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Writing as Life Performed

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An anonymous and originless slice of popular wisdom counsels that *life is not a rehearsal*.¹ If this slogan is to have any salutary effects upon those who have been so admonished, what concept of “rehearsal” is being referenced? And what presumptions about the nature of “life” today are thereby advanced? The fable of *Groundhog Day* notwithstanding, by this phrase we are given to understand that in life we have no second chances; we cannot prepare, shape, schedule and perfect life’s events in advance of their actual occurrence.² What happens to us *really* happens; and the actions we take, our decisions and interventions, have genuine, concrete consequences. So, the implication is that we had better get life right.

Real life cannot accommodate the latitude of a mere rehearsal. The rehearsal is that safe place where one can make mistakes, fluff the lines – “corpse” – without ramifications: the public is not watching, and little is at stake. But real life has to be lived with unremitting urgency. Every moment must be seized: you will never have this day again, so live it to the full. We squander our days in unhappiness or listlessness, so our mode of life should be inimical to fear, hesitation, and suffering. The goal of living should be to amass a stock of personal happiness and positive experiences.

A more melancholy spirit can go on to ask: how real is this “real” life? Oscar Wilde quips that our real life is the one we do *not* lead. The compulsion to get the most out of life might very well screen the fact that, despite our best efforts, it contains so very little. The Shakespearean tropes will suffice: with melancholy Jacques and Macbeth, we can bemoan the fact human life is a show, it is staged and predictable: at best it is scripted into its seven ages, at worst it is a tale told by an idiot. We are players upon a stage; we play roles in good faith and in bad; our being is for others. No, life is not *even* a rehearsal – at least a rehearsal is

relatively organized, at least in a rehearsal we can try things out, get to know one another, feel the potentiality of the role and of the complexities of the work. Come show time, the fun stops, the brave intentions have dissipated and the default positions take over: play it safe, keep the audience happy, be professional, and night after night the actors are locked into deadening patterns. We, too, play our minor roles at work, at home; our sexuality is a set of postures and quotations, we even *desire* as we believe others want us to desire. Our lives, as performances, are so much fakery and hypocrisy. Hence, perhaps, the nagging suspicions of modern alienation that one's real life is elsewhere: in a counter-culture, an existential authenticity awaiting a decision, in personal enlightenment, or as a citizen of a future utopia.

This way of reasoning from the premise of life's emptiness and finitude is not particularly new. In the thinking of the writer of the Biblical Book of Wisdom (probably a first-century BC Hellenic Jew attempting to land a few punches on Epicureanism) he exposes an inner relationship between hedonism and mortality. The "irreverent" (*ασεβεις*) understand life to be "short and tedious" and are forced to conclude all we have are fleeting pleasures: "let us enjoy the good things that are present. ... Let us fill ourselves with costly wine and ointments: and let no flower of the spring pass by us. Let us crown ourselves with rosebuds, before they be withered" (King James Bible, Wisdom 2.5–8). Ultimately, the "ungodly" draw these conclusions from the wrong premise: for God does not will death. Righteousness, wisdom, and hope – even Man as such – should be considered under the aspect of *immortality* (*αθανατος*). The proper manner of living is to follow a path of righteousness, for righteousness is immortal, and righteousness ensures a worthy inheritance for later generations.³ The righteous know all about local trials and suffering – "as gold in the furnace hath he tried them" – but according to this logic at least, life *qua* life flourishes all the more within a supposition of eternity (King James Bible, Wisdom 3.6).⁴

Crucially, and in the midst of these transcendent concepts, the pursuit of *Sophia* – in the guise of an alluring female personification – is remarkably grounded. An archetypal pattern is evoked: the highest spiritual goals can be approached if, and only if, life is stabilized and regularized by a form of constant application, by a loving commitment to nurture, training, and discipline (*παιδεια*), which, by a trick of perspective perhaps, aligns the student to the vanishing point of perfection.⁵ Discipline is the medium by virtue of which one can be properly and consistently orientated to life's central task. The rhetoric is the same when, in 1950, Heidegger writes to a "young student" on the question

of the thinking of Being. The task of thinking the greatest of questions describes a faltering path and to “follow such paths takes practice in going. Practice needs craft. Stay on the path, in genuine need, and learn the craft of thinking, unswerving, yet erring” (Heidegger, *Poetry* 184).

These hasty observations are attempting to trail the preoccupations of this chapter: namely, to explore the interrelatedness of practice, rehearsal, and performance and their applicability in the domain of “life.” These relationships are complicated when, in reference to Adorno’s *Minima Moralia*, the content of critical-essayistic production (which is analogous to aesthetic production in many ways) is ultimately that of the life of the author. I propose that to a large extent, the categories of practicing, rehearsing, and performing that are derivable from artistic-productive experience can be extended to lived experience. Working and living seriously and critically have significant points of convergence. What I attempt to disrupt is the presupposition of any “natural” hierarchy between these categories, whereby, for example, performance – connoting the tangible accomplishment of goals and the *visibility* of that accomplishment – takes precedence over the open-ended tasks of practice and rehearsal. In essayistic mode, I am interested in loosening the arrangement and priority of these categories and in evading finality and talking up the lesser partner in a litany of dualisms that subtend our judgments: seriousness/play, public/private, realized/unrealized, commitment/postponement, decision/indecision, planned/unplanned, action/delay, success/disappointment.

Of course, inasmuch as the “art” of anything – music, motorcycle maintenance, ballroom dancing, or, again, living – conceptually commits agents to attaining some kind of specific result through deliberate, practiced, action, accomplishment is never far from the essence of the matter. But, equally, the failure to realize intentions or the production of unintended but desirable outcomes, remain a possibility. Even so, in artistic-productive contexts, judgments regarding the success of the work might be thoroughly provisional – success is dependent on external criteria and prior intentions, both of which the work itself might be transforming. When Ernst Bloch writes “what is true is that each and every criticism of imperfection, incompleteness, intolerance, and impatience already without a doubt presupposes the conception of, and longing for, a possible perfection” (*Utopian Function* 16) he is justified in insisting that criticisms of imperfection – which are routine for the artist and writer – must presuppose a longing for a possible perfection, but the logic of artistic processes also teaches us that perfection is a moving target. In another sense, the dissatisfaction with

the work (which stimulates revision, as I discuss below) is not neatly circumscribed by Bloch's form of determinate negation and is not, if I may, particularly stimulating or helpful for artistic work. The "longing" for perfection needs a medium, a substance, and a locus for any possible accomplishment. Perfection needs to appear as a *possibility* for the artist by virtue of the contributions of a sure technique, sound materials, and realistic intentions. To speak oxymoronically of "consummate failures," artistic productions that fail to realize extraordinary, yet worthy, goals, and judge these as superior to works which fully achieve what are only meager ambitions, would, similarly, respect Bloch's logic. But if misused, making a fetish of fragments and failures eclipses the basic task to get control of artistic means. To do this, one must know something of success. While it can be accepted that worthy and remarkable failure is on the very far side of genuine competence, there is a sense that in the following, failure is treated prosaically and its significance is de-emphasized. Failure, insofar as it can be proven at all, is an everyday matter of artistic production and writing, and, as it happens, living.

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By way of illustration, I would like to set out some distinctions between my thinking on performance and Austin's concept of the *performative*, for the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably. Simply put, while a performative utterance for the most part requires a performance, a performance is not a performative. And because it is performed, it is also subject to processes of practice and rehearsal. My complaint is that only from certain points of view can rehearsal and practice be disregarded.

Take the paradigmatic case of the "I do" of the marriage ceremony. In point of fact, it is acceptable to assume that in a significant number of cases the delivery of the paradigmatic performative, the "I do" and associated vows of the marriage ceremony, have been thoroughly practiced and rehearsed prior to the occasion of their actual performative utterance. In a state of rehearsal, such that while every action and utterance of the rite could be in place, in the absence of all actual, binding perlocutionary effects, what takes place remains only a procedural outline. However sincere or committed the agents might be during a walk-through, without the panoply of guests, witnesses, counter-signatories, the binding dignity of ritual, and the solemnity of an appointed hour; in short, without the means to correctly complete the procedure, nothing of the ponderous social power of marriage is manifest. The words are, as Austin put it, "hollow," as hollow as those

uttered by actors on a stage, since no actual binding contract of fidelity will be effectuated by saying them in a state of rehearsal.⁶ But taking the externalized view of the theorist affronts the work being done by the agents concerned. Rehearsing this utterance need not be a hollow experience for the person that says it. It brings the event of marriage that little bit closer to “reality,” and all the while the prospect of the ultimate perlocutionary impact of what is said hangs before the speaker. Practicing the ceremony of marriage remains a serious undertaking. The nerves of the occasion have to be confronted and defeated if the ceremony is to pass with elegance. The presiding official can give useful direction – speak up, turn here, remember to breathe: from the point of view of the agents involved, to some extent, the marriage ceremony *is* choreographed like a theatrical event. Perhaps those involved wish the words to be said with sincerity, with confidence and clarity. These niceties hardly matter to the power of the performative. The “I do” is a signal to permit all the tremendous exterior legal, psychic, and social forces associated with marriage to do their work and demarcate a point of no return such that no one is deemed married without having undergone a certain procedure. In terms of performativity, the happy couple is not required even to mean what they say, or say it in any particular way, only that they say it and have been witnessed as saying it.

Actions, deeds, and performances, whether with words or without, often require practice and rehearsal. Accepting the position of Judith Butler, who “argues that performativity is a kind of “citational practice” by which sexed and gendered subjects are continuously constituted,” such practice would presumably involve all the hesitant false starts, mistakes and corrections that are proper to any practice (Hollywood, “Performativity” 94). The course of any efforts made to performatively constitute sexuality need not run smoothly, but more importantly, a theory of the performativity of gender could perhaps benefit from a description of gender formation as *rehearsed* rather than finally attained.

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Adorno was open in his acknowledgment of the “rehearsed” moment in his writing. He relied on a devising process of first rehearsing ideas in dictation, and then subjecting the accumulated notes to cycles of editing. The chief criterion of the editing phase is not to second-guess the response of the reader, but to ensure that the written presentation is doing *justice* to the subject matter, the object. It is in relation to this subject matter that writing can be thought of as a performance, a performance of justice,

of honoring the subject matter. If the subject matter is the writer's own life, then reflective, biographical writing like that of *Minima Moralia* is also a performance of that life, bringing, at an appointed moment, the flux of lived experience into a cogent, significant form.

Justice is served as writing struggles to approach its final form through stages of editing and re-writing. Writing anything of any consequence entails inevitable false starts, revisions, editing, and deletions. First thoughts seldom remain convincing for long and only a little while later what looked like a striking insight, or an incisive turn of phrase, is scored out with embarrassment. What occurred during the interval is something like the coming to prominence of the objective spirit of the text. The relief of having got something down on paper dissipates quickly, and the overt, concrete sense of what was actually written must be discerned from the text itself and not from the hopes of its author.

In a surprising piece of Gothic, one passage of *Aesthetic Theory* named this objective spirit an *Irrlicht*, the erring-light of folklore that haunts marshlands and lures lonely travelers off the straight and narrow. The objectivity of the text is never nailed down; rather, it lures the writer into pursuing its further development, but "without any guarantee that the productive forces – the spirit of the artist and his procedures – will be equal to that objectivity" (38–39). No guarantees, certainly. But neither can the writer do without his productive force, or more narrowly, "procedures." If not delivered all at once at midnight in a Faustian pact (such rumors surrounded the likes of Paganini), the productive forces of the writer will have been shaped and strengthened in another kind of pact: the pursuit of an elusive objectivity in the text. This amounts to a permanent apprenticeship in writing.

The same passage continues: "The risk taken by artworks participates in their seriousness; it is the image of death in their own sphere" (39). Extending this idea, we can suppose that a performance of an artwork also knows something of risk: namely, will the performing artist be equal to the task?

The prefix *per-* in "performance" implies the taking of something through to completion. In the context of art, performance is not only the successful completion of the work of art; the performance takes place against the possibility of failure. It is not the being-seen, the presence of the audience, that makes the performance. Rather, the presence of the other enforces the rules that constitute the actuality of live performance: *don't make mistakes, no second chances, keep going, don't squander the moment.* (This pressure can be recreated alone.) In live performance, the *Irrlicht* of objectivity haunts only the actual moment, the consistency – or

logic – of anticipation, response, unfolding, balancing, placing, coloring. Fail this actuality and it can be said: “I died out there.”

Training, rehearsal, practicing, sketching, note making – these are private, preliminary activities, and none seems to expose the artist to risk. But for the writer, to remain forever revising a text, to have second thoughts, doubts, reflections, edits, is to be forever scrambling textual objectivity; the objective demand of the text can never appear. To only rehearse is to risk impotence. Writers reach a point of no return whereby they perform a nonrepeatable, singular action: they give the text over, in its imperfection, to the risk of standing alone and being read as such. The placing of the text outside writerly productive force can only be a decision, a spontaneous resignation; not finished, but abandoned, as Paul Valéry’s saying goes.

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We read often enough:

The meaning of Adorno’s thought cannot be fully comprehended if one concentrates simply on content at the expense of form. Adorno strove for a consistency between the style of his writings and their themes. The structure of many of his works enact his concern with the development of repressive systems of thought and organization. (Held, *Introduction to Critical Theory* 210–211)

This is hardly an insight. It only repeats what Adorno wrote explicitly regarding how his texts were put together, and why. While form in Adorno’s writing does not receive the attention it might deserve, it would be absurd to dispute the view that Adorno’s writings *do* (or attempt to do) critical work in and through their form, presentation, or “composition,” as well as their overt content.

An analytical approach to Adorno’s essay form is certainly conceivable, and might be welcome, but in the meantime the temptation to aestheticize his writing in general terms is strong. Again, Adorno has led the way, and accelerated speculations by crossing between media: comparisons circulate between the composition of a critical text, poetry, and (especially atonal) music.⁷ Rich metaphors chase their tails in suggestive ways: asserting simultaneously the “musicality” of language and the “grammar” of music.

All of this can be raked over repeatedly, but there is no expectation that a commentary on Adorno should ever be written to similarly test the sensibilities, or “musicalize” its language, constellate its ideas, or

bring its dialectics to a standstill. One wonders how often one can be reminded in theory of the vital co-dependency of form and content in a text before we yield to the temptation to honor this theory by *performance* in our own writing. There are plenty of means for keeping the devil at bay: shall we talk about *praxis* some more? Shall we look at the form and content issue from another angle? Shall we organize a conference or a round table? Shall we rehash the arguments again and again without ever asking of ourselves, can I write like that?

The forces that prejudice the nascent thought that form could respond to content are very great. The threat of being refused publication is real, and many scholarly scruples are wrapped up with this refusal when it comes, not least the schoolboy shame of incompetence, of not having done your homework, and succumbing to pretentiousness. So many vanities and after-images of the instruments of academic repression, internalized over the years, and probably dished out in bad faith to several generations of students. Worries strong enough to defeat most: you will never have read “enough,” any thesis could be toppled by another, stronger thesis at some later date. Your reader – stepping forth from the community of scholars – is professionally committed to be critical and dissatisfied, and will waste no time in expressing their “reservations” with what you have done. I must be failing the standards of objective knowledge: so write nothing that falls outside the mood of severe defensiveness.

And then there is censorship through repletion. Arthur C. Danto identified up to 40 forms of philosophical-literary expression (hymns, *summae*, dialogues, tracts, lectures, confessions, etc.), which now have fallen from use (Danto, *Philosophical Disenfranchisement* 141). He describes the success of the scholarly article as a Darwinian survival of the fittest.⁸ The well-argued scholarly dissertation has the monopoly. Texts that generate energy through presentation are rare. And form is never talked about as such, beyond the basic model of literature review-methodology-analysis-conclusion. What other options are there? Is constellatory writing taught to students? Do we practice parataxis? Or even dialectical writing? Academic culture has generally prioritized overt content over presentation. Intensifying the relationship between presentation and content – dreaming of a philosophical prosody – is at best a spare-time activity. Something for the weekend, and not part of your professional duties. “Considerations that wish to take responsibility for their subject-matter and therefore of themselves, arouse suspicion of being vain, windy, asocial self-gratification” (Adorno, *Minima Moralia* 196).

In the face of a critical text that has disavowed standardized presentation and conventional tone, responses could be interpretative or appreciative (what does it mean, how sophisticated, how clever), or *praxial*. Ask, how is it done? The desire is to become equal to the text by being able to rewrite it.

The practical causes embarrassment. As does the “great work,” it intimidates and presupposes the inadequacy of the admirer. The exquisite portrait, the late Beethoven Piano Sonata, the prose of Walter Benjamin or Beckett, all are – always, already – beyond emulation; the work of a master is so far beyond the scope of any possible praxis, it is futile even to attempt to even acquire some of their technique.

Whatever vain or fugitive fascination took hold of works and tried to bring them closer, that tried to steal some of their power, can be punished twice over by forcing it through an utterly alien medium: the scholarly article, the dissertation, the commentary, and by subjecting the mind to new disciplines, no less exacting, but remote from the disciplines of artistic technique. In the scholarly context, self-denial, the taking of pains, painstaking attention to detail; these get their just rewards. But the expertise acquired is quite other to that dreamed of in the first pulsions of artistic enthusiasm.

Being too quick to embrace the grammar of toil – the honor, the debt to the masterwork, and the master – it is easy to overlook the possibility that a competence, something that adds to my capacities and powers, might be acquired happily, pleasurably, delightfully. Gilles Deleuze puts his finger on something:

I think it is very difficult to do philosophy if you do not have a kind of terminological certainty. Never tell yourself that you can do without it, but also never tell yourself that it is difficult to acquire. It is exactly the same as scales on the piano. (Cit. Conway 134. Taken from Deleuze’s unpublished seminars on Leibniz.)

Philosophy is difficult without grasping the key concepts, but acquiring competence in the use of those concepts is just a matter of practice and repetition. The bathos of this observation cuts the task down to size: do your scales, and in doing so, seize some productive power for yourself. Deleuze is perfectly serious about this analogy: “The history of philosophy can only be created by philosophers, yet, alas, it has fallen into the hands of philosophy professors, and that’s not good because they have turned philosophy into examination material and not material for study, for scales” (Conway, *Gilles Deleuze* 135).

Of course, scales are something of a chore, but they cannot be passed over. But neither are they difficult. They are central to the development of musical productive power, and prepare one for the moment of performance. Does one *perform* scales? Few would think the scale is material for performance; they are material for examinations. But a great deal is at stake in a scale since they describe almost all of music: line, tonality, rhythm, tempo, tone, articulation. Acquiring these curious powers, like having tactile confidence at the piano keyboard, or doing philosophy, can result from a certain kind of mundane application; though routine, with progress being made distractedly, privately, in loose, unscheduled parts of the day.

The opening gambit of "Gaps," section 50 of *Minima Moralia*, is typical of many other of the essays in the volume: the worry is to do with the vulnerability of texts and thinking to heteronomous censure and delegitimization, and how it is that the writer might counter this potential repression of her thinking:

The injunction to practice intellectual honesty usually amounts to sabotage of thought. The writer is urged to show explicitly all the steps that have led him to his conclusion, so enabling every reader to follow the process through and, where possible – in the academic industry – to duplicate it. (80)

What is targeted is an imperative that lurks in society or the institution, and weighs upon the intellectual, slowly stultifying consciousness: conform!

One could ask straight away: who does he mean? Who imposes this injunction? When? Why make generalizations about "every reader"? And why should an intellectual of Adorno's caliber be so concerned with what society expects of him? (What is wrong with the Nietzschean strategy – appropriated by Roland Barthes at the beginning of *The Pleasure of the Text* – "Looking away shall be my only negation"? (3))

It is manifestly the case that in *Minima Moralia* Adorno adopted a tactic of announcing prohibitions as a foil to his dialectical interpretations of the plight of subjective experience. It is not important how "real" these prohibitions are, or how specifically they are contextualized. Perhaps they are straw men. But this shadow boxing is psychologically plausible – therapeutic even. First, it is not such a straightforward thing to disentangle what you want to "say" from what everyone else (the Other) expects you to say. I allude to Lacan's "*che vuoi?*" Your desires have been thoroughly conditioned by encounters with the desires of

others. The “profession” expects explicit argumentation and academics expect it of themselves.

Yet explicitness of thought is not a crime or a philosophical or writerly error: it is only a problem when certain values dominate a culture, or exert a psychological and moral pressure on the writer at the expense of what is thought. By stealing the master signifier of “intellectual honesty” away from the Other (academics who are supposed to know what it means and administer scorn on those that fail), it starts to ring hollow, it is without a referent, and can therefore become the opposite of itself: the esteemed model of explicit – logically precise – exposition of thought is actually a lie, the order of our thoughts is a tangle, a mish-mash of hunches, half-understood experiences, and speculations. “Rather, knowledge comes to us through a network of prejudices, opinions, innervations, self-corrections, presuppositions and exaggerations, in short through the dense, firmly-founded but by no means uniformly transparent medium of experience” (Adorno, *Minima Moralia* 80). If the other wants intellectual honesty, it can have it. But it will read more like a diary of a hysteric than Spinoza’s *Ethics*.

Adorno’s formal “deviancy” as he deals with this issue is only apparent. It does not arise from a fascination or obsession with what the Other deems permissible, only to derive pleasure from some crafty trespass of convention. The master signifier of intellectual honesty – and those that identify with it – is symptomized: it is a product of a fantasy and it produces an inhibition: it “invokes the liberal fiction of the universal communicability of each and every thought” and it “inhibits their [thoughts] objectively appropriate expression.” The injunction is primed from the outset for a symbolic re-ordering; a new priority can be discovered from the texture of the old fantasy. A new criterion of “objectively appropriate expression” now takes a stand. Immediately one can say that one form of writing that can never be “objectively appropriate” is the cliché or the banality: “For the value of a thought is measured by its distance from the continuity of the familiar” (Adorno, *Minima Moralia* 80). An honest thought is expressed in a manner that fits the thought itself; and the thought, if it is to be valued, cannot be more-of-the-same, a cliché wrung from the repertoire of pre-masticated, socially acceptable opinions.

Marked out here, under the sign of honesty, are the virtuous practices of the melancholy intellectual: have the courage to think differently, and make the form of what you write match the content. As Adorno kept insisting, the price you pay for achieving this will be that no one will want to listen to you, or if they do, no one will understand what you say. “A writer will find that the more precisely, conscientiously,

appropriately he expresses himself, the more obscure the literary result is thought, whereas a loose and irresponsible formulation is at once rewarded with certain understanding" (101). The standardization of presentation will lead to the standardization of thinking. A thinker will then only dare to think what can ultimately be lodged neatly inside a pre-approved presentational scheme.

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One further line of enquiry is attractive: if for one moment the writer stopped worrying about making her reader happy (if your reader is happy, you have failed thought), how is the task of writing to be reformulated? Genuine thinking is coextensive with an investment in writing, in rhetorical and grammatical sophistication, in articulacy, in testing textual economies. This is how the modernist philosopher becomes a writer, or, if the term "writer" sounds a little too broad, at least becomes pre-occupied with writing. And this is why the micro-genre of "advice to the writer," usually delivered in the ancient idiom of *sententiae*, belongs properly to the oeuvre of both Adorno and Benjamin. How down to earth it sounds:

A first precaution for writers: in every text, every piece, every paragraph to check whether the central motif stands out clearly enough. Anyone wishing to express something is so carried away by it that he ceases to reflect on it. Too close to his intention, "in his thoughts," he forgets to say what he wants to say.⁹ (Adorno, *Minima Moralia* 85)

As a genre, such advice is not the proverb of common parlance, an anonymous and ideological assertion of "how it is," but is obviously the product of a relatively specialist, learned activity. As such, one could detect a degree of irony here, a countering tactic, whereby sayings of the same linguistic tone of stand-alone, portable, popular, and multi-valent wisdom, are laid out for the benefit of those isolated souls that are caught up with the sphere of critical reflection and writing, and are trying to seize hold of some fleeting moments of authenticity outside the commonweal. But the form is a risky one in that it can all too readily produce aversion: Polonius's famous speech of farewell to Laertes in *Hamlet*, while full of good sense, is also a father lecturing his son and wisdom of this sort could justifiably occasion Oedipal rage.

The *sententiae* style is not only antique, it also seems to fall foul of Adorno's own preoccupation with the necessary incommunicability of

genuine thought. While concentration and incisiveness in philosophical writing (demonstrating a trust in one's thinking and in words) can lead to a density of expression that makes the reader work, the same forces do in Adorno's oeuvre yield on occasion, neat, compact, and resonant maxims that are the very model of easy communicability.

These precepts – sometimes called aphorisms, but this seems to diminish their hectoring tone – work only for those that are already working. They conform to that register of intervention that comes from a teacher to a student, pithy, memorable, designed to get the student back on track or lift the work of the student to a new level. I recognize this from the primal scene of the instrumentalist with her music “master,” the correction of the performance, through startling insight into its deficiencies and inefficiencies.

The practical wisdom of the writer is not technical philosophy, but a quasi-proverbial consolation and stimulation to the work of the writer-intellectual. Such sayings satisfy the principle (which, quoted out of context, immediately looks like a slogan itself) “a good slogan should serve to energize practice” (Conway, *Gilles Deleuze* 19). True, providing one already has a practice to energize. For one who is struggling to write, who anticipates the scorn of editors or research assessors, whose papers are going awry, who is struggling to find focus, or an appropriate tone, Adorno's words are rather energizing: do not be sentimental, look after all those devilish details, and beware the cost of distaining your own judgment:

Should the finished text, no matter of what length, arouse even the slightest misgivings, these should be taken inordinately seriously, to a degree out of all proportion to their apparent importance. Affective involvement in the text, and vanity, tend to diminish all scruples. What is let pass as a minute doubt may indicate the objective worthlessness of the whole. (Adorno, *Minima Moralia* 86)

A more trenchant reminder to cross your “T's comes from Fernando Pessoa: to “have touched the feet of Christ is no excuse for mistakes in punctuation.”

While Benjamin had a high regard for the tools and materials of writing (see *The Writer's Technique in Thirteen Theses*, from *One Way Street*), the labor of writing is not in the first instance identified with the manual work of typing or penmanship – which can be considerable – but through a cyclical process of positing, disquiet, revision. But a gulf separates each of these stages. The cool, critical eye, or the editor's finickiness, disguise the boldness of these initial risked articulations, those rash

words on which the perfecting of these texts depends. The editor-critic is a subsequent subject position that takes responsibility for the text's perfection and discipline. A very revealing section of *Minima Moralia*, "Sacrificial Lamb," gives an insight into Adorno's practice of dictation:

Dictation makes it possible for the writer, in the earliest phases of production, to manoeuvre himself into the position of critic. What he sets down is tentative, provisional, mere material for revision, yet appears to him, once transcribed, as something estranged and in some measure objective. He need have no fear of committing something inadequate to paper, for he is not the one who has to write it: he outwits responsibility in its interests. The risk of formulation takes the innocuous form first of the casually delivered memorandum and then of work on something already existing, so that he no longer properly perceives his own audacity. (212)

For many of his most important works, Adorno dictated his first thoughts to his wife Gretel.¹⁰ These articulations begin as an informal spoken rehearsal, with approval or censure arriving fairly immediately. The amanuensis will also bear the brunt of any feelings of hurt if the text is criticized. Adorno struggled to lessen his affective involvement in his own "supposedly sacred" texts, and Gretel's role was to come between them.

The responsibility for composing the text was to an extent distributed between himself and Gretel. The first enunciations are incomplete; they are *prospective*. They are thrown forwards, towards other subject positions – the critic-editor, the Other – who will at some future date make sense of them. Adorno did not "have," in its fullness, what he *had to say* at the point of speaking. One starts to wonder after a while, how complete is this image of the writer? When Adorno uses the impersonal phrase "the writer" he cannot disguise for long the fact that Adorno means himself. This detached tone – derivable from the genre of the aphorism – demonstrates that the constitution and image of "the writer," like the ego itself, is only to be derived from the Other.

Consider the "wrath" that appears in the writer's reaction to censure. In a Lacanian mode, we can notice that aggressiveness, however mild, spills out when fissures form in the ego, when the counterpart (the amanuensis) seems to demonstrate more composure and objectivity than the one who is supposed to be doing the philosophy. The philosopher notices the incoordination of his own thinking, and at the same moment can react with hostility by imagining that the "last thing

I want is to be helped by *you*." But in this same passage Adorno notices that bringing aggressivity into play has a beneficial effect on the work: it "benignly purifies his relation to his subject" (212). It lessens internal resistance; the writer will no longer "dig in his heels" (212). Suffice it to say that re-writing and editing, especially if forced by the unflattering opinions of another, can occasion painful feelings of disorientation and loss. The reduced scale of an Adorno essay, the pithy and taut construction, is perhaps not merely a stylistic choice, but a revenge for this loss. And it offsets his own potential dissipation.

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The English word "expression" has a powerful psychological note. The freedom to express oneself is healthy; it might be considered a human right. The German *Ausdruck* means that as well. But there is a mechanical connotation also. For example, in Germany computer printers "express" A4 paper.

Adorno was comfortable to cleave to the notion of expression. The word is a micro-theory of writing: it presupposes "having something to say" and the will to express it, the will to put that something out into the open. Expression implies a movement of inside-to-outside. And once "out there," the intellectual's "expressions" have to stand up on their own – survive scrutiny, suffer incomprehension, or otherwise love their fate.

But the picture is not simple. To begin with, the "writer" (and certainly if the writer is a philosopher) is not simply one who happens to be writing, but one who, because of a commitment to thinking, is unusually committed to writing, is one who needs writing, and is accountable for what she writes. Serious writing is necessarily complicated by a master discourse. What I "have to say" is what I "have to say," it is what I am obliged to say, what the other wants me to say or demands that I say.

Those early efforts that are subsequently scored out, or deleted, might well be rejected because they resemble quotations too closely. The constructions do not yet stand out as themselves. But the objectivity of the text can be overstated; it can be adduced as doctrine. Certainly, the burden of what I *have to say* is usefully distorted and resisted by the demand of the text, and by whatever intellectual or aesthetic features of the text are released and come into play in writing. But these demands, while objective, do not make the text an object. That is to over stabilize the text and counteract the vulnerability of the writer's sense of identity.

Revision – as correction – eliminates all those "slips of the pen," those errors that might give the lie to another dimension of what the writer

was saying but did not know she was saying. But perhaps revision can court parapraxis and ramify those errors at higher levels of construction.

A less than adequate textual formulation is not necessarily supplanted in revision. A change of mind can be staged – performed, put on show – in writing via the rhetorical trope known as *metanoia*. The writer is entitled to correct herself, leaving the original undeleted alongside the supposed improvement, with both statements exerting an influence. The dialectical movement of a thought has this same quality. The second thought that switches to a farther extreme does not defeat the first, the “dialectical procedure ... makes statements in order to withdraw them and yet hold fast to them” (Adorno, *Minima Moralia* 212). Any text that is repeatedly worked over has some quality of a palimpsest. To retain all stages of editing, as if the text hoarded its excisions into a vast *variorum*, such might give transparency to thought. But the “guilt” of an unlegitimated thought is scarcely offset by making a parade of the thinker’s mistakes.

Adorno made an analogy between the course of thinking, and the course of life. Life

[d]escribes a wavering, deviating line, disappointing by comparison with its premises, and yet which only in this actual course, always less than it should be, is able, under given conditions of existence, to represent an unregimented one. If a life fulfilled its vocation directly, it would miss it. Anyone who died old and in the consciousness of seemingly blameless success, would secretly be the model schoolboy who reels off all life’s stages without gaps or omissions, an invisible satchel on his back. (*Minima Moralia* 81)

A life which was lived “according to plan” would seem less than a life, oddly devoid of incident, and the account of life’s course is edited back to only those moments that suit the narrative demands of the Other. In a totally administered existence, the only acceptable life is the one that performs its conformity. The guiltlessness of a clean CV is of the same order as a neat proof from first principles: a form of strategic amnesia.

By contrast, the noble, sweeping forgetting of the past lets life “deviate” from its assumed trajectory, take up a new course, a fresh start. Conversion of life, redemption, the self-overcoming that is affected when one changes one’s mind (*metanoia*) is not a forgetting. If guilt and shame propel one to make amendments to life, such are retained in memory, they are unforgetten, but the old order of existence no longer dominates consciousness; it persists as that old life that underwent renewal. To forget would be to risk returning to the old ways.

Here is an account from an artist who could not shake the guilt of failure, a painter who had failed the performance principle of painting: *externalize your interior vision*. His failure is a falling short of the ideal; he knows – or remembers – what the ideal ought to be, but he cannot reach it. Talk of guilt arises naturally here: *ἁμαρτία*, meaning “missing the mark,” is one of the Greek words for “sin.” The twentieth-century American painter Richard Diebenkorn reminisces in an unpublished studio notebook:

I think that my necessity to work and rework a canvas in order to realize it becomes a process wherein my ideas are externalized. I find that I can never conceive a painting idea, put it on canvas, and accept it, not that I haven't often tried. As a young man I considered this inability a shortcoming – I felt my ideas (those that I brought from my head to an initial laying out on the canvas) were essentially banal. This of course may well have been/be true but however it is, almost from the beginning, I looked forward with relief to being able to correct, to set things right, and it was with something akin to guilt that I did so in the privacy of my studio ... It was as though I'd failed in my performance but somehow was able to steal this second chance and thereby come up with something that I could set out with the works of my peers (which were of course first crack).

Somewhat later, I did realize that the arts of painting, writing and composing music were intrinsically activities that partake of revision ... Later yet I began to feel that what I was really up to in painting, what I enjoyed almost exclusively, was altering – changing what was before me – by way of subtraction or juxtaposition or superimposition of different ideas. I should also admit to a modicum of guilt in this instance too in that I felt that what was becoming my painting process was a wholesale proposition and that my initial intent, as well as intent in process, was reduced to simply making things right. (Livingston, *Richard Diebenkorn* 72)

In this instance, revision is the core technique and the shame of the artist. Revision is proof of the failure of his basic *performance*, his failure to hit the mark at the first attempt, or only to hit a mark that, in its banality, was not worth hitting. Revision is the shameful (secretive) performance of recompense, or perhaps that of concealment. The last phase of this guilty admission was that his intentions for his work had become wholly non-specific, just a matter of “making things right.” Diebenkorn had also missed his vocation.

Each section of *Minima Moralia* ends with a well-turned cadence. They close themselves off so poignantly. The damaged life that is performed

in that collection can still affect a flourish of insight. The pressure to cadence is felt here also, but, and this is the one moment when this writer mentions his life, I do not have Adorno's brilliance. I will miss the mark, but am strangely glad of it. For it means that I need to get back to the material, to practice, root out as many procedures as I can, and work through them, quietly and unnoticed.

Notes

1. I gratefully acknowledge a Research Grant from *The Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland* which greatly facilitated my work on this chapter.
2. The short story *The Secret Miracle* by Jorge Luis Borges also entertains the notion of the mutability of time, in this case, a divinely contrived suspension of actual time for a writer sentenced to death. He is taken out before a firing squad at which point time is frozen and he is granted an extra year to complete – in his imagination – a play. As the last words fall into place, normal time is resumed and the execution is carried out.
3. In marked contrast to the prospects of the heathens: “But the multiplying brood of the ungodly shall not thrive, nor take deep rooting from bastard slips, nor lay any fast foundation” (King James Bible, Wisdom 4.3).
4. A theological register is extremely important in framing the utopianism of Ernst Bloch. For both Bloch and Adorno, the abolition of human death was the key determinant of utopian thinking. See, for example, their exchanges in the interview “Something's missing”: “Utopian consciousness means a consciousness for which the *possibility* that people no longer have to die does not have anything horrible about it, but is, on the contrary, that which one actually wants” (Bloch, *Utopian Function* 8).
5. “For she goeth about seeking such as are worthy of her ... and meeteth them in every thought. For the very true beginning of her is the desire of discipline; and the care of discipline is love” (King James Bible, Wisdom 6.16–17).
6. W.B. Worthen for one takes issue with what he calls “Austin's cavalier dismissal of theatrical performatives – hollow to whom? in what sense?” (See Worthen, “Drama” 1095).
7. See for example Gillespie, “Translating Adorno.”
8. “It is arguable that the professional philosophical paper is an evolutionary product, emerging by natural selection from a wild profusion of forms Darwinized into oblivion through maladaptation, stages in the advance of philosophy toward consciousness of its true identity, a rockier road than most. But it is equally arguable that philosophers with really new thoughts have simply had to invent new forms to convey them with, and that it may be possible that from the perspective of the standard format no way into these other forms, hence no way into these systems or structures of thought, can be found.” (Danto, *Philosophical Disenfranchisement* 142)
9. The German title for this section is *Hinter den Spiegel*.
10. See Müller-Doohm, *Adorno* 57.