floating subjectivity, its abstraction from the real, the social realm of concrete politics.

In Weimar thought, politically opposed intellectuals theorized and debated the political role and function—or necessary lack thereof—of art, focusing on the ways that art can illuminate reality, open up radically new revolutionary possibilities, or reflect the reifying logics of capitalism and instrumental reason. Although the debates concerning realism and expressionism involving Lukács, Brecht and Bloch took place primarily in the mid-late 1930s, they originated in and looked back to the Weimar period, in which these thinkers began to develop and articulate their theories of revolutionary, modernist, and realist forms of art. At the same time, however, such theories were inextricably a part of a broader intellectual milieu in which thinkers associated with German nationalism and fascism—such as Carl Schmitt, Stefan George and his

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

circle—were important figures in debates on the relation of art and politics. This phenomenon is palpably expressed in the publication and reception of Schmitt's 1919 work, *Political Romanticism*. This work, whose ideas Lukács praised in his 1924 review, marked a serious theorization of the ways in which specific aesthetic forms and movements, such as romanticism and modernism, reflect and propagate a particular mode of politics. Schmitt's analysis does not simply concern itself with a critique of the liberal politics of romanticism; rather, in aiming the thrust of his argument against the one-sided individualism, subjectivity, and abstraction of romanticism, Schmitt extends his critique of romanticism to other abstract and subjective aesthetic forms, particularly, modernist, abstract and experimental art. This not only explains Lukács' positive review of Schmitt's 1919 work, but further reflects a general turn toward concrete politics in response to the social and cultural ills of modernity (i.e., fragmentation, individualism, alienation). In departing from their earlier, Expressionist and experimental aesthetic writings in the Weimar period, Schmitt and Lukács both reoriented their thought toward the concrete realm of the political, the latter of which represented a unified whole, a totality, in which subject and object, theory and practice, humanity and nature, were reconciled.

This 'hunger for wholeness' was not just a phenomenon on the right, as Gay argues, but was characterized by a cross-pollination and reciprocal interaction of ideas and thinkers across the political spectrum—as was the case with the debates on aesthetics and politics.⁴⁰ Other attempts to combat the alienation and encompassing rationalization of a fragmentary modern world focused on art itself rather than simply subordinating the latter to politics. Countering the politicization of art that culminated in the subordination of art to political ends—as advocated in the works of Schmitt and Lukács from this period—George and his followers embodied the aestheticist elevation of art above all else in their works. For George, rather creating and theorizing art for political ends, art was to be sovereign and autonomous, paving the spiritual path for all other spheres of society. In George's vision, it was precisely the artist, the poet, who would play a key role as a leader at the vanguard of the spiritual, and thus, political and social transformation of society. George's vision of the poet as a sovereign figure who would be central to the resuscitation of Germany was further developed and articulated in the works of his disciples, such as Max Kommerell in his 1928 post-doctoral thesis, *The Poet as Leader in*

⁴⁰ For more on Gay's conception of the 'hunger for wholeness' in Weimar thought, see Gay, *Weimar Culture*, 70-101. For Gay's argument that this trend was primarily a right-wing phenomenon in the Weimar Republic, see 95-97.

German Classicism.⁴¹ As Robert Norton demonstrates in his comprehensive intellectual history, *Secret Germany: Stefan George and His Circle*, in Kommerell's work—which Benjamin would link with fascism in his critical 1930 review—the poet is situated in characteristically Georgian terms, as a “spiritual leader” whose role in society is to be “the true but hidden sovereign who sees and articulates the collective fate of the *volk*.”⁴² Although often associated with fascism and National Socialism—the latter of which would subsequently appropriate George's poetry and ideas for their own political ends—George's ‘aesthetic fundamentalism’, as Martin Ruehl describes it in his work on the George circle, was in effect politically ambiguous insofar as George's lifework and utopian image of a new Germany became an inspiration not only for fascists but also for those resisting Hitler and Nazism.⁴³ Although seemingly distant from the aesthetic debates within the leftist circles, George and his associates effectively played a major role in articulating and representing the counterarguments against realist and politically committed art, advancing a modernist conception of autonomous art, one that was to be independent of and sovereign over both political concerns and social realities.

In contrast with Gay's account, a close analysis of the complex, ambivalent political status of the George circle in this period reveals the difficulties in bifurcating Weimar thought and culture—and likewise the debates on aesthetics and politics—into two political camps obstinately opposed to one another.⁴⁴ For the historical reality of intellectual and artistic life in the Weimar Republic was defined not by the intransigent opposition of right and left-wing intellectuals and artists whose aesthetic thinking was effectively alien to those outside their political orbit, but by an interaction and dialogue of politically disparate figures in the debates on art and its relation to politics. Benjamin's fascination with George and his pointed aesthetico-political critiques of influential members of the George circle (i.e., Kommerell and Friedrich Gundolf) in his 1922 essay, *Goethe's Elective Affinities*, and his 1930 review of Kommerell's

⁴¹ Also known as a *Habilitationschrift*, Kommerell's work was published in 1928 with the German title, *Der Dichter als Führer in der deutschen Klassik: Klopstock, Herder, Goethe, Schiller, Jean Paul, Hölderlin*. For more on Kommerell's work and Benjamin's critique of it as fascistic, see Elke Siegel, “Contested Legacies of ‘German’ Friendship: Max Kommerell's The Poet as Leader in German Classicism,” *Telos* 176 (Fall 2016), 77-101.

⁴² Norton, *Secret Germany*, 671.

⁴³ Martin A. Ruehl, “Aesthetic Fundamentalism in Weimar Poetry, 1918-1933,” in *Weimar Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 243-45, 260.

⁴⁴ In Gay's account, the right-wing utilization of the rhetoric of ‘revolution’—and various forms of socialist and utopian political ideas—in the Weimar Republic was merely a façade, covering over the rigid political opposition between conservatism (seeking a return to an idealized past) and liberal or left-wing progressivism. See Gay, *Weimar Culture*, 70-101.

Habilitationsschrift, are just two instances of his interaction and engagement with conservative thinkers on aesthetic and political questions. The influence of Schmitt and Klages—whose Munich-based ‘Cosmic Circle’ included Karl Wolfskehl, a central figure in the George circle—on Benjamin and others thinkers associated with the Frankfurt School has been illustrated to varying degrees by Wiggershaus, Kennedy, Scheuerman, Agamben, and Josephson-Storm.⁴⁵ As displayed by the diversity of political positions amongst those in the circle around Max and Marianne Weber in Heidelberg, during the subsequent Weimar period, intellectual and aesthetic debates were not limited to or defined by political creed. Instead of isolating themselves in closed political circles, positioned away from the broader intellectual life of the Weimar Republic, Benjamin, Adorno, Lukács and Bloch, were not only aware of but actively responding to their conservative and politically ambivalent interlocutors, particularly, Heidegger, Schmitt, Klages and the George circle. This interaction, moreover, was not simply one-way, as evidenced by the influence of the left and its ideas on right-wing politics, the rhetoric of Prussian or National Socialism, and calls for ‘conservative revolution’. In his interpretation of such aberrant syntheses, Gay presents the combination of fascist and conservative ideas with the rhetoric of the left as an obfuscation of the very real divide between right and left. Describing the development and rise of fascism in Weimar Germany, Gay writes: “Books spawned movements, which generally paraded before the public covered in deliberately incongruous labels—Conservative Revolution, Young Conservatism, National Bolshevism, Prussian Socialism—ostensibly responsible attempts to get away from traditional political terminology, actually testimony to [*sic*] a perverse pleasure in paradox and a deliberate, deadly assault on reason...pundits who proudly proclaimed that they had outgrown or—a favorite word—‘overcome’ the traditional labels of liberal politics, ‘left’ and ‘right’, generally ended up on the right.”⁴⁶ Although Gay’s account correctly points to the irrationalism and mystification of political terminology that characterized the right at that time, his interpretation of these terms as merely superficial rearrangements of political terminology and rhetoric is expanded by accounting for the various ways that right-wing and fascist movements actively drew on and appropriated ideas from the

⁴⁵ For more on Schmitt’s relation to the Frankfurt School, see Kennedy, “Carl Schmitt and the Frankfurt School,” 37-66; Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Scheuerman, *Between the Norm and the Exception*. For more on Klages and the Frankfurt School, see Jason A. Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 209-239; Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School*, 186-207.

⁴⁶ Gay, *Weimar Culture*, 80-81.

left, integrating them into their political programs. This is not to say that fascism thereby eliminated the distinction between right and left, but rather that in coopting various ideas and terms typically associated with the left, fascism in Germany reflected a radical shift in the political situation, whereby the government in power constituted a new, liberal, and relatively progressive establishment against which fascist and right-wing movements sought a ‘revolution from the right’. Similarly, in opposing the liberal bourgeois establishment, the right intended to rally the proletarian masses, in effect reflecting the leftist and Marxist aim to create a radical transformation of society through the collective power of the proletariat. However, as Benjamin wrote in his 1935 essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, “Fascism attempts to organize the newly created proletarian masses without affecting the property structure which the masses strive to eliminate. Fascism sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves. The masses have a right to change property relations; Fascism seeks to give them an expression while preserving property.”⁴⁷ Rather than positioning the fascist cooptation of traditionally socialist and left-wing ideas as a kind of paradoxical characteristic of the irrationalism prevalent on the Weimar right, Benjamin’s analysis of fascism’s relation to the proletarian masses—though deeply critical of the former—thus provides an account of the fascist utilization of socialist and left-wing ideas in their political programs. In this regard, thinkers on the right in the Weimar Republic were part of a broader trend in which left-wing concepts, ideas, and terms (e.g., revolution, socialism, the general strike) were appropriated by the conservatives and fascists in their struggle against the liberal, bourgeois Weimar establishment—just as ideas from conservative and fascist thinkers were critically drawn on and dialectically integrated into Marxist and socialist theories of art and politics (e.g., those of Benjamin, Lukács, and Bloch). To present such reciprocal interactions and intellectual exchanges simply as a right-wing attempt to muddy the distinction between right and left thereby misconstrues the extent to which this phenomenon was not only reciprocal but was the result of the shared political concerns and constituents of vying political movements aimed at the dissolution of the established liberal order. Sharing a critical antagonism toward the established liberal bourgeois order of the Weimar Republic and modernity more broadly, thinkers typically presented rigidly as either on the right and left were in dialogue not only because of their shared concerns, but also due to a common intellectual and philosophical

⁴⁷ Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” 241.

heritage (i.e., their development in an academic world dominated and stifled by Neo-Kantianism, the influence of Max Weber, and likewise of Romantic Anti-Capitalism on their thinking).

As an influential, widely read critique of the aesthetics of modernism which influenced these realism-modernism debates, Schmitt's *Political Romanticism* illustrates the reciprocal interaction and exchange of politically opposed intellectuals. This interaction dialectically reorients the historian's perspective of the complex political contours of Weimar thought, as opposed to undialectically situating right and left in a rigid opposition, and thereby eliding the manifold ways that this opposition was traversed and problematized. Schmitt's 1919 work was not simply part of these subsequent debates on account of Lukács' engagement with and positive 1924 review of this work; on the contrary, the content of the work itself constituted a politically inspired polemic aimed not only at the Romantics but at aesthetic forms such as modernism, expressionism, and aestheticism, which elevated the subjectivity and interiority at the expense of objectivity and interpretive clarity. Given Schmitt's marked presence within Weimar intellectual life—his influential works from this period, *On Dictatorship* (1921), *Politische Theologie* (1922), *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* (1923), *Roman Catholicism and Political Form* (1923), and *The Concept of the Political* (1927), attest to his prolific contributions to Weimar thought—his 1919 polemic against the Romantics could not have gone unnoticed by the key figures in the later debates on modernism, expressionism and realism within Marxist aesthetics.⁴⁸ Bloch and Lukács both knew Schmitt through their collective participation in the circle around Max Weber, whereas Benjamin was aware of Schmitt through his important writings from this period, the latter of which Benjamin drew on in two of his key Weimar works (his 1921 *Critique of Violence* and *Origin of German Trauerspiel (Trauerspielbuch)*, written in 1924-25 and published in 1928).⁴⁹ The explicit references to Schmitt in the works of Benjamin and Lukács do not only evidence an awareness of Schmitt's work within left-wing and Marxist thought during the 1920s, they demonstrate the important role of key Schmittian ideas in the aesthetico-political

⁴⁸ Although Schmitt was thoroughly immersed in these debates, as evidenced by his engagement with Benjamin, the aesthetic remains an ambivalent category in his political theory. This ambivalence grows out of the tension between his polemic against the aesthetic (in particular, the aestheticist or romantic preclusion of political decision, as well as his partition of the aesthetic and political domains in *The Concept of the Political*), on one hand, and the integration of ostensibly aesthetic concepts into his political theories, on the other hand.

⁴⁹ As it is commonly referred to as Benjamin's *Trauerspielbuch*, I will refer to Benjamin's work with this German title throughout. In his *Trauerspielbuch*, Benjamin cites Schmitt and refers to his theory of sovereignty as the 'state of exception'. See Walter Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019), 49-50, 56-59.

See chapter one below for an expanded discussion of Benjamin's engagement with Schmitt in this work.

debates that have been presented as limited to Marxist aesthetics. Just as Schmitt's attack on romanticism prefigured elements of Lukács' aesthetics, whose subsequent realist polemics against modernism and expressionism drew implicitly on Schmitt's *Political Romanticism*, similarly the innovative Schmittian conceptions of sovereignty and the state of exception would become key points of intellectual interaction in aesthetico-political writings of Benjamin, Brecht and Schmitt. Moreover, Schmitt's political career in the Weimar period, in particular, his membership in the Christian Democratic, conservative Catholic Center Party, illustrates the difficulties inherent in identifying Schmitt—and other Weimar intellectuals—with political identifiers such as right- and left-wing.⁵⁰

Although Schmitt's chief object of critique in *Political Romanticism* appears to be the movement of romanticism, the logical conclusion of his argument is a condemnation of bourgeois liberalism, modernity and its representative aesthetic forms, particularly, modernist, expressionist, and abstract art. For Schmitt, romanticism—and its concomitant political form, liberal, parliamentary democracy—is politically problematic precisely because its impulse for infinite conversation and aesthetic creation turns politics into yet another occasion for aesthetic production. In other words, working outside of the rational structure of cause and effect, romanticism's 'subjective occasionalism', the latter of which turns every event and occasion in society into an aesthetic opportunity for further creation, marks a 'nonrational' subjectification of the aesthetic sphere,⁵¹ reflecting the cleavage of the individual subject and the broader social collective that characterizes modernity. Positioning aesthetics as subordinate to the more primary category of politics, Schmitt contends that the subjectification characterizing romanticism, in which subjectivity is hypostasized not only in aesthetics but in society more broadly, yields an aestheticism that stands opposed to reason and concrete, objective politics. Situating the 'subjectified occasionalism' of romanticism as an endless flight into the infinite that effectively prevents the possibility of concrete, decisive politics, Schmitt writes: "A world that is ever new arises from ever new opportunities. But it is always a world that is only occasional, a world without substance and functional cohesion, without a fixed direction, without consistency and definition, without decision, without a final court of appeal, continuing into infinity and led only

⁵⁰ The mention of Schmitt's involvement with the Catholic Center Party draws on comments from Samuel Garret-Zeitlin.

⁵¹ Carl Schmitt, *Political Romanticism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1986), 83.

by the magic hand of chance. In this world, the romantic can make everything into the vehicle of his romantic interest; he can have the illusion, which here as well may be harmless or perfidious, that the world is only an occasion.”⁵² At issue with the subjectified occasionalism of romanticism, for Schmitt, is its transformation of the concrete realm of politics into simply another occasion for aesthetic creation (i.e., the French Revolution in romantic art and philosophy), which thereby positions the political as subordinate to the aesthetic. This aestheticism, Schmitt argues, further ‘alienates itself’ from all other aesthetic forms, particularly, ‘traditional art’: in the romantic, on the other hand, a special aesthetic achievement takes place: “Between the point of concrete reality that serves as an incidental occasion and the creative romantic, an interesting, colorful world arises that often has an amazing aesthetic attraction. We can assent to it aesthetically but taking it seriously in a moral or objective fashion would call for an ironic mode of treatment. This romantic productivity also treats all traditional art forms as a mere occasion. Thus, even though it repeatedly seeks a concrete point of departure, it must alienate itself from every form, just as it does from concrete reality.”⁵³ For Schmitt, reflecting its liberal origins, romanticism’s ‘subjective occasionalism’ renders its adherents incapable of decision, as romanticism’s irrational, subjectivist flight into infinite conversation and creative production prevents the possibility of concrete, decisive action. The occasionalist attitude is one of passivity, in contrast to the decisive statesman or the revolutionary whose action constitutes the concrete, objective realm of politics. Schmitt remarks, “The subjectified occasionalism of the romantic also accompanies what encounters it, and it should not be difficult to differentiate its organic passivity from the restraints of an active statesman that result from political experience and objectives.”⁵⁴ It is because of this passivity and inability to decide that romanticism prevents the possibility of any concrete politics, either revolutionary or counter-revolutionary.

Schmitt supports his argument that romanticism is incapable of actual, concrete politics by pointing to the multiplicity of often conflicting political positions taken up by the Romantics at various stages. Set in opposition to the objective world of politics and reality, Schmitt presents romanticism as incapable of concrete politics on account of its occasionalist passivity, its embrace of political events of the time as further occasions for aestheticization. Lacking the

⁵² Ibid., 19.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 116.

ability to ever decide, romanticism therefore passively follows the current of the times, promoting the revolution and counterrevolution alike as romantic objects occasioning aesthetic production. Schmitt illustrates how this subjectified occasionalism emanated out of occasionalist philosophies, namely, those of Malebranche. Whereas God occupied the position of the primary force for which everything in existence is merely an occasion in Malebranche's occasionalist philosophy, in romanticism, the romantic subject, the Fichtean ego, became the new center of the cosmos. For Schmitt, instead of God, "the romantic subject occupies the central position and makes the world and everything that occurs in it into a mere occasion...the final authority is shifted from God to the genius of the 'ego', the entire foreground changes, and that which is genuinely occasionalist appears in a pristine fashion."⁵⁵ This shift from God as the center of the universe to the individual reflects the secularizing trends which characterize modernity and its key intellectual and political developments— liberalism and humanism —which *in toto* elevate the individual in place of God. In Schmitt's account, a society which has disintegrated and fragmented into isolated individuals, each standing at the center of their own universe, is the only kind of context in which "the aesthetically productive subject could shift the intellectual center into itself" and away from God, society, or the state of any other objective force.⁵⁶ This is to say, such a shift can occur only in a modern, "bourgeois world," characterized by the isolated individual that becomes their own reference point and that of everything that happens.⁵⁷ In such a society, Schmitt writes, the individual does not simply become their "own priest, due to the central significance and consistency of the religious, it is also left to him to be his own poet, his own philosopher, his own king, and his own master builder in the cathedral of his personality."⁵⁸ In such an account, the issue with romanticism is not so much that it is occasionalist, but rather that it is marked by an occasionalist attitude which has replaced God, or any other objective force, with the isolated individual, reflecting the individualism of bourgeois liberalism and modernity. Although the occasionalist philosophers, particularly, Malebranche, also "possessed the disintegrative concept of the occasion," they were nonetheless able to retain a sense of "law and order" through placing "God, the objective absolute" at the center of their occasionalist

⁵⁵ Ibid., 18.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 20.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

vision of the cosmos.⁵⁹ For Schmitt, law and order were the paramount objectives of politics, the occasionalism of pre-romantic philosophers such as Malebranche was not inherently opposed to politics insofar as God provided “a certain objectivity and cohesion,” a cohesion that could be maintained within occasionalist philosophies so long as “another objective authority, like the state, takes the place of God.”⁶⁰ In romanticism, however, the situation changes to the point that occasionalism becomes nonrational, as it loses all objectivity and any possibility for a coherent, decisive politics. This change results from substitution of an objective force, such as God or the state, for the romantic subject, an individual “whose isolated and emancipated” occasionalism precludes the possibility of concrete decision and politics.⁶¹ Situating the occasionalism or romanticism within the historical context of modern philosophy, specifically the Cartesian idea of the *Cogito*, Schmitt argues that in a manner similar to the occasionalist evasion of “the initial problem—the interaction of body and soul” the occasionalist must therefore avoid “every concrete reality and efficacy as well, that he make every earthly and finite efficacy into the *occasio* for the one and only essential efficacy.”⁶² In Romanticism, then, the occasionalist attitude of evading reality is “exhibited even more conspicuously” as the *occasio* in turn realizes the extent of its ‘disintegrative power’.⁶³

In place of an objective force, in romanticism, “the individual subject treats the world as the *occasio* of his activity and productivity...the greatest external event a revolution or a world war — is intrinsically indifferent.”⁶⁴ What is at stake in Schmitt’s critique of romanticism is not simply its aestheticist occasionalism, centered on the satisfaction of the privatized individual but, moreover, his insistence on the irrationalism of the subjective occasionalist attitude, the latter of which constitutes an abstract, subjective position devoid of objectivity and distant from reality. Romanticism, for Schmitt, is therefore problematic both because of its subjectified occasionalist attitude—which places the isolated individual, the creative romantic subject at the center of the cosmos—and because of its consequent irrationalism, the latter of which stems from the ‘disintegrative concept of the occasion’. For Schmitt, the disintegrative infinite creative impulse of the Romantics is at issue precisely insofar as it attempts to subordinate all other spheres of

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 96.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

society, in particular, the political, to its occasionalist whims. “If this general disintegration, this playful sorcery of the imagination, remained in its own sphere,” Schmitt posits, “it would be irrefutable within the confines of its orbit. But it intermixes with the world of commonplace reality in a capricious and arbitrary fashion. In a general exchange and confusion of concepts, an enormous promiscuity of words, everything becomes explicable and inexplicable, identical and antithetical, and everything can be substituted for everything else.”⁶⁵ Reflecting the logic of commodity exchange and the individualism of bourgeois capitalism and modernity, Schmitt maintains that the subjectified occasionalism of romanticism is not simply opposed to concrete, decisive politics, it represents an attitude, an ideology, that could only come about under specific historical and social conditions. In other words, in his critique of the Romantics, the underlying trend against which Schmitt’s politics of decision is aimed not simply at romanticism, but rather at elevated subjectivity and individualism—abstracted and isolated from concrete social reality—which he views as characterizing modernity and bourgeois liberalism. In his work, Schmitt ties this subjectivity and individualism to the interlocking notions of privatization and liberalism. However, perhaps more importantly for later aesthetico-political debates, Schmitt further links the subjective romantic, aestheticist position with irrationalism, placing it in opposition to the logic of cause and effect and mechanical conceptions of the objective, physical world. Absent a stabilizing, law-giving objective force (e.g., God, the state, causality, or other physical laws), the occasionalism of the Romantics becomes a fantastical flight into unreality and the ‘nonrational’: “In the sense of an ‘action’ or a cause’, the word *causa* also has the meaning of a teleological or normative bond and an intellectual or moral force that admits an adequate relation. On the other hand, an absolutely inadequate relationship obtains between *occasio* and *effect*. Since any concrete item can be the *occasio* of an incalculable effect...this relationship is completely incommensurable, devoid of all objectivity, and nonrational. It is the relation of the fanciful.”⁶⁶ This attack on the irrationalism and nonobjective position of romanticism is coupled by a critique of the ‘disintegrative power’ not simply of the *occasio*, but of romanticism, and by extension, the modern, bourgeois society that it is an ideological reflection of—in Schmitt’s account. Through revealing the fundamental principles and aims of Schmitt’s political critique of romanticism, then, it is possible to grasp the implications, namely, the ways in which it further extends to

⁶⁵ Ibid., 77.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 83.

modern aesthetic and political movements which were key elements not only of the Weimar context, but of Schmitt's intellectual development.

As a close analysis of Schmitt's biography and early writings attests—and likewise, as Stark demonstrates in his analysis of Schmitt and Hugo Ball—prior to writing *Political Romanticism*, Schmitt was active in avant-garde and expressionist circles. Having published an experimental, surrealistic essay, *Die Buribunken*, in journal *Summa* (a journal which included expressionist and modernist authors such as Bloch, Herman Broch, Robert Musil, and Max Scheler) in 1918, prior to turning to a more realist aesthetic position, Schmitt was deeply immersed in his own aesthetic and literary experimentation.⁶⁷ The publication in 1916 of his positive commentary of Theodor Däubler's expressionist poem, *Das Nordlicht*, evidenced Schmitt's engagement in romantic anti-capitalist intellectual currents—prevalent in the Weber circle—on one hand, and his immersion in avant-garde, modernist literary and aesthetic circles, on the other. However, following the events of 1918 and the establishment of the Weimar Republic, Schmitt began to critique his previous expressionist and anti-rationalist positions. Rather than attacking the bourgeois order as bureaucratic and rationalizing, in 1919, Schmitt instead critiques bourgeois liberalism—as represented by romanticism—for its individualism,

⁶⁷ In his comprehensive intellectual biography of Schmitt, Reinhard Mehring offers a historical interpretation that presents the tension of Schmitt's aesthetic and anti-aesthetic positions as the result of Schmitt's intellectual and personal evolution. In his biography, Mehring documents the young Schmitt's immersion in the avant-garde literary and artistic movements and circles of the early Twentieth Century. After detailing Schmitt's close relationship and literary collaboration with Däubler and the Hungarian-German Jewish brothers, Hans Friedrich (Fritz) and Georg Eisler at length, Mehring discusses Schmitt's close friendship with the influential writer, Franz Blei, editor of the journal *Summa*, the latter of which included contributions from expressionist and modernist authors, including, Ernst Bloch, Robert Musil and Hermann Broch. His friendship with Blei, which Mehring writes, "probably came about as a result of the publication of Schmitt's Däubler study," facilitated Schmitt's 1917 publication of a satirical literary triptych, "Die Buribunken," in *Summa* (Reinhard Mehring, *Carl Schmitt: A Biography*, trans. Daniel Steuer, [Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014], 79-80). In the years leading up to Schmitt's 1919 publication of *Political Romanticism*, he also completed a satirical work, *Schattenrisse* ("Silhouettes"), which was the result of his collaboration with Fritz Eisler, who was killed during the Great War (an event that deeply affected Schmitt).⁶⁷ In Mehring's account, by the time Schmitt began writing *Political Romanticism* toward the end of the war, the literary phase of his development was already beginning to transition into a (re)turn to religion (i.e., the Catholicism of his youth) and, by extension, a more conservative, counter-revolutionary political stance. After reading Søren Kierkegaard in 1915, Mehring maintains, Schmitt "finally left his religious pessimism behind...[he] fled into the present by subscribing to the counter-revolutionary state, and he fled out of the time into the arms of Catholicism, a movement also described by Hugo Ball in his diaries *Flight out of Time: A Dada Diary*" (Mehring, *Carl Schmitt*, 80). Mehring further presents Schmitt's "Die Buribunken" as a literary reflection of Schmitt's embrace of Catholicism and God. Mehring engenders an essentially historical-psychological interpretation of Schmitt's text, conceiving of the latter as reflective of Schmitt's own internal psychological conflicts and personal evolution away from a subjectivist-individualist position toward a counterrevolutionary Catholic stance. For Mehring, then, Schmitt's intellectual engagement with the aesthetic is followed by his auto-critical transition away from the latter toward religion and his more mature political positions. See Mehring, *Carl Schmitt*, 23-40, 77-83.

‘disintegrative power’, and lack of reason or objectivity. This prioritization of reason and objectivity aligns Schmitt with a realist aesthetics that to a large extent constitutes a reaction to modernist and expressionist aesthetic modes. Critiquing the hypostatization of the aesthetic against the political in the romantic attitude of subjective occasionalism, Schmitt in turn argues for an aesthetic that complements the politics, providing law, order and clarity rather than fragmentation, disintegration, and abstraction. In bemoaning the romantic reduction of traditional art forms to mere occasions for further aesthetic production and conversation, Schmitt displays his transition from expressionism and avant-garde circles to a new appreciation for traditional art that is subordinate to the objectives and aims of the political. For Schmitt in *Political Romanticism*, traditional art—as exemplified by the politically illuminating, realist dramatic works of Shakespeare—reflects reality and the decisive action of politics. In contrast stands Romanticism, in which great works of traditional art, for instance, Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, are situated as mere occasions for further aesthetic creation.⁶⁸ To this effect, although his critique is explicitly aimed at the Romantics, it extends further to his earlier intellectual engagement with expressionist, modernist, and avant-garde aesthetics, and his ensuing autocritique of the latter in *Political Romanticism*, as it follows his transition from avant-garde literature to a heightened, serious engagement with legal and political theory. Placed in the context of Lukács’ 1924 review of *Political Romanticism*, the parallels between Schmitt’s critique of the Romantics and Lukács’ later realist attacks on modernist, experimental, and expressionist art—in favor of more traditional forms, such as the eighteenth and nineteenth-century realist novel—become increasingly apparent. In light of Lukács’ explicit reference to this work and, likewise, his and Schmitt’s shared engagement with romantic anti-capitalism, expressionism in the Wilhelmine era, the intersection of their fundamentally political critiques of the aesthetic movements (i.e., romanticism, modernism, and expressionism) cannot be overlooked. As a close investigation of Lukács’ early critiques of expressionism and modernism illustrates, the key elements at issue in these movements are precisely those identified by Schmitt in his 1919 work.

III. *From Dreams to Reality: Schmitt, Lukács and the Critique of Messianic-Utopian Art*

In their attempt to identify the political impulses and meanings of particular aesthetic forms, those engaged in the aesthetico-political debates of the Weimar Republic revealed the

⁶⁸ Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*, 78-79.

problematic nature of such identifications. Rather than illuminating the underlying or potential politics of specific aesthetic movements and forms—such as classicism, realism, romanticism, expressionism, surrealism, and dada—these debates further complicate political interpretations and inferences drawn from particular aesthetic modes. In the early years of the Weimar Republic, as Lukács moved away from his previous romantic anti-capitalist views in advancing realism (as opposed to romanticism and experimental modernist forms, such as surrealism, expressionism, and dada) as the chief aesthetic ideal and representation of an emancipatory, communist politics, Schmitt analogously advocated for a realist aesthetico-political ideal of art which serves to represent reality rather than abstract itself from it—as the Romantics and their modern successors would.⁶⁹ However, while Lukács positions realism as the fundamental aesthetic mode of communist politics, Schmitt links his own conservative, decisionist conception of politics with realism, or an aesthetics of realist representation, in opposition to the politically ineffectual, romantic disposition of liberalism. As Schmitt critically writes of the Romantics’ abstracting flight from reality in *Political Romanticism*, “They made audacious plans and bold promises. They made intimations and held out prospects. They responded to every expectation of a fulfillment of their promises with new promises...But the enormous possibilities that they had opposed to reality never became reality.”⁷⁰ In place of reality, Schmitt argues, the Romantics posit possibility “as the higher category.”⁷¹ The infinite conversation of romanticism, its flight into the subjective realm of endless possibility, is precisely what is at issue in the impossible notion of political romanticism. In “preferring the state of eternal becoming and possibilities that are never consummated to the confines of concrete reality,” romanticism precludes the possibility for a concrete politics of decisive action in reality insofar as such “a moment of realization” would effectively eliminate all possibilities in favor of one decided reality.⁷² “A world is destroyed for a narrow-minded reality,” Schmitt writes, expressing the indecisive, abstracting character of the romantic disposition.⁷³ As evinced by his positive 1928 review of Schmitt’s *Political Romanticism*—as well as his polemics against romantic anti-capitalism, expressionism and modernist experimentation in the ‘realism-expressionism’ debates with Bloch

⁶⁹ Even when Schmitt advocated myth and mythic forms of representation in politics, his aesthetic ideals remained rooted in the real world, the concrete reality of politics. This effectively aligned Schmitt’s aesthetics with realism, particularly, as it was articulated by Lukács.

⁷⁰ Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*, 66.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*

and Brecht in the 1930s—by the end of the 1920s, Lukács shared Schmitt’s antipathy to abstract aesthetic modes which represent a movement into subjectivity at the expense of objective reality, the realm of concrete politics. As Michael Löwy argues in his analysis of Lukács’ transition from romantic-anticapitalism to communism and a corresponding advocacy of realism, Lukács’ 1928 review was the first time that Lukács openly voiced his critique of romanticism. Agreeing with Schmitt’s critical account of romanticism, Lukács similarly positions the movement as an aestheticist, “anti-scientific subjectivism” which is incapable of concrete politics.⁷⁴ Despite sharing this critique of romanticism and a corresponding preference for aesthetic realism over abstract, aestheticist, and modernist forms—situated as the rightful successors to the Romantics—Schmitt and Lukács link their realist aesthetics with radically divergent political positions. Although they shared an antipathy toward liberalism and the bourgeois, neoromantic aesthetic movements of modernism, Lukács’ communism and Schmitt’s conservatism of the Weimar period (as well as his later Nazism) represented opposing political conceptions of realism as an aesthetic form.

Even though they offer competing conceptions of the politics of realism (as an aesthetic mode), Schmitt’s and Lukács’ positions coalesce around their characterization of liberalism as a political and ideological form. For Schmitt and Lukács, the political stakes and force of art entail that both be subordinated to the concrete demands of politics, to the representation of the real as opposed to the subjective, bourgeois escape into the abstract realm of endless possibility. Opposing this conception of romanticism—and thereby complicating definitive associations of particular aesthetic modes with various political positions—Lukács’ and Schmitt’s contemporaries, such as Benjamin, Bloch, Stefan George, and their associated followers, upend the conception of romanticism as an aesthetic mode characteristic of bourgeois liberalism. Where Lukács’ and Schmitt situate romanticism as a flight from reality into a realm devoid of real politics, Bloch, for instance, shows how it is precisely in the subjective movement toward the infinite, toward the open possibility of the not-yet that the revolutionary-utopian impulse of art reveals itself. In Bloch’s account, the revolutionary, utopian energies of art—in other words, its utopian, political function—which give voice to a politics of universal liberation lie in the power of dreams, myth, and the imagination of new possibilities, as practiced by the Romantics as well

⁷⁴ Michael Löwy, “Naphta or Settembrini? Lukács and Romantic Anticapitalism,” *New German Critique*, No. 42 (Autumn, 1987), 22.

as various modernist aesthetic movements, particularly, expressionism and dada. Linking Kant's conception of the thing-in-itself with his own utopian notion of the not-yet, in his chapter "The Philosophy of Music," in *The Spirit of Utopia* Bloch finds the utopian spirit of art in the aesthetic expression of the thing-in-itself, the movement toward the not-yet:

Now still a fervent stammering, music, with an increasingly expressive determinacy, will one day possess its own language: it aims at the word which alone can save us...music and philosophy in their final instance intend purely toward the articulation of this fundamental mystery, of this first and last question in every thing. For the *thing-in-itself*, still only "appearing" within spiritual yearning, and thus also having precedence over music, is what moves and dreams in the immediate proximity, in the blue around objects; *it is this, which is not yet; what is lost, pre-sensed; our self-encounter concealed in the latency of every lived moment; our We-encounter, our utopia calling out to itself through goodness, music, metaphysics, but unrealizable in mundane terms*[emphasized by author].⁷⁵

Here, Bloch points to the immaterial, inconstruable character of the utopian impulse, which like the Kantian thing-in-itself, is a mystery latent in everything, unknowable by the human subject. The 'blue around objects' which Bloch links to the dreams and 'spiritual yearning' of music, as well as art and philosophy more broadly, references his conclusion to the opening section of the book, *Objective*, in which 'the blue' symbolizes the utopian imagination of the not-yet: "This is as far as the internal path can at first go, namely toward what we call a self-encounter...To find it, to find the right thing, for which it is worthy to live, to be organized, and to have time: that is why we go, why we cut new, metaphysically constitutive paths, summon what is not, build into the blue, and build ourselves into the blue, and there seek the true, the real, where the merely factual disappears-*incipit vita nova*."⁷⁶ The utopian energies that are latent in aesthetic expressions of dreams and the imagination of new possibilities and worlds therefore evoke the revolutionary, political functions of art. For Bloch, the aesthetic expression of something other than reality, the subjective encounter with the not-yet, does not represent a politically ineffectual, liberal bourgeois spirit, as Schmitt and Lukács contend; on the contrary, romanticism and other imaginative aesthetic movements which aim at expressing what is not-yet, rather than representing objective reality, reveal the truly revolutionary, utopian possibilities and social functions of art. In this respect the very elements of romanticism that Schmitt and Lukács

⁷⁵ Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, 158.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

critique as lacking any real political effectuality (i.e., its subjectivity, yearning for endless creation and possibility) constitute its utopian spirit and political force.

Echoing Bloch's messianic, utopian interpretation of romanticism and its modernist successors, in his 1919 doctoral thesis, *The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism*, Benjamin analogously links the movement toward the infinite—the endless conversation—which characterizes the romantic mode of aesthetic criticism, with a revolutionary, messianic politics.⁷⁷ In a note explaining how his work will contribute to illuminating the “historical essence of Romanticism,” Benjamin writes that the point of view through which this can be accomplished “may be sought in Romantic messianism.”⁷⁸ Citing Friedrich Schlegel's *Athenaeum Fragments*, Benjamin locates “the historical essence of Romanticism,” its ‘Romantic messianism’, in Schlegel's conception of revolutionary messianism: “The revolutionary desire to realize the kingdom of God on earth is the elastic point of progressive civilization and the inception of modern history. Whatever has no relation to the kingdom of God is strictly of secondary importance in this history.”⁷⁹ The romantic philosophy of history, which, for Benjamin, constitutes the historical essence of Romanticism, lies in its messianism, its ‘revolutionary desire to realize the kingdom of God on earth’. After referencing another passage from Schlegel's published letters to his brother August Wilhelm, in which Schlegel links this messianic-revolutionary impulse ‘to realize the kingdom of God’ with the French Revolution, Benjamin points to an interpreter of Schlegel, Charlotte Pingoud, to support his revolutionary-messianic conception of the historical essence of romanticism. He cites her 1914 work, *Outline of Friedrich Schlegel's Aesthetic Doctrine* to bolster his political interpretation of romanticism: “Roundly denied is an ideal of human fulfillment that would be realized in infinity; rather, what was demanded was the ‘kingdom of God’ at this very moment—in time and on earth... Fulfillment at every point of existence, realized ideal on every level of life: this is the categorical imperative out of which Schlegel's new ‘religion emerges’.”⁸⁰ In this passage, Pingoud shows how Schlegel

⁷⁷ Walter Benjamin, *The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism*, in *Selected Writings, Volume 1, 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 185.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Friedrich Schlegel, *Athenaeum Fragments*, no. 222, cited in Walter Benjamin, *The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism*, in *Selected Writings, Volume 1, 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 185.

⁸⁰ I cite the English translation of this work above to maintain consistency in the language of book titles throughout. See Charlotte Pingoud, *Grundlinien der ästhetischen Doktrin Fr. Schlegels* (Stuttgart, 1914), cited in Benjamin, *The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism*, 186.

counters the Hegelian critique of romanticism as politically and philosophically ineffectual on account of its preference for potentiality over actuality and objective reality. Rather than being aimed simply at endless possibility without actualization or fulfillment, in this conception of romanticism, infinite potentiality is reconciled with fulfillment, such that the messianic, revolutionary *telos*, the realization of the ‘kingdom of God’ is sought ‘at every point of existence’—thus leaving open the potentiality of the infinite without precluding the actuality of its fulfillment. In this regard, in contrast to Schmitt’s characterization of romanticism as politically ineffectual, Pingoud’s and Benjamin’s interpretations of Schlegel position romanticism as the aesthetic form expressing the messianic spirit of revolution, a movement which aims for and expresses the desire for a complete, revolutionary transformation of society. Throughout his career, Benjamin developed a conception of messianism as a world-transforming historical power that is expressed in aesthetic, political, and theological forms (i.e., through works of art, in the concepts of sovereignty and force, and in religious notions of the Kingdom of God, redemption, and apocalypse) and actualized in moments of revolutionary upheaval. Benjamin’s early references to Schlegel’s revolutionary messianism show the extent to which Schlegel’s romantic philosophy and—along with the Lurianic, kabalistic influences present throughout Schlegel’s work on this concept—profoundly shaped Benjamin’s later synthesis of messianism and revolution in his philosophy of history and aesthetic theories (i.e., in his essays on Kafka or *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*). In contradistinction to Schmitt’s and Lukács’ critiques, Schlegel’s romanticism, particularly as Pingoud and Benjamin interpret it, therefore presents the possibility of a romantic politics aimed at social transformation and revolution, rather than political ineffectuality.

The divergent political interpretations of realism and romanticism are representative not only of these two particular aesthetic modes, but of the category of the aesthetic as a whole. The expressionism-realism debates between Lukács and Bloch—as well as the radically opposed political positions of leading expressionist practitioners and advocates—analogously reveal divergent political interpretations and deployments of expressionism (i.e., as revolutionary, as Marxist, and as fascist). As Emily Braun argues in her account of the complex linkages of fascism and expressionism, “The debate on Expressionism reveals the methodological

complexities in determining relationships between artistic styles and political praxis.”⁸¹ Instead of attempting to investigate the question of how expressionism led to fascism, in her work Braun seeks to understand how fascist regimes (particularly, Mussolini’s Italy) used expressionism for their own propagandistic ends. Although, as the title to her essay suggests, she ultimately positions expressionism as sharing key elements with fascist ideology (making it a preferred aesthetic form of fascist regimes), Braun’s account of expressionism, as well as her reversal of the ‘usual question,’ does not resolve the issue of discerning the politics of expressionism. The answer to this question is, as Braun suggests, wrought with difficulty given the contradictory political legacy of expressionism—a movement which was both advocated for and reviled by different cultural and political figures on the left and the right alike. Leading Nazis, such as Goebbels, and Italian fascists, such as Mussolini and the painter, Mario Sironi (who was “the chief propagandist among visual artists during the fascist *ventennio*”), admired expressionism and saw it as a natural ally and vehicle for fascist ideology.⁸² Rather than attempting to position expressionism as either fascist (as Lukács maintains) or anti-fascist and emancipatory (as Bloch argues), the divergent political legacies and interpretations of expressionism demonstrate the political impasse of not only expressionism, but of art more broadly. The political implications and ideology of any given aesthetic form, then, cannot be simply deduced through the criticism of a work of art or of a genre, to the extent that the interpretive opacity of artworks precludes the possibility of decisively identifying them with concrete, political movements and positions. For Schmitt and Lukács, this interpretive opacity, the ability for an artwork or an aesthetic form to yield a multiplicity of divergent interpretations and possibilities, is what is at issue in forms which seek to intensify and develop this aesthetic unfolding of difference and multiplicity (such as romanticism, expressionism, and other abstract, modernist forms). For it is precisely in this opening up of multiplicity and endless possibility that such aesthetic forms preclude the concrete, the political act of decision. While the detractors of romanticism interpret the latter’s desire for potentiality as stripping it of any capacity for concrete politics (insofar as it is situated as the characteristic aesthetic form of liberal democracy, a political system rooted in ongoing debate and conversation instead of concrete decision, in Schmitt’s account in *Political Romanticism*),

⁸¹ Emily Braun, “Expressionism as Fascist Aesthetic,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, 31, No. 2, Special Issue: The Aesthetics of Fascism (Apr., 1996), 274-275.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 273-275.

Benjamin and Bloch locate in it a revolutionary messianic spirit, a force that expresses the universal human impulse for utopia.

What is peculiar about the divergent interpretations of the aesthetic forms of modernity in the Weimar debates relating art and politics is the reciprocal intellectual-historical interaction of the key figures in these intellectual exchanges. Attending to the reciprocal interaction of the central figures of these debates in effect changes how contemporary scholars in turn understand the content of these debates. Although Bloch and Lukács held radically opposed conceptions of realism, romanticism, and expressionism—throughout the realism-expressionism debates that began in the late 1920s and continued into the 1930s, for instance—their aesthetico-political theories were nonetheless deeply entwined, influencing and drawing on one another. Likewise, Schmitt’s aesthetic and political ideas were closely read and redeveloped by Lukács and Benjamin, just as Schmitt’s critique of the Romantics shared much in common with Lukács’ conceptions of alienation and reification in his early aesthetic works, *Theory of the Novel* and *Soul and Form*. Reconceiving the reciprocal relation of these thinkers therefore changes our understanding of the ideas they debated and theorized. Instead of establishing definitive boundaries to identify particular aesthetic modes with different political positions and movements, this kind of historical contextualization reveals the aporia of aesthetics and politics. Put differently, placing these thinkers in a reciprocal relation to one another, as part of an ongoing philosophical debate on the relationship of art and politics, evokes the contradictions which arise from the difficult attempt to assign art a political praxis. Demonstrating this, the multiplicity of political interpretations and positions of artworks, and, moreover, the interpretive opacity of even seemingly political or concrete realist works, concludes in contradictory, often radically opposed, aesthetico-political positions.

In this respect, a work of art which is explicit about its political intentions and impulses—for instance, the agitprop theatre advocated by Brecht—is not simply political in the sense that its author intended.⁸³ In its attempt to politicize art and thereby rationally instrumentalize its creative force, Adorno argues, intentionally political art reverts to the alienated, instrumental bourgeois rationality that is so often opposed on the surface of such works. The utopian,

⁸³ On the contrary, as Adorno argues in his critique of Brecht’s *engagé* art in his posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory*, “Any artwork that supposes it is in possession of its content is plainly naïve in its rationalism; this may define the historically foreseeable limit of Brecht’s work.” See Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 27.

nonidentical (in the sense of being impervious to concrete political identifications and interpretations) character of the object of criticism—whether it is a work of art or the ideas of an interlocutor or political opponent—is evoked through a critique which does not simply celebrate its utopian impulses, but instead uncovers these impulses precisely through a critique that locates and deciphers its ideological functions. In his later reflections on pre-WWII debates on aesthetics and politics in *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno draws on Benjamin's early romantic conception of art criticism—namely, that criticism consists in the negation of the work from within its decaying, unraveling structure—to illustrate the dialectical, nonidentical character of art. Through a series of dialectical reflections on the possibilities (i.e., social, political, religious, and philosophical) of art and its impact on individuals and society, Adorno attempts to move beyond the impasse of the Weimar debates on aesthetic and politics, not by resolving the aporia inherent to it, but through approaching such aporia as constitutive of art, a consequence of its interpretive opacity and proliferation of difference. The ongoing, negative dialectical critique of art in Adorno's aesthetics, however, does not simply celebrate the difference and multiplicity that inheres in the work of art as an instantiation of his utopian conception of nonidentity; on the contrary, every work of art contains the dialectic of ideology and utopia, bearing the possibilities of enlightenment and deception, freedom and bondage. For Adorno, arriving at the emancipatory, truth content of a work of art does not consist in finding a timeless aesthetic form that expresses some higher ideal (such as totality, realistic representation, or utopia), but, instead, in performing a negative dialectical critique which simultaneously negates the ideological, reifying elements of the work while evoking its utopian possibilities and impulses—not directly through an explicit affirmation of the artwork, but indirectly through the negation of its ideological functions. Thus, for Adorno, even the culture industry, which he harshly critiques in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, is redeemable insofar as its works are imbued with utopian possibilities, the latter of which are evoked through the negative dialectical critique of the aesthetic or cultural object.

From Adorno's perspective, then, it is precisely the negation of critique of the various aesthetic forms and their possibilities which opens up their latent messianic impulse for human liberation. In this sense, the aesthetico-political debates and their aftermath reveal the task of the artist and the critic as one of illumination and the elevation of consciousness. Put differently, the aesthetic forms and their relation to politics, in effect, reveal their utopian spirit, a spirit aiming for enlightenment and the intellectual elevation of human consciousness. Art's capacity to

radically change society with this effect lies in its ideological-utopian dimension, a dimension which functions simultaneously as an ideology of the present and as a potential catalyst for social and political transformation.

IV. The Messianic Aesthetics of Sovereignty: Benjamin and Schmitt in Dialogue

Through an analysis of Benjamin's critique and transformation of Schmitt's theory of sovereignty, this section further illustrates the interaction of politically opposed intellectuals in this period. In critically transforming Schmitt's theory of sovereignty, Benjamin, I argue, evokes the latent aesthetic and messianic dimensions of this central theory in Schmitt's thought. His critique therefore does not only transform Schmitt's theory but illuminates the latter's political philosophy by showing Schmitt's implicit integration of the very utopian, avantgarde aesthetic currents that he critiques in *Political Romanticism*.

Benjamin's radical messianic conception of the possibilities in art and new aesthetic forms did not simply develop out of his interactions with other German-Jewish thinkers and critical theorists who similarly politicized the messianic idea in Jewish thought but was also the product of his critical transformation of Schmitt's conception of sovereignty.⁸⁴ Benjamin's aesthetically rooted critique was a mode of intellectual engagement as much as it was one of aesthetic and literary criticism. Although present in scholarship on the theme, the uniquely redemptive and aesthetic nature of Benjamin's critique of Schmitt, requires further investigation.⁸⁵ To their credit, Jacob Taubes, Samuel Weber, Kennedy, and Agamben have

⁸⁴ Benjamin's engagement with thinkers like Scholem and Bloch was instrumental to his own development of messianic concepts in his philosophy. However, as I argue in this section, Benjamin's redemptive critique of Schmitt shapes his own theory of messianic sovereignty.

⁸⁵ Although Ellen Kennedy's work on Carl Schmitt and the 'Frankfurt School' generated and greatly impacted later debates and scholarship on this subject and the Critical Theory more broadly, she did not illuminate the dialectical, redemptive character of Benjamin's engagement with Schmitt. Instead of focusing on the redemptive-critical aspect of Benjamin's relationship to Schmitt, Kennedy focused on the more immediate task of demonstrating that Schmitt was an important interlocutor and influence on members of the 'Frankfurt School'. Her impact is described, for instance, in the first appendix to Taubes' *The Political Theology of Paul*. In this appendix, titled, "The Jacob Taubes-Carl Schmitt Story," Taubes writes: "in the last issue of the 'Humanities' (*Geisteswissenschaften*) section of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, which I got to read only after my arrival in Heidelberg, there was a column entitled 'A Trauma.' This column reports on a discussion going on in journals about a certain Ms. Kennedy who wants, in a tribunalistic fashion, to pin the ideas and frameworks of Jürgen Habermas and the Frankfurt School onto Schmitt. I don't know the essay. But apparently there is a connection between Habermas's Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Koselleck's *Critique and Crisis*. And since Koselleck is certainly steeped in Schmitt, Schmitt also gets to Habermas... That this left-right scheme doesn't hold and that in fact the *old* Frankfurt School stood in a very intimate relation to Schmitt, if you count not only the official heads of the school, that is, Mr.

revealed hitherto obscured intellectual engagement of Benjamin and Schmitt, making an invaluable contribution to the intellectual history of this period.⁸⁶ Drawing on Schmitt's argument that "All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts...because of their historical development—in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state, whereby, for example, the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver—but also because of their systematic structure," Agamben and Taubes focus their reading of Benjamin's engagement with Schmitt on the nexus of politics and theology.⁸⁷ Referencing Benjamin's *Theses* alongside Talmudic and Kabbalistic sources that present the messianic age as a time in which Jewish law and the Torah are nullified or suspended, Agamben argues that Schmitt's theory of sovereignty and the state of exception undergoes a "conscious alteration" in Benjamin's Eighth Thesis where the state of exception is repositioned as "messianic time," or in other words, the "the arrival of the Messiah."⁸⁸ After introducing the Kabbalistic understanding of history as shaped by humanity's collective, messianic task of 'cosmic repair' (*Tikkun Olam*)—the rectification and reconciliation of the world's broken, divided state—in his Second Thesis, Benjamin reexamines this collective task in Schmittian terms in his Eighth Thesis: "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of exception' in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of exception, and this will improve our position in the struggle against

Horkheimer and the *Musikus* Adorno, but the more profound Benjamin, who as late as December 1930 wrote a letter to Carl Schmitt." See Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, trans. Dana Hollander (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 97-98; also see, Kennedy, "Carl Schmitt and the Frankfurt School," 37-66.

⁸⁶ Despite the valuable insights of such scholarly accounts, only Taubes and Agamben point to the way that Benjamin redemptively critiqued, or, in Taubes' words, "transformed" Schmitt's ideas. Although Weber lucidly illustrates Benjamin's critique of Schmitt, he does not present the redemptive moment of Benjamin's critique as Agamben does. In his account, Agamben shows how Benjamin negates and transforms Schmitt's state of exception into messianic time, the latter of which Benjamin situates as a revolutionary suspension of the linear continuity of history and progress in his *Theses*. For more on Benjamin's redemptive critique and messianic reconception of Schmittian sovereignty see discussion below. In her essay on Agamben's Benjaminian fusion of messianism and politics, Catherine Mills expands Agamben's account of Benjamin's redemptive critique of Schmitt by emphasizing the radical political implications of Benjamin's messianic state of exception. See Catherine Mills, "Agamben's Messianic Politics," *Contratempus*, no. 5 (Dec. 2004), 42-62; see also Giorgio Agamben, "The Messiah and the Sovereign," in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. Daniel Hiller Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000). For scholarship illuminating Benjamin and Schmitt's relationship, see Jacob Taubes *To Carl Schmitt: Letters and Reflections*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); see also Kennedy, "Carl Schmitt and the Frankfurt School," 37-66.

⁸⁷ See Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36; see also Giorgio Agamben *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 52-64; — "The Messiah and the Sovereign," 160-174 and Jacob Taubes "Carl Schmitt: Apocalyptic Prophet of the Counterrevolution," in *To Carl Schmitt: Letters and Reflections*, 1-18.

⁸⁸ Agamben, "The Messiah and the Sovereign," 160-62.

Fascism.”⁸⁹ As Agamben and Taubes suggest in their interpretations of this thesis, Benjamin’s explicit linkage of the ‘real state of exception’—as opposed to a ‘state of exception’ framed as inauthentic and in quotations, which implicitly references Schmitt’s conception—and the collective task of the ‘tradition of the oppressed’ comprises a critique through which Schmitt’s theory of sovereignty is fundamentally transformed into an antinomian, messianic theory.⁹⁰ “In defining the messianic kingdom with the terms of Schmitt’s theory of sovereignty,” Agamben writes, “Benjamin appears to establish a parallelism between the arrival of the Messiah and the limit concept of State power. In the days of the Messiah, which are also ‘the ‘state of exception’ in which we live, the hidden foundation of the law comes to light, and the law itself enters into a state of perpetual suspension.”⁹¹ Drawing on Benjamin’s presentation of humanity’s collective historical, messianic task to “bring about a real state of exception,” as opposed to the “state of exception” which the “tradition of the oppressed teaches us” is not actually the exception but the rule, Agamben thus situates Benjamin’s messianic state of exception as repudiation and transformation—in other words, a redemptive critique—of Schmitt’s corresponding theory.⁹² Taubes’ work, like Agamben’s, is illuminating in demonstrating that Benjamin dialectically transforms Schmitt’s theory of sovereignty.

In his 1979 letter to Schmitt, Taubes, a scholar of Judaism and philosophy who was in close contact with Adorno and Scholem, described himself as an “arch-Jew” hesitant to “burn my bridges,”⁹³ that is, with Schmitt, presumably on account of his unapologetic juridical support and legal justifications for the ascent of National Socialism and his anti-Semitism—which

⁸⁹ Following Agamben’s accurate translation (cited below in the concluding chapter), I alter Zohn’s translation from ‘the state of emergency’ to the ‘state of exception,’ as the this more accurately expresses the meaning of Benjamin’s term “*ausnahmezustand*”. Interpreting this thesis as a critique and reworking of Schmitt’s theory of sovereignty, Agamben writes: “Messianic time has the form of a state of exception (*Ausnahmezustand*) and summary judgment (*Standrecht*), that is, judgment pronounced in the state of exception.” See Agamben, “The Messiah and the Sovereign,” 160-62. In his second thesis, Benjamin draws implicitly on Isaac Luria’s innovative transference of messianic responsibility from a singular Messiah figure to humanity as a collective:

...our image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption. The same applies to our view of the past, which is the concern of history. The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption. There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim.

See Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 253-4, 257. For more on Luria’s conception of the messianic, see Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken, 1971), 37-48.

⁹⁰ See discussion below.

⁹¹ Agamben, “The Messiah and the Sovereign,” 162.

⁹² Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 257.

⁹³ Taubes, “Letter to Carl Schmitt,” in *To Carl Schmitt: Letters and Reflections*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 27.

entailed that as a Jew, Taubes was his mortal enemy.⁹⁴ In a lecture he delivered at the University of Berlin in 1985, published the same year, Taubes cites Benjamin's 1930 letter to Schmitt—in which he writes of the latter's influence on his own conception of sovereignty in *Trauerspiel*—that was omitted from the two-volume edition of Benjamin's *Correspondence*, ed. Adorno and Scholem.⁹⁵ After citing Benjamin's acknowledgement of Schmitt's intellectual influence in Benjamin's 1928 *Curriculum Vitae*, he presents Benjamin's letter to Schmitt as a “ticking bomb” that disrupts binary preconceptions of a rigid opposition of right- and left-wing intellectuals in the Weimar period: “Besides that there is a letter from Benjamin to Schmitt that has been omitted from the published edition of his correspondence. It turns out to be a ticking bomb that comprehensively shatters our pre-conceptions regarding the intellectual history of the Weimar period. The letter comes not from the early years, but from the time of crisis.”⁹⁶ Taubes is correct in stating the great intellectual-historical significance of this letter, in particular, its effective

⁹⁴ Taubes was not only aware of Schmitt's anti-Semitism, he also discusses his position as Schmitt's mortal enemy in his lecture “Carl Schmitt: Apocalyptic Prophet of the Counterrevolution” which explicitly references a conversation in which Schmitt admits to his own anti-Semitism: “the Church only exists because the Jews have not accepted, because they do not live in belief. The Church is consciously ambivalent, I am a Christian, there is no other way to be a Christian without a touch of anti-Semitism.” See Taubes, *To Carl Schmitt*, 43-44.

⁹⁵ In his lecture, Taubes cited Benjamin's December, 1930 letter to Schmitt in its entirety:
Dear Professor,

In the next few days, you will receive my book *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* from the publisher. I write these lines not only to tell you this, but also to express my pleasure that I might, at the prompting of Albert Salomon, send it to you. You will quickly notice how much the book owes to your treatment of sovereignty in the seventeenth century. Perhaps I might go beyond that and say that I have also found in your later works, particularly *Die Diktatur*, a confirmation of my working methods as a philosopher of art deriving from your own approach to the philosophy of the state. If your reading of my book assists in your understanding this feeling, then my intention in sending it to you is fulfilled.

Expressing my special esteem, your devoted
Walter Benjamin.

See Walter Benjamin, cited in Taubes, *To Carl Schmitt*, 16-17. In the first appendix to *The Political Theology of Paul*, Taubes recounts his reaction—and Adorno's disavowal—of the omission of Benjamin's letter to Schmitt in the first publication of his *Correspondence*: “When I got hold of this letter, I phoned Adorno and asked him: Aren't there two published volumes of Benjamin's letters; why is this letter not published? A letter like that doesn't exist, was the answer. I say, Teddy, I know the handwriting, I know the typewriter Benjamin wrote with, don't tell me stories, I've got it right here! Can't be. Typically German answer...and I get the phone call from Teddy: Yes, there is such a letter, but it had disappeared (Taubes: 2003, 98).

⁹⁶ Taubes writes that Benjamin's *Curriculum Vitae* was “written around 1930” (16). In Benjamin's *Selected Writings*, the *Curriculum Vitae* is presented as “Written in early 1928; unpublished in Benjamin's lifetime.” Taubes' emphasis that Benjamin sent this letter along with his *Trauerspielbuch* to Schmitt not in the early years of the Weimar Republic but during the “time of crisis” in late 1930s alludes to the historical context in which it was written: after Germany's economic depression and inflation had galvanized the Nazi party, it won 18% of the popular vote to become the *Reichstag's* second-largest party. See Taubes, *To Carl Schmitt*, 16-17; also see, Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 2*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 79.

dismantling of a reductionist bifurcation of Weimar intellectuals into self-contained circles on the right and left. Drawing on Taubes, Weber argues that Adorno and Scholem omitted this letter from Benjamin's *Correspondence* due to Schmitt's support for Nazism: "It is as though the fact that he had been able to admire and draw inspiration from the work of a prominent Catholic conservative who was later to become a conspicuous member of the Nazi party could only muddy and compromise the significance of an oeuvre that both Adorno and Scholem, whatever their other differences might be, agreed was of exemplary significance."⁹⁷ The significance of this letter is made clear in its articulation of Benjamin's conception of how his thought related to Schmitt's ideas. After informing Schmitt that he has sent him a copy of his *Trauerspielbuch*, Benjamin expresses a sense of affinity and intellectual indebtedness to Schmitt: "You will quickly notice how much the book owes to your treatment of sovereignty in the seventeenth century. Perhaps I might go beyond that and say that I have also found in your later works, particularly *Die Diktatur*, a confirmation of my working methods as a philosopher of art deriving from your own approach to the philosophy of the state."⁹⁸ Although Benjamin unequivocally tells Schmitt of "how much the book owes" to his theory of sovereignty, lending support to a reading of Benjamin's philosophy as deeply influenced by Schmitt's, a close examination of his *Trauerspielbuch* nuances this reading by illustrating Benjamin's redemption and transformation of Schmittian sovereignty.

In introducing Schmitt's ties to Benjamin, Taubes thus articulates Benjamin's redemption of Schmitt's theory sovereignty using the terms of a dialectical reversal. "Schmitt's fundamental vocabulary," he writes, "is here introduced by Benjamin, made use of, and so transformed into its opposite. Carl Schmitt's conception of the 'state of exception' is dictatorial, dictated from above; in Benjamin it becomes a doctrine in the tradition of the oppressed."⁹⁹ Taubes'

⁹⁷ In his essay on Benjamin and Schmitt, Weber emphasizes the intellectual-historical significance of Benjamin's 1930 letter to Schmitt: "The esteem that Benjamin expressed for the eminent political thinker who, just a few years later, was to publish texts such as "The Führer Protects the Law [*Der Führer schützt das Recht*]" (1934) and "German Jurisprudence Battles the Jewish Spirit [*Die deutsche Rechtswissenschaft im Kampf gegen den jüdischen Geist*]" (1936) hardly fits the picture that Benjamin's initial editors and former friends, Gershom Scholem and Adorno, wished to present to a broad audience. As understandable as their decision to exclude this letter may have been at the time, it nonetheless reflects a malaise related to the way in which Benjamin tends to resist any attempt at univocal classification..." See Samuel Weber, "Taking Exception to Decision: Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt," In *Benjamin's -abilities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 176-77.

⁹⁸ Walter Benjamin, cited in Taubes, *To Carl Schmitt*, 16-17.

⁹⁹ Taubes continues by presenting Benjamin and Schmitt as sharing a theological-political conception of history: "Contemporaneity', a monstrous abbreviation of a messianic period, defines the experience of history on the part of

interpretation can be expanded through an account of the fundamentally aesthetic character of Benjamin's critique, the latter of which Benjamin articulates both in his *Trauerspielbuch* and through juxtaposing his philosophy of art and Schmitt's philosophy of state in his *Curriculum Vitae* and letter to Schmitt.¹⁰⁰ Moreover, presumably in efforts to vindicate his own relationship with Schmitt, Taubes overemphasizes Schmitt's influence on Benjamin.¹⁰¹ In his 1985 lecture, Taubes argued that Benjamin 'identified' the ideas of Schmitt and Alois Riegl "as the methodological model for his work."¹⁰² In his *Curriculum Vitae*, however, Benjamin presents his ideas as linked to Schmitt's, not simply as modeled after the latter:

I have thus far directed my efforts at opening a path to the work of art by destroying the doctrine of the territorial character of art...to bring about a process of integration in scholarship—one that will increasingly dismantle the rigid partitions between the disciplines that typified the concept of the sciences in the nineteenth century—and to promote this through an analysis of the work of art. Such an analysis would regard the work of art as an integral expression of the religious, metaphysical, political, and economic tendencies of its age, unconstrained in any way by territorial concepts. This task, one that I had already undertaken on a larger scale in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, was linked on the one hand to the methodological ideas of Alois Riegl, especially his doctrine of the *Kunstwollen*, and on the other hand to the contemporary work done by Carl Schmitt, who in his analysis of political phenomena has made a similar attempt to integrate phenomena whose apparent territorial distinctness is an illusion.¹⁰³

Benjamin positions Schmitt as an interlocutor whose ideas are "linked" to his task of dismantling the rigid disciplinary partitions "through an analysis of the work of art" in his *Trauerspielbuch*. Rather than writing that his methodological framework was modeled on Schmitt (as Taubes argues), Benjamin instead presents himself and Schmitt as intellectual equals, maintaining that Schmitt 'has made a similar attempt to integrate phenomena'. Benjamin's reference to Schmitt's integration of seemingly disconnected fields in his political theory alludes to Schmitt's influential works relating politics to aesthetics and religion, namely, *Political Romanticism*, *On Dictatorship* (1921), and *Political Theology* (1922), the last of which Benjamin

both Benjamin and Schmitt; both involve a mystic conception of history whose principal teaching relates the sacred order to the profane. See Jacob Taubes, *To Carl Schmitt: Letters and Reflections*, 17.

¹⁰⁰ See discussion below for more on the aesthetic character of Benjamin's critique.

¹⁰¹ After his relationship with Schmitt became public, Taubes was asked to account for it during a 1986 debate at the Maison Heinrich Heine in Paris. It was later published as an "Extract from a Dispute About Carl Schmitt." See Jacob Taubes, *To Carl Schmitt: Letters and Reflections*, 33-47.

¹⁰² Taubes, *To Carl Schmitt*, 16.

¹⁰³ Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 2*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, 78.

cites in his *Trauerspielbuch*.¹⁰⁴ As Benjamin's *Curriculum Vitae* demonstrates, it was Schmitt's methodological synthesis of various disciplinary categories in his political and aesthetic theories that Benjamin was most drawn to. In Benjamin's account, however, the integration of such disciplinary categories is achieved specifically "through an analysis of the work of art" insofar as the artwork represents and, in turn, influences the relationships, ideologies, and norms of the unique historical context in which it was produced. In understanding the work of art as "an integral expression of the religious, metaphysical, political, and economic tendencies of its age," Benjamin situated the aesthetic work as an expression of its society, whose analysis is therefore essential to understanding the latter.¹⁰⁵ It was precisely in reference to this theory of art—where the artwork is presented as an expression of an idea, understood as a monad which reveals an "image of the world" in abbreviated form—that Benjamin presents his ideas as linked and similar to Schmitt's.¹⁰⁶ Benjamin to this effect shows that his critique of Schmitt does not only relate to the nexus of politics and theology, but is bound inextricably to art criticism and, by extension, the totality of society which can be reflected in artworks.

Understanding Benjamin's critique of Schmitt entails a close reading of his writings that reference and reconceive Schmitt's theory of sovereignty in *Political Theology*. In his *Theses* and *Trauerspielbuch*, Benjamin begins with the premises of Schmitt's definition of sovereignty and proceeds to show how, when taken to the extreme—the perpetual suspension of the law, as in messianic time—Schmitt's dictatorial theory of sovereignty is transformed into a collective

¹⁰⁴ Walter Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019), 49-50, 56-59.

¹⁰⁵ After citing Schmitt in reference to his theories of art criticism and *Trauerspiel* in his *Curriculum Vitae*, Benjamin links these elements of his thinking to a kind of social physiognomy (the practice of analyzing facial features to reveal a person's personality or character): "Above all, however, any such approach seems to me to be a precondition for any effective physiognomic definition of those aspects of artworks that make them incomparable and unique." See Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 2*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, 78

¹⁰⁶ In his *Trauerspielbuch*, Benjamin presents his theory of art in monadological terms, drawing on Leibniz's theories in particular:

The construction of the idea, as stamped by totality in contrast to its own inalienable isolation, is monadological. The idea is a monad. The being that enters into it with its fore- and after-history gives, in its own hidden figure, the abbreviated and obscured figure of the rest of the idea-world, just as, with the monads in the *Discourse on Metaphysics* of 1686, all are given obscurely in each. The idea is a monad: the representation of phenomena rests preestablished in it, as in their objective interpretation. The more highly ordered the ideas, the more perfect the representation posited within them. And so the real world could well be a task, in the sense that what matters is to penetrate so deeply into everything real that an objective interpretation of the world would therein disclose itself... The idea is a monad—this means, in *nuce*: each idea contains the image of the world. For the task of its presentation nothing less is required than to inscribe, in its abbreviation, this image of the world.

See Walter Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019), 27.

sovereignty. This collective, specifically messianic theory of sovereignty is articulated in his *Theses*, where Benjamin represents humanity's task of instituting a real state of exception as a revolutionary rupture of the historical norm: "The awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode is characteristic of the revolutionary classes at the moment of their action."¹⁰⁷ Benjamin concludes the Thesis by tying this revolutionary moment of rupture to the French Revolution and its institution of a new calendar, which Benjamin argues did not measure time but was a monument of "a historical consciousness":

The great revolution introduced a new calendar. The initial day of a calendar serves as a historical time-lapse camera. And, basically, it is the same day that keeps recurring in the guise of holidays, which are days of remembrance. Thus the calendars do not measure time as clocks do; they are monuments of a historical consciousness of which not the slightest trace has been apparent in Europe in the past hundred years. In the July revolution an incident occurred which showed this consciousness still alive. On the first evening of fighting it turned out that the clocks in towers were being fired on simultaneously and independently from several places in Paris. An eye-witness, who may have owed his insight to the rhyme, wrote as follows:

Who would have believed it!
we are told that new
Joshuas at the foot of every tower,
as though irritated with
time itself, fired at the dials
in order to stop the day.¹⁰⁸

In describing the first day of French revolutionary calendar (or any calendar) as "a historical time-lapse camera" Benjamin effectively reconceives of the revolutionary rupture of historical continuity—and by extension, the 'real state of exception' brought about through collective action—as an aesthetic phenomenon involving the representation, citation, and remembrance of history. Like a camera which captures an image bound to a unique time and place in order to reproduce, invoke, and represent it in myriad different temporal-spatial contexts, the calendar is able to create a temporally disruptive shock-effect whereby the historical moments of each day of remembrance—holidays—are crystalized, represented and, thereby, resurrected in the present.¹⁰⁹ Benjamin to this effect presents the aesthetic act of representing history through a calendar as a historical act that disrupts the historical continuum. The calendar therefore does not

¹⁰⁷ Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 261-2.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 260

¹⁰⁹ Benjamin therefore situates the resurrection of the past through its aesthetic representation, citation and remembrance as a moment of rupture that in effect 'blasts' the historical continuum

simply represent history. It shapes history. The aesthetic creation and representation of a calendar, like other historical representations of the French revolutionaries' citation and identification with ancient Roman ideas and fashion, is thus framed as integral to the messianic task of initiating a real state of exception, a temporal rupture of historical continuity wherein the law and existing norms are suspended. This historical-philosophical conception of sovereignty is already present in his *Trauerspielbuch*, where Benjamin presents sovereignty as fundamentally aesthetic insofar as it entails the representation and shaping of history: "The sovereign represents history. He holds historical happenings in his hand like a scepter."¹¹⁰ Further tying the aesthetic to the political-theological theory of sovereignty, throughout this text, Benjamin persistently deploys his critique of aesthetic historical representations, such as *Trauerspiel* and Baroque tragedy, to ultimately revolutionize or sublimate Schmitt's conception.

It is specifically on aesthetic terms and through deploying a critique of art (e.g., *Trauerspiel*) that Benjamin negates Schmitt's theory of sovereignty. Building on Weber's articulation of the aesthetic aspect of Benjamin's critique, this study focuses on the redemptive moment whereby Benjamin fundamentally transforms Schmitt's theory of sovereignty as he integrates it into his own thinking.¹¹¹ After deploying Benjamin's letter and *Curriculum Vitae* as evidence for his interpretation that "Benjamin's mode of investigation, his *Forschungsweise*, is indebted to that of Schmitt," Weber argues that Benjamin's utilization of Schmitt's ideas amounts to a decisive "modification" which dismantles Schmittian sovereignty precisely through an analysis of historical representations of sovereignty in the German *Trauerspiel*.¹¹² Weber thus maintains that Benjamin's interpretation of the *Trauerspiel* shows the indecision and tyranny of the sovereign, resulting in "the dismantling of the sovereign, who splits into an ultimately ineffective if bloody tyrant, and a no less ineffective martyr."¹¹³ As Weber illustrates, in pointing to the violence and images of death which tend to envelop sovereigns in the German *Trauerspiel*, Benjamin aesthetically invokes the violence and indecision inherent in the Schmittian conception of sovereignty.

¹¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019), 48.

¹¹¹ See Weber, "Taking Exception to Decision: Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt," 176-194.

¹¹² In his account, Weber presents Benjamin's 're-inscription' of Schmitt's conception of sovereignty as turning "out to contradict directly the conclusion of Schmitt" insofar as the German *Trauerspiel* represents "the dismantling of the sovereign." See Weber, "Taking Exception to Decision: Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt," 179, 185-9.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 189.

Although it does not explicitly reference Benjamin's redemptive critique of Schmitt, the post-war critique of Schmitt from the left has uncovered another, more striking aesthetic element that is essential to understanding Schmitt's theory of sovereignty and its Benjaminian transformation. In an attempt to distance Frankfurt School Critical Theory from Schmitt, Habermas and Wolin have drawn on Benjamin's linkage of fascism and the aestheticization of politics to argue that Schmitt's political theory constitutes an 'aestheticized politics' that is therefore both internally inconsistent and characteristic of fascism.¹¹⁴ Bracketing the political stakes inherent in the question of the aesthetic in Schmitt's thought, David Pan argues that Schmitt's political theory yields a political aesthetics (i.e., rather than an inextricably fascist aestheticized politics, as Habermas and Wolin suggest it is) insofar as it is thoroughly immersed in aesthetic concepts and themes, such as the ineluctably aesthetic concept of representation which plays a central role in Schmitt's conception of politics in *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*.¹¹⁵ In assessing Schmitt's work, then, one is confronted with the interpretive problem contained in the indeterminate and ambivalent role of the aesthetic.¹¹⁶ In this light, Habermas argues that Schmitt's polemic against political romanticism serves to obscure "the aestheticizing oscillations of his own political thought," the latter of which manifest most evidently in Schmitt's fascination with an "aesthetics of violence" wherein the Schmittian concept of sovereignty—"Interpreted on the model of the *creatio ex nihilo*"—is imbued with "a halo of surrealistic meanings through its relationship to the violent destruction of the normative as such."¹¹⁷ Habermas situates Schmitt's conception of sovereignty as an aesthetics of violence to the extent that its decisive moment, the state of exception, marks a violent break with and

¹¹⁴ See Jürgen Habermas, "The Horrors of Autonomy: Carl Schmitt in English," in *The New Conservatism*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 136-138; see also, Wolin, "Carl Schmitt: The Conservative Revolutionary Habitus and the Aesthetics of Horror," 424-447.

Note that these references to secondary scholarship on Schmitt and aesthetics (as well as the following two references) are cited in Levi's work on the latter.

¹¹⁵ See David Pan, afterward to Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba*, 69-119; Pan, "Political Aesthetics: Carl Schmitt on 'Hamlet'," *Telos*, No. 72 (1987), 41-57.

¹¹⁶ Defending Schmitt, however, Andrew Norris and Andreas Kalyvas maintain that Schmitt's explicit partition of the political and the aesthetic is to be taken at face value if we are to grasp the force and contemporary relevance of Schmitt's thought. See Andrew Norris, "Carl Schmitt's Political Metaphysics: On the Secularization of 'the Outermost Sphere,'" *Theory and Event* 4, no. 1 (2000), <https://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed February 9, 2019); Andreas Kalyvas, "Who's Afraid of Carl Schmitt?" *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 25, no. 5 (1999), 87-125; Kalyvas, "Carl Schmitt and the Three Moments of Democracy," *Cardozo Law Review* 21 (2000), 1525-65.

¹¹⁷ Habermas, "The Horrors of Autonomy," 137.

destruction of temporal and normative political continuity.¹¹⁸ Developing Karl Heinz Bohrer's intellectual historical conception of the "aesthetics of horror" (*Asthetik des Schreckens*), wherein the modernist aesthetic modes of "rupture, discontinuity, and shock" are located as originally Nietzschean conceptions which were later "renewed in the 1920s through the works of Max Scheler, Carl Schmitt, and Martin Heidegger,"¹¹⁹ Wolin argues that in *Political Theology* Schmitt deploys the rhetoric of the "vitalist aesthetics of suddenness or rupture" to elevate the extreme or exceptional case (*Grenzsituation*) as that which violently suspends and ruptures the norm.¹²⁰ Wolin's and Habermas' shared critique thus positions Schmitt's partition of the aesthetic and the political not simply as self-contradictory and internally inconsistent, but, more importantly, as a couched disavowal of the fascist aestheticization of the political that is at work in Schmitt's political theory. This dissertation therefore builds on and expands Wolin's and Habermas' accounts through evoking Benjamin's critique and redemptive transformation of precisely this aesthetic aspect of Schmitt's theory.

In a similar vein, I draw on and expand Horst Bredekamp's account of Benjamin's relationship with Schmitt through emphasizing the ways that Benjamin's engagement amounts to a redemptive critique. Instead of presenting Benjamin as transforming Schmitt's ideas through dismantling their underlying foundations, Bredekamp demonstrates their affinities and convergences by pointing to the shock-aesthetics of Schmittian sovereignty and messianic time. He places Schmitt's concept of sovereignty as an intrusion of the aesthetic into the Schmittian political domain insofar as the temporally disruptive conception of time inherent in the state of exception evokes the avant-garde aesthetics of shock and rupture.¹²¹ Schmitt's limit or borderline concept (*Grenzbegriff*) of the sovereign as the figure who 'decides the state of exception,' Bredekamp argues, is fundamentally an avant-garde aesthetic conception insofar as it entails a rupture of normative temporality in realizing "a moment of standstill and shock-like clarity."¹²² Citing Wolin's arguments while alluding to the young Schmitt's engagement with the avant-

¹¹⁸ Expanding Habermas' argument, Wolin finds evidence for his claim that Schmitt's politics are indissolubly linked with a "vitalist aesthetics of violence" in the apparently aesthetic character of Schmitt's borderline concept of sovereignty, about which Schmitt adds "In the exception the power of real life breaks through the crust of a mechanism that has become torpid by repetition." See

¹¹⁹ Karl Heinz Bohrer, *Asthetik des Schreckens*, cited in Wolin, "Carl Schmitt," 433.

¹²⁰ Wolin, "Carl Schmitt," 433.

¹²¹ Horst Bredekamp, "From Walter Benjamin to Carl Schmitt, via Thomas Hobbes" trans. Melissa Thorson Hause and Jackson Bond in *Critical Inquiry*, 25, No. 2, "Angelus Novus": Perspectives on Walter Benjamin (Winter, 1999), 247-266; see "Walter Benjamin's Esteem for Carl Schmitt," 679-704.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 688.

garde movements of surrealism and dada (in particular, Hugo Ball), Bredekamp posits that “This motif of the abrupt departure from the time of normality corresponds to the concepts of shock, the now, and suddenness from the canon of the avantgarde propagated by Ernst Jünger and Martin Heidegger as well as by André Breton and Louis Aragon.”¹²³ Differing from Wolin’s interpretation, however, Bredekamp argues that Schmitt’s state of exception corresponds with the shock aesthetics of modern cinema and montage that Benjamin celebrates in his important work, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*.¹²⁴ For Bredekamp, the aesthetic dimension at work in Schmitt’s political theory of sovereignty is not presented in exclusively negative or pejorative terms, as it is in Habermas and Wolin. Despite promoting “the shock theory of the authoritarian avantgarde,” Bredekamp argues that Schmitt’s theory corresponds with Benjamin’s conception of a revolutionary aesthetics of shock.¹²⁵ Rather than clarifying Benjamin’s critical engagement and transformation of Schmitt’s concepts—or alternatively, positioning Schmitt’s thought critically as a fascist aestheticization of politics—Bredekamp’s analysis concludes that in light of the shock aesthetics inherent in Schmitt’s state of exception, “political theory and the theory of art are intertwined.”¹²⁶ Although he acknowledges that Benjamin critiques aspects of Schmitt’s theory of sovereignty, Bredekamp nonetheless presents Benjamin’s and Schmitt’s ideas as converging, ‘united in their opposition to’ continuity: “Both were united in their opposition to the continuity of the lapsing time. This is the point at which the ideas of Benjamin and Schmitt converge.”¹²⁷ Bredekamp thus positions Benjamin as “ensnared” by “Schmitt’s theoretical association of the political, art, and time,” writing that he “remains caught in the framework” of Schmitt’s *Political Theology* and his “demand for a true state of exception.”¹²⁸ Developing Bredekamp’s account, this chapter expands the scope of Benjamin’s affinities with Schmitt by articulating his redemptive critique of Schmittian sovereignty.

A close reading of Benjamin’s conceptions of messianic time and sovereignty reveals that Benjamin did not simply develop his innovative conception under the influence of Schmitt’s theory of sovereignty. Before Schmitt had even published *Political Theology* and *On Dictatorship*, Benjamin had already related his political conception of messianic time with

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 695.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 686.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

Trauerspiel and its representation of history as an ongoing, self-repeating catastrophe in a 1916 fragment, titled, “*Trauerspiel* and Tragedy.”¹²⁹ In this posthumously published fragment, Benjamin begins to develop his political-theological reading of *Trauerspiel* by linking the latter to the biblical conception of messianic time: “This idea of fulfilled time appears in the Bible as its dominant historical idea: as messianic time. But, in any case, the idea of fulfilled historical time is not understood as the idea of an individual time. This determination, which naturally transforms the meaning of fulfillment, is what differentiates tragic time from messianic time. Tragic time relates to the latter as individually fulfilled time relates to divinely fulfilled time.”¹³⁰ Although he does not yet link his conception of messianic time to a theory of sovereignty in this fragment, the messianic is indissoluble from sovereignty insofar as the Messiah—derived from the Hebrew word, *mashiach*, “anointed,” a reference to the ritual anointing of kings in the Torah—is presented as a future king throughout the Jewish tradition.¹³¹ In drawing on his earlier fragment and Schmitt’s *Political Theology*, in his *Trauerspielbuch*, Benjamin deploys the Baroque representation of a perpetual state of catastrophe and violence maintained by the tyrannical sovereign to dismantle the very framework of Schmittian sovereignty.

This dismantling, however, includes a redemptive moment, whereby Benjamin transforms the borderline concept of Schmittian sovereignty into a messianic theory of revolutionary rupture. Thus, in his allegorical reading of *Trauerspiel*, Benjamin positions history as a repetitive, empty landscape of death and catastrophe: “in allegory there lies before the eyes of the observer the *facies hippocratica* of history as petrified primal landscape. History, in everything untimely, sorrowful, and miscarried that belongs to it from the beginning, is inscribed in a face—no, in a death’s head.”¹³² Despite their catastrophic character, in Benjamin’s account, such allegorical images unfold a dialectical reversal through which the bleak image of history as ruin is transmuted into an allegory for redemption and salvation. “For it is to misunderstand the

¹²⁹ See Walter Benjamin, “*Trauerspiel* and Tragedy,” in *Selected Writings, Volume 1, 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 55-58.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹³¹ For instance, in an influential discussion of the Messiah in the Talmud, *Tractate Sanhedrin*, the authors of the Talmud interpret a passage referencing a unique king in Isaiah as the messiah: “Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya says: The messianic era will last seventy years, as it is stated: ‘And it shall come to pass on that day, that Tyre shall be forgotten seventy years, according to the days of one king’ (Isaiah 23:15). In this context, one [*eḥad*], means unique [*meyuḥad*]. Which is the unique king? You must say that this is a reference to the Messiah.” See Adin Steinsaltz (trans.), *Tractate Sanhedrin, The William Davidson Talmud*, 99a. Retrieved from www.sefaria.org/Sanhedrin.99a

¹³² Walter Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019), 174.

allegorical entirely if we make a distinction between the store of images, in which this about-turn into salvation and redemption takes place, and that grim store which signifies death and damnation.”¹³³ Implicitly invoking Schmitt’s theory of the borderline concept, Benjamin presents images of catastrophe and destruction in *Trauerspiel* as illuminating the limits of allegory: “it is precisely visions of the frenzy of destruction, in which all earthly things collapse into heaps of ruins, which reveal the limit set on allegorical contemplation, rather than its ideal quality.”¹³⁴ Benjamin’s conception of a limit of ‘allegorical contemplation’ marks its breaking point, the extreme or exceptional case in Schmitt’s terms. In being taken to the extreme in the aesthetics of ‘death and damnation,’ the allegorical image undergoes a reversal and is turned into “the allegory of resurrection” and salvation.¹³⁵ Benjamin therefore transforms the deathly image of Golgotha into an allegorical image of redemption:

The bleak confusion of Golgotha, which can be recognized as the schema underlying allegorical figures is not just a symbol of the desolation of human existence. In its transitoriness is not signified or allegorically represented, so much as, in its own significance, displayed as allegory. As the allegory of resurrection. Ultimately in the death-signs of the baroque the direction of allegorical reflection is reversed; on the second part of its wide arc, it returns to redeem.¹³⁶

This redemptive reversal of catastrophe, of the aesthetics of death, in the *Trauerspiel*, is significant in the context of Benjamin’s critique of Schmitt. For Benjamin, the representation of history as a continuous repetition of death and destruction is precisely the conception of historical time which dismantles Schmitt’s theory of sovereignty, namely, by showing that ‘the state of exception’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule’, as Benjamin writes in his *Theses*. This dismantling is demonstrated, however, in Bredekamp’s and Weber’s accounts. Although only gestured at in his *Trauerspielbuch*, in his *Theses* Benjamin redemptively transforms Schmitt’s theory of sovereignty by representing it as a collective theory of sovereignty in which humanity—rather than an individual Messiah or tyrant—is tasked with ‘bringing about a real state of exception’. As an explosive shock to the continuous repetition of history as “one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage,” this exception

¹³³ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osbourne (New York: Verso, 2009), 232. I reference Osbourne’s translation in this passage due to its clarity in contrast to Eiland’s translation of the same passage. Other than this, I reference Eiland’s translation throughout, primarily because it includes Benjamin’s references to Schmitt, unlike the Osbourne translation which has left them out.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

to the norm of catastrophe thus describes Benjamin's conception messianic time, a revolutionary suspension of the legal order that is founded upon the historical continuity of death and destruction.¹³⁷ Interpreted in this vein, Benjamin's interaction with Schmitt is revealed not simply as an isolated engagement between two intellectuals interested in the nexus of seemingly unrelated fields, such as aesthetics, politics, history and theology; rather, in engaging Schmitt's ideas and transforming them, Benjamin uncovers a more expansive redemptive critique of the shock-aesthetics of and legacy of "the authoritarian avantgarde"—including leading intellectuals, such as Heidegger and Jünger—from Weimar to Nazi Germany.¹³⁸ In attending to this dialectical, redemptive moment of Benjamin's critique, then, it is possible to build upon and develop the secondary scholarship on the relationships between Critical Theory and leading German thinkers associated with German nationalism and Nazism.

¹³⁷ Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 257. In his "Critique of Violence", written in 1921, Benjamin argues that the law is founded on and maintained through violence. In this text, Benjamin draws on Georges Sorel's *Reflections on Violence* (which also influenced Schmitt), in particular Sorel's conception of the general as opposed to the political strike, in order to lay the ground for his critique of progress, and by extension, mythic (law-making and law-preserving) violence. The historical orientation linked with liberal, Enlightenment-based affirmations of progress is necessarily tied to an embrace of the mythic violence of the state, of the established order and law. Here Benjamin is close to Schmitt in his critique of liberalism and progress. See Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence, in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings: Volume 1*, 236-252. In her essay "Critique, Coercion and Sacred Life in Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence,'" Judith Butler synthesizes Benjamin's conception of divine, law-destroying violence with his revolutionary strain of messianism. "For Benjamin," she writes, "violence outside of positive law is figured as at once revolutionary and divine—it is in his terms pure, immediate, unalloyed...the language in which Benjamin describes the general strike, the strike that brings the entire legal system to its knees." See Judith Butler, "Critique, Coercion and Sacred Life in Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence'," in *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, ed. Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 214.

¹³⁸ Bredekamp describes Jünger, Ball, Schmitt and Heidegger as part of "the authoritarian avantgarde" in his account of Benjamin's relation to Schmitt. See Bredekamp, "Walter Benjamin's Esteem for Carl Schmitt," 694-695.

Chapter 2

Utopia, Ideology, and the Poetic: Stefan George and the Mythic Politics of Poetry

I. Redemptive Aesthetics

Reconceiving the relationship of aesthetics and politics in Weimar thought requires a fundamental third element, the theological category of redemption. The category of redemption, most prominent in the messianic, utopian impulses of art that functions as the religious foundation of the secularized concept of utopia, is key to understanding both the nexus of aesthetics and politics and the interaction of politically opposed intellectuals in this period. For it is precisely through the redemptive critique of a given artwork or aesthetic position that the interlocking utopian and ideological elements (e.g., the political valences of the aesthetic object) are revealed. The aesthetic object or position, in other words, is shown to be political in its theological or messianic, utopian impulse that is indissoluble from its function as ideology. In this vein, thinkers associated with the Frankfurt School and the tradition of Critical Theory, namely, Benjamin, Adorno and Bloch, engage in a redemptive mode of critique, harnessing a utopian interpretive optic, in order to uplift and evoke the messianic-utopian kernel of their chief object of criticism whether this object is a work of art of an aesthetic, philosophical or political position. This interpretive, philosophical mode of redemptive criticism is not simply a way of relating aesthetics and politics; it is a paradigm that highlights the theological, synthesizing utopian component, the utopian impulse to transform the world into a new one—the divine creative capacity to transform reality—as the central link of the ostensibly opposed realms of the political and the aesthetic. Rather than conceiving of the relationship of politically opposed intellectuals in early twentieth-century German thought reductively as a relationship defined by antagonism and shared antipathy, an analysis that attends to redemptive-critical paradigm illustrates the intertwinement and reciprocal interaction of these often-opposed intellectuals and their aesthetico-political ideas. Not only is the relationship of leading intellectuals in this period characterized by a reciprocal interaction and shared set of concerns; it is colored by the process of redemptive criticism, whereby the artworks and aesthetico-political ideas under investigation are dialectically dismantled, their utopian-messianic content uplifted, to show their impulse for a

new, redeemed world. This intellectual-historical framing of the debates and discourses on aesthetics and politics in this era in turn complicates and undermines the bifurcation of right and left-wing camps and thinkers that is pronounced in influential treatments of Weimar thought and the development of Critical Theory and the Frankfurt School. Rather than approaching the discourse on aesthetics and politics from a reductive standpoint that bifurcates thinkers into opposing political camps, attending to the redemptive, utopian valences of this interactive exchange creates a more comprehensive, balanced picture of this period and the nature of the debates that shaped it.

The mode of redemptive critique that characterizes Benjamin's and Adorno's engagement not only with aesthetic forms but with other thinkers and ideas is highlighted in their interaction with Stefan George and what became known as the *Georgekreis* (George circle). George, a German poet-prophet often associated with symbolism and romanticism, was the messianic, charismatic leader of the *Georgekreis*, an eclectic group of other poets and leading German-speaking intellectuals, including Max Kommerell, Friedrich Gundolf, Friedrich Wolters, Ernst Kantorowicz, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Ludwig Klages, Karl Wolfskehl, the Stauffenberg brothers (Claus Stauffenberg became famous for his role in a failed plot to assassinate Hitler), and Alfred Schuler. Inspired by the life-affirming philosophy of Nietzsche, George and his elite group of dedicated disciples, many of whom worshiped 'the Master' (George), sought a 'revolutionary', spiritual transformation of society, guided and incited by George's prophetic poetry. Occupying "a central place in Germany's intellectual landscape," as Martin Ruehl maintains, George and his circle conceived of themselves through their shared idea of a 'secret Germany' ("*Geheimes Deutschland*"), representing "a nucleus or avant-garde that would bring about their country's cultural and intellectual rebirth in its moment of greatest need."¹ Self-positioning his own poetry, and by extension, the aesthetic, spiritual, and social transformation of Germany—and the world more broadly—that he and his followers sought, as "revolutionary,"² George explicitly emphasized the political dimension of his aestheticist poetic vision, while nonetheless leaving the latter open to a variety of political interpretations and outcomes, from

¹ Ruehl, "Aesthetic Fundamentalism in Weimar Poetry: Stefan George and his Circle," 243.

² Robert E. Norton, *Secret Germany: Stefan George and his Circle* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 108-109; Ruehl, "Aesthetic Fundamentalism in Weimar Poetry," 244; Ernst Robert Curtius, "Stefan George im Gespräch," *Kritische Essays zur europäischen Literatur* (Bern: A. Francke, 1950), 153, 157.

‘conservative revolution’ and Nazism to socialist revolution and liberalism.³ Despite George’s aversion to academic culture and the scientific approach to the humanities that was prevalent in the Germany university at the time, his poetry and the movement he led had a profound impact not only in the realm of culture and aesthetics, but on the academic world as well, as Ruehl demonstrates in his work on the George circle.⁴ This impact is made explicit in Max Weber’s sociological theory of ‘charismatic leadership’, the latter of which was inspired by George, as Weber’s biographer, Joachim Radkau argues.⁵ The importance of the *Georgekreis* not only for Weimar thought and culture, but for the first half of the twentieth century in Germany and Europe more broadly is emphasized in Norton’s unparalleled work on George and his ‘school’ (as Benjamin, Adorno referred to it), as well as, other key works addressing the history of the *Georgekreis*.⁶ As Norton contends in his biography, “Stefan George and the group of people he gathered around himself - what later became formally known as his ‘circle’ - represent arguably the most important cultural phenomenon in Germany during the first three decades of the twentieth century.”⁷ Norton writes this as part of a broader argument that runs through his work, namely, that “George and his circle significantly contributed to the creation of a psychological, cultural, and even political climate that made the events in Germany leading up to and following 1933 not just imaginable, but also feasible.”⁸ However, as Ruehl demonstrates in his work on George, clearly discerning a concrete political program in George and the *Georgekreis* is complicated by the political ambivalences not only of George and his poetry but also of his disciples and their often conflicting interpretations of his vision.⁹ As Ruehl’s work makes

³ For more on the complexity and ambivalence of the politics of George and the *Georgekreis* see Ruehl, “Aesthetic Fundamentalism in Weimar Poetry,” 240-273.

⁴ Ruehl, “Aesthetic Fundamentalism in Weimar Poetry,” 240-245.

⁵ George’s role as a divine, messianic poet-king, leading his circle, aiming to transform the world by ushering a ‘new kingdom’, influenced Max Weber’s theory of ‘charismatic leadership’ as Weber’s biographer, Joachim Radkau, argues in his recent work. Stressing the central significance of George’s ‘charismatic leadership’ on Weber’s sociological theory, Radkau writes that “charisma alone cannot ground a system of rule. The same goes for Stefan George and his circle, in relation to which Weber first used the concept of charisma.” See Joachim Radkau, *Max Weber: A Biography* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 394-396, 295; see also, Ruehl, “Aesthetic Fundamentalism in Weimar Poetry,” 242.

⁶ See Norton, *Secret Germany*, ix-xvii; see also, *A Poet’s Reich: Politics and Culture in the George Circle*, ed. Melissa S. Lane and Martin A. Ruehl (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2011); Ruehl, “Aesthetic Fundamentalism in Weimar Poetry,” 240-273; Peter Gay, *Weimar Thought: The Insider as Outsider* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2001), 46-69; Ernst Osterkamp, “The Legacy of the George Circle,” in *Exile, Science and Bildung: The Contested Legacies of German Émigré Intellectuals*, ed. D. Kettler, G. Lauer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 19-27.

⁷ Norton, *Secret Germany*, x.

⁸ *Ibid.*, xvi.

⁹ Ruehl, “Aesthetic Fundamentalism in Weimar Poetry,” 240-272.

evident, the extraordinary influence of George and his circle in Germany cannot simply be “reduced” as another instance of ‘conservative revolution’ that aided in the rise of Nazism.¹⁰ On the contrary, the impact of George and his following extended to—and is therefore key to understanding—the Frankfurt School and the Western Marxist debates on the political function and possibilities of art, as evidenced by the wide array of essays and letters on or relating to George and members of his circle (e.g., Kommerell, Hofmannsthal, Klages, and Gundolf) that Benjamin and Adorno wrote throughout their engagements with literature and aesthetics more broadly.¹¹ Situating George and his circle as important figures in the debates on aesthetics and politics historically and intellectually contextualizes these debates in the interwar years while at the same time situating the *Georgekreis* and its key members as important interlocutors whose aesthetico-political ideas were critiqued and developed by the critical theorists. This chapter therefore illustrates George’s important role and contribution to the Weimar debates on aesthetics and politics, focusing on the ways in which his mythic-political articulation of poetry acted as an intellectual springboard and historical context for these debates and the development of Critical Theory.

Despite the inordinate impact the *Georgekreis* had on Weimar aesthetics and politics, on one hand, and Adorno’s and Benjamin’s consistent engagement with George or his disciples, on the other hand, George, his school and their relationship with the critical theorists remain relatively understudied.¹² The aesthetico-political debates, as framed by Jameson and Lunn, create a dichotomy of right and left-wing intellectuals that unnecessarily cuts these debates from their vital connection with and immersion in a wider milieu of German-speaking intellectuals who were theorizing, debating and reshaping the meaning and role of art,

¹⁰ Ibid., 244.

¹¹ See discussion below for more on Benjamin’s and Adorno’s essays and letters on George and the *Georgekreis*, as well as the impact the latter had on the debates on aesthetics and politics.

¹² In Jameson’s pioneering work on Marxist theories of literature, George and his circle are conspicuously absent, in spite of Adorno and Benjamin having written numerous literary-aesthetic essays exclusively on George. In contradistinction to his treatment of George, or lack thereof, the French symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé, whose works influenced George and thinkers associated with the Frankfurt School, is cited in an epigraph at the beginning of Jameson’s text and later at various points throughout the book. This elision of George and his circle is reflective of the relative obscurity of George and the *Georgekreis* in the contemporary Anglophone world. Some more recent works, such as Lane and Ruehl’s *A Poet’s Reich*, Norton’s *Secret Germany*, and Gay’s *Weimar Culture*, are beginning to draw much-needed attention to George’s relevance. See Adorno et al., *Aesthetics and Politics*, 105, 113, 192, and n. 169; Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, front page, 135-36, 314; see also Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School*, 67, 110, 197-200, 201, 207, 327, 521, 524; Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism*, 92, 175, 248, 270; Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination*, 9, 23, 94-95, 178, 204.

specifically in relation to politics and society. On the other hand, to his credit, in his work Wiggershaus focuses on Benjamin's and Adorno's engagement with Klages.¹³ However, despite his analysis of Klages and the Frankfurt School, Wiggershaus only mentions George and his circle briefly, without exploring their relationship to the Frankfurt school.¹⁴ At the same time, however, a number of scholars have begun to illuminate the relationship of Benjamin, Adorno (and other individuals linked to the Frankfurt School) with the George circle through a treatment of Klages, a member of the *Georgekreis* who was also, importantly, a key figure in the Munich Cosmic Circle, an occult group of poets, intellectuals and wizards that formed around Klages, Schuler, Wolfskehl and George.¹⁵ In their innovative essay, Georg Stauth and Bryan Turner illustrate the important, though often overlooked role Klages, and by extension, the George circle, played in the development of Critical Theory.¹⁶ Signaling the relevance of their work to understanding Critical Theory, they argue that their "commentary on Klages thereby opens the way to a more complex view of the various strands of Critical Theory, including romanticism and the symbolist poetry of Stefan George."¹⁷ In this regard, and likewise, in their account of Benjamin's engagement with Schuler and Klages, Stauth and Turner begin to uncover the complex interaction between critical theorists and the *Georgekreis*.¹⁸ In focusing on Benjamin's redemptive interaction with and critique of George, this chapter builds upon Stauth's and Turner's important account of this relationship and the critical role Klages' ideas played in the development of Critical Theory. Stauth and Turner argue that Adorno and Benjamin were deeply indebted—despite their own attempts to hide or ignore this influence—to Nietzsche and the vitalist tradition of *Lebensphilosophie* that Klages promoted and further developed in his works.¹⁹ Maintaining that the influence that links critical theorists with "Nietzsche via the cosmological thought of Klages" has been "either ignored or systematically denied by members

¹³ Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School*, 197-200, 201, 207, 327.

¹⁴ See Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School*, 67, 110, 197-200, 201, 207, 327, 521, 524. Similarly, in *The Dialectical Imagination*, Jay makes fleeting references to George and Klages. See Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination*, 9, 23, 94-95, 178, 204.

¹⁵ Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment*, 210-211. For more on the Munich Cosmic Circle's reciprocal engagement and overlap with George and his circle, see Norton, *Secret Germany: Stefan George and his Circle* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 292-310. For more on the complex relationship between the Cosmic Circle and the Frankfurt School, and Critical Theory more broadly, see Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment*, 209-236.

¹⁶ Georg Stauth and Bryan S. Turner, "Ludwig Klages (1872– 1956) and the Origins of Critical Theory," *Theory, Culture & Society*, 9 (1992), 45– 63.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 56-59.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

of the Frankfurt School (or more generally Critical Theory),” Stauth and Turner make explicit their position that Adorno and Benjamin, and by extension the ‘Critical Theory of society’ they developed, was in effect “closer to the tradition of Nietzsche and *Lebensphilosophie* in their cultural critique than to Marxism (of whatever variety).”²⁰ Disregarding Adorno’s and other critical theorists’ critiques of existentialism and other schools of thought linked with *Lebensphilosophie* as attempts at ‘systematically’ denying the influence of Klages and the vitalist critique of science, enlightenment and reason exerted on their own critical theories, Stauth and Turner argue that “Weber and Nietzsche were the theorists who provided the basic paradigm for their study of enlightenment, and...the link between Adorno and Nietzsche was in fact the figure of Klages. It was Klages who had in *Der Geist als Widersacher der Seele* (“Mind as the Adversary of the Soul”) outlined in a systematic and coherent form the whole contradiction between life-world and the instrumental rationalism of the civilizational process.”²¹ Developing Stauth and Turner’s account of Klages’ role in the development of the critique of instrumental reason and the Critical Theory more broadly, this chapter points to the chief differences between the critical theorists’ critique and those of Klages and Nietzsche. Focusing on Adorno’s critiques of Nietzsche and *Lebensphilosophie*, demonstrates the fundamental ways in which Adorno and Critical Theory diverge from the tradition of *Lebensphilosophie*, namely, in their dialectical critiques of ontology, identity and philosophies that are not critically oriented toward society and aimed at the abolition of injustice (i.e., Klages’ philosophy, which included elements of anti-Semitism).²² Put differently, Adorno (and Critical Theory more broadly) fundamentally diverges from Klages and *Lebensphilosophie* methodologically (namely, in terms of its dialectical method, influenced by Kant, Hegel and Marx) and with respect to the epistemic and normative foundations (and implications) of his critique. Critical Theory takes aim at the very ontological notions of authentic life or being, as well as, the rejection of reason that constitute key dimensions of *Lebensphilosophie* (as articulated by Klages). The critical theorists’ dialectical account of enlightenment, like their critique of *Lebensphilosophie*, effectively sought to redeem

²⁰ Ibid., 57, 45.

²¹ Ibid., 57-58, 55.

²² In his biography of Klages, Nitzan Lebovic demonstrates the extent of Klages’ anti-Semitism and its overlap and connection with what he refers to as “Nazi biopolitics.” See Nitzan Lebovic, *The Philosophy of Life and Death: Ludwig Klages and the Rise of a Nazi Biopolitics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 1-52. For more on Klages’ anti-Semitism see Georg Stauth and Bryan S. Turner, “Ludwig Klages (1872– 1956) and the Origins of Critical Theory,” *Theory, Culture & Society*, 9 (1992), 57-60; See also, Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment*, 224-225.

its emancipatory function in the course of negating its ideological, oppressive moments. Rather than rejecting reason and enlightenment, the critical theorists retained the emancipatory core of enlightenment, progress and reason as a crucial part of their thinking—the latter of which emphasizes their divergence from Klages and the *Lebensphilosophie* he represented.²³

Works specifically addressing the intellectual biographies of Benjamin and Adorno—rather than the Frankfurt School or Critical Theory writ large—have pointed to the unmistakable impact of George and his circle on their thinking.²⁴ Drawing on these important studies on the intellectual relationship of George and his circle with Critical Theory (namely, as developed by the members of the Frankfurt School), this study aims to illustrate the complex history of this relationship. In doing so, I draw on a number of important intellectual histories, notably, Jason Josephson-Storm's *The Myth of Disenchantment*, which illuminates the complex relationship between Klages, the Cosmic Circle, the *Georgekreis* and the Frankfurt School within the larger context of early Twentieth Century German philosophy and culture.²⁵ In addition to this, I draw

²³ As mentioned above, in his account of the Frankfurt School, Wiggershaus makes numerous references to Klages' influence without sufficiently addressing the role of George and his circle more broadly. See Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School*, 67, 110, 197-200, 201, 207, 327, 521, 524. For studies that address Klages relationship with Benjamin see John J. McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); see also Lebovic, "The Beauty and Terror of Lebensphilosophie: Ludwig Klages, Walter Benjamin, and Alfred Baeumler," *South Central Review* 23, no. 1 (2006), 23-39; — *The Philosophy of Life and Death*; Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Irving Wohlfarth, "Walter Benjamin and the Idea of a Technological Eros: The Way to the Planetarium," *Benjamin-Studien* 1, no. 1 (May 2002), 65-109; Miriam Bratu Hansen, "Benjamin's Aura," *Critical Inquiry*, 34, no. 2 (Winter 2008), 336-375; Miriam Bratu Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Julian Roberts, *Walter Benjamin* (London: Macmillan, 1982).

²⁴ For works treating Benjamin's relationship with George and his school, see Julian Roberts, *Walter Benjamin* (London: Macmillan, 1982); also see, Irving Wohlfarth, "Walter Benjamin's 'Secret Germany'" in *Exile, Science and Bildung: The Contested Legacies of German Émigré Intellectuals*, ed. D. Kettler, G. Lauer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 27-45; Elke Siegel, "Contested Legacies of "German" Friendship: Max Kommerell's *The Poet as Leader in German Classicism*," *Telos* 176 (Fall 2016), 77-101; Manfred Durzak, "Walter Benjamin und die Literaturwissenschaft." *Monatshefte*, 58, No. 3 (Fall, 1966), 217-231; Ned Lukacher, "Walter Benjamin's Chthonian Revolution." *Boundary 2*, 11, No. 1/2, *Engagements: Postmodernism, Marxism, Politics* (Autumn, 1982 - Winter, 1983), 41-57; Daniel Weidner, "Geschlagener Prophet und tröstender Spielmann: Stefan George, gelesen von Walter Benjamin." *Zeitschrift für Germanistik*, Neue Folge, 8, No. 1 (1998), 145-152; Eckart Goebel and Jerome Bolton, "Critique and Sacrifice: Benjamin-Kommerell," *The German Quarterly*, 87, No. 2 (Spring 2014), 151-170; David Midgley, "The Absentee Prophet: Public Perceptions of George's Poetry in the Weimar Period," in *A Poet's Reich: Politics and Culture in the George Circle*, ed. Melissa S. Lane and Martin A. Ruehl (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2011), 117-129. For studies analyzing the relationship of Adorno and George (and his circle), see Ulrich Plass, *Language and History in Adorno's Notes to Literature*, (New York: Routledge, 2007), 89-114; see Paul Fleming, "The Secret Adorno," *Qui Parle*, 15, No. 1 (Fall / Winter 2004), 97-114; Russell A. Berman, "Cultural Studies and the Canon: Some Thoughts on Stefan George," *Profession* (1999), 168-179; Peter Uwe Hohendahl, "A Precarious Balance: Adorno and German Classicism," *New Literary History*, 42, No. 1 (Winter 2011), 31-52.

²⁵ Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment*, 209-239,

on Joan Braune, whose work delves into the relationship between George and his circle and Marxist philosophers and critical theorists, such as Marcuse, Adorno, Benjamin, and Bloch, in order to contextualize and situate the development of Fromm's revolutionary, 'prophetic messianism'.²⁶ Braune argues that the George "circle emerged out of the Cosmic Circle, founded at the turn of the century by Klages in the Bohemian borough of Schwabing in Munich."²⁷ However, the relationship between the *Georgekreis* and the Cosmic Circle is far more complex than a linear narrative of their development entails, insofar as these two circles overlapped significantly, on one hand, while, on the other hand, constituting a politically, ideologically and ethno-religiously diverse group (i.e., of Jews, Germans, pagans, atheists and Christians) of artists and intellectuals who were distinct thinkers in their own right. In his account, Josephson-Storm presents a more nuanced account of the two circles: "In his own day, George was a significant cultural force, developing a tight inner circle of followers who revered him as a master and even as a prophet. This George Circle was drawn from the German academic and artistic elite, including the historian Friedrich Wilhelm Wolters, the wealthy industrialist Robert Boehring, and influential German- Jewish scholars and artists such as Friedrich Gundolf, Karl Wolfskehl, and Ernst Kantorowicz. For a time, George was a member of Klages's Cosmic Circle, or perhaps more accurately, their circles merged for a while until struggles over vision and leadership ultimately caused them to separate."²⁸ Because of the complexity of the interaction between these two circles and their members (many of whom were members of both circles), it is misleading to present Klages reductively as a representative who stands in for the *Georgekreis*. As Norton shows, Klages always maintained his intellectual independence from George, distancing himself the cultish and reverent dimensions of the *Georgekreis*.²⁹ Klages never referred to George as the 'Master' (as most of his devoted disciples did), despite writing "the first book-length appreciation of George's poetry," published in 1902, by Georg Bondi, the

²⁶ Although Braune's study of the *Georgekreis* in relation to Critical Theory constitutes an important contribution to the field, it makes a number of historical errors concerning the development of the *Georgekreis* and the politics associated with the circle. Chief among these errors, after reductively and incorrectly framing the members of the Cosmic Circle as 'proto-fascists'—²⁶ while failing to account for the fact that one of its key members, Karl Wolfskehl, was not only Jewish but was a devoted Zionist who opposed Nazism and Italian fascism. Joan Braune, *Erich Fromm's Revolutionary Hope: Prophetic Messianism as a Critical Theory of the Future* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2014), 93-111.

²⁷ Joan Braune, *Erich Fromm's Revolutionary Hope: Prophetic Messianism as a Critical Theory of the Future* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2014), 93.

²⁸ Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment*, 290.

²⁹ Norton, *Secret Germany*, 287.

principal publisher of writings for the *Georgekreis*.³⁰ Referring to himself as author of this celebratory book on George, in a letter to Gundolf, Klages concedes that “In my book I was only the VOICE and speaking tongue of an ENTIRE CIRCLE, and any knowledge that speaks from my pages was...born of the collision of spirits, and if I deserve any merit, then it is this: to have lent it EXPRESSION. Above all, however, my book sought to erect a monument to GEORGE that was WORTHY of him.”³¹ Although this gives the impression that Klages viewed himself as a mouthpiece or representative of the *Georgekreis*, Norton stresses that Klages was interested in George primarily as a poet and representative of a transformative, erotogenic cosmological project, rather than as an individual and charismatic leader of the circle, as Klages himself writes (referencing himself in the third-person) in an advertisement for the book, published in *Die Zukunft*: “In this book he was more concerned with the higher forces working through the poet than with the person of the poet George.”³² “Klages’ uneasy relationship with George,” as Norton frames it, therefore demonstrates the difficulties in presenting Klages as a representative of the *Georgekreis*, specifically as the latter relates to Critical Theory.³³ On the contrary, Klages’ philosophy represents a unique development in *Lebensphilosophie* and the reception of Nietzsche in early Twentieth Century German thought.

This study therefore builds upon the important scholarship relating Klages and the Frankfurt school, or its respective members, by investigating the interaction of the critical theorists and the *Georgekreis*. As such, although the relationship with Klages is of great importance to understanding the development of Critical Theory, his impact on the latter—especially with reference to the debates on aesthetics and politics—pales in comparison to that of George and his circle, taken as a whole. This is evidenced by the disparity between references to Klages and those to George and the ‘George school’ in the works of the critical theorists, in particular, Benjamin and Adorno.³⁴ It was George and his circle—and not simply Klages, despite his affiliation with the latter—who was the subject of numerous essays and letters by Adorno and Benjamin. Highlighting the role of George and his following in the development of Critical

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ludwig Klages, letter to Friedrich Gundolf, cited in Norton, *Secret Germany*, 291.

³² Ludwig Klages, cited in Norton, *Secret Germany*, 291.

³³ Ibid., 287.

³⁴ See discussion below. Adorno and Benjamin only make a few fleeting explicit references to Klages in their works, whereas George, a much more significant figure in Weimar thought and culture, is explicitly referenced throughout their writings on art and literature.

Theory and the debates on aesthetics and politics, furthermore, more adequately reflects the intellectual-historical milieu in which these developments occurred, namely, a context in which George and the *Georgekreis* exerted an unparalleled influence on the intellectual and artistic life not only of Weimar Germany but of the Europe in the first half of the twentieth century. In this regard, this chapter aims to uncover the reciprocal interaction of critical theorists and the *Georgekreis* while also situating George and his circle as instrumental to the debates on aesthetics and politics—and thus, as key interlocutors—in light of their ‘revolutionary’ conception of the power of art and their poetic response to the critiques of modernity, reason and scientific positivism. Rather than focusing on how those associated with the Frankfurt School engaged with and incorporated the vitalist critiques of modernity, enlightenment, science and reason into their own thinking, this chapter investigates the interaction of the critical theorists with the *Georgekreis*.

Revealing the unprecedented intellectual and cultural significance of George for art, politics and philosophy in this period, Benjamin’s early fascination with George and his circle proffers a vivid picture of the extent of George’s impact on the development of Critical Theory and its founding theorists. Reflecting on a journey he made to Heidelberg—the center of ‘secret Germany’ at the time—for the sole purpose of seeing George, Benjamin writes: “I certainly saw him, even heard him. It was not too much for me to wait for hours on a bench reading in the castle park in Heidelberg in expectation of the moment when he was supposed to walk by.”³⁵ As Ruehl and Melissa Lane argue in their essay on the *Georgekreis*, the young Benjamin’s attraction to George and his circle was part of a broader cultural phenomenon in which George enthralled a wide array of German artists and intellectuals across the political spectrum.³⁶ “Mesmerized by their unique mixture of lyrical expressiveness and formal stylization,” Ruehl and Lane write, “the young Theodor Adorno set George’s poems to music. So did Arnold Schönberg and Anton Webern.”³⁷ It is significant that it was not only Adorno, but also his vital musical and aesthetic influences, Arnold Schönberg and his student, Anton Webern—both of whom, along with Alban Berg, Adorno’s mentor, were central figures in the Second Viennese School (*Zweite Wiener Schule*) that Adorno was a part of prior to his official involvement with the Frankfurt School’s

³⁵ Walter Benjamin, cited in Norton, *Secret Germany*, 475.

³⁶ Melissa S. Lane and Martin A. Ruehl, introduction to *A Poet’s Reich: Politics and Culture in the George Circle*, 1-24.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

Institute of Social Research—found George’s poetry to be a suitable counterpart to their innovative music. In this sense, Adorno’s engagement with George (and likewise, that of Webern and Schönberg, the latter of whom set one of his first series of atonal compositions, his *Georgelieder of the Book of the Hanging Gardens*, to the poetry of George) began with and continued to develop out of the peculiar aesthetic mode and orientation of George’s poetry.

As Adorno’s writings on George illustrate, it was not simply the critique and diagnosis of modernity and enlightenment that Adorno and other critical theorists shared with the *Georgekreis* and other intellectual currents spanning the political spectrum in Weimar Germany.³⁸ On the contrary, Adorno, Benjamin, Lukács and Bloch were all deeply engaged with the particular aesthetic modes and impulses that George and his followers represented. In this engagement, moreover, these theorists, in particular, Adorno and Benjamin, redemptively critiqued and thereby incorporated key ideas represented by the *Georgekreis* into their own aesthetic and political thought. For the *Georgekreis* embodied perhaps the most influential attempt (in the context of the Weimar Republic) to respond to modernity, alienation and the mechanized rationality of a soulless, disenchanted world by transforming world through art. George was to this effect revealing the power of art not only in terms of its capacity to transform society politically, but with regards to its ability to resist the status quo through an emphasis on the nonidentity and incommensurability of language and art. This demonstrates how Critical Theory’s idea that language must be employed in resisting positivism and the logic of identity is prefigured in the poetry and thought of George, just as their aesthetic reflection on the emancipatory and utopian possibilities of art draw on George and his school.

II. *Heidegger, George and the Politics of Poetry*

Deciphering the political meaning of George’s poetry and its impact on aesthetic-political debates in the Weimar period and its aftermath requires a close interpretation not only of his poetry, but of its intellectual-historical context and reception by contemporaries. Heidegger’s writings on language, art, and poetry, many of which include valuable assessments of George’s poetry, provide an essential reference point and theoretical framework for understanding the role and nature of the political in George’s work and that of his circle. Furthermore, in uncovering the fundamentally political, utopian impulses of high modernist poetry such as George’s, Heidegger

³⁸ For more on Adorno’s engagement with George, see chapter four.

highlights the ways that the *Georgekreis* acted as a springboard not only for the debates on aesthetics and politics in the early twentieth century, but for the development of Critical Theory and the Frankfurt School's redemptive-utopian conception of the social power of art. To this effect, employing Heidegger's writings on the politics of poetry as an interpretive and historical lens for George's work unfolds the complex, redemptive interaction both of the ideological capacities and utopian impulses of George's poetry, and of intellectuals associated with the Frankfurt School and the *Georgekreis*. Heidegger's unique political conception of the politics of poetry, particularly, in the German poetic tradition of Hölderlin and George, reveals the dialectical, interlocking ideological and utopian valances of aesthetics and the debates on its relation to politics in Weimar Germany. Rather than constituting one political pole in a polarized intellectual-historical milieu, George's works and likewise Heidegger's political conception of poetry demonstrate the difficulties in assigning a concrete political identity to an aesthetic object such as George's poetry. On the contrary, Heidegger's insights into the politics of poetry evince the underlying, shared aesthetic and utopian impulses of George and those on the left, particularly, Benjamin, Bloch and Brecht.

As Wolin argues in his assessment of the relation between Heidegger's philosophy and Nazism, Heidegger's conception of self-assertion, most infamously articulated in his rectoral address of 1933, is inextricable from the broader political philosophical theme of decisionism.³⁹ Bracketing the ensuing question of the relation of Heidegger's 'decisionism' and that of his contemporary and interlocutor, Carl Schmitt, this analysis instead focuses on Heidegger's writings on self-assertion and decisionism, specifically in the context of his conception of art, in efforts of unraveling the relation of art and politics not only in Heidegger's thinking, but in the concrete historical milieus of Weimar Germany and the Third Reich. That Heidegger's decisionist conception of self-assertion is bound indissolubly to art on account of the latter's relation to poetry is made clear in his linkage of poetry and self-assertion via the Nietzschean notion of the will to power in his Nietzsche lectures of the mid-late 1930s. At the same time, however, understanding Heidegger's poeticized conception of self-assertion, as a figuration that displays the interrelatedness of art and politics in Heidegger's thought, demands placing his

³⁹ See Wolin, *The Politics of Being*, 29-32; see also, Thomas Crombez, "The Sovereign Disappears in the Voting Booth': Carl Schmitt and Martin Heidegger on Sovereignty and (Perhaps) Governmentality," in *Anti-Democratic Thought*, ed. E. Kofnel (Exeter: Imprint-Academic, 2008), 101-121.

Nietzsche lectures and rectoral address in conversation with his essays aimed primarily at the concepts of art and poetry, “Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry,” and “The Origin of the Work of Art”—both of which were conceived in the late 1930s and published after the war. As a close reading of these essays illustrates, the question of how art—which in Heidegger’s case is always already, in essence, poetry—relates to politics in general, and Heidegger’s Nazi involvement, in particular, cannot be resolved unequivocally. Rather, carefully attending to the nuances of these texts opens up their polysemous nature, thereby complicating straightforward accounts of Heidegger’s thinking on art as either fascistic, nationalist, apolitical or anti-political. This is not to say that Heidegger’s texts on art and poetry are necessarily evasive of the question of the relationship with politics; on the contrary, these works highlight the particularly nationalistic political, and thus, historical, functions and possibilities of art—and conversely the poetic character of politics and the state—while simultaneously also modulating such political roles of art in pressing for its autonomy as that which unconceals Being. Even within the apparently autonomous conception of art as disclosing Being, however, Heidegger is unable to fully grant art its autonomy to the extent that the disclosure of Being effectively endows art with a philosophical—which, given the imbrication of politics and philosophy in Heidegger’s thinking, also implies the political—end.

In Lacoue-Labarthe’s *Heidegger and the Politics of Poetry*, the sequel to *Heidegger, Art and Politics: The Fiction of the Political*, the question of the relation of Heidegger’s philosophy and politics is distilled in the author’s illuminating readings of Heidegger’s works on Hölderlin. Moving beyond his previous work, which presents Heidegger’s ‘aestheticization of politics’ more as a question than a philosophical assertion, in this later text Lacoue-Labarthe engenders a more critical tone, arguing that it is particularly in Heidegger’s withdrawal from and disavowal of National Socialism that Heidegger ultimately maps out the latter’s relation to his philosophy of poetry, making him not merely a Nazi, but “*the* thinker of National Socialism.”⁴⁰ Drawing on Heidegger’s *Introduction to Metaphysics*, wherein mythology is privileged as the means of thinking “primal history,” Lacoue-Labarthe argues that the elevated role of myth in Heidegger’s thought, which echoes central currents in Romanticism, further reflects the fascist

⁴⁰ Phillippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Heidegger and the Politics of Poetry*, trans. Jeff Fort (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 83.

aestheticization of politics, that is, the aesthetic realization of the state as a work of art.⁴¹ For Lacoue-Labarthe, Heidegger's mythologization of poetry, and by extension, philosophy, link these two categories decisively to fascist politics insofar as the latter is itself founded upon a mythopoetic conception of the nation as well as the State. Without delving into the intricate specificities of Lacoue-Labarthe's claims, what is essential to draw from his readings is the notion that the relation of Heidegger's philosophy and fascist politics is pronounced, perhaps most compellingly, in his writings on Hölderlin, wherein philosophy and politics are grounded in poetry as myth. In a similar vein, in his exposé of Heidegger's politics, *The Politics of Being*, Wolin dedicates a significant portion of his analysis to Heidegger's writings on art and poetry to illustrate how Heidegger's conceptions of the latter were intimately interwoven with his politics. Referencing Heidegger's artwork essay, Wolin writes that for Heidegger: "In essence, the state becomes a giant work of art: like the work of art, it participates in the revelation of truth, yet on a much more grandiose and fundamental scale, since it is the *Gesamtkunstwerk* within which all the other sub-works enact their preassigned roles."⁴² Rooted in close textual and historical analyses, the aestheticized political conception of the state as a work of art, which Wolin and Lacoue-Labarthe cogently diagnose in Heidegger, shows how Heidegger's conception of politics is fascistic and mythopoetic, in that the state is founded by poetry as myth. To redemptively critique Heidegger entails attending to the imbrication of antithetically opposed interpretations that grow out of the texts of Heidegger's *oeuvre*. As Jürgen Habermas writes in the conclusion to his response to Heidegger's post-war publication of *Introduction to Metaphysics*, "It appears to be time to think with Heidegger against Heidegger."⁴³

Heidegger's grounding of history and politics in poetry, made explicit in his essay, "Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry," opens up a mode of conceiving poetry, and by extension, art, that shows both the 'politics of poetry' and the ways in which the political is entwined with the aesthetic—not simply in Heidegger's philosophy, but in the context of the Third Reich and the Weimar period. Instead of reading Heidegger on art and poetry in efforts of illustrating the extent to which the linkage of his philosophy to National Socialism extended further to poetry, the latter of which lies at the heart of Heidegger's philosophical project in its many guises, a

⁴¹ Ibid., 1-5.

⁴² See Wolin, *The Politics of Being*, 117.

⁴³ Jürgen Habermas, "On the Publication of the Lectures of 1935," in *The Heidegger Controversy*, ed. Richard Wolin (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 197.

historical, critically redemptive account demonstrates how Heidegger's writings on poetry were symptomatic of broader trends in German thought and culture, on one hand, while pointing to the redeemable content of these writings, on the other. At the outset of his essay on "Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry," Heidegger continues to draw out the link between poetry and decisionism that he articulates in his Nietzsche lectures on the will to power as art. Celebrating Hölderlin as a poet who most powerfully poeticizes what it means to think or write poetry, Heidegger explains that he has chosen Hölderlin as a poet because "For us Hölderlin is in a pre-eminent sense the poet of the poet. That is why he compels a decision."⁴⁴ Heidegger's usage of the term "decision" at this juncture in his essay is not yet political, as it remains open to being interpreted as Heidegger's decision to choose Hölderlin as a representative poet. However, as he develops his conception of poetry further, it becomes clear that the decision he invokes at the outset relates to the decisions made in the realm of politics and history. At first, drawing on Hölderlin's representation of poetry as "innocent," Heidegger positions poetry in apparent opposition to the "seriousness of decisions": "Unfettered, it invents its world of images and remains immersed in the realm of the imagined. This play thus avoids the seriousness of decisions, which always in one way or another create guilt."⁴⁵ Here, echoing Schmitt's criticism of 'Political Romanticism'—of the paradox of such a formulation—Heidegger voices the conception of poetry as ineffective and indecisive. In this disparaging conception, poetry is understood as lacking actuality, any concrete relation to the happenings of history, as something "completely harmless." Understood as such, poetry, Heidegger continues "has nothing about it of action, which grasps hold directly of the real and alters it."⁴⁶ Rather than being actual, in this regard, "Poetry is like a dream, and not reality; a playing with words, and not the seriousness of action."⁴⁷ This indecisive, effete conception of poetry, however, Heidegger points out, appears fundamentally at odds with Hölderlin's presentation (in a fragment from 1800) of language—which, for Heidegger, is essentially poetry—as the "most dangerous of possessions."⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Heidegger, "Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry," 295.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 295-6.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 296.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

In "The Origin of the Work of Art" Heidegger links poetry and language: "Language itself is poetry in the essential sense. But since language is that happening in which, each time, beings are first disclosed as beings, poesy, poetry in the narrower sense, is the most primordial form of poetry in the essential sense. Language is not poetry because it is ur-poesy; rather, poesy happens in language because the latter preserves the primordial essence of poetry." See,

Heidegger thus asks, “How can these two [positions] be reconciled?”⁴⁹ At stake in this question, is the problematic of the relation between poetry and politics, insofar as the notion of danger, as it is developed in this essay, connotes the creative and destructive drives, the decisions and events that constitute the historical realm of politics. Beginning to answer this question, Heidegger writes:

But what must man affirm? That he belongs to the earth. This relation of belonging to consists in the fact that man is heir and learner in all things. But all these things are in conflict. That which keeps things apart in opposition and thus at the same time binds them together, is called by Hölderlin "intimacy". The affirmation of belonging to this intimacy occurs through the creation of a world and its decline. The affirmation of human existence and hence its essential consummation occurs through freedom of decision. This freedom lays hold of the necessary and places itself in the bonds of a supreme obligation. This bearing witness of belonging to all that is existent, becomes actual as history. In order that history may be possible, language has been given to man.⁵⁰

Understanding the idea of affirmation as a kind of declaration, Heidegger goes on to tie the self-affirmation of human existence to “freedom of decision,” a freedom, however, that is inextricable from the necessary in that it “places itself in the bonds of supreme obligation.” For Heidegger, the affirmation of human existence, and with it the becoming “actual as history,” thus entails the linguistic-poetic act not only of declaration, but moreover, of deciding. This decisive role, and by extension, the historical-political capacity of language to “become actual as history,” however, remains unclear at this point.

Contrasting his own view with the ordinary conception of language as an instrument of communication and discursive relation, Heidegger endows language with the dual role of disclosing Being and conditioning the possibility of “standing in the openness of the existent.”⁵¹ On this account, language is historical and actual (in the political sense), insofar as “Only where there is language, is there world, ie [sic] the perpetually altering circuit of decision and production, of action and responsibility, but also of commotion and arbitrariness, of decay and confusion. Only where world predominates, is there history.”⁵² In this respect, Heidegger makes

Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950), 46.

⁴⁹ Martin Heidegger, “Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry,” trans. Douglas Scott. In Martin Heidegger, *Existence and Being* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1949), 296.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 297-8.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 299.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 300.

explicit his contention that language, the material out of which poetry is formed, is indeed historical and political to the extent that it discloses the possibility of being ‘in the openness’ of the world, the locus wherein human decisions, actions, responsibilities and commotions unfold. The question, for Heidegger, remains “How does language become actual?”⁵³ For at this point, Heidegger has only argued that language is actual and historical without in effect illustrating the ways in which it is. Again, to answer this question, Heidegger takes recourse to Hölderlin’s poetry, in particular, his unfinished poem, “*Versöhnender, der du nimmergeglaubt...*”: “Much has man learnt./ Many of the heavenly ones has he named,/ Since we have been a conversation/ And have been able to hear from one another.”⁵⁴ Interpreting this poem, Heidegger argues that “Both—existence as a single conversation and historical existence—are alike ancient, they belong together and are the same thing.”⁵⁵ In this sense, language becomes “actual as conversation,” the latter of which is understood not merely as the discourse of any number of individuals, but as human existence itself which is conceived here as a conversation.⁵⁶ For Heidegger, the “real conversation, which we ourselves are” essentially consists in “the naming of the gods, and in the transmutation of the world into word.”⁵⁷ Heidegger continues, linking the mythopoetic actualization of language (i.e., as ‘the naming of the gods’ and linguistic ‘transmutation of the world’) with the political themes of responsibility, destiny and decision:

But the gods can acquire a name only by addressing and, as it were, claiming us. The word which names the gods is always a response to such a claim. This response always springs from the responsibility of a destiny. It is in the process by which the gods bring our existence to language, that we enter the sphere of the decision as to whether we are to yield ourselves to the gods or withhold ourselves from them.⁵⁸

In line with Hölderlin’s philhellenism, Heidegger’s reference to ‘the gods’ here references the now ‘fugitive’ gods of the ancient world, the gods invoked both in Heidegger’s essay, “Why Poets?” and “The Origin of the Work of Art” (in the latter, the gods are invoked with reference to Greek tragedy and the battle of the old gods and the new). Likewise, the gods are evocative of the demythologizing, Western metaphysical ‘disenchantment of the world’ (*Die Entzauberung der Welt*) that Max Weber diagnosed as paradigmatic of modernity, in that Heidegger, in “The

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 302.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 303.

⁵⁸ Ibid.,

Age of the World Picture,” presents Christianity as bringing about the de-deification (*Entgötterung*) of the world, consigning the gods of the past to exile.⁵⁹ In this context, Heidegger’s linkage of “the responsibility of a destiny” and the historical “sphere of decision” are thus linked to language precisely through its mythic claiming of the “us” (the latter of which refers to the “us” of a *Volk*, as Heidegger will demonstrate in the latter part of this essay). Put differently, in linking the ‘naming of the gods’ with the decisive, historical-political role of language, and thus, of poetry, Heidegger in effect binds the latter indissolubly with myth—represented here by the figure of ‘the gods’—which ultimately functions as the ground of both, as Lacoue-Labarthe illustrates in his work on the politics of Heidegger’s conception of poetry. This naming of the gods is further bound up with naming “the essence of things” such that “things for the first time shine out, human existence is brought into a firm relation and given a basis.”⁶⁰ Here, Heidegger further imbues the mythopoetic essence of language with the capacity to ground human existence by giving it a foundation. Thus conceived, the “essence of poetry” is understood as “the establishing of being by means of the word.”⁶¹ Clarifying, in more precise terms, how poetry thereby establishes “being by means of the word,” Heidegger argues that poetry conditions the possibility for language itself insofar as “Poetry is the primitive language of a historical people.”⁶² Thus, precisely in its unfolding as the original, “primitive language of a historical people,” poetry establishes being in history.⁶³

Much like the figure of the *Führer* in Heidegger’s explicitly political writings and lectures, here the poet is given the world-historical task of being ‘the voice of the *Volk*’, of founding their existence through the interception and transmission of the signs of the gods. “The speech of the poet,” writes Heidegger, “is the intercepting of these signs [of the gods], in order to pass them on to his own people.”⁶⁴ Heidegger’s emphasis on presenting the people, the *Volk*, as “his [the poet’s] own,” establishing a sense of belonging and of possession, evinces the fundamental bond of the figure of the poet-leader (reminiscent of the circle around the German

⁵⁹ In this essay Heidegger writes: “The loss of the gods is the condition of indecision about God and the gods. Christianity is chiefly responsible for bringing it about. But loss of the gods is far from excluding religiosity. Rather, it is on its account that the relation to the gods is transformed into religious experience [*Erleben*]. When this happens, the gods have fled. The resulting void is filled by the historical and psychological investigation of myth.” See Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” 58.

⁶⁰ Heidegger, “Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry,” 305.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*, 307.

⁶³ As Heidegger writes a few passages earlier: “Poetry is the foundation which supports history...” See, *Ibid.*, 305.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 311.

poet, Stefan George, in particular, Max Kommerell and his conception of the poet as leader, as it is articulated in *The Poet as Leader in German Classicism*) and the *Volk*. In doing so, the poet presents the *Volk* with visions of “the not-yet-fulfilled,” which—in light of Bloch’s lucid illustration of the entwinement of the not-yet and the impulse for utopia—cannot be understood without reference to the utopian possibility of what is yet to come. In light of this synthesis of poet and *Volk*, Heidegger’s earlier references to destiny, responsibility and decision gesture at the political actualization of a historical people, of the utopian realization of their historical destiny. In Heidegger’s account, this realization, prefigured in the words of the poet, is not simply historical in the sense that it is possible within the present, but rather, it is historical insofar as “it determines a new time” and thereby “anticipates a historical time”: “It is that Hölderlin, in the act of establishing the essence of poetry, first determines a new time. It is the time of the gods that have fled and of the god that is coming. It is the time of need; because it lies under a double lack and a double Not: the No-more of the gods that have fled and the Not-yet of the god that is coming.”⁶⁵

Given the historical and political role of poetry in Heidegger’s account, then, how is it both dangerous and innocent? That poetry is dangerous is evident from its entwinement with the realm of the historical destiny and self-assertive transformation of a *Volk*, that is, the realm of political decisions, on one hand, and, of national mythopoesis, on the other. In other words, as Wolin and Lacoue-Labarthe contend, and moreover, as Heidegger’s text itself shows, the latter’s conception of poetry has evident ties to his coinciding involvement in National Socialism, both as an ideology and as a political movement. For Heidegger, then, the innocent character of poetry reveals itself in the dream-realm, in the endless openness of the poetic flight into unreality and semiotic abstraction. For it is precisely in this dream-realm, the repository of mythic visions of the not-yet, that ineffectuality and un-actuality of poetry comes to the fore. Capturing the simultaneously dangerous and innocent—the concretely political and abstractly ineffectual—character of poetry, Heidegger writes: “Poetry rouses the appearance of the unreal and of dream

⁶⁵ Ibid., 313. Despite its ambiguity and openness to the manifold possibilities of the future, the poet’s prefigurative anticipation of “the Not-yet of the god that is coming” alludes to the Heidegger’s interpretation of Nietzsche’s “death of God” as the death of the old gods, the old values, and the birth of the new. However, rather than establishing a concrete interpretation of Heidegger’s implicitly messianic-utopian formulation of the not-yet of the god to come, the reference to his interpretation of Nietzsche’s “death of God” only presents one of the many interpretive possibilities furnished by this text.

in the face of the palpable and clamorous reality, in which we believe ourselves at home. And yet in just the reverse manner, what the poet says and undertakes to be, is the real.”⁶⁶ Echoing Marx’s conception of religion as the comforting ‘soul of soulless conditions’ and as flowers adorning the chains of capital, Heidegger positions poetry as a soothing antidote to the “palpable and clamorous reality,” that works through arousing the mythic images of unreality and dream-realm, in other words, of the possibilities of the that which is not-yet. At the same time, however, Heidegger also presents the poet’s expressions and undertakings as “the real,” given the concrete imbrication of poetry and the historical becoming of a people. Despite attempting to seamlessly combine these two qualities of poetry into one conception of the essence of poetry, at the conclusion of his essay, the tension between the two remains, giving way to the interpretive debates on the relation of Heidegger’s philosophy and National Socialism in contemporary scholarship. Whereas thinkers such as Jacques Derrida have emphasized the polysemous, indefinite and innocent characteristics of Heidegger’s thinking on poetry, Wolin (and to a lesser extent Lacoue-Labarthe) focuses on the dangerous, concrete political aspects that bind Heidegger’s philosophical work with his political engagement with National Socialism. To this effect, that Heidegger aestheticizes politics in his conception of poetry, and of art, more broadly, is evident from the ways in which he positions the state, and moreover, the *Volk*, as being founded in the mythic unfolding of poetry, the latter of which stands as the foundation not only of the state and the *Volk*, but of philosophy and language (in Heidegger’s account). This aestheticization of politics is noteworthy, moreover, to the extent that it reflects, symptomatically, the self-understanding of a dangerous cultural and political milieu in Weimar Germany and the Third Reich, in which the myth and poetry of *Volk* was readily fused with the political program of National Socialism. However, an association with, and even support of, the darkest forces of the history of the twentieth century, does not effectively eliminate the possibility of redeeming the truth-content of any given idea or philosophy. For within both the innocent and dangerous guises of poetry in Heidegger’s conception, lies an indefatigable truth and impulse, what Bloch calls the “spirit of utopia,” in his work bearing the same title, *The Spirit of Utopia*. Like poetry, that ineluctably expresses this impulse either latently or explicitly, the spirit of utopia is open and abstract, lacking the decisiveness and resolve of the actual. For the most ubiquitous expressions of the spirit of utopia can be found in what is often conceived

⁶⁶ Ibid., 310.

critically as ideology: popular culture and advertising. More dangerously, the utopian impulse continues to be wielded by totalitarian and fascist political movements as a means to the end either of taking or consolidating power. This does not mean that the spirit of utopia is too dangerous to be engaged and that we should instead adhere to the Marxian proscription of utopia (*Utopieverbot*); on the contrary, the dangers of the utopian impulse call for a critical investigation of its manifold representations in politics, art, philosophy, religion and culture, as well as, an emancipatory recovery of the utopian sparks of possibility latent in all works of human expression.

III. *From Barbarism to Redemption*

In light of Heidegger's simultaneously utopian and nationalist conception of poetry and the German poetic tradition, George's poetry reveals itself as a repository of the utopian and ideological impulses that are in turn redemptively critiqued and uplifted by those seeking to dialectically confront National Socialist and fascist thought. Rather than simply constituting the intellectual-poetic foundation of Nazism as some scholars have argued, George's work functioned both as a catalyst for the debates on aesthetics and politics and as an exemplification of the complex, often contradictory political valences of the aesthetic in this period in German intellectual history. To this effect, the interweaving of aesthetics and politics in Stefan George's 1928 publication, *Das Neue Reich*, illustrates the immense social power and political possibilities contained in art and aesthetic representation as a whole. In this publication, George's utopian vision of a new, culturally revitalized "Secret Germany" led by a charismatic, messianic poet-leader is expressed in poetic form. The ineluctably political spiritual-ideological (*geistig*) possibilities of aesthetic representation are realized in George's poetry and its interpretation by his circle and those critical of its affinities with the ideologies of German nationalism, conservative revolution and Nazism. In emphasizing the messianic, utopian impulses of his own aesthetic expression, George's poetic visions and their historical impact illustrate how art and, to a certain extent, culture, have the capacity to shape and transform consciousness—understood not simply as an isolated individual consciousness but as socially conditioned and formed—while also providing the ideological-aesthetic framework and underpinning for the concrete, political organization of society. The political function of the aesthetic to this effect expresses itself in a double sense. On one hand, it manifests as an aesthetic-ideological expression of

consciousness that in turn informs how individuals and entire societies perceive and experience their world, and thus, how we create and realize new social and political realities. On the other hand, the concepts and institutional structures of the political (such as the ideas and institutions of sovereignty, nationalism, racism, and political parties or regimes, such as the National Socialist and Communist Parties and their respective regimes) are themselves indissolubly bound up in the aesthetic representations that constitute their symbolic forms.

The political force of George's poetic prophecies—ushering in a new, culturally rejuvenated *Reich* with a messianic yet divine poet-leader—are demonstrated in the historical impact of his aesthetic vision for a new Germany, ambiguous as its political meaning may be. The influence of George's poetry and the social-political force that it embodied through its impact on Weimar and Nazi Germany is an exemplification of these two senses of the political function of the aesthetic. For George's thought and poetry did not simply remain in the abstract realm of aesthetic representation (i.e., where it already expressed an implicit political valence in functioning as a simultaneously utopian and ideological object), but manifested concretely in social and political form, through the circle around the Master, the '*Secret Germany*' that would usher in and help shape the establishment a new *Reich*—at first in theory and later in practice. In a similar vein, the symbolism of the swastika, the latter of which the George circle began using prior to the advent of Nazism, in 1909 in their publication, *Blätter für die Kunst*,⁶⁷ is illustrative insofar as it highlights the ways in which political institutions and states deploy aesthetic representations—expressed through visual and mythopoetic symbols and impulses—not only as a means of inculcating political ideologies, but also as the intellectual or spiritual foundations for the very concepts and instructions that constitute the political in practice. Considering this complex interaction of Weimar Germany's preeminent poet, the George circle and the rise of Nazism, an analysis of George's later poetry and its historical impact in effect opens up the ambivalent yet impactful political valences of his poetic universe, and by extension, the intellectual-historical milieu that birthed it. At the same time, moreover, such an analysis demonstrates the crosspollination and fluidity of aesthetico-political ideas and representations

⁶⁷ Robert E. Norton, "From Secret Germany to Nazi Germany: The Politics of Art before and after 1933," in *A Poet's Reich: Politics and Culture in the George Circle*, ed. Melissa S. Lane and Martin A. Ruehl (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2011), 278.

across an intractable political landscape in a historical period defined by intense political division and ultimately catastrophe.

Considering the political impact of George's work, particularly, its initial adoption by National Socialism in the early 1930s, however, should not limit the scope of one's interpretation of the works and their context.⁶⁸ Growing out of the aestheticist elevation of the poetic and its symbolic essence, the utopian dimensions of George's poetry are drawn out in Benjamin's redemptive-critical reading of his poetry, in which Benjamin critiques George's aristocratic, nationalist ethos while uplifting the utopian, prophetic elements of his aesthetic position and its poetic expression. David Midgley accurately describes Benjamin's relationship to George, when he writes that "He manages to combine a firm rejection of the ethos of the George Circle with sympathy for their aesthetic sensibilities."⁶⁹ Midgley presents Benjamin's "ambivalent position" toward George as relating to the trajectory of Benjamin's "intellectual development," presenting his early infatuation with George as being eclipsed by his later self-positioning as a kind of 'counterforce' to George and his circle.⁷⁰ In other words, Benjamin's ambivalent position is mostly explained by his own changing position toward George and politics in Weimar. However, Benjamin's ambivalent relation to George's poetic universe stems not from a change in Benjamin's own intellectual development, but rather is part and parcel of Benjamin's optic of redemptive criticism, whereby the aesthetic object is simultaneously negated and lifted up to evoke its utopian elements. Through a redemptive optic, it is possible to decipher the aesthetic work's assimilation into ideology while evoking the utopian kernel. It is precisely the utopian dimension of George's work, its encompassing embrace of aesthetic creation and its ability to

⁶⁸ Despite George's refusal to fully embrace National Socialism, he was coopted and celebrated by leading Nazi ideologists and institutions, including, Goebbels, many of whom saw his poetic prophecies as vindications of the Third Reich. As Jussi Backman recounts in his study of Heidegger and George: Soon after Hitler became Chancellor...George was offered the presidency of the Prussian Academy of Poetry (which he declined) and was warmly greeted on his 65th birthday by the new Reich Minister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, himself an ardent admirer of George's work. While apparently not without some sympathies for the "national movement," George did not want to become associated with the new regime. His death...spared him from experiencing the full reality of the new German Reich, but also made him unable to prevent the exploitation of his work by Nazi cultural politics; at Goebbels' behest, the German national book award was (temporarily) renamed the "Stefan George Prize." In the long run, however, George's aristocratic ethos and aestheticism turned out to be ill-adapted to a totalitarian mass ideology."

See Jussi Backman, "The Transitional Breakdown of the Word: Heidegger and Stefan George's Encounter with Language," *Gatherings: The Heidegger Circle Annual* 1 (2011), 54-64.

⁶⁹ David Midgley, "The Absentee Prophet: Public Perceptions of George's Poetry in the Weimar Period," in *A Poet's Reich: Politics and Culture in the George Circle*, ed. Melissa S. Lane and Martin A. Ruehl (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2011), 122.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

recreate the world, that opens up its propensity to become ideology, a reified, static reduction of the ambivalent poetic form. This utopian-creative aspect is revealed in Heidegger's conception of the German poetic tradition, particularly, poets such as Hölderlin and George, where the utopian, mythopoetic capacity of poetry—to create new vision and symbolic embodiment of a nation and a people—is situated as its underlying political effect.

Given the opacity of George's poetry, characteristic of the category of the aesthetic as a whole and in particular, the symbolist poetics that George draws on, its concrete relation to National Socialism and Nazi or fascist ideology more broadly remains ambiguous, as Ruehl illustrates in his work on the George circle.⁷¹ However, notwithstanding the interpretive ambiguity of his thought and poetry, following Hitler's rise to power in 1933, multiple newspapers in Germany presented the rise of the third *Reich* as the fulfillment of George's prophecy for a new *Reich*, with headlines such as "Stefan George der Kündler, Adolf Hitler der Führer" ('Stefan George the Prophet, Adolf Hitler the Leader').⁷² Echoing this sentiment, in a June 16, 1933 letter to Gershom Scholem, Benjamin writes of his recent essay on George, *Stefan George in Retrospect*: "Two review copies are forcing me into the disagreeable position of having to speak about Stefan George, now, before a German audience. I believe I have understood this much: if ever God has smitten a prophet by fulfilling his prophecies, then this is the case with George."⁷³ Here, Benjamin makes explicit his perspective that George was not simply an adherent or precursor to Nazism. On the contrary, for Benjamin, George's work is riddled by its simultaneous functioning as prophetic poetry and ideology, as poetry that foretells the impending doom of the Third Reich in aesthetic form without explicitly celebrating or critiquing this prophecy, leaving the political meaning of his work open. In his analysis of George and his circle, Ruehl raises the problematic contained in such framings of the latter, arguing that Benjamin's post-1933 evaluation of the political impact of George and his poetic vision, "offered a strangely skewed, one-sided assessment."⁷⁴ Ruehl juxtaposes Benjamin's evaluation with the interpretive perspective expressed in Robert Norton's intellectual biography of George, the latter of which has "read the intellectual legacies of the Circle sub specie 1933, as

⁷¹ Ruehl, "Aesthetic Fundamentalism in Weimar Poetry," 259-60.

⁷² Norton, "From Secret Germany to Nazi Germany," 279.

⁷³ Walter Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 416.

⁷⁴ Ruehl, "Aesthetic Fundamentalism in Weimar Poetry," 257.

it were,” to the effect of situating “the aesthetic fundamentalism of George and his followers” as part of the “pre-history—the ‘intellectual origins’—of National Socialism,” as evidenced by the positive reactions to Hitler’s rise to power by “so many members of the Circle, including the Master himself.”⁷⁵ Although historically validated and effective in their linkages of George and Nazism, Ruehl points to the Jewish and anti-Nazi currents within the Circle to illustrate the one-sided, misleading nature of Benjamin’s and Norton’s assessments. Beyond this, as Ruehl’s analysis shows, the political interpretation of a poet like George is wrought by the openness and multiplicity of semiotic representation, the latter of which lacks the singularity and clarity of meaning suggested by concrete associations of any particular aesthetic representation or form with an actual political movement, ideology or regime.

In spite of this semiotic instability, however, the widespread public reception of George’s poetry and vision by Nazi publications as well as Benjamin and Adorno, demonstrates the intrinsically ideological, social-political force of aesthetic representations (i.e., George’s poetic visions, the swastika and utopian ideal of a new, aestheticized German *Reich*) and, in particular, the historical assimilation of George’s poetic universe into Nazi ideology.⁷⁶ In other words, irrespective of the actual intentions and far-reaching, often emancipatory interpretive possibilities of George’s visions, the very deployment of his aesthetic-philosophical oeuvre as an ideological vehicle that facilitated the rise of the ideologies and political rise of the Third Reich, testifies to the complex intertwinement of utopia and ideology (and likewise, of freedom and subjugation) not only within the works of George and his circle, but in all aesthetic representations. This is not to say that certain elements of George’s poetic universe did not lend themselves to conservative, racialized or fascist politics; but rather, that it is precisely the utopian spirit and aesthetic enactment—within the aesthetic object itself—of a new world that provides ideologies with their persuasive, rhetorical power to consciously and unconsciously reshape human consciousness, namely, through harnessing the immense social force of humanity’s deepest utopian impulses and desires for a harmonious collectivity of free individuals.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Even contemporary, twenty-first century publications, such as *The Guardian*, which published a 2006 article with the headline, “Prophet of Doom: Stefan George, one of Germany’s most celebrated poets, was a cult figure. But, despite his close links to Hitler’s would-be assassins, his legacy has been sullied by Nazi associations” See Justin Cartwright, “German Poet Stefan George is Sullied by Nazi Associations,” *The Gaurdian*, January 14, 2006. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/jan/14/featuresreviews.guardianreview11>.

In this respect, rather than constituting an instance of one-sided interpretation, Benjamin's positioning of the rise of the Third Reich as the fulfillment of George's poetic prophecies of a new *Reich*, does not simply frame George and his circle as the willful prophets and harbingers of the Nazi regime; instead, as Benjamin suggests with the notion that George was "smitten" or punished by God through the fulfillment of his prophecies, George's poetic visions of a new utopian reality unleashed an unpredictable, open expanse of political possibilities, giving way to the Nazi deployment of these visions in their political project and its historical establishment. Put differently, in line with his entwinement of culture and barbarism, in his letter to Scholem, Benjamin situates George as being 'smitten' with the fulfillment of his vision, not necessarily because of inherently fascistic or National Socialist intentions, but rather the punishment itself was the manifestation and deployment of his utopian vision as an ideological and socially symbolic vehicle for the rise of Nazism.

This is not to interpret George and his circle as contributing to the development of the 'psychological, cultural and even political climate' that facilitated the rise of the Third Reich, as Norton argues. Nor is it to position George's notion of Germanness (*Deutschtum*) simply as "a deeply humanistic ethos and a cosmopolitan conception...that was profoundly at odds with the ideologies of the German Right," as Ruehl and Lane frame the position of those defending George.⁷⁷ Rather than remaining in a polarizing dichotomy of fascist and apologist interpretations of George and his circle, Ruehl and Lane, as well as the authors in their book on George, show that the political visions and ideas of George and his circle "changed over time and they were renegotiated and redefined by the different subgroups of the Circle (often associated with their different locations: Heidelberg, Berlin, and Munich) and the three different generations of disciples that made up the highly heterogeneous collective known as the George Kreis."⁷⁸ Contrary to the operating mode of National Socialism and the Third Reich, George and his circle specifically did not establish "a coherent ideology or *Weltbild*" nor did they explicitly outline what George's idealized polis or state would look like, as Ruehl and Lane illustrate.⁷⁹ In this regard, George, his poetry and his circle are best understood as encompassing a complex web of political and aesthetic positions, mirroring the political climate of the Weimar Republic.

⁷⁷ Lane and Ruehl, introduction to *A Poet's Reich*, 8.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

Considering the vast social-political power that inheres in the aesthetic—as it manifests as the ideological, utopian, and ultimately, messianic expression of the human spirit, the expression of which in turn realizes and shapes human consciousness—the question of the political meaning, interpretation or impact of a given aesthetic work or movement (i.e., the George circle, aesthetic fundamentalism, Surrealism, and Dada) rises to the fore. In the case of George’s poetry, which has been historically linked with Nazism and various conservative currents within twentieth-century Germany (e.g., Heideggerian philosophy, and the vitalism of *Lebensphilosophie*) a dialectical, redemptive hermeneutic, as articulated by thinkers, such as Benjamin and Adorno, redeems the object of criticism through its critique, thereby transcending the one-sided, myopic interpretation of George and his circle—or any aesthetic object or movement for that matter.

Conceived in through a redemptive optic, George’s poem, “Secret Germany,” published in *Das Neue Reich*, expresses the messianic impulse, or in other words, George’s utopian vision for a new, aesthetically rejuvenated social-political reality at the same time that this vision—precisely in its utopian and messianic expression of the desire for a new *Reich*, a new Kingdom, that parallels the millenarian religious conception of the messianic age as a one thousand year kingdom of God on earth—unfolds and functions as an ideological instrument in the growing historical movement of National Socialism. Before approaching the content of the poem itself, already in its title, the informed reader is confronted with an already existing intellectual-historical phenomenon, the ‘Secret Germany’, a prominent group of poets, artists and intellectuals in George’s orbit. This group represented the will to power of the poet-leader, the Master, in his drive toward the realization of his poetic vision in the concrete realm of social reality. For it was precisely through this group of talented, often public intellectuals that George’s vision was effectively transmitted to Germany and the rest of the world.

Although George’s revolutionary vision to transform Germany and the world in the creation of a new *Reich* bears parallels with the ideologies of the conservative revolution, it diverges from the latter in its opposition to the Wilhelmine Empire, and by extension, the conservative impulse to return to the old order represented by conservative revolution. Rather than understanding George’s poetry simply as conservative or emancipatory in its utopian expression, a close analysis of its words and history reveals the difficulties in assigning it any

particular, concrete political form. In his analysis of George's later work, Ray Ockenden maps out the history and political character of the poem's title: "The term "geheimes Deutschland" in George's sense is first attested in an essay by Wolfskehl of 1910....It was to remain a powerful, if abstract idea, as opposed to the word that, largely under the influence of Wolters, was used to describe the circle of friends — namely, 'der staat'."⁸⁰ As Ockenden's history of the poem's title shows, George's "Secret Germany," was not simply an aesthetic object, a figure in his poetic universe; on the contrary, "Secret Germany" was an aesthetic figuration that represented the political phenomenon that was George and his elite circle, and more broadly, the movement they set forth in Germany. The social organization of George and his disciples was not only aesthetic in nature (i.e., insofar as George's aesthetic principles dictated their thinking and practices), it was also in effect a collective of individuals that enacted an aristocratic politics of discipline and devotion to the divine authority (the Master) in addition to promoting an ambiguous vision of politics at the national and global levels. In this respect, Ockenden interprets George's "Secret Germany," understood both as an aesthetic object and the political phenomenon of George and his circle, as an aesthetico-political response to the destructive capacities of scientific reason, industrialization and modernity, all of which have exposed nature's enchanting secrets in their attempt to exorcize the hidden potentials for growth and human freedom from the world. For George, the gods respond with the creation of "*neuen raum in den raum*," ("new space within the space"), "a hidden and invisible realm where the seed may grow that will one day create a renewed culture," a new realm that is identified with the 'holy homeland', Germany.⁸¹ As Ockenden's reading demonstrates, George's poetic depiction of Germany is essentially apocalyptic and utopian, the 'holy homeland' is "pictured in images of virgin forests and unexploited land; the descent of the '*sonnentraum*,' which echoes the idea of incarnation, is a prelude to the poet's celebration of the secret realm (9:47), which takes the form of evocations of seven figures, together with the poet's own apocalyptic vision (8:32)."⁸²

⁸⁰ Ray Ockenden, "Kingdom of the Spirit: The Secret Germany in Stefan George's Later Poems." *A Poet's Reich: Politics and Culture in the George Circle*, ed. Melissa S. Lane and Martin A. Ruehl (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2011), 100.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

Foreshadowing his redemptive realm of “Secret Germany” as the counterforce to the deadening, modern industrial era, George begins his poem with a condemnation of everything represented by these political and social orders of the past and present:

Let me stand at your verge
Chasm, and not be dismayed!

Where irrepressible greed has
Trampled down every inch of
Earth from equator to pole and
Shamelessly wielded relentless
Glare and mastery over
Every nook of the world,
Where in the smothering cells of
Hideous houses, madness
Just has found what will poison
All horizons tomorrow:
Even shepherds in yurtas,
Even nomads in wastes – ⁸³

These lines allude to George’s disgust with the established, bourgeois liberal order of Weimar Germany, represented by the “irrepressible greed” that has “trampled down every inch of the earth” and sought to ‘shamelessly’ and ‘relentlessly’ dominate and master “every nook of the world.” Showing an affinity with Heidegger, George’s poem displays the conservative revolutionary critiques of liberalism and the bourgeois logics of universal rationality, mastery and individualism. The individualism of the liberal order, symbolically articulated in George’s reference to the individual, isolated human cells— “the smothering cells of/ Hideous houses”—is attacked as toxic poison that will cut short the possibilities of the future, “All horizons tomorrow,” and the idyllic ways of the past (i.e., ‘shepherds in yurtas...nomads in wastes’). Though this vitriolic animus toward the established liberal order and its bourgeois capitalist

⁸³ Stefan George, “Secret Germany,” in *The Works of Stefan George*, trans. Olga Marx and Ernst Morwitz (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1974), 371-72.

values is part and parcel of the intellectual heritage of the conservative revolution, it also bears close parallels with the Romantic anti-capitalist and left or Marxist critiques of capitalism, as the affinities of Lukács, Heidegger and Schmitt suggest. Juxtaposing and relating George's critique of the liberal bourgeois order with analogous positions held by those on the left (i.e., Lukács, Bloch, Benjamin and Adorno), in turn begins to destabilize the facile, binary opposition of emancipatory Left-wing or Marxist criticism and oppressive right-wing or fascistic irrationalism. For doing so unfolds redemptive criticisms of thinkers whose associations with Nazism and fascism are sometimes presented as cause for their complete elimination from various intellectual discourses.

After presenting the multisided problem of the bourgeois, liberal order represented by the Weimar Republic, George begins formulating his messianic, utopian resolution, the movement of a 'secret Germany' that will redeem the latter and eventually the world from the grips of soulless world-encompassing reason and instrumental domination. For George, like many intellectuals and poets of the period, the rejuvenation and rebirth of a new order is connected to the ancient past, particularly, Greco-Roman antiquity and the origin story of ancient Rome, the latter of which functioned as a counterweight to the Germanic, nationalist dimensions of George's later poetry:

Where no more in a stony
Forest valley the she-wolf
— Rugged nurse! — suckles boy twins
And neither untrodden islands,
Nor a garden of virgins
Dawn to foster the Great

There in the sorest of trials
Powers below pondered gravely,
Gracious celestials gave their
Ultimate secret: They altered
Laws over matter and founded

Space — a new space in the old ...⁸⁴

In evoking the vivid mythology of Remus and Romulus, George not only calls forth the origin story of Rome, but, perhaps more significantly, in presenting this mythic narrative in the context of his critique of the established order and the historical situation he and his circle so despised, George in effect positions this narrative of the ancient past as opening up new possibilities for the creation, the new origin story, of a new present. Though George's explicit reference to some "Ultimate secret" whereby the "Laws over matter" are altered and a "new space in the old" is "founded," superficially refers to the origin story of Rome, given the immense import of the constellation of a "secret Germany" for George and his circle, this "Ultimate secret"—whereby the world is ultimately transformed and made anew—alludes to the creation of a new space, a new *Reich* or domain in the historical present of the poet's life. In other words, George's reference to the origin myth of Rome at once links his present historical moment to the ancient past and to the possibility of creating a new future, a new world, inspired by the creation of the past but also entirely new in its own right, a "new space in the old." Significantly, George's reference point for the creation of a new *Reich* is ancient Rome, the latter of which is not only a political symbol of empire, power and authority, but moreover, symbolizes the immense potential and power of a unified *polis* aimed at transforming the world. Despite the implicit affinities between this reference and the influence of ancient Rome on fascist ideology and the imperial aspirations of National Socialism (and the Axis powers more broadly), what is more essential for the purposes of grasping the political thrust of this poem is the very deployment of the mythopoetic figure or symbol of Rome—perhaps the most prominent *polis* in history—and its creation as an antidote to the trials of the modern, liberal bourgeois order. For George, the tribulations he diagnoses through his poetry are to be remedied not simply through the creative *poiesis* of the poet or artist, but also necessarily through the *poiesis* of a new world, a new social political domain (*Reich*). Intrinsic to this poetic (in the sense of poetic verse and *poiesis*) vision of a new world is both the utopian, messianic impulse to right the wrongs of history and reconcile the world, and, by implication, the ideological dimension, class or collective, national or group consciousness that facilitates the cohesion and bonding of a given social group. In effect, rather than revealing the inherently fascistic or National Socialist valences of George's

⁸⁴ Ibid., 372.

poetry and thought, this poem illustrates the ambivalence of the latter to uncover the dialectic of ideology and utopia that is at play in the aesthetic work.

George's poetic conception of the 'holy homeland', Germany, is a vision not only of a sacred, pristine and paradisaal land, replete with hidden secrets and possibilities, it is also a vision of a people, a collective that is bound together as "kin":

Once down by the southern
Sea I lay on a boulder,
Wrung as lately my kin
Spirit, when breaking through
Olives, the Spook of Noon
With goaten foot flicked me:

Now that your eyes grew discerning,
Go and find in your sacred
Land primordial soil,
Slumbering lap of fill,
And regions as pathless and dark
As the densest of jungles.⁸⁵

The language of "Land" and "primordial soil" evince a deep connection to the land and the natural, idyllic state of the world prior to industrialization and modernity, a world characterized by a sacred bond the people share with one another and with the land. George's vision of Spirit "breaking through" follows from his reference to "my kin," hinting at the fundamental, spiritual role that collectivity and the unity it represents—captured in the words "my kin"—plays in the formation of George's redemptive solution to the problems of modernity. George envisions his poetic universe, as carried forth by his circle, the "Secret Germany" as the political extension of his fundamentally aesthetic impulses for a revitalized world. Although this vision has clear affinities with the National Socialist rhetoric and ideology of 'Blood and soil', it is nonetheless

⁸⁵ Ibid.

precisely this rhetoric that imbues George's poem with an essentially utopian vision of a collective in harmony with nature, open to the enchanted secrets and possibilities that are latent in the poetic act of creating the new. This utopian vision forms the foundation of George's "Secret Germany" and the political implications of the latter and its poetic expression. At the same time, however, the organized, rigid form that structures George's poem as well as the searing precision of his diction colors his vision of a "Secret Germany" with the political and aesthetic ideals of order, unity of structure, authority and cohesive harmony—ideals that dictated the social organization of George's circle. When coupled with the nationalist language of "primordial soil" and "sacred Land," these formal elements ostensibly point to the fascist or proto-fascist politics of George's poetry. To interpret his poetry exclusively in this vein, however, would be mistaken insofar as the aestheticist emphasis on openness and opacity of meaning, in George's words, the "regions as pathless and dark/ As the densest of jungles," expressed in George's verse preclude the possibility of concrete, identifiable or unified political or other such interpretations. George's poetry, in other words, leaves itself open to the hidden, secret depths of the poetic work, to the infinite font of interpretation and aesthetic creation initiated in the act of *poiesis*.

In his reading of George's work, then, Benjamin emphasizes this essentially utopian, aestheticist valence of the poet's work. Benjamin's assessment of George is captured in his dialectical conception of culture and barbarism in the artwork. Benjamin's dialectic of culture and barbarism—encapsulated in the Benjaminian conception that "There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism"—⁸⁶ is productively updated by reversing the Benjaminian formulation so that "the effectively ideology is also, at the same time, necessarily utopian," as Jameson writes in his work on the political unconscious of literary or aesthetic works.⁸⁷ The ideological is, in other words, indissolubly bond up with the utopian, collective dreams and impulses of humanity insofar as it harnesses the power of such impulses to consciously and unconsciously achieve and justify practical ends in society. This does not mean, however, that the ideological and utopian valences of intellectual or artistic expression are

⁸⁶ Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 256.

In keeping with the original German text by Benjamin, I translated Benjamin's use of the word "*Kultur*"—which Zohn translates "civilization"—as "culture."

⁸⁷ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Routledge, 1981), 276.

opposed to one another as conflicting elements, one of which instrumentally deploys the other (utopia) as means to achieve its end (i.e., “ideological manipulation”).⁸⁸ On the contrary, in this account the ideological and the utopian constitute an indissoluble unity. What makes ideology socially compelling, the very thing that provides it with its ‘ideological’ power to rhetorically function and indoctrinate is the universal, collective utopian element—the collective or class consciousness—that inheres in and characterizes it.

To answer the underlying question of how it is possible for an aesthetic, cultural or religious expression that functions as a vehicle of ideology to be the true expression of humanity’s deepest impulses for utopia and universal salvation, it is essential to understand how the ‘collective solidarity’, a universal, harmonizing sense of unity that characterizes a collective.⁸⁹ This utopian core, however, does not constitute the utopian in itself, but is instead ‘allegorical’ in pointing to the concrete utopian vision of a classless society, a society, in other words, of universally inclusive collectivity, as Jameson shows in his utopian interpretation of Benjamin and the Marxian conception of class consciousness . In this hermeneutic framework for interpreting human or cultural expression, then, the ideologies of “hegemonic or ruling-class culture” are conceived as “Utopian, not in spite of their instrumental function to secure and perpetuate class privilege and power, but rather precisely because that function is also in and of itself the affirmation of collective solidarity.”⁹⁰ This positive reinforcement of “collective solidarity” that constitutes the simultaneously utopian and ideological valences of cultural expression, in effect generalizes and applies Durkheim’s theory of religion to “cultural production as a whole,” insofar as the cultural object (like the religious or totemic symbol) facilitates the “symbolic affirmation of” a social group or collective.⁹¹ In this way, the socially symbolic, cohesive facility of aesthetic or cultural expression manifests as a political function on two interlocking levels. On one hand, the aesthetic object’s capacity to express and facilitate a consciousness of collectivity, or in other words, to facilitate the formation of a social group, marks its concrete political function as an ideological adhesive that facilitates group cohesion and the consciousness of unity amongst a group. On the other hand, however, the utopian spirit of the aesthetic object, its allegorical and tangible enactment of humanity’s collective impulses,

⁸⁸ Ibid., 278.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 281.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid., 282.

our messianic desires and dreams for a new, transformed world. This latter aspect emphasizes the social-political meaning of art, or in other words, the utopian spirit of art and human expression more broadly. For art is itself a spiritual representation, the material embodiment of which constitutes a symbolic and real expression of our deepest utopian dreams and desires for the collective creation of a new world.

The object of the artwork and its production are to this effect utopian in practice, not simply allegorically or symbolically. The ability to create freely and allow our imaginative dreams and desires to flow into a collective form of expression in this sense enacts the function and expression of utopia both in consciousness and material reality. The dialectical, simultaneously utopian and ideological character aesthetic or cultural expression, in turn unlocks the messianic possibility, the redemptive movement toward reconciliation within the work. This messianic possibility, often evoked through the ‘redemptive hermeneutic’, an important interpretive framework of Critical Theory, uncovers the redemptive political function of inherently ambivalent aesthetic objects or forms under investigation. The messianic or redemptive potentials and actualities of the aesthetic object manifest not only in the hermeneutic process that functions on the level of critical interpretation (the latter of which functions as a redemptive hermeneutic that at once negates, preserves and elevates the ideological-utopian valences of the work), but more importantly, this messianic dimension operates within the aesthetic object itself and its reception on the plane of human consciousness. In reconciling and holding together the inextricably linked yet outwardly opposed valences of utopia and ideology within itself, the aesthetic work expresses the messianic impulse for a reconciled world both internally and consequently beyond itself in the realm of human consciousness. In engendering the emancipatory, simultaneously collective and individual human ability to create something new—out of the infinite possibility presented by our freedom to choose, our sovereign capacity to decide the expression of our self via thoughts, words and embodied actions—aesthetic and cultural works constitute an expression of humanity’s messianic (representative of our innate sovereignty or ability to individually and collectively determine the course of human history) striving to create a new reality at the same time that they function as vessels containing the ideological-utopian impulses of the collective.

Chapter 3

Aesthetics Amidst Catastrophe: Heidegger and the Adorno-Benjamin Debate

I. Heidegger's Aestheticization of Politics

This chapter places Heidegger in conversation with Adorno and Benjamin through an analysis of Heidegger's aesthetico-political ideas, specifically as they relate to and productively converge with the central terms of the Benjamin-Adorno debate. In doing so, this chapter aims to emphasize the important, albeit at times implicit or indirect, role Heidegger played in the debates on aesthetics and politics both within the Frankfurt School and beyond its confines. Given the concentrated focus of this study, rather than exploring major works, such as Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*, and Adorno's philosophical works directly confronting Heidegger, *Jargon of Authenticity* and *Negative Dialectics*, this chapter focuses on writings directly addressing the relation of aesthetics and politics.

In his essay, "The Origin of the Work of Art," Heidegger represents the bringing-forth of truth as the primary way in which art bears on the social realm of the political. By juxtaposing the unfolding of truth in art with that of politics, Heidegger reveals the ways in which it is precisely the domain of philosophy—represented by truth—that uncovers the complex entwinement of these often-opposed categories. Situating the concept of truth as the clasp that binds art with politics, Heidegger elevates these categories as historical manifestations of truth. Beyond this, however, rather than simplifying their relationship, the linkage of art and politics with the concept of truth in effect unravels the enigmatic, implicitly political, tension of world and earth in the work of art. For in his representation of the entwinement of art and politics via truth, Heidegger locates the unfolding of truth in the work of art as being "present only as the strife between clearing and concealing in the opposition between world and earth."¹ Although there is considerable debate about the meaning of this opposition and its respective terms in Heidegger scholarship, a close attentiveness to the language and argumentation of the text in

¹ Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950), 37.

which it is inscribed reveals how this opposition—instead of resolving the question of how art and politics are related within and outside of Heidegger’s philosophy—ultimately opens up the ambivalences that inhere in the question of how art and politics are related. This opening up of ambiguity, a quality that Heidegger ties to his notion of world (as contrasted with the narrow closedness of earth), does not only pertain to Heidegger’s philosophy, and his thinking on art and politics; on the contrary, the ambivalences that Heidegger’s essay uncover reveal an underlying tension, a struggle between political decisiveness, on one hand, and ostensibly apolitical openness and free play, on the other, that finds itself at the heart of art and its concept. In this regard, mirroring his argumentative strategy—that is, of continually reformulating the fundamental questions of art, truth, and Being—for theorizing art in general in his essay, when it comes to the pressing question of art’s relation to politics, Heidegger circles back to the question itself to uncover the contradictions and ambiguities it opens up. Despite that, in doing so Heidegger might seem to obscure the political questions that are often invoked in current scholarship on his philosophy, his problematizing—rather than resolving—of an ostensibly stable, determinate relation of art and politics in effect exposes the difficulties of decisively resolving the aesthetico-political problematic. This is not to say that Heidegger’s thinking on art lacks coherent relation to a given mode of politics, or to his involvement with National Socialism, but rather, that his writings disclose the extent to which attempts to establish a definitive link between Heidegger’s philosophy of art (and his philosophy more broadly) and his perplexing involvement with National Socialism are complicated by a close reading of the philosophical and literary nuances of his writings on art and poetry. In investigating how art relates to the world of history, and by extension, politics, Heidegger diverges from the Western philosophical tradition—and its field of aesthetics—by opening the concept of art to questioning and the possibilities of the not-yet rather than positing its essence or true meaning. Thus, in Heidegger’s account, art, which is always related back to poetry, is that which founds history and the truth of being, where the struggle between concealment and unconcealment (*Aletheia*, truth), earth and world, is brought forth. It is precisely because this founding role, that Heidegger writes “The origin of the artwork - of, that is, creators and preservers, which is to say, the historical existence of a people - is art.”² Art’s position as origin here lies in its effecting a “founding leap”

² Ibid., 49.

(*Ursprung*) as “a distinctive way in which truth comes into being, becomes, that is, historical.”³ Rather than decisively positing the meaning of art, Heidegger instead probes its possibility (echoing Hegel’s thinking on the death of art) and its essence as the unfolding of a historical struggle or strife between the unconcealment and concealment of being. Linking art and poetry indissolubly with the philosophical disclosure of truth, Heidegger accordingly poeticizes the question of art, thereby aesthetically enacting his own conception of art, placing it in the open clearing presented by the question of being (*Seinsfrage*) and its relation to history.

Delving into the question of how truth happens in the work of art, Heidegger foregrounds the historical and political stakes of art by concentrating on struggle of earth and world in the Greek temple, conceived here as a work of non-representational art. Poetically depicting the Greek temple the world it opens up, Heidegger writes:

A building, a Greek temple, portrays nothing. It simply stands there in the middle of the rocky, fissured valley. The building encloses the figure of a god and within this concealment, allows it to stand forth through the columned hall within the holy precinct. Through the temple, the god is present in the temple. This presence of the god is, in itself, the extension and delimitation of the precinct as something holy. The temple and its precinct do not, however, float off into the indefinite. It is the temple work that first structures and simultaneously gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire for the human being the shape of its destiny. The all-governing expanse of these open relations is the world of this historical people. From and within this expanse the people first returns to itself for the completion of its vocation.⁴

Though the temple does not portray anything in particular, but instead “simply stands there in the middle...,” it also encloses and conceals the “the figure of a god” within its inner sanctum. By concealing the figure of the god within itself, however, the temple thereby “allows it to stand forth.” For in hiding the figure of the god, the structure within which the latter is concealed, thereby reveals itself as the space where “the god is present.” At this point, cautioning against the notion that the temple work will “float off into the indefinite” as the result of its non-representational opacity and openness, on one hand, and its concealment and disclosure of the holy, the figure of a god, on the other, Heidegger argues that it is precisely “the temple work” through and around which the happenings and shaping of a historical people’s destiny unfolds. For the temple work is the locus that both structures and “gathers around itself the unity of those

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 20-21.

paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire for the human being the shape of its destiny.” For Heidegger, then, just as the van Gogh painting opens up the world of the peasant woman’s shoes it purportedly represents (in Heidegger’s interpretation), the expanse opened up by the temple work “is the world of this historical people,” from within which “the people first returns to itself for the completion of its vocation.” As Heidegger argues later in his essay, instead of conceiving of world statically as an object confronting us, world is better understood as an active verb, an unfolding wherein the world-historical decisions of a people’s history are made: “Wherever the essential decisions of our history are made, wherever we take them over or abandon them, wherever they go unrecognized or are brought once more into question, there the world worlds.”⁵ The unfolding of world, and thus, of the historical decisions of a people, in the work, however, lies entangled in a mutually constitutive struggle with earth, a home-ground on and in which “historical man finds his dwelling in the world.”⁶ In opening up the world of a historical people, the temple, Heidegger stresses, stands there “on rocky ground,” made of the materials drawn out from the earth, conceived here as a protective, concealing counter-position to the openness and expanse of world. Earth, for Heidegger, is not conceived as a mere “mass of matter” or the notion of a planet; rather, earth is bound to the Greek concept of *Physis* (nature, being) as “that in which the arising of everything that arises is brought back - as, indeed, the very thing that it is - and sheltered.”⁷ Standing in opposition to the openness and unconcealment of world in the work, earth serves as a founding ground, a homeland of protection and closedness out of which the world of the work arises. “Standing there,” Heidegger writes, “the temple work opens up a world while, at the same time, setting this world back onto the earth which itself first comes forth as homeland [*heimatliche Grund*].”⁸ As such, the work of art manifests as a struggle between the conflicting forces of earth and world, concealment and unconcealment, closedness and openness, that constitute it. Whereas the nationalistic element of earth is pronounced first and foremost in the figuration of earth as homeland, the concept of world here suggests a counterpoint to the safety and protection of national homeland, as the open expanse of historical possibilities and decisions a group of people face on the stage of world-history. In being bound inextricably to the

⁵ Ibid., 23.

⁶ Ibid., 24.

⁷ Ibid., 21.

⁸ Ibid.

opposing force of earth, which functions as its ground and foundation, world does not simply represent a universalized notion of world, as Raj Singh argues in his interpretation of this essay, but instead allegorizes the world of a historical people grounded in the earth, in their homeland.⁹ The world of a historical people, however, does in effect give way to the possibilities of the broader expanse of world taken as a universal concept, such that, the struggle of world and earth in the work displays a conflict between a closed and protective form of nation or peoplehood, while world marks a people's stepping decisively out of its protective space of homeland onto the plane of world-history.

Rather than simply connoting destruction and discord, the strife of world and earth in the work of art unfolds as a tension of opposing forces that impels each to raise the other "into the self-assertion of their essences." In other words, the struggle of earth and world is not purely negative or agonistic, but ultimately results in the raising up of the antagonistic forces to their own self-assertion or determination—a conception of raising up through negation or opposition that points to a dialectical, Hegelian influence. This raising up to self-assertion, however, also signals Heidegger's National Socialist conception of self-assertion, formulated most vividly in his *Rektoratsrede*. Thus, in line with this resonance of Heidegger's artwork essay, his *Rektoratsrede* and his Nietzsche lectures referencing self-assertion, Wolin, Werner Marx and Karsten Harries argue that Heidegger's conception of art in this seminal essay is fundamentally bound up with his broader involvement—philosophically and politically—with National Socialism.¹⁰ Narrowing in on Heidegger's claim that in addition to presencing in the work of art, "Another way in which truth comes to presence is through the act which founds a state," Wolin argues that Heidegger's political philosophy is most clearly evident in his writings on art and poetry, wherein the state "plays an indispensable meta-ontological role in the unconcealment of beings...Because the state as 'work' appears as the essential prerequisite, the sine qua non, for all subsequent labor of unconcealment."¹¹ In Wolin's account, Heidegger's conception of the state as the ground and prerequisite for all other forms of unconcealment (i.e., in art, poetry, architecture, and philosophy)—a vision of the state that echoes the young Nietzsche's thinking

⁹ See Raj Singh, "Heidegger and the World in an Artwork." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 48, No. 3 (Summer, 1990), 215-222.

¹⁰ See Wolin, *The Politics of Being*, 96-130; See also Werner Marx, *Heidegger and the Tradition* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1982), 250-251; Karsten Harries, "Heidegger as a Political Thinker." *The Review of Metaphysics* 29, no. 4 (1976), 642-69.

¹¹ Wolin, *The Politics of Being*, 112-113.

on politics in his unpublished fragment, “The Greek State,” in which the state is positioned as a necessary foundation for the division of labor and the production of works of philosophical and artistic genius—is not politically ambivalent. On the contrary, Wolin argues that Heidegger’s meta-ontological positioning of the state, as the foundation out of which philosophical and artistic revelation of truth arises, effectively constitutes not only a statist conception of politics, but is fundamentally entwined with a totalitarian conception of state.¹² By modeling the state on the work of art, Wolin argues, “the state becomes a giant work of art” through which truth is unconcealed.¹³ Linking Heidegger’s conception of the state implicitly with Wagner’s aesthetics, Wolin further positions this conception of the state as modeled on the total artwork: “it is the *Gesamtkunstwerk* within which all the other sub-works enact their preassigned roles.”¹⁴ Thus, as Harries argues, in his drive to reframe the state after the ancient Greek *polis*, Heidegger subsumes all social, philosophical and cultural ends within the state to the effect of veering “toward totalitarianism.”¹⁵ Describing how this conception of the state—as meta-ontologically foundational—is totalitarian, Wolin writes: “...when the state-and the ‘destiny of a historical Volk’ that is its *raison d’être*—are accorded unchallenged ontological primacy as ‘the work for the works,’ the autonomy and integrity of the other spheres of life (social, cultural, religious) disappears: they are *gleichgeschaltet* or immediately subsumed within the political sphere.”¹⁶ Wolin continues that Heidegger’s attempted resurrection of the ancient *polis* in the context of Germany in the twentieth century is not only totalitarian, but is inextricably bound up with National Socialism: “since his twentieth century *polis*/state is integrally tied to the *Führerprinzip*, it becomes a *Führerstaat*, a new form of political tyranny, in which political space shrivels up into the person of the *Führer* and his sycophantic entourage.”¹⁷ Building on Harries’ and Marx’s interpretations of Heidegger, Wolin to thus presents the latter’s conception

¹² Ibid., 115-117.

¹³ Wolin’s argument draws on and references Harries’ interpretation which positions Heidegger’s attempted resuscitation of the ancient Greek *polis* as dangerously veering toward a totalitarian conception of politics. Wolin, *The Politics of Being*, 115-117.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Karsten Harries, “Heidegger as a Political Thinker.” *The Review of Metaphysics* 29, no. 4 (1976), 669.

¹⁶ Wolin, *The Politics of Being*, 115-116.

¹⁷ Ibid., 115.

of art in his artwork essay and other writings and lectures from the 1930s as inextricable from totalitarianism and National Socialism—giving it a definitive, unequivocal interpretation.¹⁸

For Heidegger, the enigma of art is essentially the enigma of the question of the of being (*Seinsfrage*), making it all the more difficult to come to a definitive or unambiguous interpretation of his conception of art. Cautioning the reader against such unambiguous interpretations, in his appendix, Heidegger writes that “The entire essay moves knowingly yet implicitly, along the path of the question of the essence of being.”¹⁹ Reflection on what art may be,” Heidegger continues, “is completely and decisively directed solely toward the question of being.”²⁰ As such, problem, addressed in traditional aesthetics, of “What art may be is one of the questions to which the essay offers no answer,” Heidegger writes near the end of his appendix.²¹ This unfolding of questions, that is part and parcel of Heidegger’s critique of traditional philosophical and critical aesthetic approaches to the categories of art and truth, ultimately opens up rather than closes off the possibilities of what art in Heidegger’s conception might be. Central to this opening up of possibilities through the philosophical strategy of questioning (rather than positing answers) is a theme that Heidegger self-consciously employs throughout his essay: ambiguity. As he writes in his appendix, the “two important hints” at the directions in which Heidegger’s questioning on art leads in effect involve the notion of “ambiguity”: “Among these directions are two important hints (on p. 44 and p. 49). At both places there is talk of ‘ambiguity’. On p. 49 an ‘essential ambiguity’ is mentioned with respect to the definition of art as the ‘setting-to-work of truth’. On the one hand, ‘truth’ is the ‘subject’, on the other, the ‘object’.”²² Although Heidegger’s mention of ambiguity in this context refers primarily to the ambiguity of the truth of art as being either the subject or the object, his emphasis on ambiguity—to describe the paths toward which his questioning on art leads—reveals a

¹⁸ Within Heidegger’s conception of art, it is precisely the struggle of world and earth that complicates rather than resolves the question of art’s relation to politics, insofar as this tension, and by extension, Heidegger’s conception of art, remains unresolved and therefore politically and philosophically ambiguous. As Heidegger argues in the afterward to his artwork essay, his meditations on the origin of the work of art are meant to further illuminate the question or riddle (*Rätsel*) of art and the conditions of its very possibility (that is, in light of the perception, pronounced most forcefully perhaps, in Hegel’s *Lectures on Aesthetics*, that art has perished). In his afterward, Heidegger makes explicit his attempt to illuminate the problems inherent in the philosophical questioning of art and its possibility, rather than merely defining or articulating his own conception of what art is.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 55.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

philosophical strategy of deploying ambiguity in response to perennial questions (i.e., ‘What is truth?’ or ‘What is art?’). This ambiguity, moreover, is deployed specially with reference to the question of art, and by implication, of truth, both of which are bound indissolubly with the openness and possibility of the clearing that is brought forth in the work of art. The spacious expanse opened up in and by the work of art, for Heidegger, is rife with possibility and the unconcealment of an openness, a space through which the free play of such possibilities arises. This conception of art is intentionally colored by an ambiguity, that is, precisely the ambiguity inherent in the openness and unconcealment of the work, as Heidegger writes: “With reference to the self-establishment of openness in the open, our thinking touches on an area which cannot here be elucidated. Only this should be noted; that if, in some manner, the essence of unconcealment belongs to being itself...then it is being which, in virtue of its essence, allows the freeplay of openness (the clearing of the "there") to happen, and introduces it as a place of the sort in which, in its own manner, each being arises.”²³ This element of “freeplay” and openness of possibility in the work—an element that clarifies the fundamental resonance of Heidegger and his French post-structuralist successors—is a salient feature of Heidegger’s thinking on art insofar as it allows art, as works and as a concept, to remain open to a freeplay of possibility, unconstrained by the philosophical, political or critical aesthetic demands and ends that have often been attached to it. At the same time, however, this openness and freeplay allows for the ambiguity of Heidegger’s thinking on art, making it difficult if not impossible to arrive at definitive or unequivocal, politicized critiques of Heidegger on art.

Heidegger’s emphasis on returning to an origin, on the backward-facing movement of circling back, displays a latently conservative philosophy of history that seeks a return to an idealized past. This philosophical-historical orientation—which is bound up with central interlocking critiques of modernity, technology and the Western metaphysical tradition in Heidegger’s thought—expresses a politics that is indeed conservative, however, not necessarily fascist or National Socialist. On the contrary, it is specifically with reference to Heidegger’s conservative critique of modernity and technology that the contemporary relevance of his philosophy, in particular, his positioning of art as an alternate mode of disclosing being (in contrast to the disclosure brought forth in technology) comes to light. As Heidegger notes in the appendix to his artwork essay, the intersection of the latter with his essay on the question of

²³ Ibid., 36.

technology is not to be overlooked, in that the critique of technology—and the corresponding critiques of modernity, rationalization and Western metaphysics—hinges on the distinction between the unconcealment of being that presences in technology, on one hand, and the disclosure that is brought forth through art or *poiesis*, on the other.²⁴ For in the context of an all-encompassing critique of technology and the mindset it inhabits, Heidegger’s proffering of an alternate, non-ratiocinative mode of unconcealing being, and thus, of a way for human beings to relate to the broader existence of being (*Physis*, nature, existence), reveals itself as a potential path for reorienting our relationship to the natural world in a way that is creative, non-dominating and in harmony.²⁵ Heidegger’s coemption of art, then, is not simply free-playing and open; it involves creative transformation as a mode of unconcealing being. For bound up in Heidegger’s conception of the openness of the artwork, is the “transformation of being”: “The effecting [*Wirkung*] of the work does not consist in a taking effect [*wirken*]. It lies in a transformation of the unconcealment of beings which happens from out of the work, a transformation, that is to say, of being.”²⁶ In foregrounding the creative-transformative role of art in relation to being, Heidegger further links his conception of the open possibilities and freeplay of art with the implicitly utopian, world-transformative notion of the not-yet.²⁷ Notwithstanding the possibility of a redemptive critique of Heidegger’s thinking on art, however, his interlocking

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

²⁵ For more on the relevance of Heidegger’s philosophy to contemporary movements in deep ecology and environmentalism, see Catherine Frances Botha, “Heidegger, Technology and Ecology,” *South African Journal of Philosophy* 22, No. 2 (2003), 157-171; see also Kevin Michael Deluca, “Thinking with Heidegger: Rethinking Environmental Theory and Practice,” *Ethics and the Environment* 10, No. 1 (Spring 2005), 67-87; Michael E. Zimmerman, “Toward a Heideggerian Ethos for Radical Environmentalism,” *Environmental Ethics* 6, No. 2 (1983), 99-131; Michael E. Zimmerman, “Implications of Heidegger’s Thought for Deep Ecology,” *The Modern Schoolman*, 54 (November 1986), 19-43; Bill Devall and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered* (Layton, Utah: Peregrine Smith Press, 1985); Dolores LaChapelle, *Earth Wisdom* (Los Angeles: Guild of Tutors Press, 1978); Bruce V. Foltz, “On Heidegger and the Interpretation of Environmental Crisis,” *Environmental Ethics* 7, No. 4 (1984), 323-38; Laura Westra, “Let It Be: Heidegger and Future Generations,” *Environmental Ethics* 7, No. 4 (1985); Anthony Lack, *Martin Heidegger on Technology, Ecology and the Arts* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

²⁶ Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” 45.

²⁷ As Heidegger writes, linking the not-yet with the openness that is presented in reference to the strife of truth and untruth, concealment and unconcealment, in the work of art:

Truth is un-truth in that there belongs to it the originating region

of the not-yet-(the un-)disclosed in the sense of concealment. In un-concealment as truth is present, too, the other “un-” of the twofold refusal. Truth as such is present in the opposition between clearing and the twofold concealment. Truth is the ur-strife in which, always in some particular way, the open is won; that open within which everything stands and out of which everything withholds itself- everything which, as a being, both shows and withdraws itself. Whenever and however the strife breaks out and happens, it is through it that the contesting parties, clearing and concealing, separate from one another. In this way the open of the field of combat is won. The openness of this open, i.e., truth, can only be what it is, namely this open, when and as long as it establishes itself in its open. See Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” 36.

critiques of Western metaphysics, modernity, and technology—and the corresponding antisemitic perception of a deracinated world—Jewry as representative of these ills (as articulated in Heidegger’s *Black Notebooks*)—display his immersion in a deeply anti-modern political and intellectual milieu in Nazi Germany.²⁸ Moreover, it is in this context that Heidegger’s philosophy shows itself in connection with the political thought of Schmitt, whose critique of modern political forms, in particular parliamentary democracy and liberalism, pivots on an underlying critique and rejection of technology.²⁹ The brief correspondence of these two major figures in twentieth-century German intellectual history, as well as, their complicated official and theoretical involvement in National Socialism, further displays an affinity regarding their critiques of modernity, technology and progress, which might give the impression that such critiques are therefore part and parcel of conservative-revolutionary, far-right, or fascist politics as opposed to the politics of liberalism or the left. Rather than providing clear answers, however, such critiques unravel more questions to the extent that many of the thinkers in the early twentieth century who were most pronounced in their opposition to fascism and capitalism—such as Adorno, Benjamin and Lukács—were themselves immersed in critiques of modernity and technology. Instead of being marginal to their thought as a whole, such critiques were pivotal elements of their thinking on politics, art and society. The intersecting critiques of modernity and technology, then, uncover a vital dimension to the discourses and debates about aesthetics and politics in the Weimar period and its aftermath in German thought, complicating rather than resolving the relationship between thinkers often positioned either to the right or left of the political spectrum.

Although Heidegger establishes an essential link between philosophy and poetry, locating the latter at the center of his thinking, their intersection with the political is unclear in these early sections of the text. By linking the disclosure of Being—through poetry and philosophy—to ‘human history as the work of humans and gods’, Heidegger does, in effect, gesture at the possibly political implications of his thinking. However, from this passage alone, these implications remain unclear. This ambiguity is problematized by a well-known passage later in

²⁸ For more on the link between Heidegger’s anti-Semitism and his critiques of modernity and technology, see Christian Fuchs, “Martin Heidegger’s Anti-Semitism: Philosophy of Technology and the Media in the Light of the *Black Notebooks*,” *Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society*, 13, No. 1 (2013).

²⁹ See John P. McCormick, *Carl Schmitt’s Critique of Liberalism: Against Politics as Technology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

this text, in which Heidegger links National Socialism to truth and greatness: “In particular, what is peddled about nowadays as the philosophy of National Socialism, but which has not the least to do with the inner truth and greatness of this movement [namely, the encounter between global technology and modern humanity], is fishing in these troubled waters of ‘values’ and ‘totalities’.”³⁰ As many commentators have noted, Heidegger’s decision to retain this troubling passage in his post-War publication of *Introduction to Metaphysics* evinces a reluctance to completely disavow and renounce his engagement with National Socialism in the 1930s. Despite this, what is perhaps most compelling about this passage is Heidegger’s linkage of the historical-political movement and institution of National Socialism with the fundamentally philosophical concept of truth, which, in the context of Heidegger’s philosophy, is indissolubly bound up with the disclosure of Being through poetry and philosophy.³¹

Already in his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger begins to elaborate the ways in which poetry and politics are intertwined. In one of the sections preceding his passage proclaiming the ‘inner truth and greatness of National Socialism’, Heidegger uncovers the possible political bearings of his philosophical conception of language and poetry. “Being-

³⁰ Ibid., 213.

³¹ The link Heidegger posits between National Socialism and truth is compelling to the extent that this linkage complicates the view that Heidegger’s philosophy is not necessarily implicated in his political affiliation with Nazism by uncovering an important dimension to the current debates about the politics of Heidegger’s philosophy. For Heidegger’s gesturing at the possibility of a link between his philosophy and his engagement with Nazism in a text that begins with the elevation of poetry to the order of philosophical thinking, implicitly discloses the vexing relation of art and politics. The question of the relation of the political and the poetic (conceived here as the essence of art—as discussed below) in Heidegger’s philosophy, is, moreover, key to understanding ‘the Heidegger controversy’ insofar as arguments exculpating Heidegger’s philosophy from his association with Nazism often pivot on the central claim that the focus of Heidegger’s thinking transitions from politics to *poiēsis* over the course of the mid-1930s and his later career. As David Farrell Krell argues in his introduction to Heidegger’s *The Question Concerning Technology*, the poetic rather than the political becomes central to the safeguarding of Being in Heidegger’s post-war philosophical project, particularly, in his theorization of the essence of technology: “Indeed, the work of art now comes to be more prominent in Heidegger’s thought than ever: whereas in 1935 ‘the deed that founds the political state’ participates in the revelation of beings, in 1953, the political is in total eclipse. Not the political but the poetical appears as the saving power; not *praxis* but *poiēsis* may enable us to confront the essential unfolding of technology.” Krell’s claim thus rests on a distinction—in Heidegger’s philosophy—between the political and the poetic, and between politics and art, more broadly. This distinction and the rigid separation of politics and poetry, however, is not self-evident from the texts in which Heidegger engages with the questions of art and poetry most directly. On the contrary, however, as James Phillips and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe—himself a staunch defender of Heidegger’s philosophy taken as a whole—suggests, Heidegger’s writings on art and poetry cannot be easily divorced from his engagement with National Socialism and a *völkisch* conception of German Nationalism. This is not to say that Heidegger’s conceptions of art and poetry ineluctably conclude in the affirmation of National Socialism or even of *völkisch* nationalism, but rather, that the link to these political movements and the Third Reich nonetheless exists and demands further exploration. See David Farrell Krell, introduction to ‘The Question Concerning Technology’, in Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1977), p. 310.

human, according to its historical, history-opening essence,” writes Heidegger, “is logos, the gathering and apprehending of the Being of beings...with the breakaway into Being, one finds one's way into the word, language.”³² The historical dimension of ‘Being-human’ for Heidegger lies in the event of logos, “the revealing gathering,” the discourse, through which the ‘Being of beings’ is unconcealed. Language, for Heidegger, is therefore an elemental force through which the historical essence of what it means to be human is uncovered.

In another lecture delivered at the University of Freiburg in the winter of 1934-35, subsequently published as *Hölderlin's Hymns: "Germania" and "The Rhine,"* Heidegger applies his conception of poetry to the work of the Romantic poet-philosopher Friedrich Hölderlin. In his interpretation of Hölderlin's “Germania,” a poem that presents the latter as a homeland and fatherland, Heidegger further develops these two conceptions, thus linking the event or happening of great poetry with a nationalist politics of place. In his poem, Hölderlin writes: “. . . yet if/ You waters of the homeland! now with you/ The heart's love has plaint.”³³ In approaching these lines of Hölderlin's poem, Heidegger focuses on the concept of homeland by expounding upon its political and philosophical dimensions. Locating the “I” or voice of the speaker in the poem as “experiencing itself precisely as belonging to the homeland,” Heidegger explains how we are to conceive of homeland in this context:

Homeland—not as a mere birth place, nor as a mere landscape familiar to us, but as the power of the Earth upon which the human being “dwells poetically,” in each case in accordance with his historical Dasein. . . In such homeland, the human being first experiences himself as belonging to the Earth, which he does not make empathetically subservient to his attunements. Rather, the reverse is the case: From out of the Earth, it first becomes possible for him to experience the nothingness of his individuated I-ness, which sets out by setting itself over and against everything, only to place it at its mercy as an object and empathize with it in its lived experiences.³⁴

Here, the nationalist idea of homeland is tied not only to the poeticizing of Being in poetry but to a poetic dwelling whereby “the human being first experiences himself as belonging to the earth.” In this respect, Heidegger interprets the idea of homeland not simply as a sense of belonging to a people unified by a collective cultural history and language, but moreover, as a belonging to a

³² Ibid., 182.

³³ Friedrich Hölderlin, “Germania,” cited in Martin Heidegger, *Hölderlin's Hymns: "Germania" and "The Rhine,"* trans. William McNeill and Julia Ireland (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 75.

³⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Hölderlin's Hymns: "Germania" and "The Rhine,"* trans. William McNeill and Julia Ireland (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 80.

place, to earth. This topological grounding in a place, a homeland, starkly contrasts with the deracinated logic and cosmopolitan impulses of modernity and Western metaphysics that Heidegger critiques throughout his works.

In Heidegger's interpretation, the poietic quality of bringing forth that is paradigmatic of art is thus what makes it decisive in the sense of being determinative for "every deed": "If the artistic constitutes metaphysical activity pure and simple, then every deed, especially the highest deed and thus the thinking of philosophy too, must be determined by it."³⁵ Afforded this important position, art then is revealed as something more than the disclosure of truth; art is shown to be "the greatest *stimulans* of life," as Nietzsche puts it.³⁶ Interpreting Nietzsche's five statements on art taken together as a whole, Heidegger emphasizes the conception of art as the greatest stimulant of life as Nietzsche's definitive statement on art on account of being the "stimulant" that moves things beyond themselves, thus increasing their power, in other words, the "will to power."³⁷ For Heidegger, then, it is precisely the will to power inhering in the very essence of art, that makes art truly decisive and determinative not only for philosophy but for 'all deeds' and acts of bringing forth from statecraft to pedagogy. If the will to power is conceived as a fundamentally political impulse and movement—given its ineluctable drive for ever increasing power and strength, on one hand, and its decisionism, on the other—then its imbrication with art in Heidegger's reading of Nietzsche shows itself vividly, albeit ambiguously. For the character of the politics of the will to power as art lies only in what was left unsaid at the close of this lecture.

In his lecture, "Six Basic Developments in the History of Aesthetics," Heidegger presents a critique of aesthetics from Plato to Nietzsche in the course of further developing his own, anti-aesthetic—and therefore radically modern, avant-garde—conception of art, which here begins to take shape not simply as a philosophical conception but also as a political one. Heidegger's critique of the study of aesthetics focuses on its being concerned chiefly with the ways in which the sensuous object, the work of art, stimulates or arouses the feeling of the beautiful in the

³⁵ Ibid.

Despite being an interpretation of Nietzsche's conception of art, this view further expresses Heidegger's own conception of art, as he articulates it in *The Origin of the Work of Art*, wherein art is presented as un-concealing the essence and truth of Being (like philosophy) through its activity of bringing forth

³⁶ Ibid., 75.

³⁷ Ibid., 76.

human subject. This means that the entire study of aesthetics is premised on the rigid Cartesian dichotomy of subject and object, a dichotomy that, in Heidegger's estimation, encapsulates the logic of modern metaphysics from Descartes to Neo-Kantianism. Drawing out this widespread approach to art in the history of aesthetics, Heidegger writes: "The artwork is posited as the 'object' for a 'subject'; definitive for aesthetic consideration is the subject-object relation, indeed as a relation of feeling. The work becomes an object in terms of that surface which is accessible to 'lived experience'." ³⁸ For Heidegger, however, the rigid bifurcation of subject and object is contradicted by our phenomenological experience of being in the world that destructs the subject/object opposition, in that we are both subjects and fundamentally part of the objective world. Great art, in this sense, is not in need of corresponding aesthetic reflection on it, insofar as it speaks for itself and obviates the requirement of any external, abstract justification (this is the first basic development). For this reason, Heidegger argues, the genesis of aesthetics in Greek philosophy happens "only at that moment when their great art and also the great philosophy that flourished along with it comes to an end." ³⁹ The Greek philosophers, in particular Plato and Aristotle, thus proceeded to set the foundation for the subsequent history of aesthetics in Western philosophy, beginning with the assertion of the central aesthetic opposition of form and content (*hylē-morphē*). Coinciding with this schema, Heidegger maintains, the Greeks further developed their aesthetics by linking art to *technē* ("art," "mode of production," "craft"). Heidegger continues that contrasting with *technē* is *physis* ("nature," "being," "beings"), the latter of which human beings master using *technē*, understood here as representing "human knowledge" in the broadest sense. ⁴⁰

Following from this aesthetic conception of art as *technē* now at work in modern philosophy (as opposed to Greek philosophy), Heidegger posits, "is the decline of great art, great in the designated sense...art that forfeits its essence, loses its immediate relation to the basic task of representing the absolute, ie, of establishing the absolute definitively as such in the realm of

³⁸ Ibid., 78.

³⁹ Ibid., 80.

⁴⁰ In this regard, Heidegger locates the conception of art as *technē*, a form of knowledge and bringing forth, a way of disclosing Being, that ultimately facilitates the technical manipulation and 'mastery over beings' as a conception of art that is developed in Greek philosophy precisely once great art had ceased and the consequent birth of aesthetics was set in motion. Anticipating his later work, *The Question Concerning Technology*, wherein *technē* is opposed to *poiesis*, as rivaling modes of disclosing the essence of Being, here Heidegger already begins to formulate his critique of *technē* as a mode of disclosure that is essentially bound up with the post-Socratic Greek and Western philosophical tradition Heidegger, *Hölderlin's Hymns: "Germania" and "The Rhine"*, 81.

historical man.”⁴¹ At this point in the history of aesthetics, then, “great art comes to an end,” a diagnosis Hegel posits in his *Lectures on Aesthetics*.⁴² According to Heidegger, following the ‘end of art’ envisaged in Hegel’s aesthetics, a response to this decline was formulated through the works of Richard Wagner, whose art and reflections on the latter constituted an attempt at “collective art,” thus foregrounding the national, political capacity of art.⁴³ Emphasizing his assessment of what “remains essential” in Wagner’s aesthetics, Heidegger points to the historical dimension it engendered as a collective, national work of art:

With reference to the historical position of art, the effort to produce the "collective artwork" remains essential. The very name is demonstrative. For one thing, it means that the arts should no longer be realized apart from one another, that they should be conjoined in one work. But beyond such sheer quantitative unification, the artwork should be a celebration of the national community, it should be the religion.⁴⁴

For Heidegger, despite Wagner’s failure to create “great art” what is decisive and noteworthy in Wagner’s art and his aesthetics, is his “will to the collective artwork,” that is, precisely the movement through which Wagner sought to fuse art with the politics of German nationalism. For it is this willing of the collective artwork that, in Heidegger’s account, that “raises Wagner” above his contemporaries.⁴⁵

Having laid the foundation for his own conception of art, Heidegger presents the historical imbrication of art and politics as centered on the opposition of the Apollonian and Dionysian that is at work throughout Nietzsche’s corpus from *The Birth of Tragedy* to *The Will to Power*. This opposition, Heidegger argues, is not Nietzsche’s innovation alone, but was already foreseen by Hölderlin in a letter (December 4, 1801) to his compatriot Böhlendorff, in which he “contrasts ‘the holy pathos’ and ‘the Occidental *Junonian* sobriety of representational skill’ in the essence of the Greeks.”⁴⁶ For Heidegger, however, the opposition of the Apollonian and Dionysian is, by no means, to be conceived abstractly, “as an indifferent historical

⁴¹ Ibid., 84.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 85.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 85-86.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 86.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 103-104.

finding.”⁴⁷ On the contrary, it is here that the decisive, political moment in art is manifest for Heidegger:

Rather, it becomes manifest to direct meditation on the destiny and determination of the German people...It is enough if we gather from the reference that the variously named conflict of the Dionysian and the Apollonian, of holy passion and sober representation, is a hidden stylistic law of the historical determination of the German people, and that one day we must find ourselves ready and able to give it shape. The opposition is not a formula with the help of which we should be content to describe "culture." By recognizing this antagonism Hölderlin and Nietzsche early on placed a question mark after the task of the German people to find their essence historically. Will we understand this cipher? One thing is certain: history will wreak vengeance on us if we do not.⁴⁸

To the extent that such a reading is not evidenced by the passages Heidegger cites from Nietzsche's and Hölderlin's works, Heidegger's insistence on this particular, nationalistic interpretation of the struggle between the Apollonian and the Dionysian in effect reveals more about Heidegger's refunctioning of and confrontation with these two thinkers than it does about their own philosophical or political positions. Notwithstanding the question of whether or not Heidegger's interpretation of Nietzsche and Hölderlin is adequate to their works, what remains essential here (for the purposes of understanding Heidegger's theorization of art in relation to politics) is Heidegger's assertion of a national, specifically German, imperative—"a hidden stylistic law of the historical determination of the German people, and that one day we must find ourselves ready and able to give it shape"—that grows out of the opposition of the Apollonian and the Dionysian in art and philosophical reflections thereof.

Complicating this ostensibly parochial, *völkisch* conception of art in Heidegger, however, is his presentation of an opposition between world and earth in *The Origin of the Work of Art*. Given the linkage of earth to the "blood and soil" nationalism Heidegger invokes in his *Rektoratsrede*, and his subsequent 1934 address to local German workers, "Follow the Führer!," Heidegger's emphasis on the significance of earth in his conception of art appears to confirm a truly nationalist, or perhaps, National Socialist, account of art. However, his conception of a struggle between earth and world—that is at play in art—effectively problematizes a straightforwardly nationalistic reading of his views on art. For his conception of world, which is explicitly contrasted with the more localized, indigenous, and rooted notion of earth, ultimately

⁴⁷ Ibid., 104.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

links art with the openness and unboundedness of the world, signaling a cosmopolitanism or internationalism that appears at odds with a nationalist interpretation of Heidegger's conception of art. Thus, in light of Heidegger's Nietzsche lectures, by looking to *The Origin of the Work of Art* alongside his explicitly political texts, "The Self-Assertion of the German University," and "Follow the Führer!," it is possible to begin disentangling the enigmatic relation of earth and world not simply in Heidegger's thinking on aesthetics and art, but also in his philosophy more broadly. In these terms, the question of Heidegger's 'aestheticization of politics', as Lacoue-Labarthe frames it in Benjaminian fashion, comes to the fore as a way of illuminating the political stakes of Heidegger's philosophy and thinking on art, in addition to uncovering his relation to the development of Critical Theory, particularly, the aesthetico-political theories of Benjamin and Adorno.

II. Between Art and Modernity: The Benjamin-Adorno-Heidegger Exchange

At the center of Benjamin and Adorno's debates about the utopian, politically emancipatory possibilities of art was the question of art's capacity to negate and break free from the domineering, reified logic of modern capitalist society. Drawing on Lukács' pioneering work on reification in *History and Class Consciousness*, Benjamin and Adorno situated art as containing an emancipatory-utopian quality, precisely in its capacity to wrest itself and its audience free from modernity's reifying logics of identity and instrumental reason. Critiqued by thinkers on the right and the left in Weimar Germany, modernity presented humanity with a profound sense of alienation, fragmenting and degrading human experience as the world became mechanized and endlessly dissected by modern technology, industrialization, and most importantly, the reified, instrumental thinking that facilitated such developments. Echoing German Idealism and the Romantic tradition, wherein the truth-value and emancipatory potential of art are pronounced, critical theorists as well as thinkers associated with the right, such as Heidegger and George, turned to art as an emancipatory alternative—disclosing truth—to the stultifying logic of a reified modernity. For Heidegger, the value of art lies in its reorientation of our relationship with Being, its capacity to disclose authentic Being or truth through an original, pre-modern mode of unconcealing being, namely, that of *poiēsis*. His positioning of art as

breaking out of the reified, inauthentic thinking of technological modernity rests on the artwork's recovery of an original, pre-modern, authentic mode of being, in other words, its capacity to reorient us to a more traditional, non-modern relation to Being. By contrast, despite disagreeing on various points, Benjamin and Adorno, do not seek a return to a more original, traditional or pre-modern mode of thinking and being; instead, their thinking aimed at the radical transformation of existing social reality through the clarification and emancipation of consciousness from its reifying confines.

For Benjamin and Adorno—and likewise other critical theorists and Marxist philosophers—art has the emancipatory capacity to negate the reified thinking of modernity precisely through its intensification or enactment of this very reification. In their account, then, the art that is most capable of breaking out of the logic of the reification and repetitive homogeneity of the modern, industrial world, is fundamentally modern, in that it emphasizes modernity's reification and fragmentation of experience rather than hearkening back to an idealized past. Benjamin and Adorno disagree most explicitly, however, in their discussion of the particular forms of modern art that would be capable of this emancipatory-utopian negation of reified consciousness. Whereas Benjamin sees this utopian function unleashed by the technological-aesthetic innovations and deployments of Surrealism, Dada, cinematic montage and avant-garde agitprop (i.e., Brecht's theatre), Adorno, by contrast, critiques technological reproduction and the resultant forms of mass art and popular culture as regressive to the extent that they ineluctably conform to the reified logic of sameness, repetition and the commercial demands of the market. In Adorno's account, the various technologically reproducible art forms that can be readily disseminated on a mass scale, particularly, film and radio, lack the autonomy and resistance to commodification characteristic of high modern works, particularly, those of Beckett, Kafka, Schönberg, and Alban Berg. Central to this exchange between Benjamin Adorno on the negative, utopian value of art, is Benjamin's conception of the aura—the unique presence, the here-and-now of an object that embeds within a tradition—the decline of which captures the fragmenting degradation of experience in modernity. While Benjamin and Adorno both agree on the emancipatory nature of this decline of aura (insofar as this decline wrests the aesthetic object from the grips of tradition and the mythic, cult value its unique, authentic presence inculcates), they disagree on the particular forms of art that best achieve such an emancipatory breaking free

from tradition and its interlocking myths of the authenticity, sacrality and authority of the original, auratic work of art.

Rather than framing the debate between Benjamin and Adorno reductively as confined to a left-wing, Western Marxist discourse on aesthetics and politics, my dissertation places the Adorno-Benjamin debate within the wider intellectual-historical milieu of twentieth century German thought. Situating Heidegger and his conception of art as a key part of this exchange between Benjamin and Adorno at once illuminates their respective aesthetico-political positions while showing their complex relationship of thinkers often divided by later scholars and historians into two, opposing political and intellectual camps. That Benjamin, Adorno and other critical theorists were not only aware of, by actively engaged with Heidegger's philosophy is evidenced by an array of mostly critical references to Heidegger in their works. Perhaps the most explicit of such confrontations is in Adorno's 1964 *The Jargon of Authenticity*, which critiques the ideal of authenticity—celebrated by Heidegger and existentialism more broadly—as ideological jargon. This work, like other instances of Adorno's engagement with Heidegger, evinces an attempt, on behalf of the author, to distance and differentiate his own philosophy from that of Heidegger. This attempt is equally present in Benjamin's thought as well. While living with his intellectual companion, Brecht, in Svendborg, Denmark in the early 1930s, Benjamin planned collaborate with Brecht on the publication of an "anti-Heidegger journal."⁴⁹ In the same period, Benjamin writes of his plan to work together with Brecht to "annihilate Heidegger": "The plan, in 1930, 'to annihilate Heidegger here in the summer in the context of a very close-knit circle of readers led by Brecht and me', failed because of an illness of Brecht's, his later trip to Le Lavandou and his habitual summer holiday in Bavaria."⁵⁰ This preoccupation with critically engaging Heidegger's philosophy was present not only in the aesthetico-political of Benjamin and Adorno, but likewise, in the entire discourse on aesthetics and politics in Critical Theory and Western Marxism. This is evidenced in Benjamin's minutes transcribed from meetings for *Krise und Kritik*, a Marxist journal and reading group consisting of Brecht, Benjamin, Bloch, Kracauer, Gustav Glück and Herbert Ihering. That Heidegger figured in this group's aesthetico-political exchanges is undeniable, as Benjamin writes in his minutes from a meeting on November 26,

⁴⁹ Erdmut Wizisla, *Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. Christine Shuttleworth (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 41.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

1930 for *Krise und Kritik* (attended by Bloch, Brecht, Kracauer, Ihering and Adorno, who was a guest that day):

Bloch is asked what he would like to write for the first issue.

Discussion of the topic The different forms of leadership:

Instead of the scholar (Professor) Mannheim, Kracauer suggests Heidegger.

This topic to be offered to Wiesengrund (i.e., Adorno).⁵¹

Although Karl Mannheim's influential 1929 work, *Ideology and Utopia*, which figured prominently in the intellectual milieu of the early 1930s, would have been a productive topic for the group, their decision for Adorno to present a reading of Heidegger instead demonstrates the extent to which Heidegger was a force to be reckoned with amongst left-wing intellectuals. To this effect, including Heidegger in the Adorno-Benjamin debate, demonstrates the reductive, binary character of intellectual histories that partition right and left into two, mutually opposed, separate camps with their own unique concerns. At the same time, this juxtaposition uncovers the ways that Heidegger's philosophy, or any philosophy or theory ostensibly tainted by its problematic relation to fascism or reactionary politics, can be redemptively critiqued through the elevation of its underlying truth-content. As such, including Heidegger in the Benjamin-Adorno exchange serves to simultaneously illuminate their respective positions on the emancipatory-utopian function of art in modernity while also working to unfold the political implications and contemporary relevance of Heidegger's thought.

In presenting the relationship of a politically disparate cast of intellectuals as one of reciprocal interaction (dialectic)—an interaction often colored by redemptive critique—this dissertation draws on and expands existing accounts of the Frankfurt School, Heideggerian thought and this period of German intellectual history writ large.⁵² Despite the issues inherent in the bifurcation of thinkers and schools into right and left, this dissertation deploys these terms in order to illustrate the historical complexities and incommensurability of such political identifiers

⁵¹ Walter Benjamin in Erdmut Wizisla, *Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. Christine Shuttleworth (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 202.

⁵² See Kennedy, "Carl Schmitt and the Frankfurt School," 37-66; Scheuerman, *Between the Norm and the Exception*; Norton, *Secret Germany*; Bredekamp, "From Walter Benjamin to Carl Schmitt, via Thomas Hobbes," 247-266; "Walter Benjamin's Esteem for Carl Schmitt" in *The Oxford Handbook of Carl Schmitt*, ed. Jens Meierhenrich and Oliver Simons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Marc De Wilde, "Meeting Opposites: The Political Theologies of Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 44, no. 4 (2011), 363-81; David Pan, "Against Biopolitics: Walter Benjamin, Carl Schmitt, and Giorgio Agamben on Political Sovereignty and Symbolic Order," *The German Quarterly* 82, no. 1 (2009), 42-62.

and oppositions. By deploying the terms right and left-wing, this dissertation seeks to redefine the rigid opposition of right and left as a dialectical conversation in which the boundary between right and left and the very identities of these terms are dismantled. To dismantle the opposition, to evoke its complexity and nuance, it is necessary to deploy the terms of the opposition, however, with an awareness of the inherent difficulties in utilizing them. The scholarship on Heidegger and those associated with the Frankfurt School, however, is extensive and accurate in its representation of the complex relationships between Heidegger and the critical theorists of his generation.⁵³ Accounts that synthesize ideas found in Heidegger and Critical Theory include Fred Dallmayr's *Between Freiburg and Frankfurt*, Christina Lafont's "Heidegger and the Frankfurt School" and Julian Young's "Heidegger, Critical Theory and the Critique of Technology."⁵⁴ Although they concede that this relationship was fraught by reciprocal animosity and opposition, Dallmayr, Young and Lafont argue that rather than being inextricably opposed, Heidegger and the critical theorists converge, sharing key ideas on a variety of fronts. Dallmayr's work constitutes a renewed attempt to bridge 'Freiburg' and 'Frankfurt' and their respective philosophies of ontology and critique into a "critical ontology."⁵⁵ Analogously, noting the tense intellectual relationships Heidegger had with two critical theorists Habermas and Marcuse, Lafont emphasizes the persistence of Heidegger's influence on their thinking and Critical Theory more broadly, arguing that they were unable to "fully extricate" the influence of Heidegger

⁵³ Perhaps the most compelling, comprehensive account of this relationship is Mikko Imanen's recent work, *Toward a Concrete Philosophy: Heidegger and the Emergence of the Frankfurt School* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020). Also see Eds. Andrew Benjamin and Dimitris Vardoulakis, *Sparks Will Fly: Benjamin and Heidegger* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2015). For works presenting Heidegger and the critical theorists as inextricably opposed, see Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*; Wolin, "Carl Schmitt: The Conservative Revolutionary Habitus and the Aesthetics of Horror." 424-47; see also Lacoue-Labarthe, *Heidegger, Art and Politics*, 61-76; Christopher P. Long, "Art's Fateful Hour: Benjamin, Heidegger, Art and Politics." *New German Critique*, no. 83 (2001), 89-115. Long's essay is a unique case as it embodies both interpretive positions by conflating key concepts in Heidegger and Benjamin (namely, Heideggerian truth and Benjamin's notion of Aura) specifically to show why they are intransigently opposed philosophically and politically. See discussion below. For scholarship that overemphasizes or focuses solely on the affinities of Heidegger and Critical Theory while eliding their underlying redemptive critique of the former, see Cristina Lafont. "Heidegger and the Frankfurt School", in *The Routledge Companion to the Frankfurt School*, ed. Peter E. Gordon, Espen Hammer and Axel Honneth (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 282-294; see also Iain Macdonald, "What Is, Is More than It Is: Adorno and Heidegger on the Priority of Possibility," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 19, no. 1 (2011), 31-57; Wesley Phillips, *Metaphysics and Music in Adorno and Heidegger* (New York: Palgrave, 2015).

⁵⁴ Lafont, "Heidegger and the Frankfurt School," 282-294; Julian Young, "Heidegger, Critical Theory and the Critique of Technology," in *The Cambridge History of Philosophy, 1945-2015* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), ed. Kelly Becker and Iain D. Thompson, 375-388; also see Fred Dallmayr, *Between Freiburg and Frankfurt: Toward a Critical Ontology* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991).

⁵⁵ Dallmayr account draws on Hermann Mörchen's groundbreaking attempt to bridge the apparently opposed philosophies of Adorno and Heidegger, See Dallmayr, *Between Freiburg and Frankfurt*, 1-5; see also Mörchen, *Adorno und Heidegger*.

“from their philosophical development.”⁵⁶ In light of the fact that recent scholarship has already disclosed myriad “connections ranging from the parallel development of similar philosophical interests and ideas (e.g., the critique of technology and the philosophical significance of art) to some remarkable convergences in philosophical views (e.g., the critique of Western rationality as instrumental rationality),” Lafont dedicates her analysis to exploring the ways that “Heidegger’s philosophy made a systematic contribution to Critical Theory.”⁵⁷ Likewise, in his writings on Heidegger and Critical Theory, Young claims that the two main currents in Twentieth Century German philosophy, crudely framed as the “Frankfurt-based Critical Theory” and “Freiburg-based phenomenology,” converged in their shared critique of technology.⁵⁸ Drawing on the well-known influence Max Weber exerted on both constellations of thinkers, Young argues that there is a “unity between the Heideggerian and Frankfurt School critiques of technology” while at the same time showing how they differ with respect to their positions on humanism.⁵⁹ Conflating the critical theoretical conception of reification with Heidegger’s theory of *das Gestell* (“the enframing” that captures the ‘essence of technology in Heidegger’s account), Young argues that aside from their divergence on humanism (in which Critical Theory engenders the humanism that Heidegger’s interlocking critiques of technology and humanism take aim at) “there appears to be a virtually complete convergence between the Frankfurt and Heideggerian critiques of modern technological practice.”⁶⁰ The significance of this convergence is highlighted by the centrality of the question of technology in “modern philosophy”—represented by the two major currents of Freiburg and Frankfurt—the “proper form” of which, Young continues, “is the philosophy of technology” insofar as technology is “both the defining and the most worrying aspect of modernity.”⁶¹

⁵⁶ Lafont, “Heidegger and the Frankfurt School”, 282.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Julian Young *German Philosophy in the Twentieth Century: Weber to Heidegger* (London: Routledge, 2018), 1. In this work Young establishes a reductive framework for interpreting this period in German intellectual history, separating the entire century into two dominant schools, Frankfurt (Critical Theory) and Freiburg (phenomenology). In an essay published the following year, Young focuses on the affinities of Heidegger and Critical Theory in terms of their shared critique of technology. See Julian Young, “Heidegger, Critical Theory and the Critique of Technology” In *The Cambridge History of Philosophy, 1945-2015* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), ed. Kelly Becker and Iain D. Thompson, 375-388.

⁵⁹ Julian Young, “Heidegger, Critical Theory and the Critique of Technology” In *The Cambridge History of Philosophy, 1945-2015* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), ed. Kelly Becker and Iain D. Thompson, 375-376.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 382.

⁶¹ Ibid., 375.

Indeed, the critique of modern technology in Critical Theory and Heideggerian thought plays an important role in their respective philosophies. Young's account, however, overemphasizes the role and nature of this critique in Critical Theory insofar as their ultimate target was reification and the logic of identity and not technology itself as Young maintains. Building on these important accounts of Heidegger's relationship with the progenitors of Critical Theory, this study aims to demonstrate the underlying criticisms and differences, the dialectical nuances, at work in the apparent affinities and convergences of Heidegger and the critical theorists. To this effect, I seek to expand and develop Young's account of Heidegger and the critical theorists through an illustration of the fundamental differences in their underlying modes and orientations of critique. Whereas Heidegger's critique of technology is conservatively oriented toward the past, that is, toward a pre-modern, wholesome disclosure of being, critical theorists sought to redeem modernity, activating the utopian potentials latent in the present, through a process of redemptive critique.

Two interpretative approaches, each representing opposite extremes, seek to resolve the complex, contradictory character of the relationship between Heidegger and the critical theorists—a relationship defined by theoretical affinities and intellectual influence (in that Heidegger was Marcuse's and Habermas' teacher early in their careers), on one hand, and fierce, mutual opposition, on the other hand. These conflicting approaches attempt to resolve their contradiction by either emphasizing the evident instances of influence, shared projects and affinities or downplaying the latter while arguing that Critical Theory and Heidegger were inextricably opposed, theoretically and politically. In effect, these two opposing interpretations are at once correct and incorrect insofar as the relationship of Heidegger and Critical Theory is characterized by simultaneous affinity and antagonism, not simply one or the other. Rather than presenting Heidegger and Critical Theory as either inextricably opposed or as having shared, compatible philosophical projects and concepts, this study presents their relationship as one of reciprocal interaction and ongoing engagement despite their mutual opposition on philosophical and political grounds. To this effect, instead of resolving the evident contradiction of this relationship, reconceiving it through the lens of dialectical interaction turns this contradiction into a productive tension, yielding a multifaceted optic for critically interpreting culture, aesthetics and politics and intellectual history more broadly.

Reflecting the broader trend within existing literature, scholarly juxtapositions of Benjamin and Heidegger are divided in their interpretation of the relationship between these two thinkers. Given the imbrication of Nazism and Heidegger's lifework, a number of scholarly interpretations have positioned Heidegger's artwork essay as promoting an 'aestheticization of politics', making it incompatible with Benjamin's aesthetics insofar he situates such aestheticization—linked with *l'art pour l'art*—with the politics of fascism. For instance, in their accounts of Heidegger's conception of art, Lacoue-Labarthe and Wolin present the latter as an 'aestheticization of politics'.⁶² At the other extreme, scholars seeking a rapprochement have argued that Benjamin's and Heidegger's theories of art and politics are not only compatible but similar and complementary (often in efforts of rescuing Heidegger's thought from criticisms that it cannot be divorced from fascism).⁶³

This latter point of view is illustrated most prominently in Howard Caygill's juxtaposition of Heidegger and Benjamin on the themes of destruction and tradition as manifested in the realms of art and politics. According to Caygill, although Heidegger and Benjamin were outwardly antagonistic, we should not "drive a wedge between" them, but instead ought "to read them together, each against each other's grain."⁶⁴ Caygill contends that Heidegger's artwork essay evinces a marked affinity with Benjamin in that it is orientated toward the destruction of tradition (as represented in Benjamin's artwork essay by the notion of aura, the disintegration of which Benjamin situates as a revolutionary political possibility for art): "He was as aware as Benjamin of the destructive side of tradition, and was responding to the same problem of the management of simultaneous presence and absence which it entailed. And on occasions his text goes much further than Benjamin's in surveying the terrain of possible new sites of tradition. In these Heidegger begins to consider possible shapes of the political which might follow the destruction of tradition."⁶⁵ What is decisive here, as Caygill proceeds to show

⁶² In Wolin's account, Heidegger and Schmitt are grouped together as proponents of the fascist aestheticization of politics that Benjamin repudiates in his work. See Wolin, "Carl Schmitt: The Conservative Revolutionary Habitus and the Aesthetics of Horror," 424-447; see also Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Heidegger, Art and Politics: The Fiction of the Political* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 61-76.

⁶³ See Howard Caygill, "Benjamin, Heidegger and the Destruction of Tradition," in *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, ed. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (London: Routledge, 1994), 1-31; see also Janet Donohoe, "The Place of Tradition: Heidegger and Benjamin on Technology and Art," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 39, No. 3, October 2008.

⁶⁴ Howard Caygill, "Benjamin, Heidegger and the Destruction of Tradition," in *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, ed. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (London: Routledge, 1994), 30.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

in his conclusion, is the way in which interpreting Heidegger as sharing Benjamin's philosophical-political project of 'destroying tradition' in effect rescues Heidegger's philosophy from its association with fascism to show its emancipatory political potential. The Heideggerian concept of "double concealment," Caygill writes, "implies a radical rethinking of the scene of the political, one which is far removed from the spectacular dramaturgy of Fascist aestheticized politics... [a condition of politics] in which the opposition of authentic presence and inauthentic absence is suspended, one in which the scene itself, or 'clearing', is not 'a rigid stage' but is itself negotiable and continually in play."⁶⁶ In interpreting Heidegger in this way, Caygill situates Benjamin's rejoinder to auratic art and the aestheticization of politics (e.g., his notion of 'politicized art') as sharing a close affinity with Heidegger's position in the artwork essay. "With Benjamin's 'politicized art' and Heidegger's doubly concealed clearing, the site of tradition is given the potential to assume a new shape...both thinkers arrived at insights into the revolutionary transformations undergone by the political realm under modernity."⁶⁷ Rather than being intransigently opposed, Caygill's interpretation posits that the aesthetico-political theories of Heidegger and Benjamin shared a political-aesthetic program in that they together interrogated the locus 'tradition' in light of 'modern politics' in order to develop "reconfigurations of the political which would be appropriate to the fundamental changes in subjectivity produced by modernity."⁶⁸ In spite of its productive analysis of the intersection of aura, tradition, modernity and the political, Caygill's account conflates key concepts and overemphasizes the similarities of Benjamin and Heidegger while disregarding the ways that Benjamin sought to 'destroy' and redemptively critique Heidegger's philosophy. Caygill's conflation of Heideggerian and Benjaminian political and aesthetic positions is discussed in Long's essay on art and politics in Heidegger and Benjamin. Forcefully demonstrating the issues inherent in Caygill's positive interpretation of Heidegger's politics in the artwork essay, Long argues that "Caygill is naive about the possibilities of using Heidegger's conception of the double concealedness of being for a non-authoritarian politics because he fails to recognize how forcefully Heidegger himself puts the never-fully-opened concealedness in the service of a disturbing *Blut und Boden* political

⁶⁶ Ibid., 30.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

agenda.”⁶⁹ Although he insightfully points to such shortcomings in Caygill’s work, Long himself falls victim to a similar kind of conflation of Heideggerian and Benjaminian concepts in his own work (where he conflates truth in Heidegger with Benjamin’s “aura”), the latter of which represents the antithesis of Caygill’s interpretation of Heidegger and Benjamin on art and politics.⁷⁰

In contrast to such interpretations that effectively maintain obstinately opposed, one-sided perspectives, my dissertation builds upon insights from both sides of the scholarly debate on the relationship between Heidegger and the critical theorists, thereby reconceiving this relation as a complex, dialectical interaction, crystalized in the operative method of redemptive critique. As such, a dialectical interpretation aware of the redemptive critique at work in their interaction demonstrates the differences, affinities and reciprocal critiques of their respective philosophies. One of the fundamental links between Heidegger’s conception of art and the politicized aesthetics of Critical Theory was Heidegger’s elevation of artistic creation (bringing-forth) or *poiēsis* as a utopian mode of unconcealing Being or Truth, as a mode of being, in other words, that counters the fragmented, ratiocinative thinking of modernity, as Krzysztof Ziarek argues in his work on Heidegger and Adorno.⁷¹ Although prefigured in *Being and Time* and further expanded in his artwork essay, the theme of art as a utopian alternative to the ratiocinative thinking of technological modernity is more comprehensively developed in Heidegger’s 1954 work, “The Question Concerning Technology.” In this piercing critique of modern rationality and technology, Heidegger demonstrates the manifold ways that the framework of technology, the essence of which he presents as *Ge-stell* (“enframing”), defines the ratiocinative, instrumental thinking of typified by modernity.⁷² For Heidegger, the relationship to Being engendered by the enframing of modern technology contrasts with the more wholesome, authentic relationship fostered by the bringing-forth of Being as art or *poiēsis*.⁷³ Evidencing a

⁶⁹ Christopher P. Long. "Art's Fateful Hour: Benjamin, Heidegger, Art and Politics." *New German Critique*, no. 83 (2001), 115.

⁷⁰ Throughout his essay, Long conflates Heidegger’s conception of truth in the artwork with Benjamin’s notion of aura. See Christopher P. Long. "Art's Fateful Hour: Benjamin, Heidegger, Art and Politics." *New German Critique*, no. 83 (2001), 90, 97, 100.

⁷¹ See Krzysztof Ziarek, “Beyond Critique? Art and Power,” in *Adorno and Heidegger: Philosophical Questions* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 105-123.

⁷² See Eds. Robert Scharff and Val Dusek, *Philosophy of Technology: The Technological Condition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003); see also, Tracy Colony, “Concerning Technology: Heidegger and the Question of Technological Essentialism,” in *Idealistic Studies*, Volume 39, Issue 1/3 (2009), p. 23-4.

⁷³ Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” 14.

close affinity with Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of instrumental rationality in their influential work, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, in his critique of modern technology, Heidegger effectively reveals the latter's underlying extractive, instrumental, reified logic.

Heidegger critiques technology and by extension, modern, ratiocinative thinking as “a challenging [*Herausfordern*], which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy that can be extracted and stored as such...the earth now reveals itself as a coal mining district, the soil as a mineral deposit.”⁷⁴ In this regard, under the oppressive thinking of technology's enframing, the earth is transformed into a reified arrangement of resources, inanimate objects whose sole value lies in their exploitative extraction and manipulation to fulfill the ends of instrumental rationality. Contrasting such modern enframing with the more authentic modes of being prevalent in the pre-industrialized past, Heidegger positions the enframing of technology as rapacious and oppressive, a calculative, instrumental logic that exploitatively turns nature into a mere storehouse of resources, in keeping with the degradation of modern man's mode of being-in-the-world under modern technological thinking. Opposing nature, technology turns nature, particularly, the earth, into an object, an exploitable resource that can be set upon [*stellt*], entrapped [*nachstellen*], and ordered according to the dictates of a corrosive rationality. Rather than being the locus of our reoriented relationship with Being as it is in Hölderlin's poetry, under the enframing of technology, the Rhine river is instrumentally reduced to “a water power supplier” that is to be confronted and exploited to the fullest extent.⁷⁵ Through such enframing the natural world and human beings—or in technological, modern terms ‘human resources’—fall under rationality's compulsion to secure resources, collect and administer them so that everything is turned to exploitable object, a “standing reserve [*Bestand*].”⁷⁶ In such an “oppressive” logic, the effects are totalizing, as human beings fall under the dominating, ratiocinative enframing of technology.⁷⁷ This enframing thereby reduces the world to an “orderable as a system of information,” Heidegger maintains, foreshadowing the our contemporary, social reality of personal data mining, collection and manipulation on social media platforms on which people and their inclinations and behaviors are converted into discrete data points to be secured, stored, manipulated, ordered and redistributed in the growing industry

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 16.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 17.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 17-8.

of big data (wherein private technology corporations assist governmental surveillance programs and profit commercially from the commodification of everything down to the smallest details of each individual's life).⁷⁸

For Heidegger, the enframing of modern technology is countered by the mode of unconcealing Being in art or *poiēsis*. In its purposelessness (an idea that figures prominently in Kantian aesthetics), the work of art resists the ratiocinative compulsion to instrumentally convert animate and inanimate beings into equipment to be used and 'forced into being' for calculated ends. In this sense, Heidegger argues that equipment, operating within the framework of instrumentality, is forced into being with a domineering reason that seeks to exploit beings as resources. Lacking "the character of having taken shape by itself," equipment is contrasted with the self-sufficient "granite block" of the natural world that "rests in-itself" as an autonomous object.⁷⁹ Heidegger goes on to contrast equipment with the artwork, which "through its self-sufficient presence, resembles, rather, the mere thing which has taken shape by itself and is never forced into being."⁸⁰ In Heidegger's account, the utopian value of the artwork, its unconcealing of truth and effective reorienting to authentic Being, lies in the "self-sufficient presence," in other words, the autonomous, authentic being-there in-itself (namely, as an object that was not forced into being through domineering instrumentality) of the work of art.⁸¹ Neither forced into being nor compelled to represent anything, the artwork, Heidegger maintains, is endowed with a religious, mythopoetic quality of sacrality and self-sufficient presence, as shown in the example of the Greek temple: "A building, a Greek temple, portrays nothing. It simply stands there in the middle of the rocky, fissured valley. The building encloses the figure of a god and within this concealment, allows it to stand forth through the columned hall within the holy precinct. Through the temple, the god is present in the temple. This presence of the god is, in itself, the extension and delimitation of the precinct as something holy."⁸² Heidegger's chief example of the temple as the archetype of the great work of art evinces a number of underlying conceptions of art. First and foremost, the in-itself, autonomous quality of the temple, its negation of the ratiocinative demands of representation and utility, emphasizes the centrality of autonomy and

⁷⁸ Ibid., 23.

⁷⁹ Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," 9-10.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 10.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., 20.

freedom in the work of art. The autonomy and authentic presence of the artwork thereby serves as an antidote to the repressive thinking of technological modernity. At the same time, in becoming the central locus around which a tradition and a people are formed, the temple represents an organic unity, a wholeness that contrasts with the fragmentation of the modern world: “It is the temple work that first structures and simultaneously gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire for the human being the shape of its destiny. The all-governing expanse of these open relations is the world of this historical people.”⁸³ For Heidegger, the temple opens up the sacral, cultic dimension of the work of art, revealing the latter’s mythopoetic capacity to become the site of the formation of a particular people’s national-religious tradition, the locus of its ongoing development. Negating the unauthentic being and ratiocinative thinking that typifies modernity and technology, in Heidegger’s account, the temple-work highlights the truth of the work of art, namely, its self-sufficient, autonomous presencing of Being.

Understood in this way, Heidegger’s conception of art effectively intersects with Benjamin’s and Adorno’s debate regarding the disintegration of the aura and the positive and negative moments of both popular culture and high modernism. Already in the early 1930s, in his initial versions of “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin interwove the concept of aura with the artwork’s authentic presence or authority, its ritual cult-value and embeddedness in tradition. In doing so, Benjamin mirrors Heidegger’s analogous linkage of the authentic, great work of art to a certain uniqueness, autonomy, sacrality and central role in the formation of tradition in his later essay on the origin of the work of art. Although when Benjamin was writing his own artwork essay, he would not have been aware of Heidegger’s explicit views on aesthetics as they were later articulated in “The Origin of the Work of Art,” he had engaged Heidegger’s philosophy through *Sein und Zeit*, in which the foundations of Heidegger’s concept of art are established through the notion of authentic Being, which art or *poiēsis* become the bearer of. Regardless of Benjamin’s direct knowledge of Heidegger’s conception of art, or vice versa, what is more significant, is that Heidegger’s thinking was paradigmatic of conservative intellectual currents in German thought, just as Benjamin and Adorno represented an array of intellectual trends on the left in German thought at

⁸³ Ibid., 20-21.

the time. Juxtaposing these thinkers, therefore, emphasizes the stakes and vital intellectual context of their respective theories of art and politics, while moreover, revealing the imbrication of ostensibly opposed political currents in twentieth-century German thought.

In his description of the decline aura, the here and now, of the work of art with the advent of ‘technological reproducibility’ (i.e., in film, photography, and audio recording), Benjamin writes that “In even the most perfect reproduction, one thing is lacking: the here and now of the work of art—its unique existence in a particular place. It is this unique existence—and nothing else—that bears the mark of the history to which the work has been subject... a tradition which can be traced only from the standpoint of the original in its present location.”⁸⁴ The aura—which represents an object’s unique presence, its here and now, in other words, the authenticity and embeddedness in tradition of a particular object—is therefore disintegrated by the reproduction of the original and the general advent of technological reproduction, insofar as the latter degrades the uniqueness and original authenticity of the reproduced object. “The here and now of the original,” Benjamin writes, “underlies the concept of its authenticity, and on the latter in turn is founded the idea of a tradition which has passed the object down as the same, identical thing to the present day.”⁸⁵ Put differently, the aura, or “here and now of the original,” which stands as the foundation of the object’s authenticity and authority, is predicated on its embeddedness in tradition as a self-identical object from the time of its origin to the present. Benjamin, however, situates the aura, the perceived immutability of the object, which imbues it with an authentic identity and authority as a unique object of veneration, as an essentially mythic, and therefore, regressive quality. The ritualistic cult value of the work of art, which attests to art’s origins in cultic rites, Benjamin argues, is another way of formulating the concept of the object’s aura. “The definition of the aura as the ‘unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be’, represents nothing more than a formulation of the cult value of the work of art in categories of spatiotemporal perception. Distance is the opposite of nearness. The essentially distant is the unapproachable. Unapproachability is, indeed, a primary quality of the cult image; true to its

⁸⁴ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, Second Version,” in *Selected Writings, Volume 3*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 103.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

nature, the cult image remains ‘distant, however near it may be.’⁸⁶ Here, Benjamin expands the concept of aura from the authentic here and now of the object to now include the ‘apparition of a distance’ that creates a sense of separation, unapproachability and mediacy between the viewer and the object. In effect, this distance is representative of abstraction and thus, the distancing between subject and object, ruler and ruled, master and slave. As Adorno and Horkheimer argue in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, abstraction through distancing subject and object—the modus operandi of reification and enlightenment rationality—is the means by which the ruler maintains his domination over the ruled: “The distance of subject from object, the presupposition of abstraction, is founded on the distance from things which the ruler attains by means of the ruled.”⁸⁷ This distancing creates a mythic sense of authority and sacrality of the distant, auratic object, the latter of which thereby becomes an object of veneration, as Long and Michael Jennings demonstrate in their interpretations of Benjamin’s artwork essay.⁸⁸ This linkage of aura with tradition and its mythic authority grows out of Benjamin’s initial theorization of aura in his earlier essay, “Little History of Photography,” in which he writes:

And the difference between the copy, which illustrated papers and newsreels keep in readiness, and the original picture is unmistakable. Uniqueness and duration are as intimately intertwined in the latter as are transience and reproducibility in the former. The peeling away of the object's shell, the destruction of the aura, is the signature of a

⁸⁶ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, Third Version,” in *Selected Writings, Volume 4*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 272.

⁸⁷ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 9.

⁸⁸ In his introduction to Benjamin’s artwork essay, Jennings makes this link central to Benjamin’s theory. Elucidating this connection, Jennings writes:

A work of art may be said to have an aura if it claims a unique status based less on quality, use value, or worth per se than on its figurative distance from the beholder. Figurative, since, as the definition intimates, this distance is not primarily a space between painting and spectator or between text and reader but the creation of a psychological inapproachability—an authority -claimed for the work on the basis of its position within a tradition. The distance that intrudes between work and viewer is most often, then, a temporal distance: auratic texts are sanctioned by their inclusion in a time-tested canon. For Benjamin, integration into the Western tradition is coterminous with an integration into cult practices: “Originally, the embeddedness of an artwork in the context of tradition found expression in a cult. As we know, the earliest artworks originated in the service of rituals.....In other words: the unique value of the ‘authentic’ work of art always has its in ritual.

Michael Jennings, “Introduction,” in Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, and Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 14-15; also see Christopher P. Long. “Art’s Fateful Hour: Benjamin, Heidegger, Art and Politics,” *New German Critique*, no. 83 (2001), 94.

perception whose sense for all that is the same in the world has grown to the point where even the singular, the unique, is divested of its uniqueness-by means of its reproduction.⁸⁹

In this regard, Benjamin's notion of aura functions as a kind of shell, a fetishized veil shrouding the object in the myth of the past and its concomitant authority. As Adorno's critique of Benjamin's artwork essay (discussed below) shows, this fetishizing shrouding of the object in the mythic veil of the aura constitutes the magical, mystifying character of the aura, in other words, its reifying (in the sense of predicating abstraction and the distancing of subject and object) function as ideology.⁹⁰ The operation of the aura in the work of art, as Jennings demonstrates in his introduction to Benjamin's essay, marks "the inevitable fetishization of the work of art, less through the process of its creation than through the process of its transmission."⁹¹ In other words, in being veiled by the mythic aura, artwork is reified and transformed into a fetish—understood in the Marxian sense as the mystifying veil of autonomy, abstracted from social reality, that is socially stamped on commodities through their socially-generated exchange value, the analog of cult value in Benjamin's essay. The aesthetic object thereby becomes a vehicle for reifying ideology, as Jennings writes: "If the work of art becomes a fetish, work of art remains a distanced and distancing object that exerts an irrational and incontrovertible power, it attains a cultural position that lends it a sacrosanct inviolability."⁹² In ideologically reinforcing the authority and political power of the 'ruling classes' through the reifying effects of distancing, then, "the sense of authenticity, authority, and permanence projected by the auratic work of art represents an important cultural substantiation of the claims to power of the dominant class," clarifies Jennings. In this way, Benjamin's conception of the distancing aura manifests as a cipher for the ideological function—namely, the sacrosanct cult-value, unapproachability, authority and tradition projected in the auratic object—that he critically uncovers in the work of art.

In linking the fetishizing, mythic aura of the artwork with the idea of autonomous art, then, Benjamin shows a clear parallel with Heidegger's analogous positioning of the Greek

⁸⁹ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, and Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 285-286.

⁹⁰ Adorno, *Aesthetics and Politics*, 120-133.

⁹¹ Michael Jennings, introduction to Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, and Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 15.

⁹² *Ibid.*

temple-work as a revered site of the holy and a model of autonomous, non-representational art. “Insofar as the age of technological reproducibility separated art from its basis in cult,” Benjamin maintains, “all semblance of art's autonomy disappeared forever.”⁹³ The cult basis of art, its distancing separation from the masses as an authoritative object of veneration (e.g., the god in the Greek temple), Benjamin thus suggests, disintegrates with the advent of technological reproducibility insofar as the latter elevates the exhibition value (the antithesis of cult value) of the art work while at the same time stripping it from any embeddedness in a particular tradition—a given time and place, a here and now—as it is reproduced endlessly to be disseminated around the world. The reproduction of the original for public exhibition (as opposed to the more traditional reception of art as a venerated object), highlighting the exhibition value of the reproduction of the original as opposed to the original, in other words, degrades the mythic sacrality and authenticity that had imbued auratic, original art with its cult value. This disintegration of the aura, in turn, is counteracted by the defenders of art with a new program of ‘art for art’s sake’, a vehement refusal of the growing decline of art’s autonomy and abstraction from social reality as reproduction brought it ever closer to the masses. Benjamin describes this reaction to what he perceives as the revolutionary development of technological reproduction, particularly in film and photography:

The uniqueness of the work of art is identical to its embeddedness in the context of tradition. Of course, this tradition itself is thoroughly alive and extremely changeable. An ancient statue of Venus, for instance, existed in a traditional context for the Greeks (who made it an object of worship) that was different from the context in which it existed for medieval clerics (who viewed it as a sinister idol). But what was equally evident to both was its uniqueness—that is, its aura. Originally, the embeddedness of an artwork in the context of tradition found expression in a cult. As we know, the earliest artworks originated in the service of rituals—first magical, then religious. And it is highly significant that the artwork's auratic mode of existence is never entirely severed from its ritual function. In other words: the unique value of the “authentic” work of art always has its basis in ritual. This ritualistic basis...recognizable as secularized ritual in even the most profane forms of the cult of beauty...For when, with the advent of the first truly revolutionary means of reproduction (namely photography, which emerged at the same time as socialism), art felt the approach of that crisis which a century later has become unmistakable, it reacted with the doctrine of *l'art pour l'art* that is, with a theology of art. This in turn gave rise to a negative theology, in the form of an idea of “pure” art, which

⁹³ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, Second Version,” in *Selected Writings, Volume 3*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 110.

rejects not only any social function but any definition in terms of a representational content. (In poetry, Mallarme was the first to adopt this standpoint.)⁹⁴

In this passage, Benjamin's Brechtian influence is most evident. Rejecting the high modern aesthetic conception of 'art for art's sake', that is, of autonomous art, abstracted and detached from the demands of exhibitiv representation and social reality, Benjamin shows his preference in this essay for a 'politicized art' that explicitly orients itself toward revolutionary politics and seeks to exhibit itself to the public to shape and refashion social reality through artistic expression. The notion of art that frees itself from the demands of revolution and consciousness raising here becomes yet another bourgeois attempt to reinstate the traditional, stultifying aesthetic forms of the past. This, for Benjamin, culminates in a theology of art, characteristic of the George circle and Heidegger, insofar as they position art as an Archimedean force through which the unity of society's manifold relationships develops.

Benjamin thus concludes his essay by linking the reigning form of auratic art, 'art for art's sake' or autonomous art, with the politics of fascism while presenting politicized art as the response to the aestheticized politics of fascism. Evoking the fascist, modernist movement of Futurism as embodying the culmination of art for art's sake and thus, the fascist 'aestheticization of politics', Benjamin writes: "*Fiat ars—pereat mundus*", says fascism, expecting from war, as Marinetti admits, the artistic gratification of a sense perception altered by technology. This is evidently the consummation of *l'art pour l'art*. Humankind, which once, in Homer, was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, has now become one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached the point where it can experience its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure. *Such is the aestheticizing of politics, as practiced by fascism. Communism replies by politicizing art.*"⁹⁵ What Benjamin makes explicit in his critical linkage of fascism, autonomous art and the aestheticization of politics, is the key role of humanity's self-alienation in the modern age. In Benjamin's critique of autonomous art, the reified consciousness of modernity—characterized by instrumental, abstracting rationality—is expressed in the abstract aesthetics of 'art for art's sake'. In its distancing abstraction from social reality and the masses, autonomous art undergoes its transformation into a 'theology of art', a veneration of abstract, subjectivist art, reflecting humanity's profound sense of self-alienation. For Benjamin, the response to the alienation of

⁹⁴ Ibid., 105-106.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 122.

modernity (namely, the reified consciousness that is expressed in commodity capitalism as it is in the ideology of ‘art for art’s sake’ and autonomous art) and the aestheticization of politics by fascism is the communist politicization of art. The politicization of art cannot be achieved by way of regression to auratic or autonomous art—which in effect resists the disintegration of the aura with a decadent aestheticism—but rather, through a radical deployment of the technological-reproductive forces of modernity in experimental and avant-garde forms of mass art and popular culture, such as Brechtian epic theater and Eisenstein’s dialectical montage in film. Although seemingly prioritizing the agitational-propagandistic deployment of art as an instrument of activating the masses for revolution, Benjamin’s conception of politicized art is not a straightforward utilization of art as propaganda. On the contrary, it is through alienation and shock-effects, on one hand, and their disintegration of the authority of the aura in exhibitiv engagement with the public, on the other hand, that film and photographic montage have the capacity mobilize the masses for the purposes of revolution. Presenting the mimetic, repetitive function of ritual as a regressive force from which technological reproducibility emancipates the work of art, Benjamin elevates the revolutionary political potential of media such as film and photography: “as soon as the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applied to artistic production, the whole social function of art is revolutionized. Instead of being founded on ritual, it is based on a different practice: politics.”⁹⁶ By upending the ritual, cult (i.e., distanced from the masses and hidden from their view, as a god in a temple) element that dominated auratic art, technological reproduction revolutionizes the very production and concept of art, creating the conditions for mass, exhibitiv art that is latently revolutionary on account of its radical break from tradition and authority. Thus, for Benjamin, although technological modernity has yielded the reification consciousness, fragmenting human experience and replacing the integrated experience (*Erfahrung*) of aura with the shortened, shock-like experiences (*Erlebnis*) of modern life, this degradation opens up new, revolutionary, collective (i.e., geared toward mass reproduction and reception) aesthetic modes with the capacity to emancipate art and the masses from the conservative forces of tradition and authority.

From Benjamin’s standpoint in the artwork essay, art that is cordoned off from society, to remain in its own autonomous, independent, subjective sphere, constitutes a regression to the fetishizing myth of the aura, and by implication, that of authority and authenticity. The aura

⁹⁶ Ibid., 106.

represents the weight of tradition and the past insofar as it constitutes the historical presence, the unique ‘here and now’ of the object. Auratic art, then, is venerated in the quasi-religious experience wherein the viewer has an individual encounter with the unique work of art. By contrast, the acceleration of technological reproduction and new artistic techniques in film and photography radically transformed the relationship of the masses to art, Benjamin contends. “The technological reproducibility of the artwork changes the relation of the masses to art. The extremely backward attitude toward a Picasso painting changes into a highly progressive reaction to a Chaplin-film.”⁹⁷ Insofar as the technologically reproduced work gives itself to collective reception—in contradistinction to painting which, despite public viewings in galleries and museums, remains an art form geared toward the individual—it thereby proffers a radically new, emancipatory form of mass art. In film and photography, the apparatus, that is, technological medium of production and reproduction, is transformed into an artistic medium for the masses, freeing it from the reifying effects of modern technology and instrumental rationality—as crystallized in the instrument, apparatus, or machine. In other words, the transformation of the ‘apparatus’—the model of instrumentality—into a medium for the mass reproduction and exhibition of modern film and photography effectively refunctions the instrumental reason and reified consciousness of technological modernity. “The representation of human beings by means of an apparatus has made possible a highly productive use of the human being’s self-alienation.”⁹⁸ In contrast to both Adorno and Heidegger, who are much less optimistic than Benjamin about the utopian potential of modern technology, Benjamin redemptively critiques and thereby rescues technologically reproduced art—representative of modernity as a whole—elevating its status as a vehicle for revolutionary art with the explosive potential to activate the masses.

Despite his celebration of the disintegration of aura and rise of new, technical media such as film and photography, in other writings from the same period Benjamin bemoans the decaying of integrated, whole experience in a modern world of fragmented, reified experience. For instance, in *The Storyteller* (published in 1936), Benjamin highlights the decay of experience in the decline of storytelling and humanity’s increasing inability to communicate experience.⁹⁹ This

⁹⁷ Ibid., 116.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 113.

⁹⁹ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 83-85.

situation, Benjamin contends, stems from a decline in the value of experience, resulting from the technological developments of modern, industrialized society: “For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body.”¹⁰⁰ Here, on contrast to his contemporaneous artwork essay, Benjamin is more critical of the reifying, fragmenting effects of the mechanizing forces of technological modernity. Likewise, in his 1940 essay, *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*,¹⁰¹ Benjamin compares the shock-effects of film and modern life with the sensory experience of factory work, presenting a much more critical conception of modern technology and mass art than his positive view of the revolutionary potential of film and photography in the artwork essay.¹⁰² He writes that “The shock experience which the passer-by has in the crowd corresponds to what the worker ‘experiences’ at his machine.”¹⁰³ The routinized interaction of a repetitive set of technologically interchangeable parts that constitutes the mechanized labor process of the assembly line, Benjamin illustrates, is analogously enacted in technologically reproduced media such as film. Tying the reifying, mechanized effects of the industrial labor process with film and the experience of modern life, Benjamin writes “Thus, technology has subjected the human sensorium to a complex kind of training. There came a day when a new and urgent need for stimuli was met by the film. In a film, perception in the form of shocks was established as a formal principle. That which determines the rhythm of production on a conveyor belt is the basis of the rhythm of reception in the film.”¹⁰⁴ Rather than constituting a collective artistic medium with the capacity to activate the masses for revolution, in this essay Benjamin presents film in a much more negative, Adornian light. Instead of being the assigned of the role of revolutionary catalyst, film—like the modern

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 84.

¹⁰¹ Benjamin wrote this essay at the behest of Adorno, as a revision of his earlier Baudelaire text, “Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,” the latter of which Adorno disapproved of. In this regard, Benjamin’s adoption of positions shared by Adorno in this essay are best understood in the context of Adorno’s authoritative position (along with Horkheimer) as the leading intellectual force of the Institute of Social Research, the latter of which Benjamin was dependent on for funding, and at this time a visa to leave Europe for the United States. See Adorno and Benjamin, Presentation III,” in *Aesthetics and Politics*, 110-141.

¹⁰² Ibid., 173-177.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 176.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 175.

cityscape of traffic lights and sirens—is now cast as a nefarious reifying mechanism, a tool through which the productive forces of capital inculcate the repetition and sameness that defines factory and other forms of monotonous labor.

Benjamin's critique of technological modernity, as well as his elevation of art high modern forms—namely, the modernism of Kafka, Poe and Proust, and to an extent, the neo-romantic, decadent poetry—that critically negate and uncover the reification characterizing the modern world, shows affinities not only with Adorno's critique of instrumental reason and technology but with that of Heidegger as well. This favoring of high modernist aesthetics alongside a critical emphasis on the negative moments of technological modernity and its representative aesthetic form (i.e., technologically reproduced mass art) reflects Benjamin's attempt to respond to Adorno's now well-known criticism (written in a 1936 letter to Benjamin) that his artwork essay, particularly, its reductive division of politicized mass reproduced art and fascist art for art's sake—and by extension, autonomous art—was insufficiently dialectical.¹⁰⁵ In his critique of Benjamin's artwork essay, Adorno takes issue with Benjamin's apparently undialectical association of autonomous art (exemplified in the movement of 'art for art's sake') with fascism, on one hand, and his positioning of technologically reproduced mass art as emancipatory on the other. Adorno inveighs against Benjamin's artwork essay, arguing that it is rigidly critical of autonomous art, failing to rescue and uncover its emancipatory potential while being undialectically positive about the revolutionary political possibilities of technologically reproduced mass art, the latter of which is the operative aesthetic form of the commercial culture industry. "Dialectical though your essay might be," Adorno writes, "it is not so in the case of the autonomous work of art itself; it disregards an elementary experience which becomes more evident to me every day in my own musical experience – that... the pursuit of the technical laws of autonomous art... brings it [art] close to the state of freedom."¹⁰⁶ Here, Adorno points to the problems inherent in Benjamin's allegedly undialectical critique of autonomous art as intrinsically auratic and therefore bound up with tradition, myth and fascism, all of which Benjamin links to the aura. For Adorno, precisely the contrary of Benjamin's argument in the

¹⁰⁵ Adorno, *Aesthetics and Politics*, 121-122. For more on Adorno's critique of Benjamin for being insufficiently dialectical, see Arendt, introduction to Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 11-12; also see Karen S. Feldman, "Not Dialectical Enough: On Benjamin, Adorno, and Autonomous Critique," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 44, no. 4 (2011), 336-62; Wolin, *Walter Benjamin*, 164, 174-178, 191-192.

¹⁰⁶ Adorno, *Aesthetics and Politics*, 121-122.

artwork essay is the case. Autonomous art—as represented in the works of Schönberg and Kafka—breaks free from the aura of authority and tradition as a utopian expression of subjective freedom, whereas technologically reproduced radio, TV and film reinscribe the mystifying, mythic (and therefore ideological and reifying) qualities of auratic art.¹⁰⁷

Adorno's chief criticism lies in the "disquieting" repurposing of "certain Brechtian motifs" that results in Benjamin's transference of "the concept of magical aura to the autonomous work of art" that is coupled with a reductive designation of autonomous art as "counter-revolutionary."¹⁰⁸ Thus, countering Benjamin's linkage of autonomous art and the ideological, mythic function of the aura, Adorno argues that rather than belonging "on the side of myth" and reifying ideology, "the centre of the autonomous work of art" is intrinsically "dialectical" insofar as "within itself it juxtaposes the magical and the mark of freedom."¹⁰⁹ In his repositioning of autonomous art (rather than mass reproduced media such as film and radio) as emancipatory, Adorno urges Benjamin to return to his aesthetico-political reflections on artists and writers representative of autonomous art, where Benjamin elevates the poetry of Mallarmé through evoking its dialectical character.¹¹⁰ To make his artwork essay more dialectical, Adorno suggests, Benjamin must "undertake a rescue"—critical redemption—of *l'art pour l'art* or autonomous art, which "is just as much in need of a defence" as the "kitsch film" that Benjamin defends against "the 'quality' film."¹¹¹ Another aspect of the one-sided, undialectical nature of Benjamin's artwork essay, Adorno quips, is Benjamin's failure to counterpose "technical art," or the mass reproduced "lower sphere" of art with more emancipatory instances of high modern art: "After all, it is hardly an accident if that modern art which you counterpose to technical art as aural, is of such inherently dubious quality as Vlaminck and Rilke. The lower sphere, to be sure, can score an easy victory over this sort of art; but if instead there were the names of, let us say, Kafka and Schönberg, the problem would be posed very differently. Certainly Schönberg's music is not aural."¹¹² Here, Adorno acknowledges that certain instances of "modern art," particularly, the French Fauvist Maurice de Vlaminck and the symbolist, Austro-Bohemian poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, can be critiqued as ideological expressions of the auratic or "magical

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 122-123.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 121.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 122.

¹¹² Ibid., 124.

element in the bourgeois work of art.”¹¹³ In contradistinction to Benjamin’s position in the artwork essay, however, Adorno maintains that the greatest representatives of high modern art, such as Kafka and Schönberg, illustrate the emancipatory possibilities of modernism and autonomous art, the latter of which further disintegrates the aura, stripping the artwork of its ideological, mythic elements. In accordance with his criticisms, Adorno ‘postulates’ that Benjamin completely ‘liquidate’ “the Brechtian motifs” in his artwork essay in order to reinforce it with “more dialectics” that in effect evoke the ideological elements of technologically reproduced commercial (Adorno refers to it as “utilitarian” and “dependent art” on account of its subservience to economic utility as a commodity) art and the emancipatory possibilities of high modern, autonomous art.¹¹⁴ In the conclusion of his letter to Benjamin, Adorno suggests that Benjamin’s insufficiently dialectical attempt to redeem what Adorno refers to as “dependent” or “utilitarian” art—that is, commercial art technologically reproduced for the masses—stems from an attempt to affirm the art most readily accessible and engaged by the working-class: “the aesthetic debate which you so magnificently inaugurated, depends essentially on a true accounting of the relationship of the intellectuals to the working-class.”¹¹⁵ However, whereas Benjamin situates mass reproduced art as the vehicle for the liberation of the working-class masses, Adorno argues that it is instead autonomous, high modern art that has this emancipatory capacity.¹¹⁶

Despite their disagreements concerning the constitution of auratic art, Benjamin and Adorno both seek to redemptively critique auratic art—and by extension, the Heideggerian conception of art that embraces its auratic dimension. In keeping with his general method of negative dialectic, which amounts to a comprehensive critique of all intellectual positions, Adorno still critiques the kind of art he presents as the closest to freedom (autonomous art), by linking it with bourgeois ideology and the magical element in the art of the latter. In Adorno’s conception, nonetheless, the autonomous art that Benjamin ties to aura is redeemable on account of its autonomous unfolding of freedom in the artwork, as well as, its liberating independence from the oppressive demands of utility and commercialization that shape the production and reproduction of mass art. Likewise, when taken as a whole Benjamin’s aesthetico-political theory culminates in a

¹¹³ Ibid., 121.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 124.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 125.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

redemptive critique of auratic and technologically reproduced art that at once negates and elevates these forms as emancipatory. The critical moments of Benjamin's critique of technologically reproduced art are displayed in *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*, while the affirmative redemption of such art characterizes the point of view in his artwork essay. In a similar vein, whereas the artwork essay represents a critique of autonomous art and the aura, Benjamin's other writings on aesthetics, politics and the philosophy of history evince his attempt to redeem not only autonomous art, but also the aura and by extension myth and ideology more broadly. Benjamin's redemption of autonomous art is more evident than that of the aura, as his essays elevating the works of Kafka and Proust—both representatives of high modern literature—clearly demonstrate the emancipatory, messianic-redemptive potentials of these writers (particularly in the cases of Leskov and Kafka, whose work Benjamin interprets in a messianic-redemptive vein) and autonomous art as a whole.¹¹⁷

Benjamin's rescuing of the aura and the concomitant category of myth is invoked not only in *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*, but more significantly in his *Theses*. This latter work constitutes the redemptive moment of Benjamin's critique of auratic art. For in this *Theses*, a key instance auratic art, in particular, the original painting that Benjamin himself owned and cherished—Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*—is centrally positioned not as an instance of auratic, reifying art that mystifies, but instead as an incomparable aesthetic expression that illuminates the contours of historical time, progress and redemption. In his well-known *Thesis IX*, Benjamin juxtaposes Klee's painting, a poem by Scholem and his own messianic, historical-philosophical interpretation of the two. In doing so, Benjamin not only displays his repurposing of photographic montage for literary-philosophical discourse, more significantly, he elevates the art form of painting to the level of prophetic illumination to effectively reconcile the poles of myth and enlightenment, tradition and modernity, at the heart of his philosophy:

A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the

¹¹⁷ See Benjamin's "The Storyteller," and his two essays on Kafka in *Illuminations*.

angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.¹¹⁸

By situating the storm as ineluctably propelling the angel toward the future, Benjamin presents the storm of progress as a fatalistic, inevitable progression, as though it were dictated and controlled by a transcendental God that determines the outcomes of human history. Moreover, in presenting the storm of progress as “blowing from Paradise” Benjamin thereby positions progress in explicitly theological terms. For in depicting progress as blowing from paradise, Benjamin links progress with the mythic and theological image either of Eden (or a prelapsarian state of wholeness) or of a paradisiacal reality that is in the eternal, ahistorical world to-come, the culmination of a future messianic age. Regardless of which paradise Benjamin refers to here, what is evident from this thesis is his dialectical reversal of ostensibly secular conceptions of progress, on one hand, and the fatalistic theologies of history which see a divine actor as shaping its events and happenings, on the other. Benjamin achieves this through uncovering the theology that is built into the mythic ideal of progress. Benjamin’s redemptive reconciliation of myth—in this case, the myth of progress, which is an effective secularization of the theology of history—and enlightenment is highlighted in Adorno’s retrospective interpretation of Benjamin.¹¹⁹ Describing Benjamin, Adorno writes of the condensation of philosophy “into experience so that it may have hope,” a hope appearing as a fragmented, distorted—as a ruin—he in effect alludes to Benjamin’s early allegorical writings not only on Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*, but also on *Trauerspiel*, where Benjamin dialectically recovers the messianic sparks of hope in the decaying ruins of the past as represented by the Baroque tragic drama.¹²⁰ As Benjamin writes in his

¹¹⁸ Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 392.

¹¹⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), 240-241.

¹²⁰ In his essay, “A Portrait of Walter Benjamin,” Adorno presents a lucid interpretation of Benjamin’s philosophy in retrospect:

Philosophy condenses into experience so that it may have hope. But hope appears only in fragmented form. Benjamin overexposes the objects for the sake of the hidden contours which one day, in the state of reconciliation, will become evident, but in so doing he reveals the chasm separating that day and life as it is. The price of hope is life: ‘Nature is messianic in its eternal and total transience’, and happiness, according to a late fragment which risks everything, is its ‘intrinsic rhythm’. Hence, the core of Benjamin’s philosophy is the idea of the salvation of the dead as the restitution of distorted life through the consummation of its own reification down to the inorganic level. ‘Only for the sake of the hopeless are we given hope’, is the conclusion of the study of Goethe’s *Elective Affinities* paradox of the impossible possibility, mysticism and enlightenment are joined for the last time in him.

See Adorno, *Prisms*, 240-241

“Theological-Political Fragment,” “Nature is messianic in its eternal and total transience.”¹²¹ In line with his apophatic (negative theological) conception of allegory presented in his *Trauerspielbuch*, in his “Theologico-Political Fragment,” Benjamin suggests that nature—the realm of the profane—is messianic (i.e., theological) precisely because of its disintegration into fragmented ruins, the latter of which is aesthetically represented in the fragmentary, shocking art of Dada, surrealism and avant-garde film and montage. In keeping with Adorno’s characterization of Benjamin’s philosophy as synthesizing myth and enlightenment for the last time, in his *Theses* and “Theological-Political Fragment,” Benjamin thereby fuses ostensibly opposed aesthetic and theoretical orientations at the level of both form and content. At the level of content, Benjamin synthesizes the fragmentary, ruinous realm of the profane—representative of modernity and the avant-garde aesthetics of surrealism and dialectical montage—with the utopian aspiration for wholeness and reconciliation that is encapsulated in the messianic idea of utopia. On the formal level of his *Theses*, moreover, Benjamin deploys his own unique literary style of surrealistic montage—a refunctioning of surrealistic montage and the shock-inducing, discontinuous juxtapositions of texts and citations to create a constellation of interwoven elements in his work—in the course of interpreting an auratic work of art, a painting by Klee, as an unparalleled, ‘profane illumination’ (in the dialectical sense, of being both profane and prophetic) of the dynamics of history. Precisely because of its auratic, tradition-invoking dimension, Klee’s *Angelus Novus* is imbued with the capacity to ‘explode’ the linear continuum of progress and empty historical time, through citing the past (in this case, Klee’s painting and its representation of history) in the present. Benjamin’s interpretation of Klee’s painting thus marks a redemptive recovery of myth, auratic art and the tradition of the past, the latter of which Benjamin repurposes as a utopian inspiration for revolutionary transformations in the present.

Reading Benjamin’s essays on aesthetics and politics from the last decade of his lifetime demonstrates the difficulties in assigning his thought a definitive position on the nature of emancipatory and regressive art, and likewise of myth and enlightenment, modernity and tradition. Rather than escaping into ambiguity in face of the challenge of theorizing emancipatory art, Benjamin’s thinking in effect develops a nuanced aesthetico-political position that integrates key currents present in Brecht, Heidegger and Adorno—and a wide array of other

¹²¹ Walter Benjamin, “Theological-Political Fragment,” trans. Eric Jacobson, in Eric Jacobson, *Metaphysics of the Profane* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 20-1.

key sources, such as Georges Sorel, Scholem, Jewish mysticism, surrealism, Marxism and psychoanalysis—while at the same time redemptively critiquing and transforming them. When conceiving of Benjamin's oeuvre as a constellation of interconnected works, *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*, his artwork essay and his *Theses* no longer represent contradictory positions, but are instead complementary, representing the positive and negative moments of modernity and tradition, technologically reproduced mass art and autonomous art. For Benjamin, the critical negation of modern technology and reproduction cannot be completed without the redemption of its emancipatory-utopian potential. Likewise, although Benjamin criticizes the aura (and thus, art for art's sake and autonomous art, as well as the concomitant categories of myth and tradition) and appears to myopically celebrate its decline, as a whole his philosophy redeems it, uncovering its utopian potential when he elevates the integrated experience (in *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*) as well as the nourishing power of tradition and the past (in his *Theses*). In this light, Benjamin's redemptive critique of 'art for art's sake', and by extension autonomous art, as auratic and therefore regressively embedded in tradition and the authority it wields, demonstrates his critical engagement with Adorno and Heidegger on the oppositions of myth and enlightenment, modernity and tradition. By juxtaposing Benjamin's critique of art for art's sake with Adorno's and Heidegger's conceptions of art in this fashion it is possible to clarify the nuances and affinities of their intersecting ideas on art and politics. Placing Heidegger in conversation with Benjamin and Adorno—as well as, their debates on aesthetics and politics and the broader debates that shaped the development of Critical Theory—productively expands the scope of these aesthetico-political debates and illuminates their respective philosophies while also demonstrating the unique cross-pollination and convergence of ideas across the political spectrum in this period. Rather than simply opposing Heidegger or writing his philosophy off as a crude instance of fascist ideology, this juxtaposition of Benjamin, Adorno and Heidegger on aesthetics and politics opens up an innovative, dialectical optic for interpreting aesthetics, politics and the intellectual history of this period.

Chapter 4

Adorno and the German Aesthetic Tradition: From Wagner to George

“The point of interpretive philosophy is to construct keys, before which reality springs forth.”¹

Theodor W. Adorno, “The Actuality of Philosophy” (1931)

I. *Rescuing the Hopeless: Adorno’s Critical Method*

Central to understanding Adorno’s redemptive critical method is the way in which it simultaneously critiques and rescues aesthetic and philosophical works—from the culture industry and Richard Wagner to Heidegger and Stefan George—tainted by an inherent barbarism reflective of the oppressive social and economic conditions of their production. Adorno’s perspicacious ability to reveal the internal tensions, contradictions and reversals of a given philosophical or aesthetic phenomenon is rooted in his underlying philosophical program of negative dialectics, a program seeking the enlightenment of human consciousness and freedom from domination through the dialectical criticism of everything existing. Adorno’s relentless criticism of society—from intellectuals and artists associated with fascism to the culture industry and leftist interlocutors like Benjamin and Lukács—is to this effect underpinned by his negative dialectical philosophy, first articulated in his early philosophical writings and later developed in *Negative Dialectics* (1966). Often lost to many readers is the way in which Adorno’s ‘negative dialectic’ is not simply a negation but is, in the dialectical sense, also a rescuing and affirmation of the truth content within the object of criticism, specifically within its ideological appearance (*Schein*). Adorno’s well-known critiques—of the culture industry as an instrument of mass deception, enlightenment as totalitarian, mythic domination, Heidegger as fascist mystic and Wagner as an anti-Semitic champion of violence and myth—are not simply negations that resist

¹ Theodor W. Adorno, “*The Actuality of Philosophy*”, Telos March 20, 1977 no. 31, 130.

un-freedom, they are reparative in seeking to rescue the truth content and thereby redeem the object of criticism. Interpreting Adorno in this way effectively transforms our conception of his engagement with thinkers and artists associated with the right and Nazism, such as Wagner, Heidegger, and George. For rather than understanding Adorno reductively as either simply negating or affirmatively rescuing these thinkers and the aesthetic forms they championed, a close reading of his intellectual engagements reveals his critical method to be part and parcel of his redemptive philosophical program of negative dialectics.²

Contrary to interpretations of Adorno that misread his criticisms (from enlightenment and Heidegger to Wagner and the culture industry) as absolute commendations that seek radically different paths than those offered by the objects of criticism, a closer reading makes clear that such criticisms are eminently dialectical and thus reparative, redeeming the object in and through its own immanent criticism that unfolds from within its internal structure.³ Characteristic of his negative dialectical philosophy, Adorno maintains a critical distance from all solidified intellectual, aesthetic and political positions. Instead of inhabiting any particular position vis-à-vis aesthetics and politics, Adorno redemptively critiques those of his contemporaries to evoke their own internal contradictions in which their ideological false consciousness intermingles with truth content. His critical engagements with interlocutors across the political spectrum thus reveal the tenuous nature of rigid oppositions that are constructed between right and left in twentieth-century German intellectual history. For his critiques of those on the left show their intellectual complicity with barbarism and false consciousness just as his attacks on thinkers and artists associated with the right reveal the latent, utopian truth content of their works. Rather than understanding Adorno's intellectual relationships and engagements (or any for that matter)

² In Adorno's philosophy, then, the object of criticism is at once negated and rescued as an unfinished work in a progress transformed under the unflinching gaze of the critic. Adorno's position within the debates on aesthetics and politics (that began during the Weimar Republic and continued into the Nazi and post-war periods) is thus one of obstinate critic and redeemer—of artists, movements and intellectuals on the right and the left. Even his close intellectual and aesthetic comrades such as Bloch, Benjamin, and Schoenberg—all major influences on Adorno's philosophy—were not spared from his acerbic yet redemptive criticism.

³ For interpretations opposing Heidegger and Adorno, see Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*; Wolin, "Carl Schmitt: The Conservative Revolutionary Habitus and the Aesthetics of Horror," 424-47; see also Philippe Locoué-Labarthe, *Heidegger, Art and Politics: The Fiction of the Political* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 61-76; Christopher P. Long, "Art's Fateful Hour: Benjamin, Heidegger, Art and Politics," *New German Critique*, no. 83 (2001), 89-115. For interpretations that focus primarily on the affinities of Heidegger Adorno, see Lafont, "Heidegger and the Frankfurt School," 282-294; see also Iain Macdonald, "What Is, Is More than It Is: Adorno and Heidegger on the Priority of Possibility," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 19, no. 1 (2011), 31-57; Wesley Phillips, *Metaphysics and Music in Adorno and Heidegger* (New York: Palgrave, 2015).

rigidly as either antagonistic or compatible, negative or affirmative, attending to the paradigmatic, redemptive-critical character of Adorno's thought reveals a much more complex, ambivalent history in which aesthetic and political ideas are shown to be uncontainable within the rigidified structures and categories (e.g., right and left, phenomenology and Critical Theory, modernism and the mass culture) thought up by the historian or critic.

Instead of being contained within such structures, the ideas and aesthetic expressions of a given historical moment are the product of the reciprocal interactions and cross-pollination of intellectual and aesthetic currents within a continually changing social totality, making them uncategorizable within oppositions such as right and left, the ideological and emancipatory. In "Wagner's Relevance for Today" (the essay version of Adorno's lecture at the 1963 *Berliner Festspielwochen*) Adorno thus articulates his conception of intellectual and aesthetic works as unfinished, continually unfolding historically to express manifold new possibilities: "As spiritual entities, works of art are not complete in themselves. They create a magnetic field of all possible intentions and forces, of inner tendencies and countervailing ones, of successful and necessarily unsuccessful elements. Objectively, new layers are constantly detaching themselves, emerging from within; others grow irrelevant and die off. One relates to a work of art not merely, as is often said, by adapting it to fit a new situation, but rather by deciphering within it things to which one has a historically different reaction."⁴ In these 'new layers' of possible forces, meanings and intentions that are "constantly detaching themselves and emerging from within," Adorno locates the utopian potentialities and truth content of the work. Latent within the incomplete work is its own disintegration and decay. The seeds of the work's own negation and rescue inhere in its untruth, its mythic, ideological appearance. For in naming and representing the latter, the work reveals the barbarism that is endemic to such thinking, thereby unwittingly critiquing the very form of consciousness it purports to represent. Adorno's philosophy, inhabiting the non-identical non-position of critiquing everything existing rather than positing or affirming any particular stance, thus grows directly out of the redemptive criticism of countervailing philosophies, social expressions and ideas. Adorno's philosophy, in other words, cannot be understood without reference to the opposing ideas and intellectuals against and out of which it was formed.

⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, "Wagner's Relevance for Today." trans. Susan Gillespie. *Grand Street*, no. 44 (1993), 37.

Having demonstrated (in the preceding chapters) the intellectual interactions involving the slightly older generation of Benjamin, Bloch, Lukács, Schmitt, Heidegger, and George that began to develop the debates on aesthetics and politics in the Weimar period, this chapter focuses on Adorno's redemptive critical contribution to these debates. After situating Adorno's redemptive critical method within Adorno's program of negative dialectics, the chapter turns to Adorno's redemptive criticisms of Wagner and the culture industry, showing their entanglement and reciprocal expression of myth and enlightenment, freedom and domination. Adorno's relation to Wagner is not conceived, however, as one of simple affinity, agreement, or influence or, on the contrary, as a relation in which Wagner simply functions as a negative foil, against which Adorno positions his own thinking as its antithesis. In contradistinction to such rigidly opposed conceptions of Adorno's relation to Wagner (or Schmitt and Heidegger for that matter), I contend that Adorno engages with Wagner and his other interlocutors on the right, thus developing his philosophy precisely out of such engagements. This chapter's focus on Adorno's engagement with Wagner in particular grows out of Adorno's lifelong critical engagement with Wagner coupled with his decision to publish a book-length critique of his lifework, *Versuch über Wagner* (written in 1937-1938, published in 1952), the latter of which illustrates Wagner's undeniable importance to Adorno's own thinking.

The inherently theological category of redemption, which for Adorno was inseparable from the utopian spirit of reconciliation, was key to his entire philosophical project of 'constructing constellations' to 'light up' the riddles of social reality. As Adorno would later write in *Aesthetic Theory*, "The understanding of works of art, therefore, besides their exegesis through interpretation and critique, must also be pursued from the standpoint of redemption, which very precisely searches out the truth of false consciousness in aesthetic appearance."⁵ Redemption here is meant in a polysemous, nonidentical sense in that it connotes both the redemption and rescuing of the object of criticism as well as its expression of this theological impulse, that of redemption, through its own internal logic.⁶ The aesthetic work is not simply redeemed as utopian on account of its underlying, latent truth-content—its critical exposition of

⁵ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, cited in Fredric Jameson, *Adorno: Late Marxism or the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 1990), 221.

⁶ This interpretation differs from Buck-Morss in emphasizing the precisely theological element of Adorno's redemptive critique, namely, the theological impulse of messianism that is expressed in the desire to repair the world and redeem the past.

social reality. The work itself an expression of various utopian, and redemptive impulses, however mutilated and deformed they might have become in the process of production. The capacity for philosophical and aesthetic works to evoke nonidentical thinking its expression of that which is not yet, and thus, does not conform to what is given. Thus, deploying Blochian language of the not-yet, in *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno writes that “Art desires what has not yet been, though everything that art is has already been. It cannot escape the shadow of the past. But what has not yet been is the concrete.”⁷ Incapable of realizing the not-yet concretely, art gives voice to the desire for this realization, to the ‘promise of happiness’. Framing aesthetic experience as the “possibility promised by its impossibility,” Adorno presents art as the longing for happiness that itself cannot be fulfilled by the artwork: “Art is the ever broken promise of happiness.”⁸ Art, to this effect, functions as and desires the not yet existent, that which is nonidentical with existing reality. The fulfillment of the promise of the not yet, the new—like the promise of happiness that Adorno, following Stendhal, binds indissolubly with art—cannot occur abstractly in art, but must necessarily be concrete. Adorno thus presents the antinomy of art’s simultaneous desire to be utopian and the utter impossibility of art realizing this wish without at the same time abolishing itself:

The new is the longing for the new, not the new itself: That is what everything new suffers from. What takes itself to be utopia remains the negation of what exists and is obedient to it. At the center of contemporary antinomies is that art must be and wants to be utopia, and the more utopia is blocked by the real functional order, the more this is true; yet at the same time art may not be utopia in order not to betray it by providing semblance and consolation. If the utopia of art were fulfilled, it would be art's temporal end. Hegel was the first to realize that the end of art is implicit in its concept. That his prophecy was not fulfilled is based, paradoxically, on his historical optimism. He

⁷ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 134.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 135-6.

Later in *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno elaborates on the status of art as the ‘promise of happiness’, a formulation self-consciously drawn from Stendhal:

Stendhal's dictum of art as the *promesse du bonheur* implies that art does its part for existence by accentuating what in it prefigures utopia. But this utopic element is constantly decreasing, while existence increasingly becomes merely self-equivalent. For this reason, art is ever less able to make itself like existence. Because all happiness found in the status quo is an ersatz and false, art must break its promise in order to stay true to it. But the consciousness of people, especially that of the masses who in an antagonistic society are separated by cultural privilege from consciousness of such a dialectic, hold fast to the promise of happiness; rightfully so, but in its immediate, material form. This provides the opening for the culture industry, which plans for and exploits the need for happiness. The culture industry has its element of truth in its fulfillment of a need that originates in the increasing renunciation demanded by society; but the sort of concessions it provides renders it absolutely false. In the midst of a world dominated by utility, art indeed has a utopic aspect as the other of this world, as exempt from the mechanism of the social process of production and reproduction.

See Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 311.

betrayed utopia by construing the existing as if it were the utopia of the absolute idea... Art is no more able than theory to concretize utopia, not even negatively. A cryptogram of the new is the image of collapse; only by virtue of the absolute negativity of collapse does art enunciate the unspeakable: utopia.⁹

Adorno makes explicit here that neither theory nor art—despite its often more concrete, material nature than theory—can realize, that is to say, concretize the dream of utopia even in the negative form. What then is left of utopia in Adorno's aesthetics? Adorno answers this question in by returning to the riddle-figure of the cipher, here represented by the 'cryptogram'. Art is able to articulate and give voice to that which is unrepresentable, utopia, solely on account of "the absolute negativity of collapse," the latter of which evokes the image of history as an ongoing catastrophe depicted in Benjamin's *Theses*. The image of this 'absolute negativity of collapse' in which Adorno discerns the gathering of "all the stigmata of the repulsive and loathsome in modern art," is indissolubly bound up with "the image of catastrophe," which for Adorno is not a mere mimetic "copy of the event but the cipher of its potential."¹⁰ Written after the catastrophes of the Holocaust and the Second World War, Adorno here situates "the image of catastrophe" in art as the absolute negativity of collapse, which is to say, as the legitimation of art's utopian aspect. Adorno's famous remark that "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,"¹¹ reveals a negative utopian aspect latent within art, not simply after such catastrophe but rather on account of its representation in art. For the very positioning of poetry as something opposed to the horrors of Auschwitz in effect reveals in implicit resistance to the barbarism of the latter. Adorno thus writes that it is "as if art wanted to prevent the catastrophe by conjuring up its image."¹² For Adorno, it is precisely through the negation of the existing state of affairs through the image of catastrophe, of history as a 'rubbish heap' piling up as a catastrophe, that art's redemptive-utopian force comes to the fore. That which is 'repulsive and loathsome in modern art,' in other words, its images of collapse and absolute negativity, mark a renunciation of the appearance or semblance (*Schein*) of reconciliation: "Through the irreconcilable renunciation of the semblance of reconciliation, art holds fast to the promise of reconciliation in the midst of the unreconciled: This is the true consciousness of an age in which the real possibility of utopia—that given the level of productive forces the earth could here and now be

⁹ Ibid., 32.

¹⁰ Ibid., 32-33.

¹¹ Adorno wrote this in his well-known post-war essay, "Cultural Criticism and Society." See Theodor W. Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society", *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Sherry Weber (London: Neville Spearman, 1967), 34.

¹² Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 33.

paradise—converges with the possibility of total catastrophe.”¹³ Adorno’s *Utopieverbot*, which extended from the realms of philosophy and religion to that of art, is to this effect similar to Marx’s critique of the utopian socialists (such as Charles Fourier and Robert Owen), in that it rejects the depiction of the appearance of utopia as a mere consolatory legitimation of social conditions that hinder the realization not simply of utopia but of also of its development at the level of consciousness.¹⁴

In Adorno’s philosophy, the relationship of aesthetics and politics, art and society, is best understood not through the explicit political content and intentions of the aesthetic object, but in terms of the latter’s illumination of the social contradictions and tensions of the social reality in which it was produced. In Adorno’s conception, philosophy—conceived as a negative utopian project of enlightening interpretation aimed at the radical transformation of social reality—is therefore tasked with de-ciphering the ciphers of social reality to evoke the truth content that is latent in these monadological, phenomenal (related to appearance) expressions of the social totality, as Buck-Morss illustrates in her work.¹⁵ In Adorno’s account, each work of art and commodity produced, distributed and consumed under the conditions of late capitalism, like the paintings of the Renaissance, reflect the social and economic conditions of the society in which they were created. In keeping with his avowed philosophical allegiance to the negative valence of “the materialist dialectic,” Adorno refuses to completely embrace any given aesthetic position, to uncritically elevate a particular work of art or aesthetic movement. His negative dialectical critiques of particular artists, movements and works—like those of particular intellectuals, such

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ The promise of reconciliation is not simply a longing for a better world that it not yet existent, but the demand for its concrete realization. In this vein, toward the conclusion of “The Actuality of Philosophy,” Adorno demonstrates the extent to which the negative, dialectical philosophical project of redemptive-critical interpretation of reality is itself a kind of political praxis that entwines itself with theory: “The interpretation of given reality and its abolition are connected to each other, not, of course, in the sense that reality is negated in the concept, but, that out of the construction of a configuration of reality the demand for its [reality’s] real change always follows promptly. The change-causing gesture of the riddle process—not its mere resolution as such— provides the image of resolutions to which materialist praxis alone has access.” The construction of a constellation of historical images which critically negate and redeem the fragmented ciphers of social reality through their experimental juxtaposition thus presents the demand for utopia in its very negation of its paradigmatic image, that of a reconciled world, in the object of criticism. For the negation of the latter lies in the critical recognition of its complicity with the unreconciled world and its ideology. However, it is by virtue of this negative aspect of the object, the negation of its appearance of semblance and of a reconciled world—a negativity that is at work within both the object and its immanent critique—that the object’s redemptive-utopian aspect is legitimated. Adorno’s redemptive criticism thus represents a unique mode of rescuing of the object of criticism, in that it is a rescuing that is fueled and legitimated by the object’s own redemptive, utopian truth-content that is manifested in its obstinate negation of existing social reality. See Theodor W. Adorno, “*The Actuality of Philosophy*”, *Telos* 20, no. 31 (March 1977), 129.

¹⁵ Buck-Morss, *The Origins of Negative Dialectics*, 55, 96-99.

as Heidegger, George, Bloch, Lukács—sought to show the ways in which the object of criticism illuminated the social contradictions and dialectical tensions of society. In deciphering social reality through its illusory or ideological appearance (*Schein*), its discrete, historically specific ciphers, Adorno aimed at the critical reflection and enlightenment of human consciousness. In other words, Adorno’s aesthetics were, much like those of Brecht and Lukács, oriented around the Marxist conception that art is tied to politics precisely through its capacity to dialectically illuminate reality, that is, to represent the contradictions of social reality. Unlike Brecht and Lukács, however, Adorno argued that this illumination of social reality is expressed primarily in autonomous art, freed from the instrumental constraints inherent in agitprop and the culture industry. Adorno’s aesthetic critique thus marks a unique development of the more traditional Marxist conception of ideology critique, insofar as it locates the truth content of the aesthetic object precisely in the false consciousness that inheres in the latter. Thus, in “Cultural Criticism and Society,” Adorno presents ‘the task of criticism’ as one of ‘social physiognomy’: “Hence, the task of criticism must be not so much to search for the particular interest-groups to which cultural phenomena are to be assigned, but rather to decipher the general social tendencies which are expressed in these phenomena and through which the most powerful interests realize themselves. Cultural criticism must become social physiognomy.”¹⁶ When applied to the social whole in the deciphering of the work of art, physiognomy opens up the capacity to draw out from the smallest details and fragments of reality, the characteristics of the whole. Adorno’s aesthetics in this regard were focused less on the intentions of the particular author of a given aesthetic or philosophical work, than with the internal unfolding of the work’s logic and the ways in which this unfolding dialectically illuminates the contradictions of social reality through the work’s immanent, redemptive critique.

II. *Redeeming Commodified Art and Reification: From Wagner to the Culture Industry*

Composed in 1937 and 1938 while Adorno was in exile in London and later New York, *Versuch über Wagner* articulates the ambivalent, dialectical character of a redemptive critical method which takes aim at philosophical and aesthetic objects alike.¹⁷ Adorno’s redemptive

¹⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, “Cultural Criticism and Society”, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Sherry Weber (London: Neville Spearman, 1967), 29-30.

¹⁷ See Adorno’s preface to the work for more on the history of its composition and publication. Theodor W. Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 2005), xxviii.

critique of Wagner does not simply constitute a negation of Wagner's phantasmagoric music as the forebearer of Nazi ideology that would later draw on and find support in it, just as it does not uncritically redeem Wagner by rescuing his work from its ideological and concrete historical associations with Nazism. On the contrary, Adorno's engagement with Wagner represents, in crystalline form, the character of Adorno's criticism in that it constitutes a dialectical critique that simultaneously negates and reparatively redeems the object under criticism through the evocation of its latent truth content. This simultaneous critical negation and rescue of the object of criticism does not result from a piecemeal dissection of the object that displays its regressive and progressive elements as separate parts constituting a multivalent whole. For Adorno's critique of Wagner does not simply negate the mythopoetic, proto-fascist elements of his work while elevating a countervailing redemptive, emancipatory element within the work. Rather, it is precisely in and through the very mythopoetic, proto-fascistic dimensions of Wagner's work that Adorno dialectically inverts (in the dialectical, Hegelian sense of reversal, *Umschlag*) and rescues Wagner. In doing so, Adorno draws out the internal contradictions and dialectical tensions within Wagner, as he does when criticizing other aesthetic works to reveal the social contradictions of their own concrete historical moments. This chapter therefore draws on and expands Peter Gordon's lucid analysis of Adorno's *Versuch*, in which he argues that it was only by 1945, in Adorno's lecture to the Columbia University sociology department, "National Socialism and the Arts," that "the dialectical reading of Wagner's art and the redemptive significance it contains" finally appeared in Adorno's work.¹⁸ Gordon argues that Adorno's engagement with Wagner undergoes a significant "change in perspective" in his post-war writings, particularly, his 1963 lecture, "Wagner's Relevance Today" and his 1956 essay, "On the Score of Parsifal," where Adorno ultimately comes to "recognize a redemptive moment in Wagner's music."¹⁹ Building on Gordon's articulation of the redemptive moment at work already in Adorno's *Versuch*, this chapter aims to illustrate that ways that Adorno redemptive-critical method was his operative mode of criticism in his critiques of Wagner, and of art and

As Mark Berry argues in his analysis of Adorno's work on Wagner, Rodney Livingstone's translation of the title, *Versuch über Wagner* as *In Search of Wagner*, is not as accurate as *Essay on Wagner*. Throughout my dissertation, I therefore refer to this text as Adorno's *Versuch*. Berry adds that "*Experiment on Wagner* or *An Approach Toward Wagner*" would also be adequate translations. See Mark Berry, "Adorno's Essay on Wagner: Rescuing an Inverted Panegyric." *The Opera Quarterly*, 30, No. 2-3, 205.

¹⁸ Peter Gordon, "Wounded Modernism: Adorno on Wagner." *New German Critique*, 129, 43, No. 3, November (2016), 163.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 157.

popular culture more broadly.²⁰ Gordon points out the redemptive moment in Adorno's *Versuch* in his argument that in the conclusion to Adorno's *Versuch* "the redemptive purposes of the Wagner book come to the fore."²¹ Developing Gordon's account, in her analysis of Adorno's *Versuch* Karin Bauer reveals the manifold ways in that Adorno performs a "rescue mission" of Wagner, beginning in his *Versuch* and continuing throughout his later writings on Wagner.²² As Adorno would later argue in his 1963 lecture, establishing an undeniable continuity in perspective despite some divergences from his earlier views: "I am not distancing myself from the book, nor am I abandoning the conception. With regard to Wagner the situation has changed. Therefore, I would like to present—not as a revision of what I once thought...some divergences from the old text."²³ An interpretation attentive to the dialectical character of Adorno's *Versuch*—particularly, the instances where the truth emerges from the falsehood, that is, from the ideological appearance, within the work—thus uncovers redemptive criticism as the operative mode of this work.²⁴

Part and parcel of Adorno's redemptive critique of Wagner is his conception of an indissoluble link between Wagner and the ongoing, intensifying process of commodification under late capitalism, presenting the former as a reaction to and representation of the latter. Tying Wagner to the culture industry, Adorno's assessment of Wagner thereby culminates in an anti-fascist critique that in effect dismantles the rigid opposition of modernism and popular culture, serious art and the commodified culture industry—an opposition that is often mistakenly attributed to Adorno through a misreading of his critique of the culture industry. As Andreas Huyssen argues in his account of Adorno's *Versuch*: "Its purpose was rather to analyze the social and cultural roots of German fascism in the nineteenth century. Given the pressures of the times - Hitler's affiliation with Bayreuth and the incorporation of Wagner into the fascist culture machine - Wagner's work turned out to be the logical place for such an investigation. We need to remember here that whenever Adorno says fascism, he is also saying culture industry. The book on Wagner can therefore be read not only as an account of the birth of fascism out of the spirit of

²⁰ See Peter Gordon, "Wounded Modernism: Adorno on Wagner," *New German Critique* 129, 43, No. 3, November (2016), 163.

²¹ See Peter Gordon, "Wounded Modernism: Adorno on Wagner," *New German Critique* 129, 43, No. 3, November (2016), 163.

²² See Karin Bauer, "Adorno's Wagner: History and the Potential of the Artwork," *Cultural Critique*, no. 60 (2005), 89-90.

²³ Theodor W. Adorno, "Wagner's Relevance for Today," trans. Susan Gillespie. *Grand Street*, no. 44 (1993), 33-34.

²⁴ The formulation of the truth emerging from the falsehood of the work is drawn from Adorno's program note, "On the Score of 'Parsifal'," see Theodor W. Adorno, "On the Score of 'Parsifal'." *Music & Letters* 76, no. 3 (1995), 387.

the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, but also as an account of the birth of the culture industry in the most ambitious high art of the nineteenth century.”²⁵ Through a close reading of Adorno’s *Versuch*, Huyssen illustrates the ways that Adorno’s critique of Wagner situates his music as a precursor to the commodified culture industry, namely, in its impulse toward totality (*Gesamtkunstwerk*, ‘total artwork’) and moreover, its mythic appearance (*Schein*) as phantasmagoria—understood in the Marxian sense as the fetishism of the commodity that abstracts from and hides the social contradictions inherent in the commodity’s production.²⁶ Huyssen’s illustration of the intertwining of Wagner’s opera and the culture industry in Adorno’s represents a compelling analysis of Adorno’s chapters on phantasmagoria and music drama in the *Versuch*.²⁷ Drawing on Huyssen’s and Gordon’s accounts, this chapter investigates the redemptive elements of Adorno’s critiques of Wagner and the culture industry, as they are developed in Adorno’s critical aesthetic works, the *Versuch*, essays on Jazz, the culture industry chapter in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and *Aesthetic Theory*. In emphasizing Adorno’s dialectical interpretation of Wagner’s lifework as “the privileged locus of that fierce struggle between tradition and modernity, autonomy and commodity, revolution and reaction, and, ultimately, myth and enlightenment” while also pointing to Adorno’s explicit linkages of Wagner, atonality and Schoenberg’s second Viennese school—the latter of which Adorno elevated aesthetically throughout his *oeuvre*—Huyssen articulates the underpinnings of Adorno’s redemptive critique of Wagner. Adorno did not only seek to demonstrate the dialectical contradictions of modernity as they unfolded in Wagner’s work; rather, he sought, in Benjaminian fashion, to alchemically transform the object of criticism through a redemptive critique that grows immanently out of the work itself.

Before delving into the particulars of Adorno’s redemptive criticism of Wagner in his *Versuch*, it is useful to situate it within the context of its original composition in 1937-38 in the midst of the Third Reich while Adorno was in exile. In his post-war lecture, “National Socialism and the Arts,” Adorno situates his critique of Wagner within the wider intellectual-historical milieu of Wilhelmine and Weimar Germany where the racially infused ideas of anti-Semitism

²⁵ Andreas Huyssen, "Adorno in Reverse: From Hollywood to Richard Wagner," *New German Critique*, no. 29 (1983), 30.

²⁶ *Ibid.*,

²⁷ In his chapter on music drama, Adorno explicitly links Wagner with the culture industry, specifically the development of film: “that the evolution of the opera, and in particular the emergence of the autonomous sovereignty of the artist, is intertwined with the origins of the culture industry. Nietzsche, in his youthful enthusiasm, failed to recognize the artwork of the future in which we witness the birth of film out of the spirit of music,” See Theodor W. Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 2005), 96.

and National Socialism began to take root. Noting the direct influence Wagner and his family had on the historical development of National Socialism, Adorno writes:

Nobody can escape the awareness of the deep interconnection between Richard Wagner and German supra-nationalism in its most destructive form. It may be good to recollect that there is an immediate link between him and official Nazi ideology. Wagner's standard-bearer and son-in-law, the Germanized Englishman Houston Stewart Chamberlain, was one of the first writers who combined aggressive pan-Germanism, racism, the belief in the absolute superiority of German culture—or you may rather say of German Kultur—and militant anti-Semitism. The Nazi bogus philosopher Alfred Rosenberg has confessedly borrowed most of his theses from Chamberlain's *Grundlagen des 19. Jahrhunderts*. The book had the blessing of the Bayreuth circle, and Chamberlain, as an old man, welcomed enthusiastically the National Socialist movement.²⁸

For Adorno, Wagner's intimate complicity with National Socialism and "German supra-nationalism in its most destructive form" is an inescapable reality of his personal legacy. Beyond Wagner's personal familial connections with figures central to the ideological development of National Socialism and its particular brand of biological anti-Semitism and racism, his music itself betrays not only a regression to mythic barbarism and the glorification of violence, but moreover, deep-seated anti-Semitic impulses. Adorno to this effect contends that National Socialist legacy of Wagner's personal life is not accidental, but coincides with the proto-fascist ideological content of his theoretical and aesthetic works:

The pedigree Wagner-Chamberlain-Rosenberg is more than just historical accident. Not only can we discover many elements of rubber-stamped Nazi doctrine in Wagner's theoretical writings, but we can also spot them, which is more important, throughout Wagner's works in more or less flimsy allegorical disguise. The whole plot of Wagner's *Ring* suggests some kind of a gigantic Nazi frame-up, with Siegfried as an innocent, lovable Teutonic hero who, just by chance, conquers the world and ultimately falls victim to the Jewish conspiracy of the dark dwarfs and those who trust their counsel.²⁹

In addition to disseminating anti-Semitism through the narrative framing of his work, Adorno maintains that Wagner's music discloses a "repressive, compulsory, blind and ultimately anti-individual way of his composing."³⁰ Notwithstanding the barbaric glorification of heroic violence, the mythic logic of sacrifice, and the commodified, phantasmagoric (in the sense of representing the aesthetic work as a fetish, an autonomous object, abstracted from the social

²⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, *Essays on Music*, trans. Susan H. Gillespie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 374.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 374-75.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 375.

conditions of its production and distribution) character of Wagner's work, Adorno argues that the such latently fascist elements unfold at the formal level of his compositions: "His music itself speaks the language of Fascism, quite apart from plots and bombastic words."³¹ Adorno spoke these words shortly after the downfall of the Third Reich and the catastrophes of the Holocaust and the Second World War while the wounds were still fresh. Although he does go on to qualify his condemning criticism of Wagner with an acknowledgement of "the fact that his work contains forces entirely antagonistic" to German fascism and its concomitant ideologies of racial purity and German supra-Nationalism, Adorno nonetheless holds fast to his insistence on the inescapably barbarous, oppressive elements within Wagner's work that tie it ineluctably to National Socialism.³² That Adorno argued this after the downfall of Hitler and the hitherto concrete threat of the National Socialist integration of Wagner's art as an ideological support, suggests that while in exile in 1937-38, Adorno would have been even more critical of the proto-fascist elements in Wagner's work that in effect contributed to its important place in the development of National Socialism.

Beginning with this association in mind, Adorno opens the first chapter of his *Versuch* with a scathing critique of Wagner's 'social character'. Pointing to Wagner's sadistic treatment of the Jewish conductor of *Parsifal*, Hermann Levi—whose friendship with Wagner, Adorno writes, has been used to "prove the harmlessness of Wagner's anti-Semitism"—Adorno depicts Wagner's character in particularly harsh terms: "The sadistic desire to humiliate, sentimental conciliatoriness and above all the wish to bind the maltreated Levi to him emotionally — all these elements enter into Wagner's casuistry: it is indeed demonic..."³³ Throughout this first chapter, Adorno demonstrates the ways that Wagner's anti-Semitism effectively shaped not only Wagner's personal relationships but also the content of his works. Adorno to this effect diagnoses numerous anti-Semitic and racist tropes in Wagner's recreation of Germanic and

³¹ Ibid.

It is important to note that Adorno continues that we should not overestimate Wagner's significance to the development of National Socialism: "Yet, we should not overrate the importance of Wagner as a formative element of Fascism. Apart from the fact that his work contains forces entirely antagonistic to those which I mentioned, his actual influence in Germany was definitely on the decline. True, he helped to prepare the climate for Fascism with the generation of our parents. The imagery of his works doubtlessly soaked through innumerable channels into the unconscious of most Germans. However, his work itself had largely ceased to be a living force," See Adorno, *Essays on Music*, 375-76.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 9.

Norse mythology in *The Ring of the Nibelung*. Situating Wagner in the nineteenth-century milieu of biological race theories and anti-Semitism, Adorno writes:

Race theory assumes its rightful place in the no man's land between idiosyncrasy and paranoia. The middle-class Wagner needed no lessons on the subject from Gobineau, the dispossessed feudal seigneur, with whom he was friendly in his old age. As early as *Siegfried* we can find the words:

Everything has its own nature;
And these you cannot change.
This spot I cede to you:
Take a strong stand
Contend with your brother Mime;
You may fare better with his kind.
More than that you will soon learn too!

The entire story of the Ring is implicated in this. Alberich steals the ring and curses love because the Rhine Maidens refuse to surrender to him: the dialectic of instinct and domination is reduced to a difference of 'nature' rather than one socially caused. The absolute distinction drawn in *The Ring* between the different natural kinds becomes the basis of the life and death struggle, its apparent historical structure notwithstanding. If in the social process of life 'ossified relationships' form a second nature, then it is this second nature at which Wagner gazes transfixed, mistaking it for the first. From the outset—in 1850—anti-Semitism is expressed in the categories of nature, above all, those of immediacy and the people, and he already contrasts these categories with 'liberalism'.³⁴

Attending to the minute details in Wagner's biography—such as his friendship with Arthur de Gobineau, a French aristocrat who contributed to the popularization of scientific and biological racism as well as the notion of the Aryan master race—Adorno shows the broader significance of such minor details. For as the passage from the *Ring* cited above illustrates, Wagner's narrative drama is permeated by the biological racism and anti-Semitism that he explicitly espoused in his theoretical writings. Adorno intensifies his attack on Wagner's character by arguing that his hatred of Jews went to the genocidal extreme of wishing their annihilation: "Wagner's anti-Semitism assembles all the ingredients of subsequent varieties. His hatred is so extreme that, if we are to believe Glasenapp, the news of the deaths of 400 Jews in the fire in the *Ringtheater* in Vienna inspired him to make jokes. He had even conceived the notion of the annihilation of the

³⁴ Ibid., 15-16.

Jews. He differs from his ideological descendants only in that he equates annihilation with salvation.”³⁵ Supporting this damning depiction of Wagner’s character Adorno interprets the latter’s essay on “Judaism and Music” as embodying a genocidal impulse:

Thus the closing section of the essay on the Jews contains sentences that, however ambivalently, are reminiscent of another tract on the Jewish Question: ‘Yet another Jew have we to name, who appeared among us as a writer. From out his isolation as a Jew, he came among us seeking for redemption; he found it not, and had to learn that *only with our redemption, too, into genuine manhood*, would he ever find it. To become man at once with us, however, means firstly for the Jew as much as ceasing to be a Jew... Without once looking back, take your part in this regenerative work of deliverance through self-annulment; then are we one and undissevered! But remember, only one thing can redeem you from the burden of your curse: the redemption of Ahasuerus— *Going under!*’... The mode of existence that longs for the destruction of the Jew is aware that it is itself beyond redemption. Hence its own downfall is interpreted as the end of the world and Jews are seen as the agents of doom. At its peak, bourgeois nihilism is also the wish to annihilate the bourgeois. In the sinister realm of Wagner’s reactionary outlook we find inscribed letters that his work wrested from his character.³⁶

Adorno’s citation of Wagner’s claim that “only one thing can redeem” the Jew from “the burden of” their curse, namely, their Jewishness, “the redemption of Ahasuerus—*Going under!*” is a peculiar reference insofar as Wagner’s remark about Ahasuerus’ redemption of the Jews, “*Going under,*” does not simply name Ahasverus the apocryphal ‘wandering Jew’—who Jesus cursed to walk the earth only to find redemption in perishing—but is also an oblique reference to the story of the *Book of Esther* in Jewish scripture in which the Persian King by with same name, Ahasuerus, authorizes a decree for the annihilation of the Jewish people.³⁷ In citing this passage in Wagner as part of his ruthless criticism of the latter, Adorno in effect turns Wagner’s anti-Semitism against itself, negating it through revealing its inherent barbarism and regression into myth (e.g., here of biological and metaphysical forms of racism and anti-Semitism) parading as science.

Echoing his ruthless criticism of Wagner’s social character, in his chapter titled “Phantasmagoria” Adorno extends his critique of Wagner through a demonstration of the ways that his art regress into the very commodified instrumentality that they purport to resist as autonomous, self-contained totalities unconstrained by the social contradictions and commercial

³⁵ Ibid., 16.

³⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 2005), 15-17.

³⁷ This interpretation of Adorno’s account of the figure of Ahasverus in Wagner draws on conversations with Martin Ruehl.

pressures of commodity capitalism. Adorno successfully draws a series of links between Wagner's aesthetic works and nineteenth century commodities through developing the critical Marxian notion of phantasmagoria. Whereas Marx presented his conception of phantasmagoria as a way of describing the fetishism (illusory sense of autonomy that conceals the social conditions of production) of commodities, Adorno expands Marx's notion in using it to clarify the nature of Wagner's aesthetic representation or appearance: "The occultation of production by means of the outward appearance of the product—that is the formal law governing the works of Richard Wagner. The product presents itself as self-producing: hence too the primacy of chromaticism and the leading note. In the absence of any glimpse of the underlying forces or conditions of its production, this outer appearance can lay claim to the status of being. Its perfection is at the same time the perfection of the illusion that the work of art is a reality *sui generis* that constitutes itself in the realm of the absolute without having to renounce its claim to image the world. Wagner's operas tend towards magic delusion, to what Schopenhauer calls 'The outside of the worthless commodity', in short towards phantasmagoria."³⁸ Adorno's argument that Wagner's operas regress "towards magic delusion" coincides with his critical assessment of Wagner as a mythologizer—"beneath his gaze everything becomes mythological"³⁹—insofar as the category phantasmagoria is a cipher for the mythic, abstracting, and illusory, or in other words, ideological, quality of the commodity form. Adorno in this regard situates Wagner's work alongside the most commodified forms of the culture industry (i.e., advertisements) as fundamentally ideological in its manifestation as phantasmagoria:

As a commodity it [phantasmagoria] purveys illusions...In Wagner's day the consumer goods on display turned their phenomenal side seductively towards the mass of customers while diverting attention from their merely phenomenal character, from the fact that they were beyond reach. Similarly, in the phantasmagoria, Wagner's operas tend to become commodities. Their tableaux assume the character of wares on display. As it flares up into a vast magic conflagration, the little Romantic flame of *Hans Heiling* transformed into the prototype of future illuminated advertisements.⁴⁰

In Adorno's account, Wagner's opera is fundamentally mythical and illusory. This assessment, however, is not simply due to Wagner's explicit enthrallment in mythology and his phantasmagoric attempt to conceal the social conditions of its own production; on the contrary,

³⁸ Ibid., 74.

³⁹ Ibid., 109.

⁴⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 2005), 79-80.

Adorno locates the mythic character of Wagner work in its submission to the domineering forces of Fate and myth. Adorno thereby situates Wagner's mythic character as a yielding to the "dominant forces" of an unfree social order that inculcates conformity and represses individuality: "He belongs to the first generation to realize that in a world that has been socialized through and through it is not possible for an individual to alter something that is determined over the heads of men. Nevertheless, it was not given to him to call the overarching totality by its real name. In consequence it is transformed for him into myth. The opacity and omnipotence of the social process is then celebrated as a metaphysical mystery by the individual who becomes conscious of it and yet ranges himself on the side of its dominant forces. Wagner has devised the ritual of permanent catastrophe. His unbridled individualism utters the death sentence on the individual and its order."⁴¹ Wagner's triumphal celebration of the social forces that repress the autonomy of individuals thus constitutes a suspension of the "profoundest critique" that music has to offer, namely, its critique of myth and blind submission to fate. "The Wagnerian *espressivo*," Adorno writes, "removes from his characters something that in any case they possessed as little as figures on a film screen; 'the poet speaks' because Fate strikes them dumb. And by taking sides with a Fate suspended over the powerless, music renounces its profoundest critique, its critique of myth, something that had been implicit in music throughout the entire period of bourgeois ascendancy, ever since the invention of the opera as a form. By identifying with myth, it identifies ultimately with its falseness."⁴² Wagnerian opera's renunciation of music's profoundest critique of myth thus leads, ultimately, to the work's identification with the falseness inherent in myth insofar as the relinquishing of music's sublime capacity to resist the forces of unfreedom and domination displays a complicity with and submission to the latter.

Seen in this light, how could Adorno possibly redeem an artist whose works and social character are so deeply enmeshed in the very forms of mythic unfreedom and barbarism that Adorno's philosophy unceasingly resisted? The answer to this question is found in the concluding section of the *Versuch*, in which Adorno articulates the redemptive project at the heart of his ruthless criticism of Wagner. Invoking Nietzsche's famous critique of Wagner, Adorno positions Wagner's decadence (signaling the nascent "stages of bourgeois decline") as

⁴¹ Ibid., 108.

⁴² Ibid., 113.

key to his critical redemption and rescue. “Wagner’s works provide eloquent evidence of the early phase of bourgeois decadence,” Adorno writes, “However, if a decadent society develops the seeds of the society that will perhaps one day take its place, then Nietzsche, like the Russian despotism of the twentieth century which followed him, failed to recognize the forces that were released in the early stages of bourgeois decline.”⁴³ Describing the emancipatory, utopian potential inherent in the decadence of Wagner’s aesthetic, Adorno maintains that “There is not one decadent element in Wagner’s work from which a productive mind could not extract the forces of the future.”⁴⁴ As his numerous references to Schoenberg and the second Viennese school throughout the *Versuch* make explicit, Adorno here acknowledges the clear debt that all modern composers owe to Wagner, whose innovations and modifications of traditional tonality significantly impacted Schoenberg and his development of the atonalism that Adorno champions for its dismantling of the identity-thinking and totalitarian logic (of order and semblance) that inheres in traditional, tonal music.⁴⁵ Pointing to the social truth at work in Wagner’s art, Adorno writes that “There is more of the social process in the limp individuality of Wagner’s work than in aesthetic personas more equal to the challenge posed by society and hence more resolute in meeting it.”⁴⁶ For Adorno, then, Wagner’s false consciousness, his entanglement in mythic ideology and untruth, is coupled by a corresponding ‘critical consciousness’: “He also possesses the neurotic’s ability to contemplate his own decadence and to transcend it in an image that can withstand that all-consuming gaze. It might well be asked whether Nietzsche’s criterion of health is of greater benefit than the critical consciousness that Wagner’s grandiose weakness acquires in his commerce with the unconscious forces responsible for his own decadence.”⁴⁷ Adorno already began to articulate Wagner’s ‘critical consciousness’ in an earlier section on *Music Drama*, where he argued that “there is little about Wagner that is more progressive than his paradoxical efforts to discover a rational way of overcoming conditions brought forth by a misguided use of reason...having adopted without reservation the technical achievements of the nineteenth

⁴³ Ibid., 142.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ For more on Adorno’s account of Wagner’s influence on Schoenberg and the second Viennese school, see Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, 31-37, 57-67, 100, 107-114, 144-145.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 143.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

century, despite his alleged ‘struggle’ against them.”⁴⁸ However, it is in this last section where Adorno hypostasizes the redemptive moment of his critique of Wagner in the last section:

Through a twist of the dialectic, music is transformed from the companion of the unconscious into the first conscious companion... In *Tristan* we find more than the rapturous music of dream and death, more than the delights of the unconscious which in reality has never ‘been cooled by atonement’... The feverish passages in Act III of *Tristan* contain that black, abrupt, jagged music which instead of underlining the vision unmasks it. Music, the most magical of all the arts, learns how to break the spell it casts over the characters. When Tristan curses love, this is more than the impotent sacrifice offered up by rapture to asceticism. It is the rebellion— futile though it may be— of the music against the iron laws that rule it, and only in its total determination by those laws can it regain the power of self-determination. It is not for nothing that those phrases in the *Tristan* score which follow the words ‘*Der furchtbare Trank*’ [‘that potion so dread’] stand on the threshold of modern music in whose first canonic work, Schoenberg’s F# minor quartet, we find the words, ‘*Nimm mir die Liebe, gib mir dein Glück!*’ They mean that love and happiness are false in the world in which we live, and that the whole power of love has passed over into its antithesis. Anyone able to snatch such gold from the deafening surge of the Wagnerian orchestra, would be rewarded by its altered sound, for it would grant him that solace which, for all its rapture and phantasmagoria, it consistently refuses. By voicing the fears of helpless people, it could signal help for the helpless, however feebly and distortedly. In doing so it would renew the promise contained in the age-old protest of music: the promise of a life without fear.⁴⁹

Wagner’s music, understood in this sense, therefore counteracts the mythic, ideological impulses that Adorno diagnoses in Wagner’s work as a whole. For, as Adorno maintains, “Music, the most magical of all the arts, learns how to break the spell it casts over the characters” insofar as the technical unfolding of the music itself represents a refunctioning of the technological, instrumental reason that Adorno and Horkheimer associate with enlightenment and myth in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Despite its impulses toward unfreedom, myth and barbarous domination, Wagner’s art cannot fully relinquish the critical, socially resistant function that inheres in music and art that break free from the conventions and norms of the past and present to create the art of the new, ‘the forces of the future’ that Adorno identifies in Wagner’s *oeuvre*. For Adorno, it is precisely in the formal, technical structure of Wagner’s operas that his mythic, ideological tendencies dialectically reverse into their antithesis, critical consciousness. For within the very barbaric celebration of mythic recurrence and domination, Wagner poignantly reveals the criticism of the latter. Indeed, as Adorno would later write in his more explicit rescue in

⁴⁸ Ibid., 97-98.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 144-45.

“Wagner’s Relevance for Today,” Wagner’s elevation of mythology and heroic violence ultimately works against itself: “He becomes, one might say, an advocate of violence, just as his principal work glorifies Siegfried, the man of violence. But when, in his work, violence expresses itself in pure form, unobscured, in all its terror and entrapment, then the work, despite its mythologizing tendency, is an indictment of myth.”⁵⁰ Prefiguring his later conception in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, namely, that myth, the antithesis against which enlightenment situates itself, is ineluctably entwined with its opposite, in his critique of Wagner, Adorno already begins to develop a conception of the birth of enlightenment, dialectically, out of myth. Rather than forming a rigid opposition, the relation of myth and enlightenment is positioned as dialectically, reciprocally constitutive forces in Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic*. Just as Adorno and Horkheimer redeem the concept and project of enlightenment through its ruthless immanent criticism, Adorno analogously rescues Wagner from the oblivion of myth and barbarism through a critique that evokes the critical consciousness latent within these very mythic elements.

III. *Redeeming Stefan George*

Nowhere is Adorno’s dialectical redemption of conservative elements of German aesthetics more evident than in his engagement with the poetry of George. As Paul Fleming argues, Adorno’s engagement with George is part of his persistent interaction with other “conservative, restorative poets” such as Joseph von Eichendorff and Rudolf Borchardt, George occupies a special place in these critical interactions, accompanying Adorno “like no other writer throughout his productive life.”⁵¹ Noting the critical significance of George in Adorno’s philosophical career, Fleming lists the numerous essays Adorno wrote on George throughout his life: “in 1934 Adorno wrote an essay on George’s *Days and Deeds*, which has unfortunately been lost, all the more so because of the importance Adorno is said to have attached to it (*NL2*, xvii); 1939-40 saw Adorno’s lengthy essay on the George-Hofmannsthal correspondence; in the 1940s Adorno followed the lead of Schoenberg, Webern and Berg and set a cycle of George poems to music; the 1957 essay “Lyric Poetry and Society,” concludes with a panegyric to George; and in 1967 Adorno wrote and delivered a radio piece simply called ‘George’. Not a

⁵⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, “Wagner’s Relevance for Today,” trans. Susan Gillespie. *Grand Street*, no. 44 (1993), 42.

⁵¹ Paul Fleming, “Secret Adorno,” *Qui Parle* 15, no. 1 (2004), 97.

decade passed without Adorno turning to and addressing George.”⁵² As illustrated in chapter two, George and his circle were instrumental to the development of the Weimar debates on aesthetics and politics and, more revealingly, the interaction of right- and left-wing intellectuals in this period. To this effect, Benjamin’s fascination with and critique of George was not simply an isolated phenomenon but was reflective of a broader interaction between critical theorists and an array of politically disparate intellectuals and artists in Weimar and its aftermath. More explicitly than Benjamin, Adorno positions George as a paradigmatic poet of modernity, whose works express the utopian truth content of autonomous art. Adorno’s critique of George, however, is not solely a redemption, insofar as the redemptive moment is inextricable from the proto-fascist and ideological elements of George’s poetry. George’s poetry is remarkable, Adorno argues in “Lyric Poetry and Society,” insofar as it expresses the dialectical contradictions and antagonisms of society while remaining a self-contained, autonomous expression of an individual subject (George) who formed his being and lifework in opposition to the homogenizing and democratizing forces of the social order.⁵³ In his critique of George, Adorno maintains that the interlocking relations of the universal and the particular, the collective and the individual, subjective, autonomous art (e.g., lyric poetry) and the objective realm of society, are expressed through a “pure language” that effectively sublates such oppositions and resists the reification of consciousness that concretizes them.⁵⁴ In striving to redeem this kind of ‘pure language’, the genuine linguistic expression of that which is incommensurable, other and non-identical, Adorno positions George’s poetry as a kind of “lyric speech” that “becomes the

⁵² Ibid., 98-99.

⁵³ Assessing the significance and nature of George’s opposition to the status quo, Adorno positions George’s culturally elitist, autonomous stance as resulting from “the social dialectic that denies the lyric subject identification with what exists”: “But because this poetry can speak from no overarching framework other than the bourgeois, which it rejects not only tacitly and *a priori* but also expressly, it becomes obstructed: on its own initiative and its own authority, it simulates a feudal condition. Socially this is hidden behind what the cliché refers to as George’s aristocratic stance. ...Rather, despite its demeanor of hostility to society, it is the product of the social dialectic that denies the lyric subject identification with what exists and its world of forms[what an extraordinary whitewashing of George’s willfully anti-democratic stance!], while that subject is nevertheless allied with the status quo in its innermost core: it has no other locus [it’s almost as if Adorno is saying that George had no choice but to condemn the masses from on high...] from which to speak but that of a past seigniorial society. The ideal of nobility, which dictates the choice of every word, image, and sound in the poem, is derived from that locus, and the form is medieval in an almost undefinable way, a way that has been virtually imported into the linguistic configuration. To this extent the poem, like George altogether, is neoromantic.” See Adorno, “Lyric Poetry and Society,” 51.

⁵⁴ As discussed below, this resistance to the reification of consciousness comes in the form of an intensified reification that is expressed in the artwork and which negates the kind of reification prevalent in society. See Adorno, “Lyric Poetry and Society,” 52.

voice of human beings between whom the barriers have fallen.”⁵⁵ This praise of the utopian truth articulated in George’s poetry arrives at the conclusion of Adorno’s 1957 essay, following an unyielding critique of his poetry and “the frightful cultural conservatism of the George circle.”⁵⁶ Thus, as Adorno emphasizes throughout his essay, his critique is dialectical, in that the utopian aspects of George’s poetry are shown to inhere in the very conservative and barbarous elements of his works.⁵⁷ Rather than simply negating George’s poetry as proto-fascist or as an expression of aristocratic elitism and the “progressive domination of nature”—“the universal tendency of Enlightenment” that “Artistic production cannot escape,”—⁵⁸Adorno’s redemptive critique aims to show how precisely in its very violent and dominating tendencies, George’s poetry opens up a utopian form of poetic expression, acting as a medium for the unrealized idea of a ‘pure language’ that shatters the homogenizing logics of identity and the barriers erected between human beings.⁵⁹

For Adorno, the counter-aesthetic to the objects of his criticism, such as the culture industry and other ideologically repressive aesthetic forms (e.g., Jazz, classicism, realism, agitprop, and Wagnerian opera), can be described as art that opens itself up to and expresses that which is incommensurable and non-identical—making it utopian insofar as it voices that which is not, the possibilities of the new in contradistinction to the presently existing state of affairs. In other words, Adorno elevates art that relinquishes the rationalist, classical aesthetic attempt to mirror reality (as *mimesis*) in a transparent, interpretable fashion. Adorno situates as emancipatory, art that does not believe itself to be “in possession of its content” (e.g., such as Brecht’s art, which Adorno critiques for precisely this belief), art that is characterized by its semiotic opacity and impenetrability.⁶⁰ Reflecting on the significance of George in *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno associates his poetry with the attempt to reinstate the self-evidence of art in its content, thereby demonstrating the fundamental affinities that link the aesthetics of George with those of Kafka, Beckett and Schönberg:

⁵⁵ Ibid., 54.

This interpretation of Adorno’s engagement with George and his conception of ‘pure language’ draws on and critiques Paul Fleming’s account cited above. See Fleming, “Secret Adorno,” 97-114.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 50.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 53.

⁵⁸ Adorno, “Theses on Art and Religion Today,” in *Notes to Literature, Volume 2*, trans. Shierry Weber Nichol森 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 296.

⁵⁹ Adorno, “Lyric Poetry and Society,” 50-54.

⁶⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2002), 27.

Along with the categories, the materials too have lost their a priori self-evidence, and this is apparent in the case of poetic language. The disintegration of the materials is the triumph of their being-for-other...Neo-romantic poetry as a whole can be considered as an effort to oppose this disintegration and to win back for language and other materials a degree of substantiality...Retrospectively, in Kafka's words, it appears as a lighthearted journey going nowhere. In the opening poem to a cycle from the 'Seventh Ring', an invocation of a forest, George needed only to juxtapose *Gold* and *Kameol* [carnelian] to be able to hope that, in keeping with his principle of stylization, the choice of words would glimmer poetically.² ... Analogously, Schoenberg remarked that Chopin was fortunate: He needed only to compose in F-sharp major, a still unexploited key, for his music to be beautiful. This, however, requires the historicophilosophical caveat that the materials of early musical romanticism, such as Chopin's rare tonalities, did indeed radiate the force of the untrodden, whereas these same materials were by 1900 already debased to the condition of being 'select.' The fate suffered by this generation's works, their juxtapositions and keys, inexorably befell the traditional concept of the poetic as something categorically higher and sacred. Poetry retreated into what abandons itself unreservedly to the process of disillusionment. It is this that constitutes the irresistibility of Beckett's work.⁶¹

This important passage illustrates the extent to which Adorno perceived George's poetry as achieving, or at least, attempting to achieve, the same redemption of art and its content, following the disintegration of the latter. The attempt of 'neo-romantic poetry' (Adorno's label for George's writings) to in effect "oppose this disintegration and to win back for language and other materials a degree of substantiality," marks the effort to redeem art, specifically, its content and materials (i.e., language and other aesthetic media) by granting it its own autonomy and substance. With regards to George's role in these emancipatory aesthetic impulses and developments, in citing examples in the works of George, alongside Kafka and Beckett (the two writers who are most elevated in Adorno's aesthetics), Adorno makes explicit his conviction that George's poetry ranks alongside the works of Kafka and Beckett in this regard.

Despite this utopian positioning of George's poetry, however, in his essay on the George-Hofmannsthal correspondence, which is dedicated to the memory of Benjamin. Adorno's dedication highlights the significance of George and his circle not only to Benjamin, but also to his and Adorno's friendship and aesthetico-political debates.⁶² Adorno alludes to the darker side of the *Georgekreis* when he writes that "The price of George's culture is always barbarous,"⁶³ to

⁶¹ Ibid., 16.

⁶² Another important element to note here is the fact that Benjamin and Hoffmansthal were related as distant cousins.

⁶³ Theodor W. Adorno, "The George-Hoffmansthal Correspondence, 1891-1906," in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), 195.

the effect of applying Benjamin's famous dictum—"There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism"—⁶⁴ to George's poetry. Painting an image of this complex tension of culture and barbarism, or, as Jameson expresses it, ideology and utopia, in George's poetry, Adorno writes: "Charm, grace, and their heir, the attractive person, serve precisely to conceal privilege. Nobility itself is noble by virtue of the ignoble. This emerges clearly in George... Anyone who has the presence of mind while reading George's poetry not to forget its pragmatic content in favour of its pretended identity with the lyrical aspect is often struck by a base element in the most elevated passages."⁶⁵ In his critique of George, which notably stops short of associating George and his school with National Socialism,⁶⁶ Adorno thereby situates George's poetry as an exemplary case of the dialectical interaction of culture and barbarism, ideology and utopia, in art (i.e., its simultaneous expression of utopian impulses and ideologies of that reflect its social origins). In the course of negating George's poetry as base and barbarous, Adorno shows how this barbarous element is inextricably linked with the poetry's redeeming cultural and aesthetic value. In this account, George's emphasis on virtues like nobility and grace in his poetry is bound indissolubly to a diminution of the very noble and graceful qualities he cherishes. For it is at the expense of the ignoble and ungraceful, the 'oppressed classes' (in Benjamin's terms) and those lacking cultural education the social standing necessary to acquire the latter, that the aristocratic qualities of nobility and grace can make themselves evident. Adorno therefore argues that such vaunted virtues, notwithstanding their cultural and utopian value, obscure the underlying social-economic divisions, the "privilege," of those who aristocratically celebrate high culture. The aristocratic virtues Adorno discerns and critiques in George's poetry, however, do not capture his sense of the utopian

⁶⁴ Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 256. In Zohn's translation, Benjamin's term "*Kultur*" is incorrectly translated as "civilization," a mistake which is amended in the above translation.

⁶⁵ Adorno presents the following example of this crudity or baseness in George's work: "As early as the famous introductory cycle in the *Jahr der Seele* [Year of the Soul], in 'Nach der lese' ['After the Harvest'], a degrading substitute for love is depicted which does not stop short of insulting the beloved. The most tender verses are followed by those of thoughtless crudity. Few businessmen would allow themselves to tell their girlfriend friends 'und ganz als glichest du der Einen Fernen' ['and just as though you were she, so far away'], and other such meagre compliments." See Theodor W. Adorno, "The George-Hoffmansthal Correspondence, 1891-1906," in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), 194.

⁶⁶ In his discussion of George, his circle, and their relation to Nazism, Adorno writes: "The less worldly George School summoned up greater resistance. In this respect, the sorely taxed notion of bearing still demonstrated its superiority to that 'majesty', the glance 'from above' that Borchardt singled out for praise. George himself, at least, remained impervious to a *mondanité* which was able to conduct international dialogues even about Hitler. The 'secret Germany' proclaimed by George was less compatible with the New Order than was the exquisite conformity which from the very first felt itself above all those national boundaries that were later to be revised." See Adorno, *Prisms*, 198.

possibilities that inhere not only in George's poetry, but also in the works of other poets in the same tradition (in Adorno's estimation, an aestheticist tradition of neo-romanticism), namely, Baudelaire and Hofmannsthal. For Adorno, it is the resistance to and defiance of the status quo, the estrangement of art from society and its cultural, aesthetic and linguistic norms—the latter of which is part and parcel of its aesthetic autonomy—that imbues George's poetry with its utopian content, understood here as the artwork's "determinate negation" of 'identity' and the status quo. Following his critique of George and Hofmannsthal, Adorno concludes his essay by revealing the redemptive moment of his critique, wherein the subjects of critique are elevated through an evocation of their utopian core:

The bourgeois glorifies the existing order as nature and demands that his fellow citizens speak 'naturally'. This norm is overturned by aesthetic affectation. The affected aesthete speaks as though he were his own idol... he represents the utopia of not being oneself. Of course, the others may criticize society. But they remain as true to themselves as to their notion of happiness as a healthy, well organized, rationally ordered life. The utopia of aestheticism abrogates the social contract of happiness...As faithful if moderate pupils of Baudelaire, George and Hofmannsthal established happiness where it was defamed. Confronted with the defamed, what is allowed withers and vanishes for them. The unnatural is charged with the task of recreating the multitude of instincts which were distorted by the primacy of procreation; irresponsible play seeks to overcome the ruinous seriousness of whatever one happens to be. Both shake personal identity to the roots with a silent roar, identity, the walls, of which comprise the innermost prison cell of the existing order. Whatever they may choose to provide a positive contrast to the ruling society is subordinate to it as a reflection of the individual, just as George's angel resembles the poet, just as the lover in the *Star of the League* finds 'my own flesh' in the beloved. What survives is, determinate negation."⁶⁷

What truly evokes the utopian dimension of George's poetry, in Adorno's estimation, is the way in which his poetry effectively incorporates and provides an aesthetic response to the critique of a disenchanted, over-rationalized, instrumental modern world. In taking aim at the societal conventions and norms of language, and the instrumentalization of desire (i.e., crystalized in the "primacy of procreation"), George's poetry, like that of Baudelaire and Hofmannsthal, negates the ideological-conceptual "prison cell of the existing order," the homogenous, self-similar logic of identity. For Adorno, the capacity of poetic language—as exemplified by the works of George, Hofmannsthal and Baudelaire—to open itself to that which is other, in other words, its estrangement from the rationalistic, naturalist and mimetic forms of aesthetic and linguistic

⁶⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, "The George-Hofmannsthal Correspondence, 1891-1906," in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Sherry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), 224-226.

representation, ultimately “represents the utopia of not being oneself,” the utopia of being nonidentical. In this conception, happiness, which stands at the center of Adorno’s thinking on utopia, arises not out of a rationally ordered, organized, or ‘administered society’, but rather, through the ‘irresponsible play’, the ecstatic intoxication (*Rausch*) of overthrowing the norms of instrumental reason and the logic of identity that are the conceptual and ideological corollaries and reinforcements of the status quo. It is precisely in the refusal to be readily possessed and interpreted, in its semiotic autonomy and opacity (the latter of which is emphasized in the symbolist aesthetics and theories often associated with the *Georgekreis* and their predecessors, such as Mallarmé), that George’s poetry gives form to its utopian content.

As Fleming’s compelling illustration of the redemptive element in Adorno’s critique of George makes evident, Adorno’s conclusion to “Lyric Poetry and Society” works to rescue the utopian truth content of George’s poetry.⁶⁸ Interpreting Adorno’s praise of George in juxtaposition with his other writings on the poet, makes it clear that this praise is not simply uncritical, but, as Fleming’s redemptive reading suggests, is part and parcel of a rescue operation that recovers the truth content of George’s work dialectically through its immanent critical negation. The redemptive moment of George’s poetry, therefore, is not reductively superimposed from without through a transcendent critique but is unlocked immanently from the content of the work itself—as the autonomous expression of the subject. Put differently, Adorno does not simply perform a dialectical procedure on George to simultaneously critique and elevate his poetry; instead, his redemptive critique grows immanently from the work to reveal the dialectical tensions and utopian content within the work itself. It is in this vein that Adorno situates his redemptive-critical approach to art as a mode of immanent critique aimed at evoking the social contradictions of society within the artwork: “Such thought, however—the social interpretation of lyric poetry as of all works of art—may not focus directly on the so-called social perspective or the social interests of the works or their authors. Instead, it must discover how the entirety of a society, conceived as an internally contradictory unity, is manifested in the work of art, in what way the work of art remains subject to society and in what way it transcends it. In philosophical terms, the approach must be an immanent one. Social concepts should not be applied to the works from without but rather drawn from an exacting examination of the works themselves.”⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Fleming, “Secret Adorno,” 99.

⁶⁹ Adorno, “Lyric Poetry and Society,” 38-39.

Adorno thus locates the truth content of George's poetry—and of art in general—in its dialectical encapsulation of the contradictions of society, on one hand, and its unique expression as autonomous artwork unrestrained by the conformism of its social existence, on the other. This truth content is dialectical insofar as the work is shown to simultaneously reflect and resist society, being both detached and autonomous and yet inextricably interconnected to society.

For Adorno, it is precisely in its resistance to and detachment from society that great works of autonomous art—particularly, lyric poetry as exemplified by George—express their social truth. Dialectically unfolding within great works of art, the antagonisms of society—the universal and particular, subject and object as well as freedom and bondage—are revealed not in the artwork's conforming to the norms and demands of society but in its autonomous resistance to the homogenizing social order as a unique, subjective expression of an individual. In this sense, Adorno answers the question invoked at the outset of his essay: "A sphere of expression whose very essence lies in either not acknowledging the power of socialization or overcoming it through the pathos of detachment, as in Baudelaire or Nietzsche, is to be arrogantly turned into the opposite of what it conceives itself to be through the way it is examined. Can anyone, you will ask, but a man who is insensitive to the Muse talk about lyric poetry and society?"⁷⁰ Lyric poetry and society, which Adorno concedes appear opposed to one another given the subjective interiority and detachment from society that characterizes this form of art, are indissolubly connected, not in spite of this autonomous detachment but rather because of it. "The lyric work is always the subjective expression of a social antagonism," Adorno writes, however, he adds that "the lyric subject" embodies "the whole all the more cogently, the more it expresses itself."⁷¹ In its expression of the individual subject, withdrawn into itself, as work of interiority and solitude, the autonomous artwork reveals its underlying social motivations. Put differently, the more vehemently the artwork resists the conformism and homogeneity of society as an individual expression of an autonomous subject, the more inextricably it binds itself to the social whole as its antithetical negation. The demand for the purity of the lyrical language—"the demand that the lyric word be virginal"—contains an implicit ? against a heteronomous social totality, a "protest against a social situation that every individual experiences as hostile, alien, cold, oppressive."⁷²

⁷⁰ Ibid., 37.

⁷¹ Ibid., 45.

⁷² Ibid., 39.

What reveals the social force of lyric poetry, for Adorno, then, is its antithetical negation of this alienating social situation so that in forming itself in opposition to society, the poetic work reveals society as a negative mirror image of the latter: “this situation is imprinted in reverse on the poetic work: the more heavily the situation weighs upon it, the more firmly the work resists it by refusing to submit to anything heteronomous and constituting itself solely in accordance with its own laws.”⁷³ It is thus the autonomous aspect of the artwork, its solitary, detached resistance to and alienation from society that binds it indissolubly to the latter, as a utopian expression of its latent possibilities for social transformation. Adorno writes:

If, by virtue of its own subjectivity, the substance of the lyric can in fact be addressed as an objective substance—and otherwise one could not explain the very simple fact that grounds the possibility of the lyric as an artistic genre, its effect on people other than the poet speaking his monologue—then it is only because the lyric work of art’s withdrawal into itself, its self-absorption, its detachment from the social surface, is socially motivated behind the author’s back. But the medium of this is language. The paradox specific to the lyric work, a subjectivity that turns into objectivity, is tied to the priority of linguistic form in the lyric; it is that priority from which the primacy of language in literature in general (even in prose forms) is derived. For language is itself something double. Through its configurations it assimilates itself completely into subjective impulses; one would almost think it had produced them. But at the same time language remains the medium of concepts, remains that which establishes an inescapable relationship to the universal and to society. Hence the highest lyric works are those in which the subject, with no remaining trace of mere matter, sounds forth in language until language itself acquires a voice. The unself-consciousness of the subject submitting itself to language as to something objective, and the immediacy and spontaneity of that subject’s expression are one and the same: thus language mediates lyric poetry and society in their innermost core. This is why the lyric reveals itself to be most deeply grounded in society when it does not chime in with society, when it communicates nothing, when, instead, the subject whose expression is successful reaches an accord with language itself, with the inherent tendency of language.⁷⁴

The dialectical reversal of subjectivity into objectivity, whereby the lyric work becomes an expression of the objective realm of society, is catalyzed by prioritization of language within the lyric work, as in all literature. This ‘primacy of language’ in the lyric work manifests itself in its resistance to the social demands placed on language (i.e., utility, signification, commercialization and cultural norms), whereby the language resists its very function as a utilitarian instrument of semiotic representation through its immersion in its purely linguistic, formal elements. When the lyric work “does not chime in with society,” and instead—breaking free from the dictates of

⁷³ Ibid., 39-40.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 43.

utility and signification— ‘communicates nothing’, it “reveals itself to be most deeply grounded in society.” For in its resistance to the logic of identity and the instrumental rationality of utilitarian domination of language as mere form of communication, lyric poetry shatters the homogenizing, heteronomous logic of the social totality, as it strives to become “a vessel, so to speak, for the idea of a pure language.”⁷⁵ In his account, then, the solitude and interiority—in one word, the alienation—of the lyric work reveal it as social not simply in its resistance to the latter and its immersion in the universal medium of language, but in its reflection of the fundamentally atomistic and individualistic character of society. It is in this regard that Adorno relates the apparently asocial lyric work with the objective sphere of society: “Only one who hears the voice of humankind in the poem's solitude can understand what the poem is saying; indeed, even the solitariness of lyrical language itself is prescribed by an individualistic and ultimately atomistic society, just as conversely its general cogency depends on the intensity of its individuation.”⁷⁶ As such, what makes lyrical language social and ultimately reveals its utopian truth content is its expression of “voice of humankind in the poem’s solitude,” in other words, its voicing of the alienating state of the social whole and the resulting collective desire for a transformed world.⁷⁷

After developing his thesis that lyric poetry is inextricably bound up with society precisely because of its detachment from the latter, Adorno dedicates the final pages of his essay to redemptive critique of George’s poem from *The Seventh Ring*, “Im windes-weben” (“In winds weaving”). In this poem, published in 1907, George writes:

In the winds-weaving
My question was
Only daydreaming.
Only a smile was
What you gave.
From a moist night
A gleam ignites—
Now May urges

⁷⁵ Ibid., 52.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 38.

⁷⁷ In its solitary protest against society, Adorno writes, “the poem expresses the dream of a world in which things would be different,” revealing his sense of the inherently utopian character of lyric poetry as an aesthetic form. See Adorno, *Notes to Literature, Volume 1.*, 40.

Now must
For your eyes and hair
Every day
Live in yearning.⁷⁸

In his novel reading of the poem—situated here as a paradigmatic expression of the modern lyric form—Adorno interprets George’s language as exemplifying lyric poetry’s resistance to society and “the reification of the world,” a resistance that is achieved through his attempt to rescue a ‘pure language’ which shatters the barriers of the status quo. For as Adorno argues of lyric poetry in general and of George’s work in particular, lyric poetry’s intrinsic resistance to society manifests as an opposition to its ubiquitous reification: “The lyric spirit's idiosyncratic opposition to the superior power of material things is a form of reaction to the reification of the world, to the domination of human beings by commodities that has developed since the beginning of the modern era, since the industrial revolution became the dominant force in life.”⁷⁹ Rather than engaging George from a classical Marxist view of class relations by criticizing of George’s aristocratic cultural elitism and his socially exclusionary circle of close disciples, Adorno retains a number of Marxian concepts (i.e., commodity fetishism, phantasmagoria, and reification) while discarding the potentially obfuscating lens of class relations.

In Adorno’s account, George’s poetry is worth redeeming precisely because of its elitist resistance to the status quo of a reified, homogenous society and culture dominated by commodity exchange. Adorno thus presents George’s poetry as autonomous, independent, and utterly detached from the established order and cultural tradition that shaped the social

⁷⁸ The following is the German original:

Im windes-weben
War meine frage
Nur träumerei.
Nur lächeln war
Was du gegeben.
Aus nasser nacht
Ein glanz entfacht—
Nun drängt der mai
Nun muss ich gar
Urn dein aug und haar
Alle tage
In sehnen leben.

See Stefan George, cited in Adorno, “Lyric Poetry and Society,” 50-51.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 40.

conditions of its production: “In the midst of Wilhelmine Germany the elevated style from which that lyric poetry emerged as polemic has no tradition at all to which it may appeal, least of all the legacy of classicism. It is achieved not by making a show of rhetorical figures and rhythms but by an ascetic omission of whatever might diminish its distance from a language sullied by commerce. If the subject is to genuinely resist reification in solitude here, it may no longer even try to withdraw into what is its own as though that were its property...”⁸⁰ Resisting the commercial interests and demands of the culture industry, George fashioned his poetry in opposition to a state of affairs in which the commodification of art had resulted in its degradation. Instead of resisting ‘the reification of the world’ by simply withdrawing into itself, Adorno maintains that the poetic subject can resist such reification only by stepping “outside itself by keeping quiet about itself.”⁸¹ In order to counter the reification of the world in its lyrical solitude, the subject “has to make itself a vessel, so to speak, for the idea of a pure language,” and it is precisely “George's greatest poems” that seek to rescue this ‘pure language’, Adorno continues.⁸² In elevating his poetry in this way, Adorno thereby redeems George on account of his poetry’s own redemptive rescue of the unrealized, impossible idea of ‘pure language’.

“Formed by the Romance languages, and especially by the extreme simplification of the lyric through which Verlaine made it an instrument of what is most differentiated, the ear of George, the German student of Mallarmé,” Adorno writes, “hears his own language as though it were a foreign tongue.”⁸³ As Adorno would later argue in his 1967 radio broadcast on George, the utopian, “incommensurably new element” expressed in George’s work stems from its immersion in that which is alien, other and non-identical, namely, the French language, which ‘permeates’ George’s works.⁸⁴ In immersing itself entirely in that which is other and alien, George’s poetry paradoxically transcends the reification and alienation characteristic of an ‘individualistic and atomistic society’ “by intensifying” this alienation, “an alienation of use,” that is of instrumental rationality, “until it becomes the alienation of a language no longer actually spoken, even an imaginary language, and in that imaginary language he perceives what would be possible, but never took place, in its composition.”⁸⁵ In other words, just as he transcends the alien otherness

⁸⁰ Ibid., 52.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Adorno, “Stefan George,” 187.

⁸⁵ Adorno, “Lyric Poetry and Society,” 52-53.

of the French language through his complete immersion in its otherness, that is, by intensifying this alien quality to the effect of transforming the language itself, George analogously transcends the reification of the world through intensifying its effect and transforming language itself in his poetry.⁸⁶ Evoking the redemptive moment in the poem's last four lines ("Nun muss ich gar / Um dein aug und haar / Alle tage / In sehnen leben,") which he writes are "some of the most irresistible lines in German poetry," Adorno interprets these four lines as a citation of "something language has irrevocably failed to achieve," namely, a pure lyrical language that transcends the instrumental dictates of use and signification.⁸⁷ Pointing to "the elliptical 'gar' which is probably used in place of 'ganz und gar' [completely] and to some extent for the sake of the rhyme," Adorno presents the superficial criticism that "as used in the line the word has no proper meaning," making the word apparently superfluous.⁸⁸ However, it is in their failures and aborted opportunities that "great works of art" succeed, Adorno continues, for these works "are the ones that succeed precisely where they are most problematic."⁸⁹ Rather than locating the utopian truth content in the already illusory notion of a complete, finished work, Adorno instead detects such utopian elements in that which is broken, failed and most problematic, characteristic of his critical method of redemptive critique, which redeems precisely those elements that seem most lost.

Linking the opacity and incommensurability of the word "gar" in this poem with the dissonant, superfluous notes of great musical compositions, Adorno effectively situates George as the lyrical counterpart to Schoenberg: "Just as the greatest works of music may not be completely reduced to their structure but shoot out beyond it with a few superfluous notes or measures, so it is with the 'gar', a 'residue of the absurd' in which language escapes the subjective intention that occasioned the use of the word."⁹⁰ For Adorno, the unrealizable attempt to articulate pure language in George's poetry is expressed in "this very 'gar' that establishes the poem's status with the force of a déjà vu: through it the melody of the poem's language extends

⁸⁶ For more on George's attempt to transform language, see Adorno's later radio broadcast on George. In this broadcast, published in Adorno's *Notes to Literature*, Adorno writes: "For George, labeled as a fart pour fart artist, not the individual work but language, in and through the work of art, was the highest ideal; he wanted nothing less than to change language." See Adorno, "Stefan George," 187.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

beyond mere signification.”⁹¹ In extending the language of the poem beyond the realm of ‘mere signification’, George thus sets out on a quixotic mission, Adorno maintains, given “the impossibility of this kind of restorative writing.”⁹² However, it is this very “quixotism” that reveals the poem’s truth content to the extent that “language’s chimerical yearning for the impossible becomes an expression of the subject’s insatiable erotic longing, which finds relief from the self in the other.”⁹³ Concluding his essay, Adorno to this effect positions George’s work not only as encapsulating the dialectical relationship of lyric poetry and society, but as a quintessentially utopian linguistic expression of the internal tensions and contradictions of the latter:

This transformation of an individuality intensified to an extreme into self-annihilation—and what was the Maximin cult in the late George but a desperate renunciation of individuality construing itself as something positive—was necessary in creating the phantasmagoria of the folksong... Only by virtue of a differentiation taken so far that it can no longer bear its own difference, can no longer bear anything but the universal, freed from the humiliation of isolation, in the particular does lyrical language represent language’s intrinsic being as opposed to its service in the realm of ends. But it thereby represents the idea of a free humankind, even if the George School concealed this idea from itself through a base cult of the heights. The truth of George lies in the fact that his poetry breaks down the walls of individuality through its consummation of the particular I through its sensitive opposition both to the banal and ultimately also to the select. The expression of his poetry may have been condensed into an individual expression which his lyrics saturate with substance and with the experience of its own solitude; but this very lyric speech becomes the voice of human beings between whom the barriers have fallen.⁹⁴

In these concluding lines, Adorno redeems George’s poetry, specifically, its intensified individuation and isolated solitude formed in opposition to society, precisely through an evocation of its self-annihilating, dialectical transformation of individuality. George’s attempt to create a new kind of language that resists the established order in his resolutely individual poetry intensified to the point of self-annihilation since when pushed to its extreme the “differentiation” of this individuality is “taken so far that it can no longer bear its own difference, can no longer bear anything but the universal.” This self-annihilation, which reflects the broader self-negating tendencies of enlightenment thinking—which Adorno links to art in their shared will to the domination of nature in his “Theses on Art and Religion Today”—imbues George’s poetry with

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 53-54.

the enlightening capacity to shatter its own myths, namely, that of its individuality and detachment from the social whole that it cannot extricate itself from.⁹⁵ As Adorno and Horkheimer write their earlier work, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: “Ruthless toward itself, the Enlightenment has eradicated the last remnant of its own self-awareness. Only thought which does violence to itself is hard enough to shatter myths.”⁹⁶ George’s poetry to this effect counters its own violent “will to domination”—a term Adorno applies to George in his 1967 broadcast—through its self-annihilating immersion in the other, in that which is non—identical and incommensurable. This immersion in the other arises not simply in his attempt to express a pure language that transcends the utilitarian equation of means and ends (heteronomously imposed both on art and language), but also out of the intense dedication to the other that characterized the social relations of George and his exclusive circle. It is in this regard that Adorno writes of George’s “lyric speech” as “the voice of human beings between whom the barriers have fallen,” for George’s and his circle represented the utopian overcoming of individuality through its own intensification in the lyric form. The barriers between human beings, self and other, lyric poetry and society, are thus dismantled in his poetry not through a simple rejection of these barriers but rather through an intensification of individuality resulting in its dialectical, utopian reversal.

Despite this apparently laudatory tone of this conclusion, Adorno’s engagement with George in this essay, as in his other essays treating George’s work, holds fast to his overarching method of redemptive critique. Read in isolation from Adorno’s other writings on George and aesthetics and politics, his conclusion to “Lyric Poetry and Society” may appear as “a panegyric to George,” as Fleming maintains in his account. Building on Fleming’s innovative analysis of Adorno’s redemptive criticism of George, this chapter aims to show that the elevation of George’s poetry is not simply a one-sided panegyric qualified by a preemptive criticism of George and his links to National Socialism. On the contrary, Adorno’s rescuing of George’s work develops out of a dialectical critique that draws out the self-negating, dialectical reversals, and redemptive moments of object of criticism. This critical approach to George’s work and art in general is further developed and articulated in Adorno’s 1967 broadcast, in which he redeems precisely those elements in George that appear most problematic, namely, the barbarous, violent

⁹⁵ Adorno, “Theses on Art and Religion Today,” 296.

⁹⁶ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 2.

will to domination that links his poetry—and likewise enlightenment—to myth. Under Adorno’s critical gaze, this violence turns against itself, revealing the utopian negation of the will to domination. In this regard, Adorno lays the groundwork for his redemption of George with a scathing critique linking him to Heidegger, Wagner and ultimately Hitler: “It befits everything mythical to arouse resistance, George’s temperament no less than his spiritual destiny. His will to domination links him with a significant German tradition, to which Richard Wagner belongs as do Heidegger and Brecht; with Hitler it underwent a gruesome transformation into politics.”⁹⁷ Further linking George to the Youth Movement and their National Socialist successors, Adorno writes: “Despite, or because of, the pathos of distance, George’s covenantal liturgies seem compatible with the solstice celebrations and campfires of the Youth Movement hordes and their fearsome successors. The slick ‘we’ of those poems is as fictitious, and therefore as deadly, as the kind of *Volk* the advocates of the *völkisch* envisioned. Where George descends to praise of *Führertum*, he shares in the guilt and cannot be resurrected.”⁹⁸ In this light, the attempt to rigidly separate George’s “actual poetic work” from his “ideological excursions,” would be naïve, Adorno argues, insofar as “George’s violent will reaches even into the works that are intended to be purely lyrical.”⁹⁹ Adorno to this effect agrees with “Borchardt’s suspicion that there is hardly a poem by George in which violence is not manifested in self-destructive form.”¹⁰⁰ The self-destructive character of George’s poetry, for Adorno, reveal its capacity not only to “wreak havoc with what has come before, subjecting something utterly spontaneous to the will,” but also to fundamentally transform language by doing violence to its reifying conformism to the social order.¹⁰¹ It is thus through—not simply in spite of—the very critique of George and his complicity with the catastrophe of National Socialism that Adorno redeems the utopian content of George’s poetry at a time when George’s poetry was almost completely forgotten in Germany. In doing so, Adorno reveals a mode of engagement with intellectual and artistic contemporaries that is defined not by partisan political condemnations, but by a comprehensive interaction that dialectically redeems and integrates the work through its critique.

⁹⁷ Referencing his attempt in this essay to curate an imaginary selection of George’s works, Adorno adds that “What would need to be eliminated in my selection would be the aspect of the work that contributes to the sphere of the catastrophe.” See Theodor W. Adorno, “Stefan George,” in *Notes to Literature, Volume 2*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 179.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 180.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 180-181.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

Adorno's engagement with George, therefore, is not merely a redemptive criticism that negates and refunctions the object of critique; rather, it is a redemptive interaction through which Adorno's own philosophy is transformed and shaped. Echoing his interaction with Wagner, Adorno draws George's aesthetics into his own thought, at once critiquing and integrating the utopian possibilities his poetics into his own aesthetic theories and conception of language. Throughout his post-war writings on aesthetics and politics, Adorno moves against the grain of post-war German culture by rescuing George and establishing him as critical to the development of German arts and letters, in particular, Critical Theory, and autonomous art, such as Schoenberg's modern music. More so than Wagner, who Adorno positions as instrumental to the development of modern music and Schoenberg's Second Viennese School, Adorno situates George's poetry and aesthetic innovations as fundamentally transforming the German language and modern aesthetics. In post-war works like *Prisms* (1955), *Notes to Literature, Volume I* (1958) and *Volume II* (1961), as well as *Aesthetic Theory* (written between 1956 and 1969, published posthumously in 1970), Adorno persistently presents George as authority on aesthetics whose influence on his own thought, Benjamin's, and the development of German aesthetics is undeniable. George's decline in post-war Germany, in part due to his associations with National Socialism, reinforces the extent to which Adorno's engagement with George was focused on redeeming his poetry and establishing its significance not simply for German language and poetry, but for modern aesthetics more broadly. Drawing on the impulse of "George's greatest poems," that Adorno argues were "aimed at rescuing" pure language through its expression in the autonomous artwork, Adorno's aesthetic writings sought to rescue and refunction the great works of art through invoking and incorporating their utopian spirit, that is, their expression of aesthetic autonomy, incommensurability and difference, in his own thinking. As his post-war writings illustrate, the redemptive, utopian impulse and autonomy expressed in George's poetry functions as a central influence not only for Adorno's musical compositions, but more significantly, for his redemptive interaction with intellectuals and artists associated with the right, such as George himself, Wagner and Heidegger, as well as his interlocutors on the left, such as Brecht, Lukács, Bloch and Benjamin. This interpretation of Adorno's redemptive critique of George therefore draws on Fleming's essay, "Secret Adorno," in which he

insightfully demonstrates Adorno's persistent, underemphasized engagement with George and the ways in which this culminated in the redemptive criticism of George's works.¹⁰²

In much of the contemporary scholarship such as the aforementioned studies of the Frankfurt School, Adorno's aesthetics of autonomous art is commonly associated with a select group of progressive artists, in particular, Beckett, Kafka, Proust, Schoenberg, and Berg, whose works Adorno elevates in his writings. Drawing on and developing these important studies, this chapter focuses on Adorno's ongoing redemptive interaction with artists and intellectuals associated with the right and National Socialism, in particular, George and Wagner. For in Adorno's post-war aesthetic writings, George is placed alongside figures like Nietzsche and Schoenberg in terms of his impact on modern aesthetics, in particular, Adorno's conception of the latter. In his essay on Schoenberg, published in *Prisms* in 1955, Adorno argues that Schoenberg's free atonal music—elevated here as a model of autonomous art that crystalizes the dialectical tensions of society—begins “with the *Georgelieder*,” Schoenbergian compositions set to George's poetry.¹⁰³ Positioning George's poetry as “authentic poetry” that facilitates the success of modern music and free atonality, Adorno reinforces his interpretation of Schoenberg's free atonality (as beginning with his *Georgelieder*) with the proposition that “authentic vocal music will succeed only when it encounters authentic poetry.”¹⁰⁴ It is in this sense that Adorno presents his mentor, Schoenberg, as productively engaging with George in a way that fundamentally transformed his own musical compositions and by extension the course of modern music. “Schoenberg's encounter with George's poetry, which is diametrically opposed and yet inherently related to his work,” Adorno writes, “is one of the few fortunate events in his sporadic and uncertain experiences with the non-musical life of his epoch.”¹⁰⁵ In other words, of Schoenberg's infrequent engagements beyond the realm of music, his fruitful interaction with George's poetry had an indelible effect on his works, driving them to match the authentic, incommensurable poetry of George with the autonomous music of free atonality.

As a close reading of Adorno's redemptive interaction with George in *Aesthetic Theory* demonstrates, George's poetry is “inherently related to” the works of Schoenberg, and by

¹⁰² Fleming, “Secret Adorno,” 98.

¹⁰³ Theodor W. Adorno, “Arnold Schoenberg: 1874-1951,” in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Sherry Weber (London: Neville Spearman, 1967), 159.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 158.

extension, Adorno, insofar as his poetry stands not only as a paradigm but as an original force in the development of modern, autonomous art and language, thus, paving the way for Schoenberg's modern music. In Adorno's estimation, it was not only progressive artists—like Schoenberg, Berg, and Beckett—who created and promulgated autonomous art; on the contrary, the development of autonomous art in Germany aesthetics had its origins in an intellectual tradition descending from Nietzsche and Wagner to George. Planting Schoenberg firmly within this tradition, Adorno writes that with respect to his aporetic attempt to achieve objectivity in his autonomous, subjective expression that is “removed from the contingency of mere existence” and the objective world, “Schoenberg resembles not merely Nietzsche and George, but also Wagner.”¹⁰⁶ Adorno thus positions Schoenberg's atonal music as continuing and ‘repeating’ the ‘destiny’ of the new that Nietzsche and George articulate in their respective creations of a ‘New Table’ of values and a ‘new god’ (Maximin):

Schoenberg was never more sovereign in his use of technique than in the Arabesques, which playfully overcome all musical gravity. But he collides with the very historical necessity which he, more than any other composer of the epoch, embodies. He became entangled in the aporia of the false transition... The aesthetic subject, like the philosophical subject, having developed fully and in control of itself, cannot stop at that self and its ‘expression’; it must aim at objective authority, as Schoenberg's bestowing gesture intended from the very first... In Schoenberg, the destiny of Nietzsche's ‘New Table’ repeated itself, as well as that of George, who invented a new god in order to ensure the possibility of cultic poetry; it was no accident that Schoenberg felt himself drawn to both men.

This ‘destiny’ of the new (values, god, or art) that Adorno identifies in Nietzsche, George and Schoenberg is inextricably connected to the artwork's autonomy insofar as the latter is the result of toward something completely new, breaking with the conformity of existing society and the past. Whereas Nietzsche developed a new table of values and George created a new god for his cultic poetry, in Adorno's account, Schoenberg invented a ‘new music’ that rearticulated this destiny of the new. Further establishing George's critical role—together with Nietzsche—in the development of German aesthetics, in his essay on the restorative German poet, Rudolf Borchardt, published in 1961, Adorno positions George alongside Nietzsche, implicitly situating them as equals in terms of their impact on the German aesthetic tradition and language.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 164.

¹⁰⁷ In his essay Adorno links George and Nietzsche in their shared proscription of humor in art: “At one point the experience of the divergence is intensified through reflection until it becomes a rescuing of the claims—claims

It was not only Schoenberg and his atonal music that Adorno argues were deeply influenced by George's lyric; for Adorno, the entire German aesthetic tradition and language itself had been transformed by George. Linking his own thinking and aesthetics to that of George, in his essays on Benjamin, Adorno explicitly emphasizes the important impact of George on Benjamin's development throughout his writings on the latter. Perhaps most significantly, in his 1955 introduction to Benjamin's *Schriften*, Adorno closely links Benjamin and the George circle: "Reminiscent of the George School, to which he owes more than one can see on the surface of his work, is a spellbinding philosophical gesture that stops its animated subject matter in its tracks, the monumentality of the momentary that constitutes one of the defining tensions in the form of his thought."¹⁰⁸ Likewise in his essay, "Benjamin the Letter Writer," Adorno presents George as an important intellectual and cultural influence on Benjamin with reference to his ritualistic "private demeanor": "Here one looks to the influence of Stefan George and his school...he learned the schemata of ritual from George."¹⁰⁹ Adorno does not only reference George's influence on Benjamin in relation to Benjamin's lifework and biography taken as a whole, but also shows George's influence concretely, in the specific work and ideas Benjamin produced. Thus, Adorno begins his essay on Benjamin's *Einbahnstrasse* (*One-Way Street*) with an introductory paragraph detailing the George's conception of *Denkbild* (thought-image) and its redemptive incorporation into Benjamin's philosophical and aesthetic works, in particular, *Einbahnstrasse*, which Adorno argues "is not, as one might at first think, a book of aphorisms but rather a collection of *Denkbilder*."¹¹⁰ Further reinforcing George's influence, in an essay on Proust, Adorno articulates this conception of George: "Just as one can tell whether any particular German poem is pre- or post-Stefan George in spirit, even if it has nothing to do with George's poetry as such, so German prose should no doubt be divided into pre- and post-Proustian."¹¹¹ Here, Adorno bases his claim that German prose should be divided into pre- and

shamefully in decline and rightfully persisting in literature—of humor, which has been proscribed since Nietzsche and George." See Theodor W. Adorno, "Charmed Language: The Poetry of Rudolf Borchardt," in *Notes to Literature, Volume 2*, trans. Shierry Weber Nichol森 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 203.

¹⁰⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, "Introduction to Benjamin's *Schriften*," in *Notes to Literature, Volume 2*, trans. Shierry Weber Nichol森 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 223-224.

¹⁰⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, "Benjamin the Letter Writer," in *Notes to Literature, Volume 2*, trans. Shierry Weber Nichol森 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 234.

¹¹⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, "Benjamin's *Einbahnstrasse*," in *Notes to Literature, Volume 2*, trans. Shierry Weber Nichol森 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 322.

¹¹¹ Theodor W. Adorno, "On Proust," in *Notes to Literature, Volume 2*, trans. Shierry Weber Nichol森 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 312.

post-Proustian prose—despite the fact that Proust was himself a French writer—on the more self-evident proposition: “Just as one can tell whether any particular German poem is pre- or post-Stefan George in spirit...” In doing so, Adorno makes explicit his understanding that George irrecoverably transformed the development and history of German poetry. In Adorno’s analysis, George’s contribution to German poetry consisted in imbuing it with a “utopian strain,” an “incommensurably new element” that unfolded new possibilities for German poetry and aesthetics more broadly—as evidenced by George’s impact on Schoenberg, Benjamin and Adorno.¹¹² In his 1967 essay on George, Adorno thus writes: “With this soaring music-like erotic élan, George won for German poetry a utopian strain that goes beyond his retrospective mentality; today it is no more...”¹¹³ In writing of George’s capacity to ‘win’ this erotic, utopian strain ‘for German poetry’, Adorno implicitly situates George’s poetry as fundamentally altering its course. On the next page, Adorno reinforces this conception of George when he argues that “the incommensurably new element that George's lyric work gave to German poetry cannot be separated from George's permeation with French poetry.”¹¹⁴ What makes George’s poetry utopian, its breaking free from the confines and moral-aesthetic norms of society and tradition, is its “incommensurably new element,” its unique, incommensurable contribution to German poetry, which, for Adorno, is inextricable from George’s incorporation of a foreign language and aesthetic tradition—French poetry—into his own works.

As such, it was George’s transcendence of national and linguistic boundaries in incorporating a foreign language and spirit into his own poetry that imbued his works—and by extension, German poetry, which was thereby transformed by the introduction of this new, foreign element—with a utopian, incommensurably new element. For in incorporating this foreign poetry, the language of that which is other, different, nonidentical, into his poetry, George not only unfolded an incommensurably new dimension to German poetry; he imbued it, moreover, with a particularly French spirit. Adorno thus writes: “France endowed George with a Romance verve, a slender grace which of itself, through its mere existence, swept away the petit-bourgeois homegrown quality of the so-called German *Erlebnislyrik* [lyric of experience] of the later nineteenth century. This new linguistic level remained canonical even for generations who

¹¹² Theodor W. Adorno, “Stefan George,” in *Notes to Literature, Volume 2*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 186-187.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 186.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 187.

no longer remember its prototypes in George's work."¹¹⁵ In introducing such 'Romance verve' and 'erotic élan' (elements that Adorno positions as emanating from the French poetic tradition) into German poetry for the first time, George distinguished himself as a true innovator of the German language and poetic tradition, the latter of which Adorno positions as indelibly changed by George, a "Frenchifying aesthete" as he is referred to in Adorno's 1962 essay, "Commitment".¹¹⁶ Positioning George as an innovator and 'Frenchifier' of the German language, Adorno argues that he was 'first' in many respects: "He was actually the first to do justice to French poetry in a land where people imagined, and largely still imagine, that they cultivated lyric poetry as a natural form and could justifiably look down on French poetry as artificial."¹¹⁷ By doing justice to the French language, Adorno means that George was the first person to adequately translate French poetry into German, not simply to replicate or imitate it, but to extend "his own language through the other," namely, the French language, "as Benjamin demanded the translator do," in his essay, "The Task of the Translator."¹¹⁸ George's translations of Baudelaire, Adorno argues, thus "rank amongst his most significant works; not simply because as translations they are virtuoso accomplishments but as works in the German language, precisely by virtue of the literal immersion in the other language."¹¹⁹ George's immersion in that which is other, foreign and nonidentical with his native language and poetic tradition, is precisely what makes his poetry not simply worthy of redemption for Adorno but, moreover, a paradigm of aesthetic expression that redeems through its expression of and immersion in the otherness of language. It is in this respect that Adorno positions George's unparalleled translation and incorporation of French poetry into the German tradition, as winning for German poetry a radically new, "incommensurable element," a utopian strain, colored by the 'erotic élan' of this foreign tradition and language. However, it was not just German poetry that Adorno argues George sought to transform, but rather language itself: "In George's poetry the technical work—and he was the first in German poetry to make the concept of technique an honorable one—in an individual poem is almost always work on language as such at the same time...For George, labeled as a *l'art pour l'art* artist, not the individual work but language, in and through the work

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 186.

¹¹⁶ Adorno, "Commitment," in *Aesthetics and Politics*, 192.

¹¹⁷ Adorno, "Stefan George," in *Notes to Literature, Volume 2*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 187.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 188.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

of art, was the highest ideal; he wanted nothing less than to change language.”¹²⁰ This transformation of language at work in George’s poetry, Adorno suggests, entailed a complete immersion in an alternate, foreign linguistic and aesthetic tradition. Through immersing himself in the language and poetry of a national, cultural and linguistic other, and in the process translating such foreign lyric, George’s language, and by extension, the German language, was thereby transformed. Not least because he translated Baudelaire into German in a manner that did justice to the original, but moreover, it was George’s mode of translation that accounts for his transformation of the German language. Situating George as a teacher of his and Benjamin’s own theories of language and translation, in the first volume of *Notes to Literature*, Adorno writes, “It was Stefan George who said, correctly, that the task of a translation of lyric poetry is not to introduce a foreign writer but to erect a monument to him in one’s own language, or, in the turn Benjamin gave the idea, to extend and intensify one’s own language through the incursion of the foreign literary work. Despite this, or perhaps precisely because of the intransigence of his great translator, the historical material of German literature is unimaginable without Baudelaire.”¹²¹ In the context of this passage as well as Adorno’s emphasis on George’s innovations in the German language and his “genius” throughout his 1967 essay and other writings redemptively engaging George’s work, it is difficult to overemphasize the significance of George’s contribution to the German aesthetic tradition in Adorno’s account.¹²²

In light of George’s notable contributions to German poetry, Adorno therefore situates his autonomous poetry as productively disrupting and resisting status quo of the German aesthetic tradition and society more broadly. For Adorno, George’s ‘unequaled’ translations and poetry incorporated the decadent French aestheticist spirit that celebrated autonomous art and *l’art pour l’art* into the German language and poetic tradition, thus imbuing the latter with a new incommensurable, utopian element. For as Adorno argues in *Aesthetic Theory*, in contradistinction to Baudelaire and the French tradition of *l’art pour l’art*, in the German tradition art was given the express social function and utility of moral reform: “Sartre rightly accented that the principle of *l’art pour l’art*, which has prevailed in France since Baudelaire, just as in Germany the aesthetic ideal of art prevailed as an institution of moral reform, was taken

¹²⁰ Ibid., 187.

¹²¹ Theodor W. Adorno, “The Artist as Deputy,” in *Notes to Literature, Volume 1*, trans. Shierry Weber NicholSEN (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 98.

¹²² Adorno, “Stefan George,” 187.

up by the bourgeoisie as a means for the neutralization of art with the same willingness with which in Germany art was appropriated as a costumed ally of social control and order.”¹²³ Whereas Baudelaire’s ideal of *l’art pour l’art* served to neutralize art in the French context, in Germany, where the tradition of art as a didactic, moral institution reigned, George’s incorporation of this decadent, autonomous French spirit into his poetry in effect resisted and transformed the German language and aesthetic tradition. In other words, isolated in its native context, without being translated and transformed in its incorporation into German poetry, the French ideal of autonomous art remained yet another instance of the ideological neutralization of art, of society’s capacity to neuter art’s revolutionary power, in this case through abstracting and thus removing it from society; however, when translated and incorporated into German in George’s innovative works, the very idea and practice of autonomous art—and likewise, German poetry and language—was thereby transformed. For in the German context, the French ideal of autonomous art thereby constituted a resistance against the utilitarian and moral demands of the German aesthetic tradition while also resisting the commercial pressures of late-capitalist society.

In a section of *Aesthetic Theory* titled “The Ugly, the Beautiful and Technique,” Adorno further emphasizes George’s influence on his own aesthetic theories. The ideal of autonomous art that George aspired to, Adorno argues, is bound up with art’s spiritualization, its progressive process of becoming more subjective and conscious.¹²⁴ Spiritualization is connected with the autonomy of art, Adorno maintains, insofar as it is the process through which the artwork can intentionlessly and freely unfold as an autonomous work, a pure aesthetic expression freed from the constraints of the social totality.¹²⁵ Adorno therefore ties the spiritualization of art with

¹²³ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2002), 236.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹²⁵ Later in *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno elaborates on his conception of the spiritualization of art, linking it with aesthetic autonomy, intentionlessness and expression of ugliness through the work’s content and form (the technical imposition of the which is always a violent act on the amorous material), “The unleashing of the elemental was one with the emancipation of the subject and thus with the self-consciousness of spirit. This self-consciousness spiritualized art as nature. Art’s spirit is the self-recognition of spirit itself as natural. The more art integrates into itself what is nonidentical, what is immediately opposed to spirit, the more it must spiritualize itself. Conversely, spiritualization for its part introduced into art what is sensually displeasing and repugnant and what had previously been taboo for art; the sensually unpleasant has an affinity with spirit. The emancipation of the subject in art is the emancipation of art’s own autonomy; if art is freed from consideration of its recipient, its sensual facade becomes increasingly a matter of indifference. The facade is transformed into a function of the content, which derives its force from what is not socially approved and prearranged. Art is spiritualized not by the ideas it affirms but through the elemental—the intentionless—that is able to receive the spirit in itself; the dialectic of the elemental and spirit is

Baudelaire's decadent aesthetics of the "sensuously unpleasing, the repulsive": "Precisely through its progressive spiritualization, through its division from nature, art wants to revoke this division from which it suffers and which inspires it. Spiritualization provided art anew with what had been excluded from it by artistic practice since Greek antiquity: the sensuously unpleasing, the repulsive; Baudelaire virtually made this development art's program... Art is not infiltrated by spirit; rather, spirit follows artworks where they want to go, setting free their immanent language."¹²⁶ What is repulsive and unpleasing in art, the ugly in other words, is precisely what Adorno argues provides art with its utopian force, its negative capacity to resist existing society. Situating the ugly in art as a critical mode of resistance that dialectically turns ugliness—and what it can "justly" be equated with, namely, "the expression of suffering—against itself in representing it and thus revealing its barbarous character."¹²⁷ Thus, in elevating autonomous art for its socially critical, resistance to the society and affirmative culture, Adorno emphasizes that this socially critical function is bound inextricably with the expression of the ugly, that which is barbaric and repulsive, in the form and content of the artwork:

Art must take up the cause of what is proscribed as ugly, though no longer in order to integrate or mitigate it or to reconcile it with its own existence through humor that is more offensive than anything repulsive. Rather, in the ugly, art must denounce the world that creates and reproduces the ugly in its own image, even if in this too the possibility persists that sympathy with the degraded will reverse into concurrence with degradation. In the penchant of modern art for the nauseating and physically revolting—in objecting to which the apologists of the status quo can think of nothing more substantial than that the world is ugly enough as it is and art therefore should be responsible for idle beauty—the critical material motif shows through: In its autonomous forms art decries domination, even that which has been sublimated as a spiritual principle and stands witness for what domination represses and disavows. Even as semblance this materialistic motif form remains what it had been external to that form: critical.¹²⁸

The autonomy of art, then, for Adorno lies not simply in its free-floating expression of aesthetic ideals such as beauty or sublimity, but rather, in the artwork's breaking free from the repressive aesthetic and cultural values and norms of society. In the very form of the autonomous artwork, in its technical imposition of form onto the formless material, the artwork expresses the ugliness,

the truth content" (196). In another passage, Adorno further links the spiritualization of art with the concept of intentionlessness when he writes that "Spiritualization takes place not through ideas announced by art but by the force with which it penetrates layers that are intentionless and hostile to the conceptual." See Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 93.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 92.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 49.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 48-49.

that is, the barbaric domination, heteronomy and violence, of society, its repulsive aspect that affirmative culture seeks to repress under the distracting veneer of ‘idle beauty’. As Adorno makes explicit in this section, George’s translations of Baudelaire importantly informed and in effect shaped Adorno’s theory of the negative utopian quality of autonomous art, namely, its capacity to resist the ugliness and barbarism of existing society by dialectically deploying ugliness against itself.

Invoking the National Socialist condemnation of ‘degenerate art’ as part of its totalitarian attempt to redeploy art, specifically, Neoclassical and monumental art, as a means of social control and order, Adorno thus situates George’s Baudelaire translations as embodying precisely this sort of degenerate art: “However, because art has the power to harbor its own opposite without slackening its longing, indeed because it changes its longing into this power, the element of the ugly is bound up with art’s spiritualization; George clear-sightedly recognized this in his preface to his translation of *Flowers of Evil*. This is alluded to by the subtitle ‘Spleen and Ideal’: Back of the word spleen is the obsession with what resists being formed, with the transformation of what is hostile to art into art’s own agent, which thus extends art’s concept beyond that of the ideal. The ugly serves this purpose in art.”¹²⁹ In Adorno’s account, it was George who ‘clearly recognized’ the link between the ugly and the spiritualization of art, for in the very subtitle of his translation of Baudelaire’s *Flowers of Evil*—itself a work attempting to present the ugly and repulsive side of society—George articulated the dialectical relationship of culture and barbarism, the spiritual and refined as opposed to that which is ugly and repulsive. The spleen, which represents the embodiment of nature, the amorphousness of the material that resists the dominating process of ‘being formed’, is thus opposed by the spiritualization (e.g., becoming mind-like and progressively shaped by consciousness) of the ideal. The spiritualization of art, which is to say, its progressive development as an expression of human consciousness, thus involves the ugliness and violence of the ratiocinative, totalizing logic that Adorno and Horkheimer critique in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.¹³⁰ The material of art, Adorno maintains,

¹²⁹ Ibid., 49.

¹³⁰ Earlier in the same passage Adorno makes the link between the ugly, art and the dialectic of enlightenment: “The concept of the ugly may well have originated in the separation of art from its archaic phase: It marks the permanent return of the archaic, intertwined with the dialectic of enlightenment in which art participates. Archaic ugliness, the cannibalistically threatening cult masks and grimaces, was the substantive imitation of fear, which it disseminated around itself in expiation. As mythical fear diminished with the awakening of subjectivity, the traits of this fear fell subject to the taboo whose organon they were...But the old images of terror persist in history, which has yet to

“What art in the broadest sense works with,” it therefore “oppresses: This is the ritual of the domination of nature that lives on in play.”¹³¹ In other words, works of art replicate the domination of nature that is ubiquitous in society insofar as the very act of forming the formless, amorphous material constitutes an act of violence and closing off of the latter and its infinite possibilities. Despite, this, however, “those artworks succeed that rescue over into form something of the amorphous to which they ineluctably do violence,” Adorno continues, to the effect of presenting the rescuing of the amorphousness and open potentiality of the material into the form of the work as “alone” in being “the reconciling aspect of form.”¹³² In being a product of the technical domination of the amorphous materials that constitute the raw media out of which the artwork is formed, art thus represents and expresses the repulsive violence and domination, in one word, the barbarism, of society and its ratiocinative, instrumental logic. Not simply in spite of, but rather because of this violence, Adorno however argues—crucially drawing on George’s articulation of the dialectic of spleen and ideal in his translation of Baudelaire’s *Flowers of Evil*—autonomous artwork bear the negative utopian, socially critical capacity to resist the barbarism of society through projecting it (in their technical formal logic) as a means of its exposure and denunciation. In an unveiled attempt to redemptively resuscitate George in the post-war German intellectual milieu in which he was in disrepute, primarily due to perceptions of his role in the development of National Socialism, Adorno here (and in his other post-war writings) maintains that George’s poetry resists rather than bolsters such barbarism. In this respect, Adorno’s engagement with George represents more than a mere redemptive criticism of the latter’s poetry; rather, it is paradigmatic of Adorno’s ruthlessly critical yet redemptive interaction with an array of thinkers across the political spectrum. Through such redemptive interaction, Adorno thus revealed the dialectical, dynamic openness of his philosophy, his ability to resist the barbarism of his time not simply through its repression but rather through redemptively critiquing, incorporating and in turn refunctioning such barbarism against itself and for the utopian promise of freedom.

redeem the promise of freedom, and in which the subject-as the agent of unfreedom-perpetuates the mythical spell, against which he rebels and to which he is subordinate.” See Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 47.

¹³¹ Ibid., 50.

¹³² Ibid.

Conclusion

Toward a Critical Theory of Redemption

“...and every book, in its meant-to-be, in its a priori, the power of this book of utopia, would finally like to be like two hands clutching a saucer, carrying this prize to its destination, filled with the drink of the self-encounters and of music, explosives against this world and the tropic essences of the goal, held aloft to God.”¹

—Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*

My dissertation began as an investigation into the debates on aesthetics and politics within the specific intellectual historical context of Critical Theory and Marxist aesthetics in the twentieth century. Drawing on the influential historical and philosophical works by Gay, Wiggershaus, Wolin, Jay, Eagleton, Jameson on Critical Theory and the debates on aesthetics and politics, this dissertation develops this history by including other, politically opposed interlocutors, whose aesthetico-political theories were not only part and parcel of the debates on aesthetics and politics within Critical Theory but also helped shape the development both of the tradition of Critical Theory more broadly. Rooted in the Enlightenment project of realizing universal human liberation, in such historical accounts Critical Theory is correctly situated as developing out of an effort to counter conservative or fascist ideology and thinking. Critical Theory’s opposition to fascist and conservative thought, however, is not rigid in the sense that they simply cancel and negate the ideas and positions of their interlocutors; on the contrary, as illustrated by the series of redemptive interactions investigated in my dissertation, the critical theorists’ engagement with conservative and fascist German intellectuals—in particular, Schmitt, Heidegger, George, Klages and Wagner—was characterized by an attempt to redeem and incorporate (into one’s own thinking, and our collective planning) the object of criticism not simply in spite of its critical negation but through the latter. In this regard, this dissertation

¹ Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, 268.

represents an intellectual history of the redemptive origins of Critical Theory amidst the Weimar debates on aesthetics and politics.

Instead of being mere appendages to the history of aesthetics and politics and the origins of Critical Theory, the ideas and aesthetics which these conservative and right-wing artists and intellectuals developed were indissolubly bound up with those of their left-wing counterparts. In the first chapter, Lukács' intellectual-historical account and theorization of romantic anti-capitalism reveals the extent to which reigning intellectual trends in early twentieth century German thought did not only transcend the political binary of right and left, but actively undid it by uniting intellectuals from across the political spectrum in their romantic anti-capitalist criticisms of modern society, industrialization and alienation. After demonstrating this crucial intellectual-historical context, this chapter links the aesthetico-political ideas of Lukács and Schmitt, two influential political figures at opposite ends of the political spectrum, in the context of the realism-modernism debates of the Weimar period. As the presentation of the realism-modernism debates in this chapter shows, Lukács' and Schmitt's shared realist critique of romanticism, or in Schmitt's terms, "political romanticism," in turn helped shape the intellectual culture out of which the debates on aesthetics and politics developed. In Chapter Two, George and his circle—often associated with German conservatism and the Third Reich—are repositioned as a critical, missing component in the intellectual history of Critical Theory and Weimar Period debates on aesthetics and politics (as they are articulated by leading scholars). Through a close analysis of George's poetry, aesthetic ideas, and Benjamin's redemptive interaction with the latter, this chapter reveals George as integral to the development of important aesthetico-political ideas promulgated by Critical Theory—namely, redemptive criticism, thought-images, and autonomous art. In addition to demonstrating George's integral role, this chapter draws on existing scholars such as Paul Fleming to develop a redemptive-critical interpretation of George and the aesthetics of other artists and intellectuals associated with fascism and other forms of barbarism.

The third chapter analyzes Adorno's and Benjamin's intellectual opposition to Heidegger by juxtaposes the latter's conceptions of art and politics with the Adorno-Benjamin debate. In placing Heidegger in conversation with Adorno and Benjamin, this chapter illustrates the convergences and relationships between their respective philosophies, in particular, their

aesthetico-political ideas. Positioning Adorno's critical method of negative dialectics as a later articulation of his earlier mode of redemptive criticism (which he developed under the influence of Benjamin), the first part of Chapter Four uncovers Adorno's redemption of Wagner, the culture industry, and the utopian possibilities of both, a redemptive moment in Adorno's thought which could be easily overshadowed by his otherwise ruthless criticisms of high art and popular culture. As a close analysis of Adorno's critique of Wagner demonstrates, rather than being opposed to Wagner on account of his politics and anti-Semitism, the latter's opera as well as his aesthetic theories, Adorno argued, were integral to the development of modern music and the autonomous art of Schoenberg's Second Viennese School. This is not to say that for Adorno Wagner was free of his complicity with the barbarism of anti-Semitism and fascism; rather, Adorno's redemptive critique shows how precisely in the very barbarism of Wagner's art, lies a latent possibility for redemption, the utopian kernel of truth within the falseness of the ideology—that is, the appearance of the artwork. The dialectic of culture and barbarism, the capacity for an artwork to simultaneously advance the liberating enlightenment of culture and the mythic ideology of barbarism, is thus contained in Wagner's work, specifically as it is uncovered through Adorno's redemptive critique. The second part of Chapter Four expands on the arguments of the previous chapters through an analysis of the various ways in which George's poetry and aesthetics influenced not only Adorno's thinking but that of Benjamin and the entire period of German intellectual history and aesthetics. Adorno's redemption of George at a time when his poetry was being disparaged or forgotten in Germany—tainted by its associations with German nationalism and the Third Reich—crystalizes the intellectual force of redemptive criticism. Rather than ineffectually disavowing or ignoring the philosophies and aesthetic ideas of their intellectual and political opponents, Critical Theorists like Benjamin and Adorno critically negated, transformed and incorporated the ideas of their contemporaries into their own philosophies.

As these reciprocal intellectual interactions and coincidences show, the debates and theories on aesthetics and politics that shaped the development Critical Theory cannot be understood without reference to their politically ambivalent historical context within twentieth-century German cultural and intellectual life in general and the critical theorists' redemptive mode of engagement with politically disparate intellectuals and artists in particular. Representing the intellectual history of aesthetics, politics and the origins of Critical Theory from a perspective

that attends to the central significance of redemptive criticism in the interaction of critical theorists and conservative thinkers thus opens up an optic through which to understand the development and cross-pollination of ideas in their multilayered historical contexts. My dissertation thus illustrates how Critical Theorists like Benjamin and Adorno redeemed the thought of their interlocutors on the right in the course of critiquing them. Does this redemptive mode of engagement with such thinkers show a conservative political strain in Benjamin and Adorno, and thus, Frankfurt School Critical Theory? Although it might appear to add a conservative element to their thought, this mode of interaction emanates precisely from their emancipatory refusal to conform to any reified identity-thinking of instrumental reason. For it is only a reified bifurcation of left and right, good and evil, as absolute, irreconcilable extremes which would result in the perception that ideas and thinkers lack any redeeming qualities as a result of their contamination by right-wing or fascist politics. Benjamin and Adorno engaged their intellectual opponents not to affirm their political stances, but to evoke the utopian, emancipatory potentialities within them and transform them as a result. This marks a radical political and intellectual orientation insofar as it engages opposition not through fear or dehumanization of the other, of that which is different from oneself, but through evoking the redemptive moments in their ostensibly unredeemable thinking.

Although the redemptive-critical optic represented in my dissertation is bound to the specific historical context of its expression in the history of ideas, as it has been shown to be the critical theorists' paradigmatic mode of interaction with objects of criticism from art and religion to philosophy, it nonetheless retains relevance for historians and contemporary society. For as a mode of interacting with intellectual or political opponents, redemptive criticism allows the critic to inhabit a dialectical, dynamic position that opens itself to the other, not to simply cancel it but rather to evoke its underlying truth. As the redemptive criticism at work in the development of Critical Theory shows, it is not only more effective to transform and incorporate opposing ideas into one's own thinking; this mode of redemptive interaction holds fast to enlightenment commitment to discovering and promoting truth. For regardless of the political associations or pronouncements of an intellectual or artist, the optic of redemptive criticism entails approaching intellectual expressions simultaneously as autonomous works and as embedded in the concrete historical context of their production. In their autonomy and concrete expressions of their specific historical moment, all great intellectual and aesthetic works to this effect invoke their

own truth content. Their autonomous, free expression of the human imagination and capacity to create something new is itself an embodiment of the spirit of utopia, as Bloch's first major work bearing this title and the ensuing interpretive tradition of redemptive critique developed by Critical Theory illustrates. In addition to constituting a productive mode of intellectual engagement, the optic of redemptive critique further represents a way of understanding the history and interactive development of ideas throughout time and space. Rather than conceiving of ideas and intellectual schools or currents as isolated cells opposed to one another, seen through the optic of redemptive critique, intellectual phenomena are revealed as being neither opposed to nor in complete agreement with one another. Rather, they all develop out of a reciprocal relation or interdependence. The optic of redemptive criticism, in other words, pushes the historian or critic beyond the limits of reified thinking, of the rigid, either/or logic of identity, and into a more dynamic, dialectical thought process which perceives the complex interactions and mutual constitution of ostensive opposites.

Beyond opening up a unique optic for understanding history and a fruitful mode of intellectual interaction, perhaps more significantly, redemptive critique redeems even the most repulsive works by uncovering the critical, utopian potentials and impulses latent in all expressions of the human spirit. In keeping with the tradition of criticism and their resistant position vis-à-vis existing society, the promulgators of redemptive critique redeemed works only precisely through their immanent negation, a process through which the work is critiqued from within to evoke its underlying socially critical, negative utopian function. In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno thus identifies the utopian spirit of art as contained within its expression of negativity, or in other words, that which is loathsome and disagreeable in it: "This is compelling in architecture: If out of disgust with functional forms and their inherent conformism it wanted to give free reign to fantasy, it would fall immediately into kitsch. Art is no more able than theory to concretize utopia, not even negatively. A cryptogram of the new is the image of collapse; only by virtue of the absolute negativity of collapse does art enunciate the unspeakable: utopia. In this image of collapse all the stigmata of the repulsive and loathsome in modern art gather."² The absolute negativity of collapse represented in the artwork marks the "irreconcilable renunciation of the semblance of reconciliation"—that is, the artwork's self-conscious, ironic representation as an artificial, incomplete and fragmented totality, in an "unreconciled" alienated modern world

² Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 32-33.

which occludes the very possibility of an organic or complete totality, a reconciled unity.³ Evoking the possibility of transforming society into a regenerative, ecological and social paradise out of the image of “total catastrophe,” Adorno lucidly demonstrates the capacity for redemptive criticism to transmute the barbarism of cultural objects into a utopian cipher of redemption:

Through the irreconcilable renunciation of the semblance of reconciliation, art holds fast to the promise of reconciliation in the midst of the unreconciled: This is the true consciousness of an age in which the real possibility of utopia—that given the level of productive forces the earth could here and now be paradise—converges with the possibility of total catastrophe. In the image of catastrophe, an image that is not a copy of the event but the cipher of its potential, the magical trace of art's most distant prehistory reappears under the total spell, as if art wanted to prevent the catastrophe by conjuring up its image. The taboo set on the historical telos is the single legitimation of that whereby the new compromises itself politically and practically: its claim to being an end in itself.⁴

Art's “claim to being an end in itself,” in other words, its self-sufficient individuality and autonomy that breaks free from the instrumental reason of means and ends through which human beings dominate themselves and nature, in effect expresses the utopian potential of art. This utopian potential, however, increases in significance in a world in where the concrete possibilities of modern technology mark the convergence of real utopia and total catastrophe (e.g., the Holocaust, World War, and the threat of nuclear annihilation). The ugliness and barbarism expressed in artworks and their dominating technical manipulation of the materials out of which they are constructed—as is most evident in modern art which embraces the effects of shock and repulsion—are to this effect evocations of the barbarism, the “principle of violence and domination,” in existing societies that function to illuminate social criticisms of the latter.⁵ Adorno thus articulates a vision of the ecological, utopian possibilities of raising consciousness through art when he expresses the social contradictions of society while remaining an autonomous, self-contained work in itself:

In technique, violence toward nature is not reflected through artistic portrayal, but it is immediately apparent. It could be transformed only by a reorientation of technical forces of production that would direct these forces not only according to desired aims but equally according to the nature that is to be technically formed. After the abolition of scarcity, the liberation of the forces of production could extend into other dimensions

³ Ibid., 33.

⁴ Ibid., 33.

⁵ Ibid., 46.

than exclusively that of the quantitative growth of production. There are intimations of this when functional buildings are adapted to the forms and contours of the landscape, as well as when building materials have originated from and been integrated into the surrounding landscape, as for instance with chateaux and castles. What is called a "cultural landscape" [*Kulturlandschaft*] is a beautiful model of this possibility. A rationality that embraced these motifs would be able to help heal the wounds that rationality inflicted. Even as bourgeois consciousness naïvely condemns the ugliness of a torn-up industrial landscape, a relation is established that reveals a glimpse of the domination of nature, where nature shows humans its facade of having yet to be mastered... It [the ugly] marks the permanent return of the archaic, intertwined with the dialectic of enlightenment in which art participates. Archaic ugliness, the cannibalistically threatening cult masks and grimaces, was the substantive imitation of fear, which it disseminated around itself in expiation. As mythical fear diminished with the awakening of subjectivity, the traits of this fear fell subject to the taboo whose organon they were; they first became ugly vis-a-vis the idea of reconciliation, which comes into the world with the subject and his nascent freedom.⁶

Through its dialectical transformation and deployment of the technical, ratiocinative logic of domination in the work, redemptive criticism expresses in art the dialectic of enlightenment and myth, culture and barbarism. For it is precisely an artwork's technical dimension—its creation through the technical manipulation of the amorphous materials which constitute it—that encapsulates both its barbaric involvement in the logic of domination and its utopian functioning as an autonomous, self-sufficient end in itself. As the passage from *Aesthetic Theory* reveals, redemptive criticism is relevant today not only because of its intellectual integrity and openness, but, moreover, because it uncovers the utopian, ecological potential within all expression of human consciousness and its progression in history. As a cipher and monadic representation of the technological forces and developments of modernity, modern art thus encompasses the dialectical potential latent in human reason: the simultaneous capacity for culture and barbarism, paradise and catastrophe. Instead of myopically condemning and disposing of the intellectual and aesthetic forces which they identified with barbarism, unfreedom, and domination, the originators of Critical Theory instead aimed to liberate precisely these elements, negate their valences, and repurpose them in the collective struggle to concretely realize the dream of a transformed, redeemed world.

In a world inundated by technology, where a seemingly endless stream of technologically reproduced images and psychometric tools transform big data into personalized marketing

⁶ Ibid., 46-47.

strategies that lock individuals—now framed as “users,” highlighting the addictive nature of the media they consume—into repetitive cycles of consumption, the increasing importance of the critique of culture becomes clear. Such a critical approach is not bogged down in instrumentally using culture as a means of manipulating individuals, nor does it conform to dogmas, political allegiances, parties, positions or racial, class, gender, or other such divisions in modern society.

Rather, it is dedicated to universal human liberation through critical reason’s capacity to awaken consciousness. The early twentieth century debates on aesthetics and politics thus reveal the extent to which Critical Theory was not simply a left-wing, Marxist phenomena—and certainly not in any dogmatic or partisan sense as class politics and identity politics are broadly presented today—but was instead deeply enmeshed in the right- and left-wing political currents of its time, growing out of a cross-pollination of aesthetico-political ideas and forces in twentieth-century German thought. Rather than reductively negating the positions of their political, aesthetic and ideological opponents, thinkers like Benjamin, Adorno, and Bloch redemptively critiqued them to evoke their truth content, their underlying utopian impulse—thus uncovering a dialectical approach to aesthetics and politics, and the opposition to fascism in particular. Instead of negating and disavowing—cancelling—aesthetic movements, thinkers, or even political actors due to their association with Nazism or fascism, the originators of Critical Theory actively engaged with and integrated their political opponents’ works into their own.

Bibliography

Note on Bibliography:

As the footnotes throughout the text provide the original publication dates of the primary sources, for the sake of clarity the bibliographic citations below only contain the publication of the particular edition I reference in my dissertation (rather than listing the original publication dates as well).

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