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# You Unseen Cathedrals: A Study of the Conceptual Conditions of Negativity

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Theory and Criticism

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation addresses a gap in contemporary negativity studies by examining twentieth-century texts that engage with negativity beyond the subject. Starting with the premise that the concepts of negativity and subjectivity are intertwined, I argue that the predominant tendency in scholarship has been to conceptualize subjectivity as a circular structure that incorporates negativity as its dynamic foundation. However, when negativity is defined in subordination to the subjective circle, its radical features are diminished, resulting in “weak negativity.” In Chapter 1, I exemplify my arguments using the works of Alexandre Kojève, Jean Hyppolite, and Judith Butler. In contrast to weak negativity, radical negativity is a slippery concept that can only be treated obliquely to avoid its incorporation into subjectivity. In the works of Theodor W. Adorno, Roger Caillois, Michel Foucault, Maurice Blanchot, and Manolo Millares, I identify an alternative set of concepts and approaches for tracing a partial definition of radical negativity. In Chapter 2, I show how Adorno employs various techniques in pursuit of non-identity, a correlate of radical negativity, and arrives at the notion of mimesis as a means for conceptualizing radical negativity materially embedded in art. In Chapter 3, I analyze Caillois’s work on mimesis in insects, identifying the notions of worklessness and the outside, as well as the device of the double death, to further outline the conceptual conditions of radical negativity. Foucault’s and Blanchot’s works help steer the discussion of mimesis, along with worklessness, the outside, and double death, back to art and aesthetics grounded in radical negativity. To conclude, I propose that the paintings of Spanish Informalist Manolo Millares can be seen as examples of art that embodies radical negativity without subordinating it to the voracious circularity of the subject.

**Keywords:** negativity, subjectivity, circularity, non-identity, aesthetics, mimesis, worklessness, the outside, Kojève, Hyppolite, Adorno, Caillois, Blanchot, Millares

## SUMMARY FOR LAY AUDIENCE

This dissertation examines the notion of radical negativity in twentieth-century philosophy. I argue that radical negativity, which is often associated with death and various other phenomena that threaten a comfortable vision of existence, is opposed to weak negativity, a diluted and simplified version of its radical counterpart that allows one to tame and accept the possibility of one's own limits and ultimate demise. By examining several referential texts by philosophers Alexandre Kojève, Jean Hyppolite, and Judith Butler, I find that when the notion of negativity is approached by and through the subject, negativity is only possible in its weak form. However, in Chapters 2 and 3, I consider other means for theorizing radical negativity. For example, the notion of mimesis, as developed by Theodor W. Adorno and Roger Caillois, shows how an organism can engage with something that is absent—a process that in this dissertation is called “worklessness.” By analogy, the creative acts of writing and painting, which always start from nothing, highlight that a subject's communication with an absent other can be used as a way of understanding negativity beyond its weak form. In examining the works of Michel Foucault, Maurice Blanchot, and Manolo Millares, I claim that they create the conceptual conditions for thinking radical negativity without blunting its sharpest and most disconcerting edges. Finally, the purpose of this dissertation, beyond exploring the conceptual conditions of radical negativity, is to show that it is possible to contest the instrumentalization of art and thought for subjective ends by maintaining a space and time in which existence can be approached in all its bizarre splendour.

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I am grateful to Justas Patkauskas; without him, thinking, writing, and traveling would be mimesis without alterity.

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*Heart time, those  
we dreamt stand up for  
the midnight cipher.*

*Something spoke into stillness, something was silent,  
something went its way.  
Banished and Vanished  
were at home.*

*You cathedrals.*

*You unseen cathedrals,  
you rivers unheard,  
you clocks deep in us.*

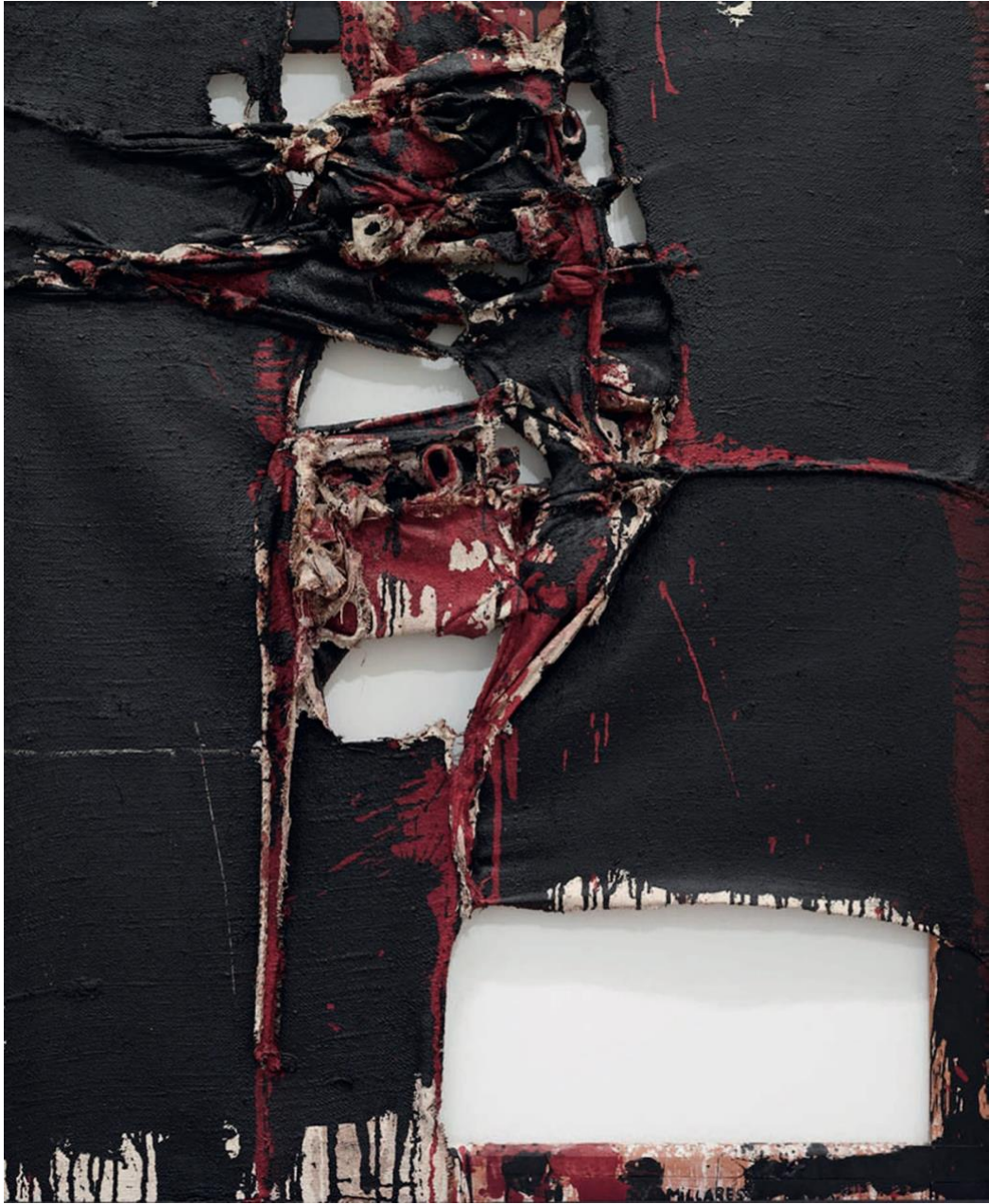
Paul Celan 1959

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**Figure 1.** Manolo Millares, *Homúnculo* (1960), VEGAP, Madrid, 2016.





**Figure 2.** Manolo Millares, *Animal de fondo*<sup>1</sup> (1963), detail, Fundación Antonio Pérez, Cuenca, 2022.

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<sup>1</sup> The painting references the homonymous poetry book by Juan Ramón Jiménez, published in 1949.

## INTRODUCTION

The subject of philosophy must also recognize that he or she is already dead, and that philosophy is neither a medium of affirmation nor a source of justification, but rather the organon of extinction.

(Ray Brassier 2007)

This project critically examines the concept of negativity in twentieth-century continental thought. Most of the texts discussed in this dissertation were written after World War II. Their authors found it essential to question the implications of the constitution of subjectivity, whose history so often intersects with the conquest and domination that world powers exercise internally and externally. In the aftermath of the devastation caused by not one but two extensive wars within the first half of the century, the critique of the Western subject became especially relevant. Thus, although this dissertation focuses on the role of negativity in structures of thought, it also includes the related criticism of the (Western) subject.

This dissertation is not a survey and does not provide an exhaustive study of the concept of negativity, either historically or in contemporary thought. It is true that the concept of negativity has been present in Western thought,<sup>1</sup> in one shape or another, since the latter's Greek beginnings. However, due to its slippery nature, negativity does

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<sup>1</sup> In this dissertation, negativity is often associated with such notions as the void, the outside, and exteriority. One of the earliest mentions of negativity comes from the Greek atomists Leucippus and Democritus in the fifth century BC. Against Parmenides's denial of the void, the atomists introduced the notion of the void as "what-is-not" (Graham 2010, 523) and the condition for existence as heterogeneous and changing: "Now Democritus, taking principles testified of by sensation, that there is division and plurality in things, as well as motion, on the basis of these he introduces the void, constructing the obscure from the evident" (531). By using the void as the locus for existing things, the atomists interpreted change as motion. They distinguished between two types of void: (1) the inter-atomic void (atoms "are completely kept apart by void," 539), which is also present within bodies composed of atoms (533), and (2) the inter-world void, which is rather an "intermundane region" (545) and "a very empty place" (545). Although the atomists' idea of the void should clearly not be equated with modern conceptions of negativity, their contribution to the history of the obscure thought of negativity is paramount. The positing of the void as "what-is-not" (a form of being different from but "no less than what-is" [523]) prompts the notions of change as motion and a proliferation of things in existence and even of worlds, most of them occurring in pairs. The atomists' notion of the "productive" void already exhibits some of the aspects of weak negativity that can be observed in modern dialectical structures, such as circularity (expressed by the atomists as a vortex out of which the world is borne and which "captures whatever things it touches," 543) and the tendency towards totalization exhibited by subject-based dialectical systems.

not lend itself to a typological study in the field of the history of ideas. For example, an extensive study of the sources that affirm the existence of non-being (one historical guise of negativity) could be developed<sup>2</sup> along the lines of apophatic theology—an important tradition of thought from Neoplatonism onwards, which has lately witnessed somewhat of a revival in scholarship. Other trends that emphasize the “dark” side of conceptual work are extinctionism, nihilism, accelerationism, and speculative realism/materialism, the last being, perhaps, the most recognizable umbrella term for “dark” studies in contemporary critical theory. When writing this dissertation, instead of seeking to bring order to the endless proliferation of negativity-based trends, I chose to follow a more uncertain research path, rejecting the classificatory and positivist method in order to avoid suffocating the more delicate aspects of negativity. Rather than setting out to write this dissertation with a pre-determined notion of negativity, I favored an approach that led me to observe the subject’s circular web extending to infinity in spite of its constitutive emptiness in the works of Alexandre Kojève, Jean Hyppolite, and Judith Butler. This path of inquiry also allowed me to discover the barely-suggested withdrawal of reason in Theodor Adorno’s analysis of Hegel’s lecture notes, the flickers of the inorganic matter in abundant living organisms in Roger Caillois’s reflections on mimesis in nature, and the glimpse of the outside in art—the most subtle aspects of negativity that also contain a hidden intensity.

As such, my project is a somewhat unconventional study of negativity that attempts to respect the elusiveness of this concept. To do so, I draw inspiration and research material from a wide range of sources, such as continental philosophy, literature, political philosophy, aesthetics and painting, and speculative theory. Although I have no wish to diminish the specificity of each area, I found that research on negativity requires the broadness and freedom of association that only an interdisciplinary approach can provide. For example, Roberto Bolaño’s (2016) provocative characterisation of good literature as defined by the author’s “ability to peer

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<sup>2</sup> Two volumes that undertake an extensive study of themes in negative theology are *Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation and Relationality* (2010), edited by Chris Boesel and Catherine Keller, and *Contemporary Debates in Negative Theology and Philosophy* (2017), edited by Nahum Brown and J. Aaron Simmons. The theological themes of the unbodied and the unsayable have been given considerable importance in continental discussions. For example, Arthur Bradley’s work *Negative Theology and Modern French Philosophy* (2004) undertakes a general survey of the interest that French thinkers of the twentieth century, such as Jacques Derrida, Michel de Certeau, Jean-Luc Marion, Julia Kristeva, and Michel Foucault, showed in apophatic theology (or, as it is also called, *via negativa*).

into the darkness, to leap into the void” (34) can equally be applied to philosophy and art. Bolaño’s statement allows one to speculate whether the understanding of such key terms as “literature” (or “theory,” “philosophy,” and so on) and “author” (or “artist”) is also challenged by the leap into the void. In fact, it can be inferred that the leap is only possible if the author and the work are already secondary to the void itself. The leap is always double, both personal and impersonal, and specific to the creative act involved in the production of art, literature, philosophy, and other speculative fields.

To start tracing the current project’s intersections with negativity in contemporary theory, I will first take a few steps back. Although this dissertation engages with texts that were mostly written in the last century, along with concepts whose roots date back several centuries (e.g., subjectivity, representation, and dialectics), the questions that inform my work have been formulated in the last two decades. During this time, several trends have risen and been washed away in the sea of critical theory, only to come back later, reconfigured, often deliberately falsifying entire areas of knowledge to shed light on other, external terrains of thought. The so-called “negative turn” (Dekeyser 2020, 371) is one such trend, which opposes “affirmationism,” an umbrella term meant to represent most philosophical texts of the Western canon. Affirmationism<sup>3</sup> is the insistence to focus on the positive aspects of metaphysics insofar as they confirm and encourage the inventive and continuously productive virtues of subjectivity. Affirmationism also rejects negativity in its radical forms. Contemporary theorists’ engagements with negativity reveal a persistent preoccupation with an area of theory—the study of negativity—that has not been canonically legitimized and which can be approached only obliquely. While subscribing to the general trend of negativity studies and cautiously accepting the critique of the affirmationist trend in continental thought as valid, this project does not argue for the legitimation of a new discipline at the cost of another; rather, my dissertation is calling for a reconfiguration of current practices of criticism to include an area—negativity—which has been long overlooked or misunderstood and which is already present in critical theory. In the last couple of years, the production of texts in which a variant of negativity plays an important role—in fields such as queer theory, trans studies, afro-pessimism, posthumanism, non-philosophy, geography, and extinction studies—has

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<sup>3</sup> A longer explanation of affirmationism is given on pages 14–15 of this dissertation.

continued and even intensified as contemporary events spell a grim future. However, it is important to acknowledge that for the most part, these texts approach negativity as a means towards an end specific to their concerns.

Among the works that comprise the field of negativity theory, perhaps the most controversial early engagement with negativity comes from Nick Land's texts collected in *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 2007–2011* (2012). This collection, a chaotic assemblage of vivid theoretical and experimental fiction, ultimately advocates an acceleration of capitalism's processes of self-destruction and disintegration. Although Land is as much a cult figure as a disgraced scholar in theory and criticism,<sup>4</sup> his work remains a point of reference for contemporary realist and posthumanist thinkers. Associating his thought, on the one hand, with a lineage of against-the-current thinkers, such as Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Cioran, Bataille, and Artaud, and, on the other hand, continuing on the path opened up by Deleuze and Guattari,<sup>5</sup> especially in *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), and by Lyotard's *Libidinal Economy* (1974), Land seeks to show, in discourse, how capitalism exacerbates its own dark, self-destructive potential by means of the deterritorializing processes that are inscribed within it. As Robin MacKay and Ray Brassier summarize in their joint "Editors' Introduction" (2012) to *Fanged Noumena*, Land's nihilist accelerationism calls for "a mobilization of the synthetic forces partially unleashed by capitalism, but released from their restricted organizational inhibition in such a way as to dissolve nationalism, racism, familialism, along with everything that couples Capital to the xenophobia that constitutes the 'proto-cultural' basis of what counts as human, and whose fascist destiny modernity has succeeded only in inhibiting at its convenience" (10). For Land, death is the hidden element in Kant's transcendental subjectivity, and an intensification of the death drive, which he understands as the heightening of the desire and urge towards death, is supposed to inspire one to "explore death and attempt to plot out modes of escape, activating the unconscious revolutionary force shackled by the inhibited

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<sup>4</sup> Land is often associated with far-right discourses due to his scathing critique of leftist values, such as tolerance and egalitarianism (explicitly in *The Dark Enlightenment* [2012]), and constant jabs at twentieth-century theory currents, often associated with the academic left, such as critical theory, phenomenology, and deconstruction. In more recent years, this negative attitude towards the academic left has been supplemented with expressions of support for reactionary conspiracy theories.

<sup>5</sup> As MacKay and Brassier (2012) present it, "Land seized upon Deleuze-Guattari's transcendental materialism – years before its predictable institutional neutering" (5). Supposing that MacKay and Brassier are referring to the popularization of the Deleuze-Guattari corpus, it follows that Land was working on said corpus when it was still somewhat obscure, at least in the UK, in the '90s.

syntheses of modern culture” (46). Land’s work, especially the texts comprising *Fanged Noumena*, is emblematic in the field of negativity studies because, although chaotic and with problematic implications, it addresses one of the main issues of concern in contemporary theory: the central position of the subject in post-Kantian thought and its relation to the negation inherent in capitalism. Neoliberal capitalism and the post-Kantian subject are represented by the tensions and dislocations that they constantly produce and through which they constantly reproduce themselves, engulfing and consuming all possibilities of thinking beyond the subject/capitalism. Even though I do not endorse Land’s version of accelerationism, I believe that his influence in contemporary theory was crucial in fostering a critically oriented perspective that includes negativity and seeks to step out of structures of thought circumscribed by the subject’s domination. A reconfigured nihilism that serves as a foundation for thought and an actualization of the death drive without its absorption into the structures of “civilization” emerge out of Land’s anti-humanism. Land’s thought, at its best, was meant to shake the conservatism latent in most currents of thought formulated in the aftermath of poststructuralism.

Even though Land’s affront to academic theory resonated more within artistic and fringe circles, his influence in critical theory is also notable. Andrew Culp, for example, although highly critical of Land,<sup>6</sup> adopts much of Land’s (along with Deleuze and Guattari’s) “dark” aesthetic and metaphors, complete with a reinterpretation of Deleuze and Guattari’s work, which, together, resulted in the writing of *Dark Deleuze* (2017). In this book, building explicitly on Land’s accelerationism, which he criticizes for not taking “the process far enough” (28), Culp argues for an even darker and more destructive process using expressions such as “a truly dark path” (29), “Breakdown, Destruction, Ruin” (28), “mad black communism” (26), and a whole range of other terms with the markers “negative” or “dark” next to them, thus attempting to respond to the joyous aesthetic predominant at the time in Deleuze studies.<sup>7</sup> In spite of the

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<sup>6</sup> Andrew Culp’s interview with Joseph Weissman for the theory blog and podcast *Fractal Ontology* expresses some of Culp’s concerns with Land’s work, which mostly have to do with the latter’s alignment with far-right corporatism, the implications of his accelerationism, and the superficiality of Land’s engagement with his sources (<https://fractalontology.wordpress.com/2018/05/17/theory-talk-dark-deleuze-with-andrew-culp/>).

<sup>7</sup> For a contextualization of Culp’s (and others’) negative/dark impulse, see Justas Patkauskas’s review of *Dark Deleuze*, “A Dark Deleuze for a Sunny Century” (<https://thescatteredpelican.com/review-spring-2017/a-dark-deleuze-for-a-sunny-century/>).

insistence on negativity and the outside (a term used frequently in Deleuze studies), Culp's work has little to do with negativity as such. In fact, although darkness and negativity have been trending concepts in theory for some time now, scarce research exists on negativity as such; usually, the term serves merely as a handy metaphor.

At the same time, other contemporary scholars, such as Lee Edelman and Jack Halberstam in queer studies, although to some extent maintaining the aestheticism of the negative turn, have used the concepts of the death drive and negativity to propose an absolute rejection of the dominant heterosexual and reproductive social and political order. For Lee Edelman, as argued in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), this rejection involves the refusal to participate in the reproduction of subjectivity and a definitive repudiation of a society oriented towards producing and caring for the universal child, who is not exactly an individual child but an idea of the future, an ideal that “has come to embody for us the telos of the social order and come to be seen as the one for whom that order is held in perpetual trust” (11). Queer negativity, for Edelman, is the decision to accept “the senseless pulsion” (27) of the death drive—the empty, “abjectified difference” (26), the unabsorbable surplus of *jouissance*—in a bid to de-idealize “the metaphoric reproduction on which heteroreproduction takes its stand” (27). In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam (2011) accepts Edelman's theoretical move<sup>8</sup> but, seeking to politicize Edelman's apolitical tone, proposes to develop a set of affective negativities in order to “embrace a truly political negativity, one that promises, this time, to fail, to make a mess, to fuck shit up, to be loud, unruly, impolite, to breed resentment, to bash back, to speak up and out, to disrupt, assassinate, shock and annihilate” (110). Although Edelman and Halberstam employ a corpus of works that lies outside of Land's accelerationist reach, both camps subscribe to the repudiation of dominant structures, neoliberal capitalism and the heteroreproductive social order, respectively, to which they oppose negativity in some form. However, neither of these thinkers approaches negativity with sufficient conceptual depth; instead, they employ negativity as a mediating concept whose radical

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<sup>8</sup> In 2005, following the publication of Edelman's book *No Future*, the MLA panel The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory hosted talks by both Edelman and Halberstam, who took inspiration in their interventions from Leo Bersani's books *Homos* (1996) and *Is the Rectum a Grave?: and Other Essays* (2009). Their follow-up articles, published in *PMLA* one year after the MLA panel, clarify their positions in relation to each other and the anti-social/negative turn in queer theory. See Halberstam's “The Politics of Negativity in Recent Queer Theory” (2006) and Edelman's “Antagonism, Negativity, and the Subject of Queer Theory” (2006).

potential is treated as a means towards something even more radical—a complete breakdown of capitalism or an antisocial revolution. In the process, negativity itself gets lost, being reduced to nothing more than a secondary, evocative concept.

In addition to the current discussions on negativity, another set of concepts developed in the last twenty years has been instrumental to my project. The binary of affirmationism and negativity employed in contemporary discussions within the frame of the negative turn was established in tandem with other developments in theory, especially as elaborated by the so-called speculative, or neo-realist, trend. Speculative realism and the negative turn are not explicitly connected. However, there are several elements that they share, such as overlapping influences (e.g., Nick Land and Nietzsche), a suspicion towards poststructuralism and deconstruction’s maintenance of anthropocentric trends of thought, the pairing of subjectivity and capitalism in a transforming global market, and their attempt to break the anthropocentric/capitalist bias by creating assimilation-proof concepts (e.g., radical contingency and strong negativity). Moreover, for speculative realists, negativity is a concept used to signify a wide range of “objects” that the human subject cannot reach, such as “the great outdoors” or “the real.”

Several related themes emerged in an area of speculative natural philosophy in the first two decades of the 21st century, which coagulated into a movement known as speculative realism. According to the movement’s own creation myth, it all began in a conference named Speculative Realism that took place in 2007 at Goldsmiths’ College, where the four keynote speakers—Quentin Meillassoux, Ray Brassier, Graham Harman, and Ian Hamilton—focused on redefining philosophical realism in light of a radical little book in contemporary philosophy, namely Meillassoux’s *After Finitude* (2008).<sup>9</sup> One of the main concepts in Meillassoux’s book, to which the other proponents of speculative realism subscribe, is that of correlationism,<sup>10</sup> which constitutes the

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<sup>9</sup> For a survey of the movement, its genesis, background, and some of the main arguments associated with speculative realism in its initial phases, see Graham Harman’s *Speculative Realism: An Introduction* (2018). However, it must be mentioned that the book often makes use of Harman’s own reductive tendencies in argumentation and his biased presentation of some of the positions of his interlocutors at the Speculative Realism conference, such as that of Ray Brassier, who subsequently sought to distance himself from the movement. For a more neutral and recent survey of speculative realism, see Leon Niemoczynski’s *Speculative Realism: An Epitome* (2017).

<sup>10</sup> In *Guerrilla Metaphysics* (2005), Graham Harman uses the term “philosophy of human access” (23) to describe the refusal of post-Kantian philosophy to grant access to the world “in-itself” outside the relation between world and thought, which is, of course, exclusively human.



background for the notion of circular subjectivity that the first chapter of my dissertation advances. Correlationism and its criticism, as formulated by Meillassoux and Brassier, developed in parallel with affirmationism and its criticism, both anticipating new ways of theorizing negativity.

In *After Finitude* (2008), Meillassoux gives the following definition of correlationism:

By “correlation” we mean the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other. We will henceforth call correlationism any current of thought which maintains the unsurpassable character of the correlation so defined. (5)

Correlationism is Meillassoux’s diagnosis of the problem inherent in metaphysics: the tendency that characterises Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy whereby only knowledge of phenomena is possible, while knowledge of things-in-themselves (noumena) is not. Although in *After Finitude*, Meillassoux focuses on Kant as the central figure of correlationism, seeing Kant’s transcendental idealism as the main culprit in precluding access to things-in-themselves, in his later works, Meillassoux expands his diagnosis to all philosophy after George Berkeley. Berkeley’s rejection of materialism, including Cartesian dualism, in his famous phrase *esse est percipi (aut percipere)*—“to be is to be perceived (or to perceive)”—can be summarized as the following syllogism: all material<sup>11</sup> things are mind-independent; such mind-independent things do not exist; therefore, material things do not exist (Downing 2011). In a sense, the two “streams” of correlationism that Meillassoux identifies can be termed *epistemological* (Kant’s rejection of the thinkability of an object independent of thought) and *ontological* (Berkeley’s refusal to grant ontological status to anything external to thought). Although my dissertation does not engage with correlationism and speculative realism in detail, my position rests on some of the fundamental assumptions of speculative realism. Moreover, I take Meillassoux’s distinction between weak and strong correlationism, in a substantially reworked form, as groundwork for the notions of weak and strong negativity. Meillassoux (2008) distinguishes between weak

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<sup>11</sup> As Downing (2011) explains, material things, in this formulation, refer to things that exist separately from thinking and perceiving things. As a result, materialism is “‘the doctrine that material things exist.’ This is in contrast with another use, more standard in contemporary discussions, according to which materialism is the doctrine that only material things exist. Berkeley contends that no material things exist, not just that some immaterial things exist” (n.p.).

correlationism—defined by the Kantian thesis that no knowledge of the object in itself outside of transcendental subjectivity is possible—and strong correlationism, which he considers to be the dominant form of correlationism in contemporary thought (30) and which is defined by a second step after the Kantian thesis, whereby the subject-object *relation* is primary over the *elements* of the relation (subject and object).<sup>12</sup>

My own notion of circular subjectivity, in which weak negativity is treated as the mobile “resource” animating a structure of circulation, is inspired by the notions of circularity and subjectalism that Meillassoux advances. In “Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition: A Speculative Analysis of the Sign Devoid of Meaning” (2016), Meillassoux identifies circularity as the substructure of the correlationist argument against realism. The argument consists in claiming that “we never have access to any intended thing (understood in the most general sense, not necessarily in the phenomenological sense) that is not always-already correlated to an ‘act of thinking’ (understood, again, in the most general sense)” (118), which means that any claim about the existence of a thing relies on representation,<sup>13</sup> while the thing as such can only exist outside of representation. However, since correlationism, according to Meillassoux, “argues for the enclosure of thought into itself, and for its subsequent inability to attain an absolute outside of itself” (2018), there is no way for thought to access the thing in itself outside of its own representation. Another way of describing correlationism, as Peter Hallward (2008) does, is to posit “some sort of fundamental mediation between the subject and the object of thought, such that it is the clarity and integrity of this relation (whether it be clarified through logical judgement, phenomenological reduction, historical reflection, linguistic articulation, pragmatic experimentation or intersubjective communication) that serves as the only legitimate means of accessing reality” (53). This definition goes hand in hand with another aspect of correlationism

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<sup>12</sup> Ray Brassier’s article “Correlation, Speculation, and the Modal Kant-Sellars Thesis” (2017) is a reliable source for further clarification on Meillassoux’s weak and strong correlationism and the implications of the latter for Meillassoux’s development of the notion of facticity. Brassier proposes Wilfrid Sellars’s modal expressivism (or the “modal Kant-Sellars thesis”) as “another way out of the correlationist dilemma” (79) by asserting the formal distinction between representing as an act and the object being represented and thus affirming the existence of a world beyond thought.

<sup>13</sup> Meillassoux’s use of representation refers mostly to the Kantian model of representation as the way in which objects are subjectively determined by experience. Kant uses representation to distinguish between things-in-themselves and things as known by sensible subjects, setting up the distinction from the outset in the “Preface” of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1998): “Our representation of things as they are given to us does not conform to these things as they are in themselves but rather . . . these objects as appearances conform to our way of representing” (112).

that Meillassoux (2016) criticizes—the deabsolutization of thought—according to which “the enclosure of thought into itself” (118) results in “its subsequent inability to attain *an absolute* outside itself” (2018, my emphasis). Hallward (2008) points out in a more general way the tendency that Meillassoux’s critique of correlationism identifies as essential for metaphysics (and derived contemporary fields): the prohibition to think what is deemed as not being sanctioned human thought. My dissertation is partly informed by the critique of correlationism that identifies the mechanism of mediation as a prohibition to access what lies beyond the subject’s categories and perceptions.

According to Meillassoux (2016), one of the consequences of strong correlationism is the ontological necessity and primacy of the thinking subject. As opposed to weak correlationism, which abolishes the absolute altogether by enclosing thought into itself, strong correlationism “absolutizes the correlation of thought and the world through the choice of various traits, all of which are present in human subjectivity” (122). In other words, by being a necessary part of absolutized correlationism, subjectivity as such becomes a necessary and absolute experience; as a result, from a correlationist point of view, anything that is unrelated to some aspect of subjectivity is regarded as impossible, just as reality without subjectivity is not possible either. Throughout the history of philosophy, different aspects of subjectivity have been raised to the level of absolute necessity, argues Meillassoux, who presents a long list of such subjectivity-derived concepts, ranging from Berkeley’s perception and Hegel’s real to Nietzsche’s vitalism and Deleuze’s larval subject (121). Meillassoux defines subjectivism as “any metaphysics that absolutizes the correlation of being and thought, whatever sense it attaches to the subjective and objective poles of such a relation” (134).

My dissertation starts with a similar formulation of the subject as a dominant ontological and epistemological category in twentieth-century thought. However, it is important to acknowledge that the critique of the subject is not a new trend in philosophy. Amongst the many forms of rejecting the Cartesian and Kantian traditions of thinking the subject, Nietzsche’s position is representative. As João Constâncio, Maria João Mayer Branco, and Bartholomew Ryan (2015) argue, Nietzsche “rejected the notion of a subject, he considered the subject a ‘fiction’” (1) and held similar views regarding Descartes’s dualistic notion of the subject and pure cogito, Schopenhauer’s replacement of the latter with the idea of “will,” and Kant’s transcendental subject. Nietzsche’s attack on the subject is followed by an entire philosophical tradition aimed

at decentring the rational subject (Constâncio 2015, 280), which is said to have brought about “modernity’s crisis of the subject” (Vattimo 1986, 8) and was taken up by thinkers such as Heidegger, Bergson, Deleuze, Barthes, and Foucault, among others.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the preoccupation with the subject’s privileged status in philosophy was a major topic in the twentieth century. However, I argue that most of the time, the critique of the subject merely leads to the replacement of the subject with other concepts that maintain the structure of subjectivity intact; expressed in more contemporary terms, the dismantling of anthropocentrism and of the privileges of organic life frequently leads to a naturalization of subject-like qualities as part of inorganic nature.

Regarding the subject’s dominating legacy and its consequences, Meillassoux (2016) posed the following question:

So was it this that was paradoxically called the “critique of the subject,” of the humanist subject? Critiquing the primacy of the rational subject so as to put in its place the subjective everywhere; setting against a certain type of subjectivity (consciousness, freedom, objective knowledge), housed only in the human, another type of subjectivity (will, life, habit, contraction of duration), this time housed everywhere? (124)

Meillassoux rejects the totalization of the subjective in ontological and epistemological structures and argues that a critique of the subject is insufficient due to the fact that the rejection of humanism “all too obviously amounts to disseminating the human everywhere, even into stones and particles, according to the entire scale of intensities” (130). He proposes, instead, imposing a regime of finitude,<sup>15</sup> which he describes in poetic terms as “[growing] a desert around such a subject that, owing to the lack of the vital drops of a seasonal rain, would put paid once and for all to all these charming wills, warring and implacable . . . – these intensities that promised us that, once our existence was over, we would still survive a little – barely, but a little – at home among these perennial, nodular, querulous, divergent lives and laying out the thousand perspectives of their richly disharmonious creations” (130–131). Meillassoux is here alluding to

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<sup>14</sup> *Nietzsche and the Problem of Subjectivity* (2015) edited by João Constâncio, Maria João Mayer Branco, and Bartholomew Ryan is a collection of articles and an excellent recent resource for understanding Nietzsche’s engagement with different aspects of subjectivity as well as his influence on modern reiterations of the subject.

<sup>15</sup> Finitude, for Meillassoux, is the return to the materialist subject, which is defined by the acknowledgement of the human subject’s meaningless mortality. Moreover, what thought can access is its own finitude—its non-being. By means of finitude, Meillassoux proposes the return to a speculative absolute, whereby the concept of the contingency of thought serves as an absolute concept. As such, the absolute contingency of thought is implied to lead to the absolute contingency of being.

difference-focused ontological regimes, such as Deleuze’s transcendental immanence or Derrida’s deconstruction, which are often criticized from a realist stance as advancing an enchanted worldview that only apparently severs being and (human) thought while, in fact, conserving and even disseminating an anthropocentric regime of thought.

Meillassoux (2016) proposes, against both weak and strong correlationism, the absolutization of contingency and a mathematical system centred on what he calls the “empty sign” (163) that allows access to the otherness contained in thought—that is, things that are not defined as correlates of the human mind, represented as being (matter) without thought. Meillassoux maintains that access to matter is possible for thought “insofar as it is deprived of thought, of subjectivity” (147) with the help of “a mathematized physics whose referent ‘feels nothing’ of being what it is” (147). This kind of semiotization of the world is inspired by Meillassoux’s mentor, Alain Badiou, who proposes a renewed mathematical Platonism against the metaphysical essentialist projects that existentialism, phenomenology, and historicism advanced in the twentieth century. However, Meillassoux’s speculative materialism,<sup>16</sup> despite creating a world devoid of meaning in order to evade subjectalism, has been criticized—for example, by Graham Harman—for remaining centred on a human perspective of the world. Harman (2015) identifies Meillassoux’s realism as a “knowledge-centered brand of realism” (127), which claims that human knowledge has access to a reality that is beyond the reach of the human. Harman goes so far as to call Meillassoux’s realism “a flagrant form of idealism” (127) insofar as it “holds that reality can be converted into knowledge under the right conditions” (127). To oppose this, he proposes his own object-oriented ontology, whose subject matter goes beyond the scope of this dissertation.

Without going into details regarding contemporary realism’s internal schism between Meillassoux’s (and, notably, Brassier’s) speculative realism and Harman’s object-oriented ontology, the tension between a subject-based system of thought and an unreachable objective reality is an important discussion in contemporary philosophy. My dissertation seeks to address, through negativity and aesthetics, the issues that Meillassoux describes in relation to the ontological and epistemological positions that maintain the dominating presence of the subject. Similar to Meillassoux’s setting up of

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<sup>16</sup> Meillassoux (2016) calls materialist “any thought that accedes to an absolute that is at once external to thought and in itself devoid of all subjectivity” (120).

correlationism, I begin with the subject and identify its *modus operandi*, starting the first chapter with one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century, Alexandre Kojève, and continuing with two other post-Hegelian thinkers, Jean Hyppolite and, closer to the present time, Judith Butler. The circularity of the subject—the structure that I identify in the first chapter and which serves as a dominant backdrop for the notion of weak negativity—centers on the subject itself instead of the correlation (which, in my case, would be the circular reproduction of the subject). I identify, especially, in the post-Hegelian line of thought, the subject's need for different types of negation and negativity in order to self-sabotage its dominance and, ultimately, to reach beyond its own limitations to achieve complete authority. Consequently, the purpose of this dissertation is to show how a range of concepts related to negativity can ultimately tear through the overbearing fabric that the subject imposes over different structures of thought, without, nevertheless, falling into classificatory and over-simplified ontological systems.

In addition to Meillassoux, another significant influence in this dissertation is Ray Brassier, whose nihilist interpretation of speculative realism endorses Meillassoux's finitude-focused materialism and provides, instead of a dead end for philosophy, a ground for a speculative search for truth with a side of scientism. In *Nihil Unbound* (2007), Brassier employs several concepts, such as the "outside" or extinction, to try and reach beyond the grasp of the subject. According to Brassier, the concept of extinction is more radical than that of death because extinction does not allow for the subject's dialectical reintegration into the system, nor does it heighten the subject's power to know through reference to its own finitude. Extinction puts an end to correlationism, as opposed to the contemplation of the individual's death, which maintains correlationism by extending the subject's projection:

Thus, it is not so much that extinction will terminate the correlation, but that it has already retroactively terminated it. Extinction seizes the present of the correlation between the double pincers of a future that has always already been, and a past that is perpetually yet to be. Accordingly, there can be no "afterwards" of extinction, since it already corrodes the efficacy of the projection through which correlational synthesis would assimilate its reality to that of a phenomenon dependent upon conditions of manifestation. Extinction has a transcendental efficacy precisely insofar as it tokens an annihilation which is neither a possibility towards which actual existence could orient itself, nor a given datum from which future existence could proceed. It retroactively disables projection, just as it pre-emptively abolishes retention. In this regard, extinction

unfolds in an “anterior posteriority” which usurps the “future anteriority” of human existence. (230)

Extinction gives nihilism the force that the latter could not encounter in twentieth-century movements, such as existentialism. The particularity of extinction is the making real of the absence of thought, which, for me, serves as a grounding moment for a project on negativity. Unlike in Meillassoux’s arrangement, in which things that are outside of thought can nevertheless be reintegrated into the subject’s range of knowledge and can be given meaning by means of a mathematizable physics, Brassier’s focus is on the object itself rather than on the thought which can or cannot know it. Brassier’s nihilism allows for a structure “wherein the thought of the object is reversed by the object itself, rather than by the thought of the object” (229–230). Extinction is not empirical, as it cannot be experienced, but it is nevertheless real and has a historical dimension, in light of which the understanding of the “outside” is renegotiated: there is a real outside, which can wipe us out, and it is closer to us now than perhaps ever before. Conceptualizing subjectivity while thinking negativity in the form of extinction allows for an intervention into the subject’s circle. Thus, Brassier introduces a negative dimension into speculative realist thought on the subject according to which the subject can no longer maintain a relation of subordination with other concepts surrounding it. The subject is defined by something greater than itself, more real, and more violent—the death of death—a concept that originates not with Brassier but with the twentieth-century French thinker Maurice Blanchot, whose work I turn to in the third chapter of this dissertation.

Benjamin Noys’s book *The Persistence of the Negative* (2010) is another important contemporary source in the development of this dissertation. Although Noys does not engage with Meillassoux’s correlationism in any substantial way, he identifies a predominant structure in contemporary continental philosophy that relies on similar mechanisms to correlationism: affirmationist thought. Unlike Meillassoux, whose work can be confidently framed within the bounds of contemporary philosophy, Noys engages with a wider range of material, and his writing generally fits the critical theory label. Noys’s focus is mostly on late-twentieth-century thinkers. He criticizes Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Bruno Latour, Antonio Negri, and Alain Badiou for succumbing to affirmationism and attempts to rescue whatever remnant of negativity they maintain in their works. Although his readings are somewhat schematic and generalizing, Noys establishes a set of issues in theory that is instrumental in the study

of negativity. At the origins of contemporary affirmationism, Noys identifies “the anti-systemic struggles of the 1960s and 1970s (usually condensed in the figure of ‘May ‘68’)” (x)<sup>17</sup> that aimed to oppose capitalism’s mechanisms of commodification, fragmentation, and diffusion. However, according to Noys, this resistance “has often taken the form of the affirmation of new generic forms of universality” (x). Essentially, he argues that poststructuralist theories of difference mistakenly oppose strong forms of negativity in their attempt to resist capitalism’s mechanisms of fragmentation and recuperation. For thinkers of the 1970s, affirmationism is an attempt to construct a way out of the cunning deterritorialization that capitalism effects, but Noys argues that affirmationism results in another totalizing system of production (whether through creativity or the celebration of alterity) and rejects all possibilities of radical change by suppressing the thought of negativity. This suppression only allows neoliberal capitalism to triumph once more. Noys also connects affirmationist thought with “metaphysical ontologies, the inventive potential of the subject, and the necessity for the production of novelty, and a concomitant suspicion of the negative and negativity” (ix), with “historical density, complexity and materiality” (ix)<sup>18</sup> and, above all, with “the new positive thinking of the ‘Same’” (13) and “a superior ‘Difference’, irreducible to conventional social differences” (13)—tendencies that persist within contemporary disciplines in the humanities and the social sciences.

Perhaps one of the most interesting (and least rigorously argued) aspects of Noys’s (2010) diagnosis of contemporary thought is his incorporation of a “weak negativity” (xi) (a term that I adopt in this dissertation, although with a slightly modified meaning) into the ultimately affirmationist system of neoliberal capitalism. According to Noys, the inability of contemporary thought to make room for negativity without “reifying negativity into the negative” (ix) (or weak negativity) results in a configuration of the subject that supposedly allows it “to always escape or exceed

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<sup>17</sup> Noys further elaborates the connection between continental metaphysics (in particular French, German, and Italian theory) and the politics of libertarianism of the 1960s and 1970s on pages 4–5 of *The Persistence of the Negative* (2010). At the height of affirmationist thought he locates Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s theory of desire machines and flows in *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) as well as Jean-François Lyotard’s *Libidinal Economy* (1974), which argues that jouissance is the very engine of capital. Noys criticizes Lyotard’s position as a totalizing and accelerationist one that leaves no space for the potential collapse of capital.

<sup>18</sup> It is interesting to note that, for Noys, the focus on “being” and “materiality” falls under the label of affirmationism, while Meillassoux proposes a way out of the domain of correlationism exactly by means of materiality and being, even if the latter is the being of non-being.



capitalist capture” (17). At most, weak negativity becomes associated with the “suffering pathos of the subject” (17) or its constitutive finitude, though only insofar as the subject can continue on the same path as previously. Ultimately, Noys’s rejection of affirmationist thought, especially in its conscription of weak negativity, is a denunciation of a certain conception of subjectivity that, in opposing strong forms of negativity, “leaves mysterious the processes by which the failure of the subject will be converted into active and successful resistance” (17). Noys’s declared project is “to trace such a political reading of negativity, stressing it as a practice of the destruction of existent positivities through the performance of immanent ruptures” (17). The rupture aims to encourage the recuperation of negativity as a notion that is unassimilable by affirmationism. Noys also employs the term “agency” instead of “subjectivity” to recover the active, non-reified sense of the impulse that negativity entails. In the context of neoliberal capitalism, Noys wishes for “a collective practice of negativity” (18) in order to reclaim the break-away potential of the free agent from the command that the market exercises over the subject.

Following up on several of the trends mentioned above, Claire Colebrook provides a Deleuzian angle on extinction as the horizon informing and destabilizing the subject. She also advocates an anti-humanist feminist position, challenging the notion of “man” by launching virulent condemnations of the Cartesian subject and advancing a post-Butlerian articulation of the body against the established representation of the subject, and makes repeated attempts to think an exit from correlationism (Colebrook prefers the term “relationality” to correlationism, which implies a posthuman perspective instead of the human-focused knowledge perspective that Meillassoux maintains). In “A Cut in Relationality” (2019), Colebrook suggestively describes how the evils of “an existence that has fallen into the same dull round of managerial relationality” (181) could be opposed by modes of existence that are not included in the biopolitical totality of the liberal society. She proposes “a radical cut or refusal of relationality – such as would come about through decolonisation” (185), and mutated relations or non-relations at the end of the world—a deconstructive formula that brings the unknown closer in order to decentre the stability of the known and enclosed whole. Colebrook provides a synthesizing moment between the negative turn, posthumanism,

speculative realism, and gender studies. However, although her writings<sup>19</sup> are highly evocative and interdisciplinary, she does not treat negativity as a central concept, and it is often unclear to what extent Colebrook commits to the radical engagement with concepts related to negativity (e.g., extinction and non-relation) that she proposes. The ultimate configuration that she discusses in “A Cut in Relationality” (2019) is essentially an opened-up relationality, in which “everything is brought into relation with everything else” (187) by means of arrow-based rather than circular relations:

Arrow nomadism . . . moves towards all-inclusive comprehension, such that everything is in relation to everything else and simultaneity is comprehensive rather than disruptive. Any individual’s existence in the present is, ideally, in harmony with any other’s, with the single concept of a filiative humanity generating one world. (190)

This example suffices to show that negativity, at least in its more radical forms, is not an enduring concept in Colebrook’s configuration. This kind of flattened-world arrangement, on which many Deleuze-inspired theorists rely, especially in posthumanist studies, exemplifies Meillassoux’s (2016) description of a world devoid of the subject’s permanent gaze but “disseminating the human everywhere, even into stones and particles” (130).

This dissertation does not have such lofty ambitions as disrupting the circular flow of the subject and its relation to the world, though to some extent I also associate negativity with the potential to escape from the clutches of circular dominance. Except for Meillassoux and Brassier, all the other contemporary thinkers discussed above conflate negativity with social and political collective action. However, most of these thinkers also ignore the fact that such a radical practice of negativity would still be carried out within the same system of values that led to the reification and incorporation of negativity into affirmationist assemblies in the first place. In my project, I work with some texts that are not incorporated yet into the corpus of the negative turn. These texts could, in fact, be considered as falling under the affirmationist or even correlationist category. With the exception, perhaps, of Judith Butler, whose engagement with negativity I consider to be one of the more conservative ones, more so than Kojève’s and Hyppolite’s treatments, none of the thinkers whose works I read closely propose to completely break the circle of subjectivity. Blanchot, a known connoisseur of Hegel,

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<sup>19</sup> Colebrook’s negativity is mostly explored in relation to extinction in her two books *Death and the Posthuman: Essays on Extinction, Vol. 1* (2014) and *Sex after Life: Essays on Extinction, Vol. 2* (2014).

maintains a dialectical relation while subtly inverting the relationship between the subject and negativity, up to the point where the subject, lost at sea, cannot find its way back to close the circle. Contemporary thinkers fall into the trap of the subject's dominance, thinking that calling for action in the name of radical negativity could lead to breaking out of correlationism, relationality, neoliberal capitalism, heteroreproductive societal models, and so on. However, all these structures always already contain negativity—weak negativity, that is. Breaking out of a totalizing structure with the help of negativity by forceful practices, without facing the intricacies of the subject-negativity relation, only leads to recreating the same structure, though with slightly different coordinates. And while that may already be an achievement—minute mutations building up to a differential monster—conceptually, from the point of view of negativity, little real attention has been paid to the absolute other who is not a subject.

In my project, I also wish to challenge, if ever so slightly, the sweeping generalizations and one-sided assessments that have become so dominant in contemporary scholarship and which are exemplified, to some extent, by the use of affirmationism and correlationism as conceptual nemeses for radical thought. Instead of this, I shall align myself with a somewhat different understanding of negativity, accepting its slippery nature, finding in the turning of circular subjectivity the small cracks in the wall through which one can peak towards the darkest sky. Negativity and subjectivity are intertwined; yet negativity holds the secret that only the already-decentred subject can access. Radical negativity can only be double—the death of the dead; the night of the night. And it can only be peaked at sideways. The aim of this dissertation is to bring about the sensibility of the negative as an aesthetic practice, as an ever-sliding element that is nevertheless essential in breaking out of the ever-enclosed structures of the subject. My project addresses a gap in contemporary negativity studies by going back to twentieth-century texts and, by reading them closely, following through with the implications of negativity as it arises out of these texts. For example, instead of taking Adorno at his word as he presents the negative dialectic in the eponymously titled book, I examine his own engagement with Hegel's work and the way in which negativity arises out of the concept of mimesis in *Three Studies of Hegel* (1963/1993). Following the winding line of negativity—a truly alternative line which, as I discovered when writing this dissertation, does not obey cursory categorizations—

has led me towards a conceptual reconfiguration that several thinkers, such as Michel Foucault and Blanchot, had intuited. In the twentieth century, the moments of clarity regarding negativity are few but follow a similar pattern: there is a doubling of the same structure, effected by means of negation, then a leap into the outside.

Although this dissertation uses the contemporary critique of correlationism and affirmationism in relation to subjectivity to explore the possibility of a radical notion of negativity, it does not subscribe to sweeping arguments regarding twentieth-century continental thought, according to which all negative potential is suppressed in post-Kantian and poststructuralist thought. More than anything, this dissertation aims to locate and rediscover the functioning of negativity in relation to the circle of subjectivity in several fundamental theoretical texts of the twentieth century. In terms of methodology, rather than carrying out a topological study of negativity, I have relied on close readings and interpretations of selected influential texts that engage with aspects of negativity. Besides circular subjectivity, which I analyze in more detail in the first chapter, this dissertation uses the notion of mimesis as a background for teasing out a concept of radical negativity, in tandem with the “outside.” The notion of mimesis that I employ in this dissertation is related to its modern development in post-representational aesthetic thought as understood primarily by thinkers such as Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, and Julia Kristeva. More specifically, I discuss aspects of mimesis in the second and third chapters, in relation to Adorno’s negative dialectic, social theory, and his aesthetic theory and to Roger Caillois’s case studies of natural behaviours, respectively. As my sources indicate, my interpretation of mimesis is informed by twentieth-century post-representational aesthetics, in which mimesis becomes dissociated from its Greek meaning as the repetition of the identical, or imitation,<sup>20</sup> and from its Hegelian articulation in relation to art, whereby beauty in art is the sensuous representation of the Idea.<sup>21</sup> A number of works that are not discussed

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<sup>20</sup> In *Ion* and *The Republic*, Plato develops his concept of mimesis as imitation between art and nature informed by the realm of Forms. To summarise, according to Plato, the artist’s imitation of reality is not accurate because it is produced by means of his senses. Only the philosopher has access to the realm of Ideas (or Forms) and, therefore, being capable of reproducing the Idea, is above the artist, who becomes lost in the world of appearances. For a survey and analysis of Plato’s idea of mimesis and its relation to art and philosophy, see Santiago Juan-Navarro’s “The Power of Mimesis and the Mimesis of Power: Plato’s Concept of Imitation and His Judgement on the Value of Poetry and the Arts” (2007).

<sup>21</sup> Hegel develops his philosophy of art in *Hegel’s Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art, Vol. 1* (1975). For an insightful study of Kristeva’s and Benjamin’s reworkings of Hegel’s concept of mimesis, see Elaine P. Miller’s “Negativity, Iconoclasm, Mimesis: Kristeva and Benjamin on Political Art” (2008).

in this dissertation nonetheless inform my engagement with mimesis in relation to negativity. Amongst them, Eric Auerbach's *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1953) is a seminal work for the theory of mimesis in the twentieth century. This magnum opus, famously written by Auerbach during his seven-year exile in Istanbul without access to research and reference materials and which contains close readings of canonical European texts, is a performance of the author's hermeneutical engagement with literary works, which themselves are depicted as being determined by the changing historical context. The mimesis that Auerbach describes is one that takes place over long historical periods, making it difficult to articulate the exact relation between text and reality. Auerbach's mimesis is not, in any case, a direct relation of representation but rather a continuous process of interpretation. René Girard's *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (1961) is another seminal book for the modern theory of mimesis. Girard develops his understanding of desire as a turning-towards others. All cultural production, according to Girard, is mimetic, with mimesis referring to imitation by means of desire. Imitation, in this case, is not a form of copying but an engagement with the other.<sup>22</sup>

Walter Benjamin, whose historical and material understanding of mimesis is closest to my own, develops mimesis as an encounter between worlds. In "The Lamp" (1933), he describes mimesis as an instinct of imitation that is inscribed in both nature and humans: "[The] gift of mimesis . . . was the natural heritage of mankind in its early stages and . . . continues to function nowadays only in children. The gift we possess for seeing similarity is nothing but a feeble vestige of the formerly powerful compulsion to be similar and to behave mimetically" (691). Benjamin's two famous essays on mimesis are "Doctrine of the Similar" (1933/1999) and "On the Mimetic Faculty" (1933/1999). Benjamin sees the mimetic faculty as magical correspondence between realms, though one that, in modern times, is marked by "increasing fragility" (720). Thus, while mimesis used to be sensuous in times ancestral, with the development of language, which holds the key to the way in which mimesis is performed nowadays—in a mechanical, technological fashion—the modern mimetic faculty is the performance of "nonsensuous similarity that establishes the ties not only between what is said and what is meant but also between what is written and what is meant, and equally between the

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<sup>22</sup> The collection of essays *Mimesis, Desire, and the Other: René Girard and Literary Criticism* (2015) provides material for further explorations of Girard's theory of mimetic desire.

spoken and the written” (722). In terms of negativity, although Benjamin does not express the “mutation” at the heart of modern aesthetic production as directly as Adorno does, he nevertheless introduces an absence, or rather a nonappearance, in language. The mimetic element is the flash that appears, just like the flash of photography: “It flits past” (722). Nevertheless, this nonsensuous similarity is fused with the medium. The imitation of nature becomes, therefore, a form of absence, of nothing: “‘To read what was never written.’ Such reading is the most ancient: reading prior to all languages, from entrails, the stars, or dances” (722). In the process of nonsensuous mimesis, one returns, by means of an absence, to a time ancestral. Although Benjamin does not develop negativity in his works as explicitly as Adorno does, the foundation for a reconfigured thinking of mimesis, which gives way to radical negativity, is set up.

Before providing an overview of my project chapter by chapter, it is important to mention that, although I cannot engage with all twentieth-century thinkers of negativity, most of them, at some point or another, return to a pivotal moment in modern thought: Stéphane Mallarmé’s poem *Un coup de dès jamais n’abolira le hasard* (originally written in 1896 and published in 1914).<sup>23</sup> This poem, which announces the crisis of the subject-object relation in twentieth-century thought, is one of the most inspiring poems in modernity.<sup>24</sup> Mallarmé’s influence on Blanchot<sup>25</sup> resulted in the conception of negativity as absence appearing at the very moment of presence. Blanchot (1989) insists on doubling the negative moment to cancel out the passivity that could be read in the throw of the dice: “The absence that Mallarmé hoped to render pure is not pure. The night is not perfect, it does not welcome, it does not open. It is not the opposite of day—silence, repose, the cessation of tasks. In the night, silence is speech, and there is no repose, for there is no position. There the incessant and the uninterrupted reign – not the certainty of death achieved, but ‘the eternal torments of Dying’” (118). To the image of the shipwreck in Mallarmé’s poem—a passive, dialectical position, which I equate here with weak negativity—Blanchot opposes the “not pure” night,

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<sup>23</sup> Translated into English as “A Throw of Dice Will Never Abolish Chance.”

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, *The Number and the Siren: A Decipherment of Mallarmé’s ‘Coup de dès’* (2012), Quentin Meillassoux’s book dedicated entirely to Mallarmé’s poem, and, less recently, Leo Bersani’s book *The Death of Stéphane Mallarmé* (1982).

<sup>25</sup> For an overview of and an insightful commentary on Mallarmé’s influence on Blanchot, especially as concerns the concept of impersonality as de-subjectification of the literary consciousness, see Paul de Man’s essay “Impersonality in the Criticism of Maurice Blanchot” in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (1971).

uncertain and absurd, the only moment out of which the creative act can take root—which I equate with radical negativity. The third chapter of my dissertation reaches this moment by means of a series of leaps. However, this moment, in its aconceptual nature, is almost impossible to hold down without the development of an entire sea of negativity, which I attempt to generate in the pages prior to it. With all its flaws and oversights, my project attempts to stay true to this moment of the night of the night.

The first chapter of the dissertation identifies post-Hegelian thought as the source of contemporary discussions on “weak negativity.” I start by outlining the circular structures by which negativity is subdued in three fundamental post-Hegelian texts—namely, Alexandre Kojève’s *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (2009), Jean Hyppolite’s *Genesis and Structure of Hegel’s “Phenomenology of Spirit”* (1974), and Judith Butler’s *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997). In this chapter, I show how weak negativity contributes to the circular structure of the subject, which ends up containing and controlling the radical potential of negativity. The Hegelian working notion of the subject that the three thinkers (and most twentieth-century continental thinkers) take for granted already includes weak negation. The chapter begins with a discussion of the differences between Hegel’s and Descartes’s notions of subjectivity to establish the ground on which the notions of the subject and negativity are developed in the twentieth century. As I show, the shift from thinking the subject in its immediacy to the dialectical process of knowledge that the subject undertakes in relation to itself is explicit in Hegel. For Kojève, Hyppolite, and Butler, as well as for most thinkers engaged with aspects of negativity in the twentieth century, this mediated manner of thinking the subject, which involves negation, remains unchallenged. Thus, I argue that the key to the understanding of the functioning of negativity in the circular structure of the subject is its operationality. When negativity becomes negation—a mediating operation between any two terms—it loses its own ontological status. Weak negation, then, is negation defined by its operationality and reliance on the circular structure of subjectivity. The three aspects of circular negativity that Kojève, Hyppolite, and Butler engage with are, respectively, discourse and man, the unhappy consciousness, and desire. All these concepts maintain the dominance of the circular subject by means of weak negativity, such as in consciousness’s use of self-negation, which is eventually resolved positively, resulting in an ever-present subject and its ever-asymmetrical relation to negativity. The constant reproduction of the circular structure results in the predominance of such

notions as knowledge, the state, and the absolute, which cancel out the possibility of conceptualizing negativity on its own terms, in spite of the moments in which all three of the thinkers discussed in the first chapter attempt to rescue the elements that disrupt the subject's circularity.

In the second chapter, I turn to Theodor Adorno's negative dialectic in combination with his aesthetic theory. Adorno develops a concept of negativity that acts as a deconstructive element. Instead of focusing on his most discussed work related to negativity, the *Negative Dialectics*, I focus on other works, such as the *Three Studies on Hegel* and *Aesthetic Theory*, examining closely how Adorno develops his analysis of texts to the point of breaking. In doing so, Adorno opposes the reading of the philosophical text (Hegel's or Kierkegaard's) as a syllogistic argument oriented towards the concept. Instead, by means of critique, he shows how the object, namely the text, becomes central and unsettles the dominance of the subject. In tandem with this method, I take up a series of concepts, such as Kierkegaard's crisis of interiority, which Adorno uses to break out of the closed circle of the subject. The interior becomes a space where psychological and social elements intersect, generating tensions that, once they reach an aporetic moment, give way to the negative moment of Utopia. It is also in this chapter that I relate negativity to aesthetics and, by means of Adorno's concept of non-identity in mimesis, discuss how the negative becomes present in art when artworks turn in on themselves, revealing, in their materiality, the absent object at their core. Although Adorno does not completely break out of a subject-centred dialectic, he emphasizes the negative and provides the ground for it to show itself as a rare insight that appears as if in a dream sequence.

The third chapter furthers the argument on mimesis that Adorno advances, theorizing the relation of sameness with what is outside the subjective structure that mimesis exposes. Thus, I engage with several suggestive texts, such as Caillois's work on mimesis and the praying mantis, Foucault's text on exteriority, and Blanchot's text on Kierkegaard, as well as other texts that contain an understanding of negativity as the foundation for creativity. Central to this chapter is the idea of non-representational mimesis. Here, based on Caillois's case studies, I identify two types of relation to the outside that function differently from the circular subject: (1) embodying the void and (2) worklessness. Then, I engage with Foucault's definition of the outside and Blanchot's presentation of the complicated relationship between Kierkegaard and



Regine Olsen. The ambiguous relationship between the two, in which Olsen is written about though never allowed to speak, gives way to the image of the walled-in lover. Immurement, or entombment, is significantly related to negativity, as the absent lover performs his or her own absence in order to be addressed in the text by the one writing towards his or her absence. Likewise, in Blanchot's interpretation of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth, the Orphic space provides the negative space for Eurydice, dead, to perform death in order to sustain the very work that sacrifices her. Kierkegaard's writing and Orpheus's song, in being faithful to silence and death, respectively, by being completely oriented towards the absent other, break out of interiority and, paradoxically, out of the entrapment of the subjective circle. The work of the negative, I argue at the end of the chapter, is worklessness insofar as it demands loyalty not to the work itself but to that which is beyond the work—to absence. The ideas of radical negativity, which is not equivalent to but acts as the background for the outside, and the other night provide the necessary conditions for the worklessness of creative work, though direct access to radical negativity is impossible.

In the Conclusion, I propose a reading of the Spanish Informalist artist Manolo Millares's work by using some of the notions developed in this dissertation. Although negativity maintains its elusiveness, its acknowledged aura makes possible a reading of artworks that transcends an obvious, positivist interpretation of a demanding aesthetic, such as that of Millares. Thus, I discuss how Millares's historical context institutes a regime of cruelty and subsequently a relation to the death of the other that forces Millares's work to perform a relation of mimicry with the radical other. In Millares's refusal to submit his work to a symbolist reading, as well as in his commitment to a raw abstractness, as opposed to explicit political subversion, there hides a strong critique of the limiting circle of subjectivity and positivism, which maintain the structures of dominance that Millares's negativity-inspired work attempts to break.

Regarding the interpretation of Millares's work and beyond, it should be noted that the ambiguity and indefinability of the notion of radical negativity is not simply due to the evasiveness of the thinkers and artists who engaged with the notion creatively. Rather, negativity imposes a formal exigency that can liberate creative and intellectual engagements by cutting off the fetters that the market-driven discourses of urgent applicability and real-world impact have imposed on thought and art. Radical negativity, in resisting the instrumentalization of art and thought, creates the space and

time for the genuine reconfiguration of the structures of art, thought, and, ultimately, of subjectivity. Radical negativity, by frustrating the closure of the subject's circle or of the artwork's representational function, forces the elaboration of structures of resistance that are not easily incorporated into the discursive and political machine of an ever-self-reinventing market.

At the end of an introduction, it is not unreasonable to expect an explanation of the overarching purpose of a work such as a dissertation. In my case, I have identified a problem (i.e., negativity used as a means or an evocative concept to reach some other desired end) and a research gap (i.e., the concept of negativity as such), and my work is meant to be a contribution to scholarship by addressing the problem and filling the gap. More generally, I maintain that the concept of radical negativity, elaborated using my method described above, which involves following negativity without pinning it down, can help us glance at the night of the night. But what does this even mean, and what are the benefits of such a procedure? Clearly, I believe that this goal is worth pursuing, but its value is something that cannot be stated explicitly without being immediately dissipated and subsumed into the circuits of subject-based valorization. The mystery, the beyond, which art and philosophy can help us glimpse—its “benefits” cannot be identified in quantities and tangible evidence, nor can it be stated as a positivist research objective. The subject is not the end; rather, beyond the subject's end, there is what is not, an end of ends, and whether this end of ends is an end worth pursuing is a question that I myself answer positively but for which I cannot provide a defence other than the work itself of chasing this end.

## Chapter 1:

### THE CIRCULAR NOTHINGNESS THAT “I AM”

To elaborate (*travailler*) a concept is to vary its extension and its intelligibility, to generalize through the incorporation of its exceptions. It is to export it outside its original domain, to use it as a model or conversely to find it a model, in short to progressively give to it, through regulated transformations, the function of a form.

(Georges Canguilhem 1970)

#### INTRODUCTION

My aim in this chapter is to outline the circular conceptualization of subjectivity in several influential sources of the twentieth century in order to determine what role negativity plays in relation to the subject. To this end, I will trace how negativity interacts with fundamental unifying structures that constitute the subject, such as language, sense, and desire. My inquiry will follow the subjectivity-negativity relation in the works of three thinkers who deal with subjectivity and negativity in light of the Hegelian notion of the concept and whose considerations inform contemporary scholarship on negativity. The three authors are Alexandre Kojève, Jean Hyppolite, and Judith Butler, and what they have in common, besides contributing to the reception of Hegel in the twentieth century, is their understanding of subjectivity as a circular structure premised on some form of non-radical negativity. Although each of these thinkers pays considerable attention to negativity, ultimately, they all, for different reasons, end up “taming” the radical implications of negativity precisely by conceptualizing subjectivity as a circle in which negativity becomes regular and predictable. For these thinkers, negativity equals negation—that is, negativity is a form of mediation that helps relate concepts and beings to one another through the operations of the subject. For this type of negativity, I use the term “weak negativity.” Consequently, in the sources discussed in this chapter, negativity in the strong, radical

sense, as nothingness that exceeds the subject and its circular negations, is dissipated and left without its own ontological grounds.

In the first section of this chapter, I set up the background for my discussion of negativity by considering the connection between Hegel's understanding of the subject and Descartes's *cogito*, since the latter is often referred to as the originator of the philosophical lineage that conceives of man as subject (*subjectum*). I examine Hegel's engagement with Descartes's thought and Hegel's criticism of the *cogito* as framed by the accounts of Alexandre Kojève and Bernard Bourgeois. Then, I emphasize the difference between Hegel's and Descartes's development of the "I" because the divergence between these two philosophers conditions the ground for discussing conscience and negativity in the aforementioned three thinkers of the twentieth century and beyond. As my analysis will show, Hegel introduces the element of negation in thinking the "I," which entails shifting the focus from the "I" as immediacy to the process of mediated knowledge undertaken by the subject. Finally, following the path laid out by Kojève, I consider the works of Hyppolite and Butler and discuss the different forms of integrating negation, as understood in light of Hegel's reception, in twentieth-century thought.

Though my sources in this chapter can all be categorized as belonging to the field of Hegel studies, this dissertation is not a contribution to the intellectual history of the continental reception of Hegel. Nor am I tracing, in the following investigation of circular subjectivity and negativity, the historical accuracy or textual fidelity with which Kojève, Hyppolite, and Butler discuss Hegel. All three thinkers, in fact, state their distance in one way or another from a historically accurate textual interpretation, although they engage in close readings of Hegel's work. Since this dissertation does not attempt to present a historical narrative, connecting early twentieth-century accounts of negativity to the current ones, this chapter does not dwell on the conceptual genealogy that connects Kojève, Hyppolite, and Butler. A genealogical study of negativity in the twentieth century would require an applied approach, involving archival materials, and its overall focus would need to be narrowed down. More important to the current project and, by implication, to this chapter, are the strategies and adjacent concepts used across the sources I engage with. Although certain contemporary events and intellectual discussions seem to overlap with those informing my sources, I recognize that the connections between these sources and the current understanding of negativity are

established retrospectively, from the perspective of contemporary concerns. In this chapter, by taking a trans-temporal approach (opposed to a linear temporal one) and focusing on the intricacies of these thinkers' considerations of subjectivity and negation, I aim to establish that these sources endorse a weak version of negativity that works within the boundaries of circular subjectivity and constitutes the background for the development of negativity in contemporary thought. The three concepts associated with weak negativity that emerge from these sources are the following: for Kojève, *discourse and man*; for Hyppolite, *the unhappy consciousness*; and for Butler, *desire*. I will argue that these three concepts maintain the sovereignty of human-centred subjectivity by treating negation as the subject's constant power of establishing and renewing itself. Finally, as I will discuss in the last section of the chapter, the subject, whose moments of birth and death are either omitted or mythological, is conceptualized as a circular process of self-production in spite of its internal disjunctions, alterities, aporias, and death—that is, in spite of facing nothingness, or radical negativity, both within itself and in the world at large.

### *Circularity*

The notion of circular subjectivity will continue to evolve throughout this dissertation. To start with, the articulation of subjectivity in twentieth-century continental thought often fits with the description of circular reasoning in logic: “A definition is circular if its *definiens* has to be explained by appeal to its *definiendum*, or if its *definiendum* appears in its *definiens*. This is in violation of the rule in formal logic that the *definiens* should not contain any part of the *definiendum*” (Bunnin and Yu 2004, 113). A famous example of an alleged circular argument is Descartes's proof for the existence of God in the “Third Meditation” (1996), known as the *Cartesian circle*:

This idea of a supremely perfect and infinite being is, I say, true in the highest degree; for although perhaps one may imagine that such a being does not exist, it cannot be supposed that the idea of such a being represents something unreal, as I said with regard to the idea of cold. The idea is, moreover, utterly clear and distinct; for whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive as being real and true, and implying any perfection, is wholly contained in it. (31–32)

Descartes eliminates doubt related to the existence of “a supremely perfect and infinite being” (31) by means of “clear and distinct” (32) perceptions, whose veracity is ultimately vouchsafed by the very same existence of God, who guarantees the reality of

the subject's perceptions.<sup>1</sup> In other words, the subject perceives and knows God to exist, but it is also God who guarantees the subject's clarity and knowledge—a basic circular structure involving the subject, something external to the subject (in this case, God), and a relationship between the two is evident. Descartes's argument for the validity of reason follows the same pattern, and, although some scholars<sup>2</sup> defend the argument as non-circular, the fact remains that arguments regarding the “first item of knowledge” (24)—the *cogito*, which is posited in the “Second Meditation” (1996)—adopt the same circular structure.

Circular reasoning has been described in various ways, such as the *vicious circle* and *begging the question*. For example, in a highly simplified form, the following argument is circular: the subject is defined by its capacity to self-negate; therefore, self-negation is the process by which the subject is constituted. As the different elements will usually appear in paraphrased form, identifying a circular argument is not as straightforward as it may seem. Moreover, it is important to note that circular reasoning is often not considered a fallacy (Dancy, Sosa, and Steup 2010, 277). Scholars argue, in fact, that most instances of circularity involved in inductive arguments can be categorized as epistemic circularity<sup>3</sup> because “[they derive] from our epistemic situation as humans” (Levey 2003, 25). Dancy, Sosa, and Steup (2010) provide a more specific explanation of the cases in which circularity becomes a fallacy:

Arguing in a circle becomes a fallacy of *petitio principii* or begging the question where an attempt is made to evade the burden of proving one of the premisses of an argument by basing it on the prior acceptance of the conclusion to be proved. . . . So the fallacy of begging the question is a systematic tactic to evade fulfilment of a legitimate burden of proof . . . by the proponent of an argument in dialogue by using a circular structure of argument to block the further progress of dialogue and, in particular, to undermine the capability of the respondent, to whom the argument was directed, to ask legitimate critical questions in reply. (277)

This dissertation is neither a contribution to classical logic nor is it an exercise in analytic philosophy. However, the definition above can be used to identify a circular

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<sup>1</sup> In defense of Descartes's argument, Lynn E. Rose (1965) argues that there is a lack of understanding at play in labelling Descartes's argument as circular, which is due to lack of precision in Descartes's language use and the fact that “the clear and distinct perceptions used in the demonstrations of the existence of God are not the same as those whose reliability depends upon the existence of God” (80).

<sup>2</sup> Such as Harry G. Frankfurt in “Descartes' Validation of Reason” (1965).

<sup>3</sup> For a further justification of circular epistemology and the role of circular arguments in relation to sources of belief and their reliability, see William P. Alston's “Epistemic Circularity” (1986).

pattern that is frequently employed by scholars in articulating the notion of subjectivity, at least in relation to negativity and the associated concepts. Identifying a pattern of circularity, however, is not equivalent to labeling entire currents of thought as fallacious. In fact, charging twentieth-century speculative thinkers with evading the burden of proof is sometimes a manner of avoiding the essential questions that they are posing and dismissing dialectical thought altogether. This dissertation is not an argument against circularity in general; rather, it diagnoses how circular conceptions of subjectivity (sometimes literally elaborated using the image of a ring, as in Kojève's case) can lead to the dismissal of a significant question: What is the nothingness, or the radical negativity, that looms within and beyond the subject?

## **ALEXANDRE KOJÈVE: CIRCULARITY, NEGATIVITY, AND DISCOURSE**

### ***Hegel's and Descartes's Concept of the "I"***

Kojève's lectures, published as *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (1947/2009),<sup>4</sup> were immensely influential in the context of the French reception of Hegel at the beginning of the twentieth century and are still considered an important moment in the modern elaboration of the concept of subjectivity.<sup>5</sup> In the opening lecture, Kojève points out that Hegel, who started his search for absolute knowledge in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, considers unsatisfactory Descartes's answer to the question "What am I?" because Descartes focuses on the action of thinking and forgets the most important element: the self, or the "I." When presenting the difference between Descartes's and Hegel's approaches to the thinking of the "I," Kojève (2009) describes them as follows:

Starting with "I think," Descartes fixed his attention only on the "think," completely neglecting the "I." Now, this I is essential. For Man, and consequently the Philosopher, is not only Consciousness, but also—and above all—*Self-Consciousness*. Man is not only a being that thinks—i.e., reveals Being by *Logos*, by *Speech* formed of words that have a *meaning*. He reveals in addition—also by *Speech*—the being that *reveals* Being, the being that he

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<sup>4</sup> Referred to as the *Introduction* henceforth.

<sup>5</sup> Stefanos Geroulanos's *An Atheism That Is Not Humanist Emerges in French Thought* (2010), in addition to providing a broad overview of the main scholarship on Kojève's work, influence, and the discussions in which the latter fervently participated during the 1920s and 1930s, argues, against the main lines of scholarship, that Kojève's stance "was anthropological only insofar as it was radically anti-anthropocentric, anti-idealist, and anti-subjectivist, insofar as it produced a discourse on man in the negative (Man is not part of the given or Being), a discourse of man as a negative" (171). Thus, according to Geroulanos, Kojève is one of the earliest thinkers in the twentieth century to advance a vehement critique of subjectivist humanism.

himself is, the revealing being that he *opposes* to the revealed being by giving it the name *Ich* or *Selbst*, I or Self. (36)<sup>6</sup>

Hegel's direct engagements with Cartesian philosophy are few, and they mostly concern the role that Hegel grants to Descartes as a *precursor* to real philosophical work. Philosophy, according to Hegel, truly starts with Spinoza.<sup>7</sup> In his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Volume III* (2009), originally delivered in 1825–1826, Hegel acknowledges Descartes as the originator of the unity between the subject and the object and as a thinker of absolute immediacy. For Hegel, Descartes is the first to think the fixed identity of the thinking being with its own thought, as expressed in Descartes's proposition "I am a thinking being." Descartes starts his inquiry by asking "What am I?"—which seemingly opens up a path more focused on the "I" than the question with which Hegel's *Phenomenology* starts off, namely, "How is absolute knowledge possible?"—and ends up with a method that advances only the thinking part of the subject: the *cogito*. As Hegel notes in his *Lectures*, "Rene Descartes is the initiator of philosophy in the modern world insofar as philosophy makes thought its principle. Here thinking on its own account is distinguished from philosophizing theology, which it puts on the other side. What we have here is an entirely new territory" (106).

Hegel's exposition of Descartes's reasoning traces the sequence that starts with doubt (*de omnibus dubitandum est*) and posits that thinking must be considered on its own, without interference from presuppositions, representations, or experiences of the sensible world. Certainty is only found in thinking that proceeds from itself, "in its pure form, as relating itself to itself" (Hegel 2009, 109–110). Further on, Hegel takes up Descartes's argument in which being is conjoined with thinking: doubt can be applied to everything aside from one's own existence. In fact, being depends on the pronouncement of one's existence ("I"), resulting in the *cogito*—a merging of thinking

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<sup>6</sup> In working with Kojève's text (and, subsequently, with Hegel's, Hyppolite's, and Butler's texts), I have kept the original capitalization of terms in the quotations, but otherwise, I refer to the concepts without using capital letters to maintain consistency with the rest of my project and with the contemporary context in which I write, wherein self, subject, being, state, power, and similar concepts are treated as common nouns.

<sup>7</sup> As opposed to Hegel's engagement with Cartesianism, Hegel's crossings with Spinozism are well documented and researched in scholarship. See, for example, Charles Taylor's *Hegel* (1975, 16), Pierre Macherey's *Hegel or Spinoza* (2011), and Gregor Moder's *Hegel and Spinoza: Substance and Negativity* (2017). An often-cited phrase expressing Hegel's regard for Spinoza is this: "Spinoza constitutes such a crucial point for modern philosophy that we might say in effect that there is a choice between Spinozism and no philosophy at all (*du hast entweder den Spinozismus oder keine Philosophie*)" (cited by Macherey 2011, 13).



and being (110). Hegel notes that, although the unity of thinking and being appears for the first time in history with Descartes's account, there is no proof given for their union (112). For Hegel, immediacy is the key concept in explaining the identity of thinking and being *and* for distinguishing between the two: thinking and being are both immediacy but, whereas thinking is immediacy *and mediation* (since "it is its *self-negating* mediation with itself" [111]), being is *solely* immediacy. In other words, Hegel maintains that thinking is immediacy *plus* something else, and it is this something else that allows thinking and being to become conjoined (more on this below). Descartes does not explain how the two parts of the *cogito* are different and naively considers thinking to be simply pure action rather than being split into two parts: into being (immediacy) and that which reflects on itself (mediation).

According to Bernard Bourgeois (1985), Hegel considers Descartes's work to be the first appearance of self-consciousness as truth, albeit in a naïve form: truth as certainty, or truth as the concreteness of experience that the subject (*cogito*) has of the object (being) (227–228). For Hegel, what is of interest is the "being-truth of truth, the truthfulness of truth" (227).<sup>8</sup> The first moment when, for Descartes, the subject has immediate and total grasp of the unity of the subject and the object is the moment of self-certitude. However, according to Hegel, Descartes's unity of the subject and the object (equivalent here to thinking and being, respectively) is only *posited immediately* rather than mediately, as Hegel has it. The mediated unity of thinking and being involves negativity and establishes a dynamic structure of self-consciousness: the consciousness of self-difference and negation as constitutive of subjectivity (230).

Bourgeois's account of Hegel's evaluation of the Cartesian *cogito* as a first step towards, in Hegel's terms, a truly speculative<sup>9</sup> process of mediation between thought and knowledge contradicts Kojève's statement cited above, in which Kojève posits self-consciousness as something that Descartes had no access to in the immediacy of the *cogito*—a lack addressed by Hegel in Kojève's (2009) interpretation: "Man, and

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<sup>8</sup> « Ce qui l'intéresse, ce n'est plus simplement le vrai—l'être de vrai—mais l'être vrai du vrai » (Bourgeois 1985, 227).

<sup>9</sup> I am using the term "speculative" differently from its established meaning in speculative realism, which tries to recuperate an interest in a philosophy of the Absolute, allegedly lost during the human-focused philosophical turn initiated by Berkeley and Kant. As broadly defined by Robert Audi (1999), speculative philosophy is "a form of theorizing that goes beyond verifiable observation; specifically, a philosophical approach informed by the impulse to construct a grand narrative of a worldview that encompasses the whole of reality" (868).

consequently the Philosopher, is not only Consciousness, but also—and above all—*Self-Consciousness*” (36). According to Bourgeois (1985), the structure of the speculative process is already in place in Descartes, especially because God is used as external support for the *cogito* (229). Bourgeois points out that self-consciousness is posited as foundational for the reflection of the self in Descartes’s inquiry beginning with the question, “What am I?” By the end of the essay, Bourgeois also concedes that, for Hegel, Descartes’s positing of self-consciousness does not constitute a true speculative process because Descartes lacks the movement of negation needed for the development of the dialectic of spirit. According to Hegel’s brief overview of the Cartesian unity, spirit (or God in Descartes’s terms) does not bring anything different from what is already in the *cogito, ergo sum* (the form in which it is rendered in the “Second Meditation” [1996] is “*I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind” [17]).

Despite this interpretive difference between Bourgeois and Kojève concerning the notion of the “I” in Hegel and Descartes, they both agree that what is missing in Descartes’s *cogito* from Hegel’s perspective is mediation through negation: “[Man] reveals in addition—also by Speech—the being that *reveals* Being, the being that he himself is, the revealing being that he *opposes* to the revealed being by giving it the name *Ich* or *Selbst*, I or Self” (Kojève 2009, 36). This means that, in addition to the identity of the subject and the object posited immediately as *cogito*, Hegel (2009) thinks that one of the main components of the structure of the self is missing: the part of the self that needs to be outside itself to then return, “in self-negating mediation” (111), back to itself. This part needs to be in a negative (or rather opposing) relation to itself so that self-consciousness can truly function, not only as a stagnant entity but also as a process of revealing itself in thought. As Kojève points out, Hegel’s focus is on the “I” that reveals itself by opposing itself as the “I”—the beginning of the process which constitutes the subject’s formation.

Kojève mentions that Descartes and Hegel pose different questions at the start of their projects, but he thinks that there is still some overlap in their philosophical aims. In fact, the question that is attributed to Hegel—“What is absolute knowledge and how is it possible?”—is actually a follow-up to the Cartesian “What am I?” Knowledge, for Hegel, discloses the truth as absolute knowledge. This knowledge is possible only for a certain kind of subject at a specific moment of history. Absolute truth is “no longer a

particular and momentary aspect of Being . . . but Being in its integral whole, as it is in and for itself” (Kojève 2009, 33). For Hegel, then, the Cartesian “What am I?” must provide an answer to what the specific “I” is, if the question is asked by the philosopher who has access to absolute knowledge. Hegel’s quest is centred on determining the *who* of the “I” in Descartes’s “What am I?”

Thus, we see that the basic structure of circularity is, to some degree, already present in Descartes, whereby the subject perceives and knows its own existence and truth by positing outside itself something (in Descartes’s case, God) that guarantees the subject’s perception and knowledge but which, since it is *posited*, comes *from* the subject. According to Hegel, however, Descartes perceives this structure only naively because, essentially, he takes it for granted. What Hegel is after is a fuller elaboration of circularity in *dynamic* terms, according to which the subject arrives at self-knowledge through a process of mediation instead of simply possessing such knowledge immediately. At the core of the dynamic articulation of circularity in Hegel is the subject’s self-negating mediation, which constitutes one form of weak negativity. I will now return to Kojève’s reception of Hegel, tracing how, for Kojève, the circular, self-knowing “I” develops through weak negativity.

### ***Kojève’s Circularity***

Kojève’s lectures on Hegel focus on the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and are informed primarily by the nineteenth-century Marxist reception of Hegel. In his letter to Trần Duc Thao (1948/2009), Kojève addresses the Vietnamese thinker’s criticism of his historically-focused and dualist (rather than monist) take on the *Phenomenology*: “My work does not constitute a historical study—it mattered relatively little to me to know what Hegel himself meant in his book” (349). Also, regarding his socialist leanings, predominant in the French academy at the time when he was teaching his courses, Kojève admits openly that “[my] course was primarily a work of propaganda, intended to make an impression [*frapper les esprits*]. That is why [I] consciously reinforced the role of the master/slave dialectic and, in a general way, schematized the content of the *Phenomenology*” (349). Therefore, it is more accurate to treat Kojève’s contribution as a creative and persuasive engagement with Hegel’s work rather than as exegetic scholarship.

As Kojève himself states, at the core of his reception of Hegel is the master–slave dialectic, a moment that develops and culminates with the figure of the wise man who is, eventually, the philosopher in possession of absolute knowledge. Modern man, according to Kojève (2009), continues the work of the slave by “projecting himself onto the idea of private Property, of Capital, which—while belonging to the Property-owner as his product—becomes independent of him and enslaves him just as the Master enslaved the Slave” (65). In tune with his Marxist leanings,<sup>10</sup> Kojève sees modern man as the property-owning bourgeois who has freely accepted his enslavement to capital. However, because the slave’s self-realization by means of work depends on the slave’s confrontation with death, the terror that a revolution brings is necessary; out of this revolutionary moment the state is born. Kojève recognises Napoleon’s empire as Hegel’s state, with Napoleon being “the wholly ‘satisfied’ Man, who, in and by his definitive Satisfaction, completes the course of the historical evolution of humanity” (69). This man, who completes the course of history, is the individual recognized by all men, but he is not yet aware of it because he lacks self-consciousness. Kojève sees Hegel as Napoleon’s self-consciousness because Hegel is the author of the *Phenomenology*,<sup>11</sup> a book that “is the realized ideal of human existence” (69). It is at this moment in Kojève’s interpretation that the idea of circularity is introduced—an idea that constitutes one of the central notions in my study of negativity.

The process out of which circularity arises is the self’s constant “self-negating mediation” (Hegel 2009, 111). Circularity is fully realized when the perfect man sublates the contradiction specific to self-consciousness. In order to supersede the condition of split self-consciousness and finally attain wisdom, self-consciousness needs to posit its own extension. For self-consciousness, the “tendency to extend itself as much as possible” (Kojève 2009, 82), whereby self-consciousness constantly posits itself outside of itself in order to arrive at a final state of self-accomplishment, is essential in the dialectical process by which nature becomes spirit. The extension

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<sup>10</sup> In “Introduction to the Reading of Alexandre Kojève” (1981), Patrick Riley analyzes the Marxist elements in Kojève’s work, particularly as they influence Kojève’s reading of Hegel.

<sup>11</sup> Riley (1981) provides the background for Kojève’s Hegel-Napoleon unity, especially in the context of the end of history. He explains as follows: “Hegel’s role in the process is simply to ‘understand’ and to ‘reveal’: ‘this Sage, who (through ‘knowledge’) reveals Reality (incarnated in Napoleon), is the incarnation of Absolute Mind: thus he is, if one likes, the incarnated God of whom the Christians dreamed.’ . . . And Kojève ends with a bold claim: ‘the true, real Christ = Napoleon-Jesus + Hegel-Logos; the Incarnation thus takes place not in the middle but at the end of history’” (10). On the concept of the end of history, see Footnote 14 in Chapter 1.

process matures to full circularity at the end of history by returning to full identity with itself.<sup>12</sup> Expressed differently, the argument resembles a *petitio principii* argument, whereby self-consciousness, defined also by the “tendency to extend itself as much as possible” (82), demonstrates itself as self-consciousness by means of its ability to extend itself beyond itself. We can also see that the philosophers working with circular structures of subjectivity—and this was already noticeable with Descartes positing God as the condition of the subject’s self-certainty—tend to transgress boundaries between categories and mix them together. This is nowhere more evident than in Hegel, for whom the circular development of the subject mirrors the circular development of history, which, in turn, mirrors the circular development of nature, as well as that of spirit, all of which happen to be necessary for the circle of the subject to function in the first place, and so on. I will return to the infinite self-propagation of circular subjectivity later, but for now, it is important to note that one of the features of circularity is the tendency to jump between categories.

Consequently, the philosopher can attain absolute knowledge (i.e., full circularity at the end of history) only by means of “a continuous process of dialectical pedagogy, in which each step is conditioned and determined only by all the preceding steps” (Kojève 2009, 90). Circularity begins with the extension of self-consciousness as the means of accessing and surpassing every step of the dialectic, hence gradually achieving the totality of absolute truth. Kojève contrasts the philosopher’s process with that of the religious man (represented, for example, by Plato), who relies on an external being (God) and an “abrupt jump,” as in “revelation” or “grace” (90), to achieve absolute knowledge. The religious man’s process of self-realization is not a circular dialectical process, which for the philosopher ends at the same place where it starts, but rather a theological one that is interrupted by God’s intervention. Another difference between the religious man and the (atheist) philosopher is that the religious man’s achievement of knowledge does not depend on a particular historical moment but can happen at any time because God can intervene at any moment. The philosopher, who does not depend on a universal being (God), relies, in turn, on the condition of man in

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<sup>12</sup> It may seem counterintuitive to describe an evolving and changing entity as a circular one, identical to itself. Nevertheless, for Kojève (2009), change is part of circularity: “Identical being can nonetheless *become* what it is. In other words, it can represent its eternal ‘nature’ in the form of a temporal evolution, such as the egg which becomes a hen (which lays a new egg). But this evolution is always circular” (207, my emphasis).

the world. The condition of man in the world is necessary for closing the circle of knowledge, but this happens only when the total structure<sup>13</sup>—the state—is in place. As Kojève states, “the reality that transforms this total and circular knowledge into truth is the universal and homogeneous State (‘homogeneous’ here means free from internal contradictions: from class strife, and so on)” (90). The moment when the universal and homogenous state is realized is the end of history.<sup>14</sup>

Kojève considers that ultimately, the question “What am I?” in the *Phenomenology* is answered by the philosopher (rather than Napoleon) who attains self-consciousness by analyzing himself. Accordingly, the one who can completely answer the question “What am I?” is necessarily wise because that question can only be answered from the position of self-realization. An answer is complete when it “is truly a total answer, an answer to all possible questions relating to human existence, and consequently to the existence of him who asks them” (Kojève 2009, 92); the proof of the totality of knowledge and existence at the end of the *Phenomenology* is guaranteed by the circularity of knowledge. Inversely, the circularity of knowledge is completed by its totality. Kojève argues that the originality of Hegel’s answer to the understanding of philosophy and wisdom, which all philosophers had talked about and had provided similar answers to, is found precisely in the circularity of knowledge (93). According to Kojève, the definitions of wisdom that past philosophers provide (he gives the examples of Aristotle, the Stoics, and the Epicureans) either offer a subjective solution (such as arresting the subject’s desires) or an objective one (e.g., if the object of knowledge is oneself, then perfect self-identity eliminates the split between subject and

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<sup>13</sup> As opposed to totalizing structure, which Kojève argues strongly against. A total structure is a complete and circular structure, whereas a totalizing structure is a structure that lends dominance to one element only. However, as I am discussing in this chapter, in Kojève’s circle, subjectivity is privileged over negativity.

<sup>14</sup> Michael S. Roth (1985), in “A Problem of Recognition: Alexandre Kojève and the End of History,” provides a succinct explanation of Kojève’s famous concept of the end of history. He explains that, influenced by Marx and Heidegger, Kojève advances a concept of the end of history that formalizes human finitude and integrates it into history. The end of history is not conceived, however, as the end of everything—it is not realized negativity or Blanchot’s concept of the night of the night. It is rather Marx’s realm of freedom, “where men (recognizing each other mutually and without reserve) no longer struggle, and work as little as possible (Nature being definitively tamed, that is to say harmonized with Man)” (Kojève, cited by Roth 1985, 297). A point that may seem confusing is whether the end of history has happened already (seeing that Hegel is the philosopher describing the end of history). On this point, Roth states the following: “Kojève first writes of the realization of the realm of freedom, he is not pointing out that a final liberation has already taken place. It is rather that the idea of this realm has been fully described (by Hegel), and the process of its realization mapped out (by Napoleon). We can now know the End of history, but – as Kojève writes in 1946 – the actualization of this End, the ultimate proof of our knowledge, is still dependent on our Action” (297).

object). Hegel, Kojève believes, is the only philosopher who keeps both subject and object connected by the wisdom that self-consciousness achieves. Moreover, Hegel extends the knowledge of oneself present in self-consciousness to the rest of the world: to know oneself is to know the whole world and vice-versa (93–94).

Circularity needs both an abstract and a specific aspect to function as *Begriff*, or “a concrete concept” (Kojève 2009, 94). The abstract aspect of circularity (which, according to Kojève, applies to all philosophical thinking) is represented by wisdom (95–96). The concrete aspect is the existence of the wise man, who has a circular existence and who can realize self-consciousness because his life and knowledge are total (full) due to circularity: “the Wise Man remains in identity with himself, he is closed up in himself; but he remains in identity with himself because he passes through the totality of others, and he is closed up in himself because he closes up the totality of others in himself” (95). The precondition for the existence of the wise man, who has achieved full self-consciousness, is the perfect state; therefore, total wisdom can only be achieved at the end of history, when Napoleon’s empire, which coincides with the emergence of the perfect state and the end of strife, has been realized. However, one element in this schema of attainment of perfect self-consciousness and wisdom by the wise man is overlooked: the wise man is an embodied being in the world, marked by death and negativity. Kojève addresses both aspects, as I will show in the next section, by incorporating them into the total structure of circular subjectivity.

Therefore, according to Kojève and Bourgeois, whereas Descartes is a thinker of immediacy and self-identity, Hegel introduces a split in the immediacy of the Cartesian “I.” For Hegel, the “I” needs to be outside of itself in order to return back to itself in self-negating mediation. Moreover, Kojève’s understanding of Hegel’s “I” follows up on Hegel’s mediating circularity and establishes circularity at the core of the process of knowledge. The “I” that Kojève uses is the concrete, embodied “I,” representing the philosopher who has access to perfect wisdom. Up to now, we saw that for Kojève, circularity is Hegel’s answer to what the true wisdom of philosophy is, sustained by the enduring questions of philosophy. The wise man is able to achieve perfect wisdom only at the end of time, in the perfect state (i.e., when all circles come together—the circle of the subject, of history, and of spirit), but, being a mortal entity, he is also conditioned by death. In fact, facing and understanding death is key to achieving perfect wisdom, according to Kojève.

### *Circularity and Negativity*

In an appendix to his lectures on Hegel entitled “The Idea of Death in the Philosophy of Hegel” (1947/1973), Kojève distinguishes between pre-Hegelian philosophers, who consider substance (which Kojève equates with nature) to be the object of philosophy, and Hegel, for whom subjectivity is the wise man’s primary object of study, as Hegel considers that studying oneself is more important than studying nature, which is devoid of subjectivity. It is one of the moments when Kojève insists that Hegel’s *Phenomenology* is an anthropological *undertaking* rather than merely the detached study of the natural world as “Being that is *given* to [the Philosopher]” (Kojève 1973, 115, my emphasis). Thus, the process of understanding is of utmost importance. In the appendix, Kojève selects passages from the Preface of the *Phenomenology* and develops his analysis of subjectivity as dialectical negativity: “Man who is dominated in his very being by Negativity is not static-[and]-given Being, but *Action* or the Act-of-positing-itself or of creating itself” (116). This means that negativity (or action) is the concept directly opposed to immediacy, which represents nature. Thus, negativity, or action, is what denies the subject its immediate self-identity and divides it into self and object. The division between the self and the object, in Hegelian scholarship generally and in Kojève in particular, correlates with another distinction: between discourse, which pertains to the self, and the natural, which pertains to the object. And so, given that both the self and the object are parts of the subject, we can also say that the subject consists of discourse on nature. According to Kojève, the subject is necessarily human (as the only being capable of discourse) and is partly opposed to nature while also being partly determined by it: “It is also this same Negativity, realized as human existence in the midst of Nature, that reunites anew the subject and object in and through true consciousness, in which Discourse ‘coincides’ with the being that it reveals” (116). Discourse, or logos, discloses the truth as it relates to human reality as opposed to nature; only the philosopher has access to this truth and its circularity, precisely because only the philosopher is preoccupied with the self, which coincides with discourse. As a result, the truth revealed to the philosopher in discourse is the culmination of a long process of man’s negating and engaging with his object (substance or nature).

Negation, according to Kojève (1973), is a “creative movement” (116) and is available to human experience exclusively through discourse. It is only at the end of philosophical engagement, which is also the end of time (again, because the closing of



one circle, that of the subject, entails the closing of all circles), that discourse achieves unity in totality (uniting the subject and substance-nature) while also being absolutely true. The circularity of this process implies that discourse itself is a constitutive part of the totality of spirit. Thus, “in arriving at the end of the philosophical description, we are thrown back toward its beginning, which is the description of its becoming” (117). Discourse, then, is the medium by which truth is revealed, while “the negation of the given (natural and human)” (117) is the method that the creative and historical human process employs; the absolute, which relies both on negativity and identity, is spirit (119).

For Kojève, the “sum total” of Hegelian spirit spells the end of the dual nature of the world:

Subject and Object, Thought and Being, Nature and Man are but abstractions, when we take them in isolation, just as isolated discourses and particular thingish [*chosistes*] entities are abstractions. Only the sum total of Reality, revealed through the sum total of Discourse, . . . is an objective-Reality; and this sum-total in a double sense—that is, the natural World implying the Man who speaks of it—is precisely what Hegel calls “Spirit.” (119)

The notion of totality as inclusive of all reality is fundamental for the Kojévian triad: nature, man, and spirit. In fact, Kojève considers that, as the man-nature dualism is dialectical to begin with, it cannot be deistic, meaning that it cannot be “overcome” by a third element (e.g., spirit) as a greater, all-encompassing concept in relation to the first two. According to his letter to Thao, and also backed up by Gwendoline Jarczyk and Pierre-Jean Labarriere’s analysis in *De Kojève à Hegel* (2014), Kojève avoids ontological dualism by opting for a *dialectical* and *temporal* man-nature dualism while rejecting the Spinozist position (which Thao, for example, defends) whereby man is deduced from nature. Kojève considers man to be the negation of nature (Jarczyk & Labarriere 2014, 94), as negation is the creative act by which man affirms his distinguishing trait—freedom—a position that ultimately places man’s freedom and nature’s necessity in opposition. Contrarily, for Thao and other Spinoza-informed thinkers, freedom cannot be distinguished from necessity. In the following quote, Kojève (2009) defends his position against Thao’s criticism that, in not taking the implications of his arguments far enough and “in declining to draw the materialist consequences from atheist humanism, [Kojève] inadvertently [leaves] room for a return to religious humanism” (351):

I used the image of a gold ring, which would not exist as a ring if there were no hole. . . . In our case, the gold is Nature, the hole is Man, and the ring—Spirit. This means that if Nature can exist without Man, and has in the past existed without Man, Man has never existed and cannot exist without and outside of Nature, just as the gold can exist without the hole, whereas the hole simply cannot exist if there is not metal to surround it. Given that Man was only created in and by, or, more precisely still, as the negation of Nature, it follows that Man presupposes Nature. This essentially distinguishes him from everything divine. Given that he is the negation of nature, he is something other than that divine pagan that is Nature herself; and given that he is the negation of Nature, which, like all negation, presupposes what is negated, he is unlike the Christian God, who, rather, comes before Nature and creates her in an affirmative act of will. (350)

Therefore, each element of the triad (nature-man-spirit) presupposes and is grounded in the other two. Spirit does not create nature, nor is man ever completely outside of nature. It is by means of the negative work of man that spirit emerges—the negative work represented in the quote above as “the hole [that] Man [is]” (350). Before man, nature is substance (equated also with being as immediacy), but “from the moment that Man exists, Being in its entirety is Spirit, since Spirit is nothing other than the Nature that includes Man” (350). This nature of spirit can only be fully accomplished when man is total subject or when, as philosopher, man can realize by means of discourse (or negative work) the true nature of spirit. Although spirit and man presuppose nature, they are also not *a priori* deduced from nature but can only be deduced from it *a posteriori*, as Kojève argues in his letter (351). As man is the negation of nature, he differs from it but also contains it: “He can and must oppose himself to it and negate it in himself” (1973, 120).

In Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, negation and negativity are constantly reconfigured according to the specific moment in the development of a particular dialectic; however, Kojève does not provide an explanation for how these terms evolve throughout the *Phenomenology*, nor does he account for the difference between negation and negativity in his own interpretation. In fact, there are times when Kojève is using the two terms interchangeably in his work. In “The Idea of Death” (1973), negation is the action of opposing the given (substance), while negativity, as one can deduce, is the sum total of the work that endows the subject with the freedom of being distinguished from nature. Man is “creat-ive Action (negate-ive of the given)” (118), while action, taken as a “fundamental category” (118), is negativity. The system is complete, according to

Kojève, only when the dialectical process of creative action is fully circular and “the process . . . ends up in a term whose negation is no longer the creation of a new term” (118)—that is, at the end of historical time, when no new truth is possible. At the end of time, negation is complete, and negativity dissolves into the positivity of the completed circle of subjectivity. Therefore, Kojève’s understanding of negativity maintains the conceptual line of a weak negativity, which is instrumental to the formation of an all-encompassing structure of subjectivity.

### *Death*

Kojève (1973) follows the thread of the substance-become-subject in Hegel, finding its original inspiration in the Judeo-Christian anthropological tradition of conceiving man in opposition to nature, as a historical being transcending the natural world. To further this view, the Judeo-Christian tradition maintains that another world, truer than the natural world, exists—the *divine* world of spirit (spirit here means strictly God), which man only has access to after his death. This means that death is an end only to the *natural* existence of man, as he is to join the infinite world of God afterwards. The implication is that “Man penetrates into [the divine world] after his death, never more to leave it; and he also participates in it while living, by having been in it already before his birth” (121). It is by virtue of the non-human, transcendent world of God that the subject is infinite and beyond all things in nature. Moreover, the subject can only truly access its own spiritual essence after death, after realizing that the historical world is not “truly ‘objectively-real’ Spirit” (121). As Kojève argues, Hegel’s dialectic requires a world that is necessarily finite (122) because for the human subject to be truly free, the anthropological world cannot be made true by a transcendent, immutable God. For the subject to be a free, individual, and historical being, it needs to be a finite being conscious of their own mortality. A divine realm where the subject’s “truly ‘objectively-real’” (121) nature is realized after death is not compatible with Kojève’s atheistic interpretation of Hegel’s system: “The Man that [Hegel] has in mind is real only to the extent that he lives and acts in the midst of Nature; outside the natural World he is a pure nothingness” (122).

Kojève considers that the main idea in Hegel’s philosophy is that substance is conceived as subject, but this view is not simply an extension of how the Kantian transcendental subject is often understood: as a subject that engulfs all that is alien in nature, seeing nature as an extension of consciousness. Kojève’s (2009) understanding

of the Hegelian project makes sense only if we accept his premise, as he writes in his letter to Trần Duc Thao, that “Man has never existed and cannot exist without and outside of Nature” (350). It is only then that substance, as nature, can be conceived as subject and can conceive itself fully and circularly in discourse. As in the above-quoted example of Kojève’s triad represented by the golden ring, all three elements—the gold, the hole, and the ring—include one another. Here, Kojève’s triad means that substance, subject, and discourse include and depend on the existence of one another. For true discourse to be possible, the subject must give a truthful account of itself—therefore, a truthful account of that which is outside its experience, of the historical world that it lives in, and which it knows in three ways: “as ‘finite’ in and through [itself], on the ontological level; as ‘worldly’ or spatial and temporal, on the metaphysical level; and as ‘mortal’ on the phenomenological level” (1973, 124). Thus, Kojève considers Hegel’s philosophy to be “in the final analysis *a philosophy of death*” (124) due to the finite and nature-based existence of the subject, and he considers that only starting from a full acceptance of death can the subject be engaged in the “Struggle for pure prestige” (124). Therefore, by consciously accepting and even welcoming death, the subject is able to account for its finite existence and complete history through all-encompassing discourse.

Discourse, which is the work of understanding that only the human subject is capable of—that of continuously separating one thing from another, naming it, breaking it off from its surroundings, from the whole that it forms together with other things—becomes fully operational as “discursive thought” (Kojève 1973, 126). According to Kojève, Hegel discovers the idea of negativity when studying the mechanisms of discursive thought, which “disengages the meaning from Being by separating essence from existence” (130). Kojève sees the “fundamental (ontological) category of *Negativity*” as the basis of the Hegelian dialectic. The next step, however, is more problematic: Kojève argues that, while negativity is the work of thought, it does not originate in a void or an abstract “I” but rather “belongs properly to the ‘Ego’” (130), which “has necessarily an empirical-existence in the natural spatio-temporal World, being a *human* Ego” (130). Taking this logic to its anthropological conclusion, Kojève argues for a parallel between discourse and the existence of man: “The miracle of the existence of discourse, of which philosophy must render an account, is therefore nothing else than the miracle of the existence of Man in the world” (130).

It is not my intention in this chapter to determine whether this is how Hegel originally conceives the subject in relation to negativity. Rather, my focus is on Kojève's interpretation, whereby the human subject is the crowning of nature and the miracle of existence. Hegel, not working with the same concept of subjectivity as a twentieth-century thinker, conceived discursive thought and negativity in a less anthropological vein than Kojève. For the latter, the parallelism between the universe and the subject is at play as the subject is conceived as a microcosm within which external forces play out. Although Kojève is not a one-dimensional thinker and surely employs the power of the negative and the finitude of death to maintain the complexity and tension of his anthropological interpretation of the *Phenomenology*, one can understand why Trần Duc Thao's criticism that Kojève "inadvertently [left] room for a return to religious humanism" (2009, 351) is at least partly justified. In his reply, as quoted above, Kojève insists that he does not conceive the subject as being outside of nature but inside of it and, as such, bound by its mortality: "[humans are] pure nothingness outside the natural world" (1973, 130). But while that may be true, human subjects are also not entirely aligned with nature, for there is a part of them (discourse) that escapes nature—a fact that justifies the humanist position of considering the human subject the master of nature.

Death and negativity have an interdependent connection in Kojève. When considered as separate from the natural world, ontologically, negativity is "pure Nothingness" (1973, 131), opposing being with action—all of which enacts the end of immediacy as a thing-in-itself. At the metaphysical level, Kojève sees this simple opposition in isolation as historical action, while at the phenomenological level, it is simply finite existence. Action implies temporality and mortality, and since the subject represents action, it is bound to nature by death. At the end of history,<sup>15</sup> when the human-subject-become-philosopher is able to give an account of the whole of experience, one's own death needs to be included in the account and rendered on an ontological, metaphysical, and phenomenological level (132). Since for Kojève the function of understanding in Hegel is to provide the subject with self-understanding, the subject only comes to such understanding in thinking and being conscious of its own death. Therefore, negativity, in anthropological terms, is death, which the philosopher

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<sup>15</sup> Once more, Kojève's end of history is not the end as such but rather the end of struggle and the beginning of the realm of freedom.

must face in discourse. Facing death, or “abiding” (133) with it, is the action that makes the subject free: the action of “discursive contemplation of Negativity revealing itself through death” (132) is the essence of Kojève’s anthropological interpretation. The human as subject is created by “transforming, as if by ‘magic,’ the Nothingness that he is and that is manifest to him and through him as death, into a negate-ive existence, of the warrior and of the labourer, creator . . . of History” (132). The life that eventually leads to self-knowledge is the life that takes account of death fully. However, the human as complete subject, capable of discourse, is only that subject that is able to *work* against nature, and thus against death, “or who negates in Struggle the given animal that he is himself, and through Labour, the natural World that is given to him” (132). Thus, in negating the nothingness of death, at a metaphysical level, the subject uncovers the alien part of nature and renders it intelligible in discourse. Negation *is* action, which opposes being and transforms nature by labour, but only discursive action, or action as knowledge, is recognized as full action and negation. Kojève adds, moreover, that “the human being itself is no other thing than that Action; he is [a] death that lives a human life” (134).

Although “[a] death that lives a human life” (Kojève 1973, 134) seems to be an affirmation of death and finitude, it is in fact the opposite: a toning-down of the finality of death due to the mediating role attributed to the discourse that the subject possesses. In equating the human subject with death, Kojève drives towards the active, operational aspect of discursive thought as the work of negation. As I discussed earlier in this chapter, the subject is not the simple “I” of the Cartesian cogito in its immediacy but opposes itself by means of negative action (“in self-negating mediation”), a process needed for the subject to be revealed to itself in thought. However, if “pure nothingness” were considered in terms of all of its radical implications, Kojève’s ring would be taken over by the emptiness that man is—that is, there would no longer be the ring, only the hole. However, the subject is only a “hole” when serving, as subject of knowledge, the completion of the circle and the emergence of spirit—the hole is bounded and kept in check by the discourse out of which the ring is truly crafted. This position is, to some extent, understandable because it is excessively difficult to address death in its radicality, and this is not Kojève’s project anyway; he prefers to focus on the dialectical movement that gives birth to the action-driven historical subject and on the themes of struggle and labour. But the dialectical movement is connected at both ends to the

nothingness of death, while nothingness itself is transformed into negating action: “Man is the Nothingness that annihilates (as Action or real, ‘historical,’ Time) by ‘dialectically supressing’ what is and by creating what is not” (155). When connecting logically all the elements of Kojève’s (circular) articulation of subjectivity, the result is that the subject, defined by negative action as discursive thought, manifests the nothingness of death by means of discourse. Instead of having an all-powerful God creating the world out of nothingness, the subject is endowed with the power of creating out of nothingness, a power that is acquired by becoming conscious of and contemplating one’s own death. Finitude informs the natural state of the subject, the way it informs the natural world. The result is that, when substance becomes subject, death, as radical finality, is no longer possible. The subject cannot die, though it is nevertheless borne out of death and kept alive through its constant engagement with it, because the subject’s ability *to say* death in discourse excludes death from happening in actuality and turns death into simply another object of knowledge.

The subject, for Kojève, transcends the natural world by means of circular action. Its continuous struggle (or the labour of the negative) is kept constant and circular by the absolute power of the state as sum-total of the subject and its reality. Kojève decides that the moments when Hegel is inclined to give more importance to nature and immediacy than Kojève (1973) himself does constitute a mistake:

Drawn into error by the monistic ontological tradition, Hegel sometimes extends to Nature his analysis of human or historical existence. He says then that everything that is, is in the last analysis an annihilation of Nothingness<sup>16</sup> (which, obviously, has no meaning, and ends up in an indefensible philosophy of nature). He says, for example, in the Lectures of 1805–06, in [the course of] developing his philosophy of Nature (Schellingian inspiration): “The shadows are Nothingness; by the same token space and time are not; the same way as in general all is Nothingness” (Vol. XX, p. 80, lines 5–6). (156)

When the source strays from its intended purpose, Kojève acts on it, mastering it in his desired direction, much like man does with nature in his anthropological interpretation of Hegel. Kojève neither wants to deal with the often-untidy Hegelian entanglement of spirit and nature, deeming these unwanted inferences of the concepts that are already inscribed in both Hegel’s and his own system as “an indefensible philosophy of nature”

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<sup>16</sup> The meaning of this phrase can be clarified as follows: everything that is, in the last instance, is an annihilation carried out by nothingness. Nothingness is not annihilated but rather becomes the agent of annihilation.

(156), nor does he consider error and doubt to be integral to the labour of the negative. He casts “error” aside as that which holds back the subject from attaining the full purpose of historical existence—achieving absolute knowledge. For Hegel the subject did not have the meaning that it has for Kojève at the turbulent time during WWII, when the latter was delivering his lectures—there is nothing stopping Hegel from “[extending] to Nature his analysis of human or historical experience” (156). However, Kojève does not follow through with his own analysis of the human subject as a void or nothingness, which I took up earlier in this chapter: “Hegelian anthropology is formed by this idea that Man is not a Being that is in an eternal identity to itself in Space, but a Nothingness that nihilates as Time in spatial Being, through the negation of this Being” (48). As Thao’s criticism articulates Kojève’s failure in “declining to draw the materialist consequences from atheist humanism” (2009, 351), it is apparent here that, if Kojève were to follow through with the implications of his own analysis of “Hegelian anthropology” (1973, 154), there would be less humanism and less anthropology in his philosophy, as he might have reached exactly Hegel’s conclusion in the lines quoted earlier, where the annihilating power of nothingness eventually engulfs the historical world of the subject: “The shadows are Nothingness; by the same token space and time are not; the same way as in general all is Nothingness” (1973, 156).

Therefore, as Kojève reads Hegel’s criticism of Descartes, the *cogito* introduced by Descartes is grounded in the immediacy between thought and being. Such immediacy is limited to self-identity, and Kojève’s Hegel proposes self-negating mediation as a process through which the self casts itself outside itself in order to return to itself (which constitutes the dialectical process of constructing self-consciousness). Thus, Kojève, in his interpretation of Hegel, substitutes the immediacy of the *cogito* with a circular process composed of an abstract and a concrete concept. The abstract is absolute wisdom, which can only be achieved through discourse at the end of time, while the concrete is the wise man, who achieves perfect wisdom in the perfect state, borne out of revolutionary zeal and represented, for Hegel, by Napoleon’s empire. Kojève’s interpretation of Hegel’s idea of negativity is the key component of his circular method of conceiving subjectivity. Negativity, for Kojève, is action that culminates in discourse. Negativity is also constitutive of man through death, which man has to face in order to truly know himself and achieve wisdom. However, in facing death, man negates nothingness, which allows him to render all of reality into discourse. Hence, for



Kojève, both circularity and negativity culminate in discourse—a procedure that, ironically, sublates and eradicates the radical negativity said to be the source of man’s finitude. Kojève’s structure of circular subjectivity emphasizes the humanist aspect of subjectivity. In fact, circularity leads to the exacerbation of the totalizing factors of subjectivity, which allows the structure of subjectivity to engulf all concepts around it. As a result, subjectivity becomes infinite and infinitely positive with the help of weak negativity.

### **JEAN HYPOLITE: ALTERITY AND LOGOS**

Breaking with Kojève’s over-privileging of the subject at the centre of the system, Jean Hyppolite resists the Marxist-humanist line of interpreting Hegel and attempts to salvage a more radical process of negativity, though, as we will see, negativity ends up being neutralized by the structures of consciousness and language, not dissimilarly to the way in which discourse neutralized negativity in Kojève. Hyppolite considers himself, first and foremost, a historian of philosophy and a commentator on the philosophers of the past, focusing specifically on Hegel. Hyppolite’s insistence on approaching the work of Hegel as a commentator already gives the reader an idea of the break with the Kojévian legacy and of the subsequent direction of his own analysis, as John Heckman notes: “In fact, Hyppolite’s openness and his choice of becoming a ‘commentator’ rather than an ‘interpreter’ already implies an interpretation” (Heckman 2000, xxxvii).<sup>17</sup> Hyppolite’s focus changes from considering the human as the locus of negative action, who closes the circle and achieves the absolute at the end of history, to primarily a focus on being, which is determined, in its development towards the absolute, by opposition and difference and which culminates in the absolute as Logos or “sense”—Hyppolite’s central concept in *Logic and Existence* (1953/1997). For

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<sup>17</sup> The three thinkers I explore in this chapter have different approaches to Hegel’s work. Kojève engages with the text as an interpreter, applying a Marxist-humanist understanding to Hegel’s works without insisting on textual agreement with Hegel’s own position. Hyppolite, departing from Kojève’s practice, pays close attention to the text and its historical and philosophical context, as well as to Hegel’s own oeuvre. As for Butler, whom I discuss in the last section of this chapter, her method is that of rhetorical reading inspired by Paul de Man’s theories of reading and interpretation as constitutive of the text itself. Kojève’s interpretative method is deeply personal and social, oriented towards fostering political engagement with the world at the time. Hyppolite’s engagement is, perhaps, the most text-focused, although, as Heckmann (2000) notes, the choice of calling oneself a commentator betrays the commentator’s non-neutral stance towards the text. Finally, Butler’s reading is a synthesis of the previous two, which also adds an element of exteriority (the reader) and a horizon of understanding that maintains a spectre of ambivalence.

Hyppolite, at the core of the Hegelian absolute is not the subject's self-determination by labour but the constant self-positing of the subject as opposed to itself in its process of transformation; this movement is not only undertaken by the subject as man but also by the concept itself (or being), although this development is made clearer when Hyppolite focuses on Hegel's *Logic*. In his first book, *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's "Phenomenology of Spirit"* (1946/1974), the subject's process of alienating itself by means of opposition and contradiction in order to negate the negation of itself and achieve synthesis in returning to itself is never really complete and results in the unhappy consciousness—the consciousness that is always exposed to its own contradictions (with itself and the world). Hyppolite exposes the loose threads in the Hegelian system, emphasizing the moments of disjunction in the project of the *Phenomenology*, and shows how the inadequacies of the system lead consciousness to the painful self-awareness of its split existence.

### ***The Travails of the Common Consciousness***

In *Genesis and Structure*, Hyppolite builds his own system of thinking implicitly, through a running commentary on Hegel's *Phenomenology*, which he spent a considerable amount of time reading in the original German, translating, and lecturing on during the war (Heckman 2000, xxvi–xxviii). The procedure that Hyppolite undertakes in this book is, as mentioned above, that of commentary, so the book follows the dialectical structure of the *Phenomenology*. However, Hyppolite outright rejects a totalizing, systems-based interpretation of Hegel:

Perhaps nothing is more opposed to a closed system than the Hegelian manner of thinking. I have always refused to write a Hegelian system because, although Hegel said, "Philosophy must be a system," I could never manage to close off this system; I always found several systems, in such a way that this thought always escapes all closure.<sup>18</sup> (quoted in Bourgeois 1993, "Jean Hyppolite et Hegel," 148)

Greatly influenced by Jean Wahl's *Le malheur de la conscience dans la philosophie de Hegel*, as well as by the reception of Hegel by Kierkegaard and Marx (especially the notebooks of the young Marx, where he reworks elements of Hegel's *Phenomenology*),

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<sup>18</sup> My translation from the French: « Rien n'est peut-être plus opposé à un système clos que la pensée hégélienne. Je me suis toujours refusée à écrire un système hégélien, parce que, bien que Hegel ait dit: "La philosophie doit être un système", je n'ai jamais pu réussir à boucler ce système ; j'ai toujours trouvé plusieurs systèmes, de telle manière que cette pensée échappe toujours à toute clôture. »

Hyppolite maintains an affinity with some existentialist themes, the most notable of which is the unhappy consciousness itself. The focus on negation is put into motion by mediation, the transformation of the same (Bourgeois 1993, 148), and the knowledge of consciousness's process of learning.

From the first pages of *Genesis and Structure* (1974), Hyppolite points out an important factor that distinguishes Hegel's approach to the theory of knowledge, setting him apart from his precursors and contemporaries, such as Kant, Schelling, and Fichte: Hegel considers that, in fact, philosophy is not simply a theory of knowledge because knowledge is not solely an instrument of the subject and the object cannot be separated for the purpose of inquiry. In contrast to Schelling, Hegel does not regard absolute knowledge and phenomenal knowledge (knowledge of the world) as separate, refusing to start his *Phenomenology* with absolute knowledge, the way Schelling does: "Instead, Hegel . . . returns to phenomenal knowledge, that is, to the knowledge of common consciousness, and claims to show how it necessarily leads to absolute knowledge, or, even, how it is an absolute knowledge which does not yet know itself as such" (6–7). As Hyppolite argues, the implication of Hegel starting his inquiry with phenomenal knowledge is that there is, to some extent, a return to the subject-focused philosophy of Fichte and Kant. Thus, absolute knowledge is the process by which "common consciousness" gets to know itself, while phenomenal knowledge is "the knowledge which the absolute gradually has of itself" (7). As Kojève also notes, for Hegel, substance (equivalent to nature or being) is also subject (or consciousness). Up to this point, in their understanding of Hegel's treatment of the relationship between consciousness and the natural world, Kojève and Hyppolite are in agreement, and Hyppolite seems to be heading in the same direction—that of an anthropological interpretation of the Hegelian system.

However, looking more closely, it becomes clear that, in pointing out from the start the difference between Hegel's integration of consciousness's reflection and Kant's, Fichte's, and Schelling's approaches, Hyppolite is already on a very different path from Kojève. For Hyppolite, the key to understanding Hegel's approach is the latter's insistence on describing the experience of consciousness in a more detailed and involved manner than that of his predecessors while avoiding the imposition of one's own standards or preconceived ideas, which are foreign to the object of research, in order to "succeed in considering the thing as it is in-and-for-itself" (Hegel quoted by

Hyppolite 1974, 10). The fact that Hegel describes consciousness “in the way that it offers itself” (10) rather than making it fit the Procrustean bed of a predetermined philosophical track allows Hyppolite to advance tentatively, in his reading of Hegel, an emphasis on consciousness that is not entirely anthropological: “It is truly by going ‘to the things themselves,’ by considering consciousness as it *presents* itself directly, that Hegel wishes to lead us from empirical to philosophic knowledge, from sensuous certainty to absolute knowledge” (10, my emphasis). This line of investigation implies consciousness’s involvement with the object of knowledge—the natural world—and the process of knowing itself, which, by maintaining the tendency towards circularity in argumentation, never completely allows the circle to close, as Kojève does. For Hyppolite, consciousness is in constant involvement with the world and can never fully return to itself in a self-identical manner, while Kojève’s full self-consciousness is able to do so, as the philosopher returns to themselves by means of an all-knowing discourse.

Hyppolite focuses on the structure of the *Phenomenology* in a way that allows him to speculate regarding Hegel’s text, its conceptual implications, and its relations to other philosophical paths. As Hyppolite argues, the importance of a work’s structure outweighs that of an author’s intentions. This approach extends to the subject’s will as well: the development of consciousness is determined not by its own decisions but by the contingencies and necessary developments contained in the system of knowledge that consciousness is embedded in, a system that has inbuilt structural flaws. As Hyppolite notes when discussing the development of the project of the *Phenomenology* and the difficulties Hegel faced in writing it, “Often apparently external circumstances best allow us to reveal ourselves” (1974, 52). This means that for him, knowledge is “apparently external” (52) to consciousness itself. Hyppolite reads the *Phenomenology* not as an *outline* of Hegel’s philosophical system, as it was planned to be, but as an *integral part of the system*. The consequence is that consciousness, the main actor in the search for absolute knowledge, lends its internality to the open scene of spirit out of which it is carved:

It is quite possible that Hegel’s intention changed in the very course of completing his book, but the stress he laid on certain chapters of the first part (observation of the organic, physiognomy, phrenology) left him no opportunity to turn back. He was led, almost despite himself, to write not only a phenomenology of consciousness but a phenomenology of spirit, in which all spiritual phenomena would be studied from a phenomenological point of view. (55–56)

Hyppolite insists that the key to Hegel's *Phenomenology* is the particularity of the individual consciousness and, specifically, the negation that determines it: "Spirit is not the abstract universal; it is individual (the spirit of a great man, or of a people, or of a religion, etc.). But Hegel strives to grasp individuality as the negation of negation, as a movement to surmount its particularity" (1974, 50). The common consciousness whose development Hyppolite's Hegel traces is a world-involved, supra-human consciousness that participates in an idea of consciousness outside of the strictly human, historical world.

Hyppolite's interest in the work of the negative, especially as related to doubt, becomes apparent when he comments on the development of common consciousness. In *Genesis and Structure* (1974), he advances his own reading of Hegel's concepts of consciousness and knowledge, focusing on how consciousness's knowledge relates to its own existence. For Hyppolite, inspired by a long tradition of skepticism in philosophy, doubt, Descartes' foundational concept for modern philosophy, is essential for philosophical investigation and central to the development of consciousness. However, Hyppolite argues that Hegel, instead of positing "universal doubt as a first principle" (12), which would be correlated with philosophical reflection and would be against his project of exposing consciousness's learning progression, incorporates doubt into the history of consciousness's evolution. Thus, consciousness not only *thinks* doubt but *experiences* it at every step in its evolution and, as doubt implies that the discovery which was previously true is no longer so, doubt about the very nature of existence leads to most profound anguish: "This route is not only the way of doubt; it is, Hegel adds, the way of despairing doubt" (13).

Hyppolite breaks down the Hegelian process of learning into many moments of negation, ultimately concluding that "phenomenology is no longer an introduction to it but is a part of the philosophy of spirit, that part which corresponds to the moment in which consciousness of spirit manifests itself to itself as object" (1974, 61). The notion of negation that Hyppolite advances is equivalent to the structural opposition between the subject and the object, though opposition becomes negation only when it (opposition) is integrated into the dialectic and becomes internal to the object. And since consciousness is dependent on the object in experience, negation is absorbed into the structure of consciousness, as described above in the case of doubt:

For the I thus reflected back on itself, it is the object that changes; hence the dialectical progression is a progression within the object itself. The phenomenological dialectic is a dialectic of experience. But for us, consciousness changes along with its object. The function of spirit as consciousness is to make its manifestation identical to its essence. The I must raise its certainty to truth. (60–61)

In Hyppolite's interpretation of Hegel, the phenomenological dialectic is a moment in consciousness's progression towards "a finished system of truth, an absolute knowledge, in which consciousness is actually transcended" (62). This moment is nevertheless essential to the system of truth, one that actually "threatens to absorb all the rest" (62) due to the internal contradictions that the phenomenology exposes. The progression towards "a finished system of truth" (62), or consciousness as spirit, relies on constant engagement with the object of knowledge, which is first posited as absolute truth and then transcended and shown to be false.

Negation becomes integrated into the system of truth and is almost immediately depicted as merely an operative concept, which in the end is completely absorbed into Hyppolite's all-encompassing structure of alterity, logos, which I discuss in the following section. Hyppolite claims that "if it is true that every determinate position is a negation (*omnis affirmatio est negatio*), it is no less true that every determinate negation is a particular position" (1974, 14). The different moments, fuelled by consciousness's doubt, expose the fact that error contains its opposite, truth, since the transcendence of error constitutes truth, and every truth contains its error, which it has surpassed. United as moments in experience, the determinate positions form a structure in which negativity is merely active at the level of the determination (instead of being considered as a fully formed concept, independent of its workings at the determinate level):

Negativity, then, is not a form opposed to all content; it is immanent in content, and it allows an understanding of the latter's necessary development. From its beginning, naïve consciousness aims at the entire content of knowledge in all its richness. But it fails to reach it. It must experience its own negativity, which alone allows content to develop in successive affirmations, in particular positions, inter-connected by the movement of negation. (15)

However, Hyppolite's understanding of negativity does not simply boil down to affirmationism as the simultaneity of opposites. Given that common consciousness does not have knowledge of the system in its totality, negativity (in this context, a certain kind of lack) is the reality of its experience. Due to the constant exposure to negativity,

“[consciousness] is always beyond itself; it goes beyond or transcends itself. This transcendental requirement constitutes the nature of consciousness as such” (16). Consciousness is not exactly an object, a fixed and determined thing, but rather the movement of transgression: constantly split, as it is partly certain of its own truth in itself and partly going beyond itself in its process of knowledge, so opposing itself as object. Thus, similarly to Kojève, though drawing different consequences, consciousness, for Hyppolite, *is* negativity.

For Kojève, discursive thought, borne out of the negative action carried out by the subject, has the absolute power of encompassing, at the end of time, all of substance because it is equated with absolute truth. For Hyppolite, the subject’s knowledge and truth are always at odds with each other. Hyppolite’s subject is “humanity considered in terms of its history, for it is only history that decides the truth of an action emanating from an individual self” (1974, 495), where the “individual self” (496) is the acting consciousness, exposed to limitations and finitude in the process of knowing itself as object. Without the internal opposition and without negativity, there is no common consciousness to begin with, so there is no possibility of absolute truth because substance and subject (or thought and Being) never coincide (there is never the case that  $A = A$ ); Hyppolite always maintains active the disjunction between substance and subject:

The distinction between knowledge and its truth is “the internal opposition of the concept” (PE, II, 311; PG, 562; PM, 806); it is what disappears at the end of the *Phenomenology*. Broadly interpreted, it means that knowledge is contraposed to being, self to substance. Being appears to consciousness as alien to the self; for its part, the self, with its reflectiveness, is distinct from being. For this reason any philosophy that is limited to an epistemology may culminate in the thing-in-itself, in an opaque being which is impenetrable for knowledge. Knowledge will always be subjective knowledge, understanding will always be our human understanding, and the basis of things, being, will be unknowable. (576)

For Hyppolite, true knowledge must include experience, but when it does so, consciousness cannot know itself completely because it always remains separate from the world. Likewise, it is important for philosophy itself to not be solely an epistemology but to involve itself with the world to avoid reaching a state of opacity in the substance that it takes as its object. What Hyppolite hints at here is also that knowledge must be more than subjective knowledge and more than simply knowledge

of the object in order to surpass the famous Kantian problem of the unknowable thing-in-itself.

In its search for truth, consciousness develops into self-consciousness, which is not only knowledge of the object but also knowledge of its own knowledge—we can see a certain circularity at work here. The progression of common consciousness is a turn from sensuous consciousness to perceiving consciousness and finally to understanding consciousness. When it reaches the moment of understanding, consciousness becomes “consciousness of its own knowledge rather than consciousness of the object” (1974, 66); that is, consciousness loops back upon itself. In its empirical experience of the world, consciousness discovers itself: “The I takes itself as object by moving beyond the other” (67). However, the “I” never fully returns to itself, and it is never the case that  $I = I$  because “consciousness is not experienced as the I in the reflection of scientific thought, but in its impulses and their actualization, in the movement of its desires” (67). As self-consciousness is premised on the constant movement of transcending—that is, going beyond itself—it always requires otherness, which is assimilated in order for consciousness to discover itself in the assimilated object: “It can be an I only insofar as it contraposes itself to another I and discovers itself in him” (67). The other that self-consciousness assimilates is not a fixed object but “a negative object, as the object which must be negated in order that through this negation of the being-other self-consciousness establish its own unity with itself” (158). Thus, maintaining its structural alterity and not achieving unity with itself or its object of knowledge, common consciousness culminates in unhappy consciousness—considered by Hyppolite to be “the fundamental theme of the *Phenomenology*” (190).

### ***Alterity and Logic***

For Hyppolite, the unhappy consciousness is the core of Hegel’s philosophy and the key to reading the *Phenomenology*, but it is the “result of the development of self-consciousness” (1974, 190) rather than a predetermined moment of synthesis. Self-consciousness has negativity and separation as its fundamental truths throughout its developing stages but only becomes aware of this fact when it reaches the stage of the unhappy consciousness. As mentioned previously, consciousness learns by separating itself from the world and maintains this otherness in order to know itself. Self-consciousness, in fact, is premised on the constant movement of separation between the self and its negative object, and the subsequent assimilation of the other. Self-



consciousness strives to achieve truth and perfect knowledge of itself and the world in its unity with itself, but it is, instead, marked by the realization that this unity is not possible:

Self-consciousness is subjectivity constituted as truth, and this subjectivity must discover its own inadequacy and experience the pain of the self that fails to reach unity with itself. As we have seen, self-consciousness is the reflection of consciousness on itself; this reflection implies a split from life, a separation so radical that consciousness of it is consciousness of the unhappiness of all reflection. . . . Consciousness of life is a separation from life, an opposing reflection: to become aware of life is to know that true life is absent and to find oneself thrown back on nothingness. This feeling of disparity within the self, of the impossibility of the self coinciding with itself in reflection, is indeed the basis of subjectivity. (190–191)

Hyppolite emphasizes the “experience of pain of the self” (190) as constitutive of self-consciousness, but it only becomes so when *knowledge of the self* is involved. “Consciousness of life” (190), likewise, implies knowledge of and reflection on life. Self-consciousness reflects on itself and realizes the fact that it can never attain identity with itself because its nature is changeable and because, in order to exist, it has to continue negating all that is. For Hyppolite, the “separation from life” (190) and the “feeling of disparity within the self” (191) are constitutive of subjectivity, but it is only when the work of knowledge is involved that the constitutive split of subjectivity is actualized. Skepticism, which is the moment on which the unhappy consciousness builds, is, for Hyppolite, “the joy of destruction, dialectical action as purely negative” (1974, 188), meaning that skepticism is equated with experience rather than with knowledge and reflection. Thus, skepticism represents a return to an object–subject duality (rather than a duality *within* the subject that is implied by knowledge) because the constant negation of otherness is required for the maintenance of the destructive impulse. The skeptical consciousness is still certain of itself as it maintains the split *outside of itself*, in experience: the split, for the skeptic, is between itself and the object, so it is not yet constitutive of itself. At the same time, for the unhappy consciousness, the split is *internalized* by reflection.

In this whole process, in which self-consciousness proceeds from common understanding to skepticism and finally to the unhappy consciousness, negativity becomes “the feeling of disparity” (1974, 191), “the impossibility of the self coinciding with itself” (191), and that the opposition between the self and the world is internalized

as opposition between negating self and negated self. As a result, with the unhappy consciousness, the opposition between self and object becomes transformed into alterity, which involves a play of differences between objects mediated by the different meanings assigned to them by the subject. At this point, negativity amounts to the processes that involve the subject in knowledge. This means that negativity is still a relational and active power, which, eventually, is turned into positivity, due to being internalized by consciousness as logos. Negativity is now the internal action of consciousness, which opposes itself constantly. When expressed externally, negativity is labour and desire, though for Hyppolite, a thinker of ontology, these terms are not actualized politically in the struggle for recognition, as they are for Kojève. For Hyppolite, labour and desire lead back to the generalized anxiety that characterizes the unhappy consciousness, in which negation is internalized and transformed into generative power. Therefore, the unhappy consciousness continues the common consciousness's looping process, though in an internalized and more complex manner. What follows is that "self-consciousness will seek a new realization of its unity with the immutable. The meaning of its labor is to reach that communion. Negation must go so far as to negate itself in asceticism and alienation—to be the negation of the negation—and, by so doing, reestablish the universal" (209). Only, of course, the universal is never reestablished because absolute Spirit is itself "the identity of identity and non-identity" (604); therefore, internal, generative alterity is still constitutive of it.

Hyppolite further traces the path of consciousness begun with the *Phenomenology* in Hegel's *Science of Logic* by emphasizing what he calls "a certain dualism in Hegelian philosophy" (1974, 603), not only as the insistence upon opposing pairs, such as substance and subject, but as "the work of the self which poses itself, and, insofar as it poses itself in a determination, opposes itself to itself" (603): the internalized work of negation. Even in the case of spirit as logos—the ultimate synthesis at the end of the *Phenomenology*—the truth of alterity, constitutive of the unhappy consciousness, is still active:

The logos is spirit, it is the whole, the universal, but as logos it abstracts itself from itself. It is this negation of itself as nature which poses logos and which has a creative force only because it is an internal negation, a negation of self, in other words, because it is the movement of negativity that constitutes the subject. That is also why logos is more than itself and contains nature in-itself, why it is all of philosophy, and why we cannot however say that Hegel reduces philosophy to the formalism of the *Logic*. (603)

Refusing to give in to the totalizing construct of the Hegelian dialectic, Hyppolite returns to the moments in which the internal split of the particular moment he is commenting on is emphasized. These happen to be the moments in which negativity is operating in Hegel's text. But in spite of Hyppolite's insistence on the work of the negative, in the form of the nothingness at the core of the subject ("we are nothingness," 155), and in spite of his insistence on the subject's alienation and internal split, poles apart from the revolutionary Kojévian historical subject in terms of its power of totalizing, Hyppolite's ghostly subject has infinite regenerative powers. In fact, in *Logic and Existence* (1997), Hyppolite develops the structures that can truly utilize the "tremendous power of the negative" (Hegel quoted by Hyppolite 1997, 107) at full force, for the development of positive configurations, such as *language* and *sense*.

Following the trend in French thought in the middle of the twentieth century, and in fact partly initiating, with his popular courses at the Collège de France, what will be known as French poststructuralist thought, Jean Hyppolite changes his approach to Hegel's work in *Logic and Existence* (1997, originally published in 1953), proposing language as the fundamental structure that grounds all other categories in the dialectic. Hyppolite's structure of language now demonstrates the coexistence of opposites in which negativity remains only a logical relation between concepts. In fact, at the level of logos, which is language in abstract form, negativity is resolved into difference. Although some of the conceptual moves leading to Hyppolite's philosophy of logos were foreshadowed in *Genesis and Structure* (1974, originally published in 1946), *Logic and Existence* is less a commentary and more openly Hyppolite's own philosophy (although he still operates with Hegelian terms throughout). The *Phenomenology* remains important for Hyppolite, but his focus in *Logic* is rather on what he considers "the proper object of philosophy . . . the category of the *Logic* which designates the concrete unity of essence and appearance, the presentation which presents only itself and tests its necessity not in a separate intelligibility, but in its own movement and development" (1997, 4). Logic (or logos) is, for Hyppolite, the abstract equivalent of "human language" (8), the focus on which attests to the influence that Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* (published originally in 1916) had on Hyppolite and on continental thought in the twentieth century. Despite the focus on ontological categories and overall structure, Hyppolite returns, in his later work, to the question of the subject in its human form (as opposed to the subject in its non-human,

non-historical form, as discussed earlier in relation to *Genesis and Structure*). Thus, is there finally a reaffirmation of man à la Kojève in Hyppolite's rearrangement of Hegelian thought?

The reinsertion of man through the focus on language reveals the humanist turn in Hyppolite's treatment of negativity. Due to the insistence on maintaining the motor of negativity in the constitution of consciousness, while at the same time returning to an idea of logos as absolute, Hyppolite leans in the direction that Hegel cautions against when criticizing Schelling for remaining a Spinozist, and which Hyppolite himself cites at the beginning of *Genesis* (1974): Hegel argues that if one starts with the absolute, with  $A = A$ , particularization becomes impossible because the absolute plays a unifying and mediating (here in the sense of nullifying) role in relation to other concepts, and "this Absolute is the night in which all cows are black" (Hegel quoted by Hyppolite 1974, 30). The same criticism could be expanded and applied to Hyppolite's focus on language as self-referential structure and subsequently his development of the concept of sense as "actuality understanding itself and expressing itself as human language" (1997, 4). With the use of sense, any trace of radical negativity as something that remains unassimilable to knowledge is erased. While negativity is still employed in the structure of language as difference, the meta-category of sense adds another level of abstraction and renders even the form of negativity as difference indistinct. Human language, in this case, follows the same pattern of circularity that characterizes Kojève's structure of subjectivity, in which negativity is used at first as an operational tool, to distinguish and set in motion the structure of subjectivity (or in Hyppolite's case, of language), which is then engulfed by the totalizing structure of the subject (or sense).

For Hyppolite, weak negativity—the form of negativity that operates in the process of affirming a more potent structure (here, that of language)—becomes the dominant form of negativity as soon as he switches from his commentary centred on the internally-split consciousness to the subject defined by logos. Although he insists on the power of the negative, logos and the absolute seize all the radical potential of the negative:

Hegel's philosophy is a philosophy of negation and negativity. The Absolute is only by determining itself, that is, by limiting itself, by negating itself. The Logos is the Absolute which abstracts itself from itself, separates itself from itself as nature, and thinks itself, but this thought sublates itself. It is more than itself. It surmounts its negation or its limitation, and becomes by means of

contradiction the very thought of its other. This internal sublation is the genuine affirmation of the Absolute, the one which is no longer immediate; *affirmation is negativity or the negation of the negation*. (105–106, my emphasis)

When it exceeds itself, logos “surmounts its negation” (105), becoming “the genuine affirmation of the Absolute” (106)—an argument that displays similar patterns in the formation of the concept (in this case logos) as discussed in the case of Kojève’s circular subjectivity. The absolute as concept relies on its negativity-sustained determination as logos; the final and “genuine” (106) affirmation of the absolute contains the underlying negativity and, while logos owes being “more than itself” (105) to self-determination as negativity, the final concept in the argument—logos as absolute—is an all-affirming concept that comprehends its own negation.

Although, in *Logic and Existence* (1997), Hyppolite emphasizes alterity<sup>19</sup> in thought and criticizes Marx for thinking positivity as the foundation of history while taking logos as abstraction only, he maintains that “Hegelianism preserves in its immanence the negation at the heart of every position” (183) and immediately adds that “in actual history, there is a real negation, but the Logos comprehends this negation since negation is ontological. The Logos is the thought of itself and of all actuality” (183). The signification of “comprehends” here is both that of logical understanding and encompassing or subsuming: the operation of logos carries the logical procedure onto ontological grounds. Thus, while preserving negation as the motor of logos, Hyppolite defends an affirmationist position by positing an all-subsuming, discursive logos. Negativity is the operation by which actuality and determination are integrated into dialectical movement by means of mediation. And mediation, in *Logic and Existence*, is the work of logos, or “dialectical discourse” (27), which refers to “the

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<sup>19</sup> Alterity is a persistent term in Hyppolite’s work. In *Logic and Existence* (1997), it is the defining factor in setting up his structure of difference. Although Hyppolite sees alterity as an intensification of negativity, his development of the structure in which alterity is embedded ends up dissipating the negativity in alterity. Tracing the idea of alterity as negativity in Hegel, Hyppolite compares it with alterity in Plato: “By recognizing alterity, Plato hopes to discover the eternal measure that allows the different genera to participate with one another in a true order; in his own way, he excludes contradiction from these mutual relations. In contrast, Hegelian dialectic will push this alterity up to contradiction. Negation belongs to things and to distinct determinations insofar as they are distinct. But that means that their apparent positivity turns out to be a real negativity. This negativity will condense the opposition in negation; negation will be the vital force of the dialectic of the real as well as that of logical dialectic” (113). However, further on in the same work, alterity (as difference) is rendered as merely a contributor to the grand structure of pure thought (a placeholder for Hyppolite’s concept of sense): “It is the pure thought in which difference (the one that will be set free in external nature and in finite spirit) is the alterity that leads thought to sublimate itself” (166).

becoming of the categories in which being and thought are identical” (27). Language maintains negation active at the level of the different categories (e.g., sensibility and understanding) while simultaneously merging the categories, as “language presents the originary identity of the sensible and the understanding” (27).

In fact, for Hyppolite (1997), *negativity* only occurs where negation is not at work because negativity exists in nature as that which “presents itself as disappearance and death” (184), while “negation . . . is there as the concept for the spirit who discovers it; animals die but know nothing of it; negation is external because it is internal” (184). Just like Kojève’s thinking of finitude, Hyppolite only thinks death as that which allows man to achieve “supreme freedom” (184). While radically affirming the power and importance of death, Hyppolite, in the very next sentence, tames it:

Death is the revelation of absolute negativity, because man, as pure self-consciousness, exists this nothingness (*existe ce neant*). By apprehending death, man becomes the supreme abstraction which was nature’s interiority, its nothingness, its detachment from every Dasein, from every determination. (184)

Hyppolite’s concept of alienation still dominates his understanding of negation: for him, the strong affirmation that “man, as pure self-consciousness, *exists this nothingness*” (184, my emphasis) implies his equating of existence with thought. Man is the self-consciousness that detaches itself from its determination in the world and maintains this alterity through the impossibility of attaining an internal union. Here, “exists” is active and transitive; it is a doing, an acting-upon, while nothingness is that which self-consciousness needs as the beyond which it is the contradiction of and which, at the same time, it needs in order to maintain its dialectical process of knowing.

In a way, Hyppolite (1997), although seemingly more radical than Kojève in his affirmation of alterity and in positing the structures of logos and sense to replace the revolutionary élan of man, brings back, in full force, the power of man’s discourse—discourse as absolute positivity that spreads its tentacles beyond finitude:

On the other hand, it exhibits, at the very heart of this negation, a repetition of negation, a negation of the negation which alone constitutes authentic positivity. Such is the work of the negative which appears first to be dissolution and death, which turns out, however, to be the thing that reveals “the Absolute as subject.” Such a proposition amounts to saying that mediation alone, and not any sort of immediate base, sustains the whole. (106)

By eliminating the power of negativity and transforming negation into alterity, Hyppolite establishes a circularity that influences philosophy and scholarship as a

structure for thought well beyond his own time. Relying on language as an escape from the Marxist and Kantian moral imperatives, Hyppolite ends up with “the concept of sense already immanent to the being of absolute knowledge” (4), a concept, however, that has man’s mark inscribed within it, working as split consciousness, in all-encompassing alterity.

### **JUDITH BUTLER: CIRCLES OF READING**

Jean Hyppolite is effective at synthesizing several important elements in the reception of Hegel’s work that will become crucial for French thought in the later part of the twentieth century. The focus on language, structure, and the criteria for ordering knowledge were central to the thinkers who came into direct contact with Hyppolite’s work, such as Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault. However, in the late twentieth century, another thinker further develops French post-Hegelianism, actualizing it through her focus on desire and performativity: Judith Butler, the last representative figure of circularity and weak negativity in this chapter. Although famous beyond academia for her contributions to the area of Queer theory—which, in fact, she helped found as a discipline and for which she has been both acclaimed and heavily criticized—the conceptual grounds for her advances in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (2002/1990) and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (2011/1993) are often forgotten. My engagement with Butler’s work here is limited by the size and scope of this dissertation; therefore, I only consider two of her works, in which she develops her approach to subjectivity apart from its gender dimension: *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France* (1987/2012) and *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (1997).

Butler’s work represents a mode of thinking negativity that—although in many ways a continuation of the French reception of Hegel, where negativity is incorporated and neutralized by an ontological unity that privileges the subject and remains, at least latently, anthropological—opposes the constitutive unity of presence which neutralizes negativity. In her work, one can find an attempt to break with the inherited reception of Hegel by proposing a different reading of the latter and retracing the development of certain key concepts, such as the work of the negative in the different moments of the dialectic. However, as I will show, Butler’s constitution of the subject, despite her

various theoretical advances, remains founded on a model of alterity that maintains an affirmationist and circular structure of subjectivity (even if the circle never fully closes).

### ***Rhetorical Desire***

*Subjects of Desire* (1987/2012), which is based on Butler's doctoral dissertation, is her first book. It explores Hegel's work and his French reception and focuses specifically on the development of self-consciousness and the master-slave dialectic. Butler states in the Preface to the paperback edition, written in 1998, eleven years after the first edition of the book, that her work on the reception of Hegel's *Phenomenology* in France, which she calls her "juvenilia" (xiv), is not an attempt at writing a comprehensive history of thought on Hegel's reception but rather "a critical inquiry into a relation repeatedly figured between desire and recognition" (xiv), which nevertheless focuses on Hegel's work. As the book consists of her commentary on the concepts of desire and subjection in Kojève, Hyppolite, Sartre, Deleuze, Derrida, Lacan, and Foucault, her own voice is not always easy to distinguish from those of her precursors. In the Preface, Butler admits that she "was not quite prepared to make the theoretical moves that [she] begin[s] in the final chapters and that [she] subsequently made in the writing of *Gender Trouble*" (2012, xiv); nevertheless, this early text successfully illustrates the theoretical tendencies that have informed her work throughout her entire career.

It is important to note that Butler (2012), instead of regarding Hegel's text as a structure comprised of fixed logical constructions that interact and develop in a predetermined manner, presents the reader with the "obduracy of descriptive language itself" (xvii). Marked by Hyppolite's *Logic and Existence* and by the deconstructionist focus on language, Butler engages with Hegel's text using the practice of rhetorical reading. To understand this practice better, we can briefly turn to Paul de Man (whose lectures Butler attended), who, in *Allegories of Reading* (1979), writes that he favors "a process of reading in which rhetoric is a disruptive intertwining of trope and persuasion or—which is not quite the same thing—of cognitive and performative language" (ix). Thus, for de Man (and Butler), language is always already an unstable, self-altering process that contradicts its own referential function. A rhetorical practice of reading highlights this tension between the referential and figural aspects of language. Butler's approach to Hegel's text starts from this point—from an understanding of the philosophical text as being undermined by its own literary and rhetorical dimensions. Thus, Butler (2012) argues that "the language we thought was reporting on the reality



of negation turns out to take part in the activity itself, to have its own negating function, and, indeed, to be subject to negation itself” (xvii). Language is not simply the discourse of absolute knowledge, as it is for Kojève, nor the abstract logos that conditions all relations as for Hyppolite; instead, for Butler, language is literary in the sense of being characterized by a kind of rhetorical surplus of changing meaning.

By shifting from a purely concept-focused reading to a language-based one, Butler positions herself, like the deconstructive theorists, against the idea of a fixed or “correct” interpretation of the Hegelian project and against a teleological reading of the text. As she emphasizes, there is a constant drifting in reading and interpretation from the conceptual work to language in its rhetoricity: “The language of the text thus exhibits its own rhetoricity, and we find that the question of logic and that of rhetoric are indissociable from each other” (2012, xvii). At the same time, even though she proposes a language-oriented reading, Butler is also interested in the conceptual dimensions of the text, dedicating many pages in *Subjects of Desire* and *The Psychic Life of Power* to the theory of the subject. It is precisely this tension between the theory of the subject and the rhetorical practice of reading that, I believe, provides Butler with an opportunity to conceptualize radical negativity—an opportunity that she does not take up and which remains a latent potential in her work. Although the scope of my dissertation does not permit me to explore this potential to its full extent, in what follows, I will show how Butler builds on Kojève’s active negation and Hyppolite’s negation-as-alterity by surveying the connections between the subject, negation, and desire in *Subjects of Desire* and *The Psychic Life of Power* insofar as these connections help clarify different aspects of negativity.

Butler (2012) starts off with a conception of the subject sustained by the motor of the negative. She chooses a contemporary reading of Hegel in which the subject “constantly finds itself outside of itself, and whose periodic expropriations do not lead to a return to the former self” (xxi). This self-externalizing, unstable subject relates back to itself by means of desire, because a subject “is the very action of desire as it [desire] perpetually displaces the subject” (xxi). Thus, the subject not only undergoes the dialectic of the common consciousness, transforming itself through negative action in relation to the world, but also constantly reflects back on itself by its own desire-based negativity, which both ties together and displaces all the moments of the subject’s development. As I will show below, this desire-based interpretation of subjectivity is,

on the one hand, a synthesis and further development of Kojève's and Hyppolite's works, but also, on the other hand, another exemplar of the same kind of weak, or tamed, negation, which is dissipated in a structure of alterity via the self-displacing structures of desire.

In the first chapter of *Subjects of Desire*, "Desire, Rhetoric, and Recognition in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*," Butler develops a concept of desire as a performative rhetorical action that emphasizes the generative and creative aspects of negation. Butler's desire is a human desire, operating within the boundary of the subject, though it compels the subject to reach outside of itself towards an external object. Hannah Stark (2014) summarizes this process as follows:

Butler's subject is etymologically 'ec-static': it is outside of itself. In *Subjects of Desire*, Butler renders desire as ecstasy because it motivates the subject to pursue what it lacks, which is, of necessity, outside of itself. Driven into interactions with others and with its environment, this subject's identity is mediated by the reflexivity that being-outside-of-itself allows, and it can find itself only in this state. Butler acknowledges the paradoxical nature of Hegel's subject, which is isolated in its pursuit of an autonomous self-consciousness while also and necessarily discovering its identity through relating to others (1999b: 4). She describes this subject's interactions with its surroundings as a double process of assimilation and projection. As a result, Hegel's subject internalises otherness while simultaneously externalising itself (Butler, 1999b: 42). Consequently, the porous boundary between what the subject is and what it is not drives it into a constant state of becoming in which it will always remain incomplete. (90)

Put briefly, alterity (defined as the lack of identity between subject and other) characterizes the subject from the outset, and desire sets in motion the subject's going outside of itself and returning to itself, or the process of internalization of the other and the concomitant externalization of the self. In order to maintain the motion integral to the subject's becoming, Butler interjects desire between the subject and object. The issue, however, is that such alterity is not truly external; rather, the other is articulated as negative only in relation to the subject and ceases to matter when it is not within the range of the subject's desire. Thus, Butler's model of subjectivity does not seem to go beyond a self-generating circular subjectivity because alterity is not chiefly motivated and informed by a factor external to the subject.

Following Hyppolite, Butler maintains a view of negativity bound within the confines of the dialectical operations of a discontinuous experience of subjectivity. As

long as the subject is involved in a process of becoming, negativity is operative, though it remains a form of weak negativity (or negation). As Stark (2014) notes, “Butler’s notion of becoming is generated through negation, which ensures that everything is constituted in opposition to what it is not. This subject-in-process can never return to how it was prior to a particular interaction with difference because the experience of alterity disrupts its coherence” (91). Thus, while subjectivity for Butler is not circular in the strict sense, as the circle does not return to the same point from which it started, she nonetheless uses a circular model to conceptualize the subject: the subject propels itself outwards by the motor of its own desire, opposing and subsuming what it is not, and returns, still running on the force of the very same desire that propelled it, to itself, although this return is not a satisfying one, which means that desire keeps running, and the subject keeps looping. Although this circular model does not render her articulation of subjectivity fallacious, it does indicate that Butler’s focus is primarily on the subject, which, in turn, means that even though she favors a discontinuous, fragmented configuration of the subject (i.e., the subject never completely returns to itself), otherness, or alterity, is an operation put in place by the subject and depends on the subject’s desire. To put this point in the vocabulary I have been developing so far, Butler’s subject seems to “intuit” some form of radical negativity, but this intuition (for lack of a better word) is quickly dissipated into the circuits of desire.

Butler (2012) focuses on desire “as a lack, a being-without” (9), a conception of desire which, in her words, “signifies negativity” (9). Lack, however, informs the desire at the core of Butler’s subject. Initially, Butler’s approach seems to be another articulation of Hyppolite’s negativity as alterity internalized by the subject, only framed differently with a focus on desire as that which “articulates the subject’s relationship to that which is not itself, that which is different, strange, novel, awaited, absent, lost” (9). For Hyppolite, the unity of consciousness, in all the moments of its development in the *Phenomenology*, is challenged by its contact with otherness; this is especially clear in relation to the unhappy consciousness.<sup>20</sup> However, Butler takes this negativity, the negativity of opposition, and adds another layer through desire, which she characterizes as “a way of thematizing the problem of negativity” (9). For Kojève, negativity is action, which is eventually dissipated in the circularity of discourse. For Hyppolite, negativity

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<sup>20</sup> See the previous discussion on pages 55–58 in this chapter.

represents the subject's active relationship with the world and is a constitutive part of the subject as split consciousness, becoming an ontological category as it gets flattened into logos and sense. For Butler, "desire is . . . the mode in which consciousness makes its own negativity into an explicit object of reflection" (9). Thus, Butler's concept of desire could be said to synthesize or, in Hegelian terms, "sublate" Kojève's and Hyppolite's positions, with desire functioning as both action and mediation. By desire, the subject constitutes itself through the "negativity in the objects and others we desire" (10)—desire is both the subject's inward motor and externalized wish, as well as the means by which the subject reaches out to the world and comes to know itself.

This is where the novelty in Butler's treatment of negativity as desire becomes most apparent: her rhetorical reading makes explicit the self-reflexive function of circular negativity, in addition to providing another register, that of affect and emotion, for the analysis of subjectivity. For Butler, language is not the abstract logos of Hyppolite; rather, language is literature, which involves rhetoric and reading. Given that desire operates through language, the subject of desire is a reader: Butler means this both figuratively and literally, in the sense that subjects "read" and interpret the world through desire, but also, the actual reader of literature is directly engaged in the same structures of desiring. Therefore, one can study literature to learn about "reading" the world, and one can learn about literature as well by studying how the world is read by subjects. Put otherwise, the subject's constitutive alterity is doubled by the reader's reflective and affective engagement with the process of constituting the subject. By "the reader," I am not referring to a specific reader reading the text (though the particularity of a specific reader could also be an interesting dimension to consider elsewhere). The reader, in this case, is the subject itself, "reading" its own (re)constitution in light of its desire. The rhetorical-interpretive aspect, especially important for Butler's (2012) concept of desire, is generated by the action of reading, giving the subject access to an emotional spectrum that Kojève's and Hyppolite's subject did not experience: "We read our negativity in the objects and others we desire; as desirable, detestable, solicitous, or rejecting, these emotional facts of the world mirror our ontological insufficiency" (9–10). In reading its own negativity, the subject pendulates between "the promise of plenitude" (10) and "the threat of reaffirming [its] nothingness." The result is that desire *is* reading: a theoretical position that problematizes both the subject, emphasizing its

elusiveness, and negativity, to which another layer of production of signification is added.

Thus, according to Butler's (2012) rhetorical reading of Hegel, desire brings together two aspects, both of which are informed by a type of negating action: on the side of the reading subject, there is an encounter with the text (equivalent to the process of self-constitution) and the necessity to switch "from reading literally to reading rhetorically" (30), while on the side of the text (or on the other side of desire), "sentences enact the meanings that they convey; indeed, they show that what 'is' only is to the extent that it is enacted" (18). For Butler, negation is constitutive of both the reader's and the text's reality. However, negation only acquires actuality in the world when it is acted out in the world: "In stating or dramatizing its truth, negation gains a home in the world, and thus is transformed from an indeterminate negation to a determinate one, one that exists as a moment in a web of interrelatedness, one that has a place" (30). Although in the process of dramatizing negation, it gains particularity, desire is what is needed for negation to function in the world. Desire has a mediating role in relation to negativity and, overall, it is the producer and stage director of the dramatization. Therefore, although Butler states that negation is "constitutive of experience itself" (35), and desire is that which reveals "the ontological primacy of negation" (35), negativity is not considered outside of its weak form.

In more concrete terms, the subject is marked by its lack and need for otherness, which it requires in order to attempt to know itself (an attempt that never fully succeeds). The subject, as "pure vacuity" (Butler 2012, 38), consumes its object—a dramatic action by which "desire once again determines itself as a positive reality" (38). Butler uses different metaphors to illustrate the negativity in the subject's experience of the world. One of the metaphors is that of "essential poverty" (37), which the subject experiences because it does not have access to the object of desire. This reality results in the fact that "self-consciousness becomes a vacuum that must consume Life in order to gain some temporary reality for itself" (37), where "Life" is the generalized reality of the desired object. The effort of consuming the desired object (or life) is the only relation that the subject can have with the other. Consuming also illustrates the subject as a vacuum which experiences the world by means of destructive desire. Thus, desire is "revealed as a negating negativity, no longer a lifeless and isolated nothingness. As an active or generative negation, desire is articulated as determinate reality" (38).

Therefore, negation is, for desire, first potential, then ground for creative action. Butler pays attention to the moment in which the subject is “pure vacuity” (38) only briefly because the main point in her reading of Hegel is to emphasize a structure of being where desire, in its generative power, becomes central. Desire is, indeed, all encompassing, as it “safeguards its own negativity as the source of its own perpetual life” (39). However, negativity (as alterity), is rendered indistinct by its lack of specificity and the endless (capital-like) accumulation of desire: “Desire requires this endless proliferation of alterity in order to stay alive as desire, as a desire that not only wants life, but is living” (39). Therefore, there is no negativity in the strong sense in Butler’s reading of Hegel, only an endless (re)composition of subjective desire. Butler problematizes the discourse centred on the subject by turning desire into a rhetorical element, but in doing so, she further neutralizes negativity because she adds another layer of all-encompassing desire, powered by negativity but determined by the subject’s internal void. Although Butler’s subjectivity, given its Hyppolitean inspiration, is marked by alterity, fragmentation, need, and loss—all aspects that human subjects endure because they “appropriate the power of the negative and express it in the form of freedom” (Butler 2012, 151)—subjectivity remains fueled by desire rather than negativity.

It is important, however, to reiterate that Butler does take steps in a direction that begins to make a dent in the circular understanding of the subject based on weak negativity. In both *Subjects of Desire* (2012) and *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997), she questions the domination of the structural unity and circularity that inform poststructuralist thought, in spite of the declared attempt of the theorists she takes up to break through the system-focused thinking passed on from Hegel’s Idealism. Butler claims that each in their own way, these theorists end up replacing the unity of the Hegelian dialectic with another:

This unity or absolute presence then becomes the tacit but fundamental project of desire—the cause of love, according to Lacan—which is either imagined (Sartre, Lacan) or pursued through a revolutionary return to natural Eros (Deleuze). The Hegelian effort to transvaluate or supersede all negativity into an all-encompassing Being remains the constitutive desire of these ostensible post-Hegelian positions. The inexorable necessity of the *Phenomenology* seems no longer to serve as a persuasive narrative, and the psychoanalytic and Nietzschean routes engage fewer illusions about the autonomy of the subject and the dialectical structure of reason and experience. But the dream of

reconstituting that lost unity of Being still structures these theories, whether through the notion of *jouissance* or the theory of forces, and no matter whether the dream can be realized. (2012, 217)

Butler indirectly proposes her own reading of the *Phenomenology* at the beginning of her book, in which, synthesizing the Kojévian emphasis on discourse and his action-based negation, along with Hyppolite's idea of internalized negation as the constitutive alterity of the subject, she maintains self-consciousness's dialectical process while problematizing unitary discourse by adding on a layer of rhetoricity through reading as desire. However, as her insertion maintains the circular, relational aspect of weak negativity, Butler posits the creative function as the main power of the negative, thereby eliminating the possibility of thinking negativity in itself.

### ***The Perpetual Return of the Subject***

In *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997), Butler continues to highlight the reflexivity of the process of subject formation, this time in relation to the concept of power. She argues that the subject has a tropological structure—a term that, by its etymological roots, signifies both the ontological structure of the subject and the nature of the language in which the subject is couched:

The moment we seek to determine how power produces its subject, how the subject takes in the power by which it is inaugurated, we seem to enter this tropological quandary. We cannot presume a subject who performs an internalization if the formation of the subject is in need of explanation. The figure to which we refer has not yet acquired existence and is not part of a veritable explanation, yet our reference continues to make a certain kind of sense. The paradox of subjection implies a paradox of referentiality: namely, we must refer to what does not exist. Through a figure that marks the suspension of our ontological commitments, we seek to account for how the subject comes to be. That this figure is itself a “turn” is, rhetorically, performatively spectacular; “turn” translates the Greek sense of “trope.” Thus the trope of the turn both indicates and exemplifies the tropological status of the gesture. (4)

For Butler, the turning of the subject is coupled with the fact that any attempt to trace the original moment at which the subject comes into being results in the subject slipping away: there is *nothing* to turn back to. However, Butler focuses, instead, on the aspects of the subject that emphasize the continued and “spectacular” (4) process of internalization. Thus, one is faced with the problem that the subject seems to be borne fully formed and armed, like Pallas Athena sprouting out of the head of Zeus, full-grown. While in her earlier work, Butler problematized the subject's circularity only

indirectly, through the maintenance of the structures of unity that she highlighted in post-Hegelian thinking, in *The Psychic Life of Power* she focuses on the circularity of subjectivity directly.

Along with circularity, Butler (1997) criticizes discourses that equate the subject with the individual, advancing, instead, an extra-individual subjectivity, by which the structures of subjectivation are made open for a critical reading:

“The subject” is sometimes bandied about as if it were interchangeable with “the person” or “the individual.” The genealogy of the subject as a critical category, however, suggests that the subject, rather than be identified strictly with the individual, ought to be designated as a linguistic category, a place-holder, a structure in formation. Individuals come to occupy the site of the subject (the subject simultaneously emerges as a “site”), and they enjoy intelligibility only to the extent that they are, as it were, first established in language. The subject is the linguistic occasion for the individual to achieve and reproduce intelligibility, the linguistic condition of its existence and agency. No individual becomes a subject without first becoming subjected or undergoing “subjectivation” (a translation of the French *assujétissement*). It makes little sense to treat “the individual” as an intelligible term if individuals are said to acquire their intelligibility by becoming subjects. Paradoxically, no intelligible reference to individuals or their becoming can take place without a prior reference to their status as subjects. (11)

Butler replaces the proliferation of the doubles of the subject with the linguistic structure that allows for a process of making sense or a gaining of intelligibility of the process of subjection. For Butler, the fact that the structure of subjection determines the subject proves that the subject’s liberation is inscribed in the same terms. Butler explores the process of subjection in conjunction with the linguistic aspects that lend intelligibility to the subject, exposing, in Hegelian and post-Hegelian thinking, the “all-at-once” nature of subjectivity. The constant need for individuals to “occupy the side of the subject” (11), to establish themselves as subjects, reproduces, once more, the circular syllogism: an individual is defined as subject by its subjectivation; therefore, the subject as a linguistic category is the place-holder through which the individual can define itself as subject. Butler’s subject is determined by the process of becoming-subject; the inability to escape the paradox of the subject’s self-referential intelligibility is one of the most insistent tropes in contemporary subjectivity studies. The subject is a content vacuum in the sense that it is not determined by another element outside of itself. This model, although seemingly fragile, is powered by a great hunger, which encompasses every other concept around it. A radical form of negativity cannot be thought in relation



to such a concept because there is no outside as such in Butler's structure of subjectivity. There is no escape for the individual from all structures of subjection, such as ideology, guilt, subordination, judgement, and all forms of power. In *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997), Butler does not think negation outside of the Hegelian framework, outside of an operative, tame negation that contributes to the processes of subjection. One may wonder, then, if introducing a concept of radical negativity that is not easily absorbed by affirmationist positions could be helpful in conceptualizing a non-circular, non-Athena-like subject.

By scrutinizing Kojève's, Hyppolite's, and Butler's incorporation of negativity in their works, I have discussed the circularity of subjectivity, relying on a concept of "weak negativity," or negation, which can best be defined as an operationalized form of negativity with the purpose of subjective production and subsumption and which merely contributes to a dialectical process that gets resolved positively. At the centre of these accounts, as I have discussed, there remains imprinted the mark of man, either in an all-encompassing articulation, as with Kojève's historical and revolutionary man, or in Hyppolite's drive for sense, where a despairing consciousness's constant exposure to self-negation maintains the process of the discursive logos, or a problematizing rhetorical reading, in Butler's case, in whose work desire and power expose the subject in its circularity. In all three cases, radical negativity, or nothingness, in the strong sense of the term is hinted at or even openly stated, yet in the actual systems of these thinkers, negativity is warded off and de-problematized in favour of circulation and subjectivation. Consequently, the notion of circular subjectivity seems to be wedded to weak negativity, which relies on the invocation of radical negativity only as a sort of rhetorical strategy on the way to a positive resolution and obliteration of negativity. In the rest of my dissertation, I will explore avenues for conceptualizing negativity in a manner that cannot be easily recuperated by the reproductive circuits of subjectivation.

## Chapter 2:

### THEODOR W. ADORNO:

#### “POST-CIRCULAR” NEGATIVE AESTHETICS

For it was that which I should have chosen above all others, feeling quite certain, with a botanist's satisfaction, that it was not possible to find collected anywhere rarer specimens than these young flowers who were interrupting at this moment before my eyes the line of the sea with their slender hedge, like a bower of Pennsylvania roses adorning a garden on the brink of a cliff, between which is contained the whole tract of ocean crossed by some steamer, so slow in gliding along the blue and horizontal line that stretches from one stem to the next that an idle butterfly, dawdling in the cup of a flower which the moving hull has long since passed, can, if it is to fly and be sure of arriving before the vessel, wait until nothing but the tiniest slice of blue still separates the questing prow from the first petal of the flower towards which it is steering.

(Marcel Proust 2006)

### INTRODUCTION

The first chapter explored the circular conceptualization of subjectivity, whereby a weak form of negativity is intertwined with the subject in a dialectical, circular process, in the works of two French post-Hegelian thinkers, Alexandre Kojève and Jean Hyppolite. The last part of the chapter focused on tracing circularity and weak negativity in Judith Butler's early work, in which she engages with French post-Hegelian scholarship and directly takes up Hegel's *Phenomenology*. These works, representative of the twentieth-century thinking on subjectivity, all attempt to go beyond the concept of circularity. As I discussed, the moments when self-consciousness, seemingly enclosed in its own loop, seems to break out of the circular structure were theorized, by Kojève, in relation to the death-driven subject; by

Hyppolite, in relation to the Hegelian system's inconsistency and tendency to fracture, especially when it comes to the unhappy consciousness; and, by Butler, in relation to the practice of reading rhetorically, which exposes the mismatch between the figural and literal aspects of language, thus potentially interrupting the subject's discourse of self-identity. However, upon further reflection, I found that all of these potential "breaking" points were premised on the model of weak negativity, which involves the subject taming the radical potential of its own undoing by means of some form of a circular system, such as absolute knowledge (in Kojève), alterity (in Hyppolite), and desire (in Butler). The three thinkers questioned the dominant nature of the subject while, nonetheless, maintaining the subject-centred circularity. Therefore, the following question arises: Was it possible, during the twentieth century, to theorize a more radical form of negativity, which would in some way gain conceptual prominence over circular subjectivity and the associated notions, such as absolute knowledge, alterity, and desire?

Weak negativity functions as a relation of controlled opposition or contradiction between two concepts. Often, the concepts that are in a negative relation to each other are overrun by a third concept into which they collapse, though, as Hyppolite argues, there is always an excess, and the synthesis is never whole. However, Western thought since the Enlightenment, whose logical roots lie in the Socratic-Platonist subsoil, maintains the goal, or perhaps the imperative, of resolving contradictions, oppositions, and differences, which is why it is often noted that differential structures<sup>1</sup>—such as Hyppolite's sense and alterity, or an ongoing process of differentiation and systematization—are conceived in such a way that they incorporate both general and particular elements into a philosophical sequence that seems to render all distinctions playthings of a unifying third.

Although in this thesis I am following neither a triadic dialectical sequence nor a linear historical approach, I rely on both a modified material dialectic and an accumulation of historical and conceptual content to foreground an understanding of radical negativity that breaks down the pattern of circularity discussed previously. In my research, the most productive field for the accumulation of such material has been the philosophy of aesthetics understood, in the broad sense, as a theory that analyzes

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<sup>1</sup> I am using the term "differential structure" in the Saussurean sense of a network of relations between signifiers defined by internal difference rather than by a pre-existing link between the signifier and signified.

how philosophical concepts make their way into and develop in artistic works, but also as the way in which the two media, philosophy and art, reflect and misrepresent each other. To follow through with the development of negative thought in the twentieth century in post-WWII Europe, I will now turn to Theodor W. Adorno, whose conceptualization of the negative dialectic seems to pick up and build on many of the loose threads from the works of Kojève and Hyppolite.

I write “seems to” because, surprisingly, there was very little intercourse between the French and German philosophical scenes in the middle of the twentieth century. According to Michel Foucault (1983), there was something of a missed encounter between the critically minded philosophers from both countries:

It is common knowledge that many representatives of the Frankfurt School came to Paris in 1935, seeking refuge, and left very hastily, sickened presumably — some even said as much — but saddened anyhow not to have found more of an echo. Then came 1940, but they had already left for England and the US, where they were actually much better received. The understanding that might have been established between the Frankfurt School and French philosophical thought — by way of the history of science and therefore the question of the history of rationality — never occurred. And when I was a student, I can assure you that I never once heard the name of the Frankfurt School mentioned by any of my professors. (200)

The French philosophy scene of the mid-twentieth century was almost completely unaware of the works of influential German thinkers at the time, such as Max Weber, Jürgen Habermas, Max Horkheimer, Hannah Arendt, Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor Adorno. One can infer that the reverse may also have been true, with renowned French thinkers belonging to the structuralist and deconstructionist currents also not having much of an audience among German philosophers. And yet, Foucault argued that Critical Theory (i.e., the multidisciplinary Freudian-Marxist-inflected philosophy crossed with social theory and developed mainly by thinkers of the Frankfurt School) and French structuralism and deconstruction shared a fundamental likeness: “It is a strange case of non-penetration between two very similar types of thinking which is explained, perhaps, by that very similarity. Nothing hides the fact of a problem in common better than two similar ways of approaching it” (200). But what exactly is this common problem that informed the French and German philosophical currents in the second part of the twentieth century, marking them with a likeness while making the two unreceptive of each other?

For Foucault, both Critical Theory and French Structuralism were concerned with the legacy of Kant's question "Was ist Aufklärung?", but the two factions approached this question differently: for the French school of thought, the focus was on the development of reason via the history of science and the latter's significance for philosophy; this reiteration of the question of the Enlightenment can be seen, for example, in the positivist thought of the nineteenth-century philosopher August Comte, later on in phenomenology, or in the works of Georges Canguilhem, the influential historian of science. Meanwhile, German thinkers, at least from Max Weber onwards, were concerned "with the history of reason, with the ascendancy of reason, and with the different forms in which this ascendancy operates" (Foucault 1983, 200). In short, though using different means—the history of science by the French and the history of forms of reason by the Germans—Critical Theory and Structuralism were engaged in a kindred yet mutually unrecognized project of reinterpreting the legacy of the Enlightenment and re-elaborating a number of foundational elements of Western thought. In my own vocabulary, I would say that the philosophers from both Critical Theory and (post-)structuralism were seeking to escape from the seemingly infinite loops of weak negativity and the all-consuming problem of circularity in thinking the subject. I hope that by the end of this chapter, the kinship between the French thinkers whom I covered in my previous chapter—namely, Kojève and Hyppolite—and the German thinkers I discuss below will become clear.

More specifically, in this chapter, I turn to the work of Adorno, who, though labouring under the long shadow of Hegel, accentuated, like Kojève and Hyppolite, the inadequacies of the Hegelian dialectic. This chapter advances the notion that Adorno's conceptualization of negativity acts as a pivotal moment in the history of negativity as a philosophical concept<sup>2</sup> by addressing some of the issues related to circular negativity and working towards making place for radical negativity and a possible reconfiguration

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<sup>2</sup> Although critical of Adorno's conception of negativity, which he considers as belonging to the category of weak negativity, Benjamin Noys (2010) grants that Adorno may be the philosopher who allows for a minimal reconfiguration of negativity. Noys locates Adorno's negative thought at the confluence of Adorno's aesthetic theory and his socioeconomic critique of modernity: "Adorno had, in fact, offered a necessarily tortured defence of the possibility of a minimal negative thinking in the very torsion of 'absolute' capitalism. This occurs at the point that the absolute artwork meets the absolute commodity, in which the autonomy of the artwork at once figures its status as complete commodity and its status as the immanent contradiction of the commodity form" (119). In this chapter, I aim to show that the matter is more complicated, especially given Adorno's reconfiguration of Hegelian negation. In addition to emphasizing the importance of objectivity in the dialectic of the subject and proposing the notion of non-identity against totalizing thought, Adorno also develops negativity as a style of philosophical writing.

of the relationship between negativity and subjectivity. Scholarship in the field of Adorno studies is vast, and I cannot engage here with all the sources that focus on negativity and adjacent concepts in his work. The sources that I do take up address the specific angles that I am pursuing, which involve teasing out the possibility of negativity beyond circularity, the aporias that Adorno's writing is prone to, the horizon of utopia, and the ambiguity of mimesis. Benjamin Noys's (2010) critique of Adorno's "weak thought" serves as a starting point for my investigation. Noys criticizes Adorno's lack of commitment to negativity as radical thought, in spite of the latter's use of negativity to reverse the otherwise-affirmationist version of the dialectic:

Adorno's mordant posing of negative dialectics courts convergence with the softer forms of affirmationism, in its embrace of weak thought, finitude and the pathos of the suffering subject. Here we have the ironic affirmation of human finitude as the essential operator of resistance. This risks not only a defanging of negativity, but also bringing negativity into alignment with the ideologies of militarised humanism and tolerated difference, which are predicated on the model of a weak and suffering humanity. (xi)

However, whereas Noys aims for resistance and agency, my goal in this chapter is different. I aim to show that there is radical potential in Adorno's writing, which can be developed further, specifically by following some of the loose threads, such as the potential of mimesis, especially in its relation to art. For this purpose, the secondary sources I use in this chapter and generally in this thesis are not "radical" in any way, but the combination of their strategies forms a constellation of thought that, like Adorno's writing, brings out the negative in the form of *rilievo*.

One objective of this chapter is to engage with Adorno's practice of negativity as evidenced by his writing style, a strategy that has been pointed out by other scholars (e.g., Coole 2000). I do this not by undertaking a literary or rhetorical analysis of Adorno's prose but by mapping out the conceptual decisions that Adorno makes, how he implements them in his text, and how their implications (sometimes expressed, though largely not) constitute a *style of thinking*. Thus, my modest contribution to Adorno scholarship does not involve some sort of interpretive breakthrough; rather, I want to highlight the conceptual connections between French (post-)structuralism and Adorno and to show, using a speculative and creative approach, that Adorno's philosophy can function as a vehicle for peering into the realm of negativity beyond the circularity of the subject.

### *Negative Dialectics and Objectivity*

Although the terms “negative” and “negativity” appear frequently in Adorno’s work, he never approaches negativity as an independent concept; rather, negativity is always at work in a dialectical process.<sup>3</sup> Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics* (1966/1973), which David Sherman (2016) called “his philosophical masterpiece” (353), sets out to turn dialectics around by emphasizing negativity: “As early as Plato, dialectics meant to achieve something positive by means of negation; the thought figure of a ‘negation of negation’ later became the succinct term. This book seeks to free dialectics from such affirmative traits without reducing its determinacy” (Adorno 1973, xix). However, exposing the rationale and *modus operandi* of negative dialectics as a manner of doing philosophy is an arduous task, seeing that discontinuity and concretion are emphasized in contrast to and in tandem with the syllogistic structure of classical metaphysics. *Negative Dialectics* (1973) is perplexing because it seeks “to serve authentic concretion” (xix) while remaining, for the most part, a “largely abstract text” (xix). It is important to note that Adorno’s position is anti-positivist and anti-totalizing, but it is not anti-thought. Adorno emphasizes the importance of conceptual work in reaching the concept’s other. His project in *Negative Dialectics* is to attempt “by means of logical consistency to substitute for the unity principle, and for the paramountcy of the supraordinated concept, the idea of what would be outside the sway of such unity” (xx). The contention that the concept is not identical with the object to which it refers heralds Adorno’s critique of identity, which is at the heart of *Negative Dialectics*. The anti-identitarian premise that “objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder” (5) sets up one of his most important theses regarding negative dialectics, which is that “dialectics is the consistent sense of nonidentity” (5) in which “contradiction is nonidentity under the aspect of identity” (5). Thus, Adorno turns the unity of the concept into the heterogeneity of the object.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Adorno was skeptical of the idea of pure, or strong and unmediated, negativity. For him, the dialectical process was essential to philosophical understanding. In “How It Is (After Auschwitz): Adorno and Beckett” (2020), Jean-Michel Rabaté notes the following regarding Adorno’s reception of Beckett’s emphasis on negativity in relation to theory of art: “Adorno expressed some incomprehension about the issue of negativity, and noted: ‘Very enigmatic remark about a kind of positivity contained in pure negativity. In view of such absolute negativity, one could be said to quasi live’” (119).

<sup>4</sup> As Andrew Bowie explains in *Adorno and the Ends of Philosophy* (2013), Adorno links identity (and its counterpart, non-identity) to both Kant’s categories of understanding, on which constitutive subjectivity is built, and Hegel’s concept (*Begriff*) “as a dynamic structure of inferences that encompasses the changing status of things which results from their shifting relations to other things” (26).

David Sherman (2016) argues that Adorno sets up the subject-object relation as the foundational dualism for many other dualist relations, such as “concept and intuition, form and content, abstraction and concretion, universal and particular, and history and nature” (353),<sup>5</sup> all of which unfold on philosophical and sociohistorical grounds. These dualist relations are complicated by the philosophical methodology that Adorno proposes—negative dialectics—which, in its treatment of dualisms, is both inspired by and opposed to materialist and idealist dialectics:

What sharply distinguishes negative dialectics from idealist dialectics (Hegelian) and materialist dialectics (Marxist) is its rejection of “identity” in favor of “non-identity.” According to Adorno, both idealist and materialist dialectical accounts wrongly subsume the second (“object-related”) term in each of these interrelated dualisms under the first (“subject-related”) term, with the result that the object-related terms are in effect classified by or identified with the subject-related terms. . . . Negative dialectics, in contrast, privileges the object-related terms, which overflow the subject-related terms. . . . Thus, while all dialectical accounts are negative in that they are motored by contradictions, what makes negative dialectics uniquely “negative” is that the object-related terms are not totally subsumable, and thus cannot be classified by or identified with the subject-related terms once and for all. (353–354)

Negativity, as conceived by Adorno, is the product of the recognition and intensification of the contradictory relation between the subject and object by strengthening the second term, the object, which tends to become absorbed by the first term, the subject<sup>6</sup> (a process that I have been referring to as circular subjectivity). The “object’s preponderance” (Adorno 1973, 183) is meant to counter Hegel’s subject-dominant dialectics, though Adorno does not discard subjectivity either.<sup>7</sup> Rather, the difference between the idealist and Adornian approaches starts with the way in which each approach sets up dual relations. As Sherman (2016) points out, “while Hegel argues for ‘the *identity* of identity and non-identity’ . . ., Adorno argues in effect for the *non-identity* of identity and non-identity: ‘To change this direction of conceptuality, to give it a turn towards non-identity, is the hinge of negative dialectics’” (355, my emphasis).

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<sup>5</sup> I would also add interiority and exteriority to the list above, as I will argue later in this section.

<sup>6</sup> For a thorough treatment of Adorno’s epistemological structure, especially regarding his thoughts on the priority of the object in the epistemic reception of experience, the active and materially determined subject, and their mediated relationship in *Negative Dialectics* and beyond, see Brian O’Connor’s (2004) *Adorno’s Negative Dialectic: Philosophy and the Possibility of Critical Rationality*.

<sup>7</sup> The philosophical approach remains dialectical; therefore, both subject and object, regardless of how reconfigured their relationship may be, remain in place.



The hinge of negative dialectics, then, is the leap out of the subjective circle and into the world of experience.

Although *Negative Dialectics* is Adorno's seminal work regarding negative dialectics as a methodology, the complexity of the book's conceptual apparatus makes it difficult to address the negative moments in Adorno's work. Moreover, this dissertation focuses not on the negative dialectic as such but on negativity. Negative dialectics, whose purpose is to recover, in philosophical terms, "nothing but full, unreduced experience in the medium of conceptual reflection" (Adorno 1973, 13), supports the recovery of negativity in different forms, but I contend, it is not until Adorno's task of concretion is taken at its word that negativity can be thought on its own terms. Therefore, in this chapter, I attempt to establish a constellation<sup>8</sup> of concepts that can be found across selected works by Adorno—concepts which, in their process of logical disintegration (144), may release the negative excess that resists assimilation into the subjective circle. I will refer in the following sections largely to *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic* (1933/1989), *Hegel: Three Studies* (1963/1993), and *Aesthetic Theory* (1970/2013). In addition to analyzing the philosophical concepts related to negativity in these works, I approach Adorno's writing style as a crucial part of the negative dialectic and its mission of touching upon negativity. In this sense, I am taking Adorno at his word when he argues that "the presentation of philosophy is not an external matter of indifference to it but immanent to its idea" (Adorno 1973, 18).

One notion that is instrumental to understanding negativity in Adorno's work (to be discussed more extensively in the later sections of this chapter and in the third chapter of this dissertation) is the mimetic quality of philosophical expression, which surfaces through the language employed by philosophy and signals the presence of the non-identical. Language, for Adorno, is a key part of dialectical negativity. Simon Jarvis (1998) describes Adorno's concept of language as being related to the idea of the constellation:

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<sup>8</sup> David Sherman (2016) defines Adorno's idea of a constellation of concepts as follows: "For Adorno, a constellation is a grouping of contemporary (sociohistorically generated) concepts that mediate one another in the construction itself, which serves as a pedagogical device to come to new insights regarding its constituents. Within this puzzle-like construction, the relationship between the concepts themselves and (ultimately) the objects for which they stand manifests the relationship between them within the prevailing sociohistorical context" (360). I would add that the concepts included in a constellation require not only sociohistorical contextualization but also aesthetic and literary analysis, given that the notion of style is of paramount importance for Adorno.

The “language” invoked in Adorno’s account of “constellation” is a language which still retains its double character, a language which has not yet wholly surrendered itself to sign or image, concept or intuition. In this it is distinguished, for example, from mathematics. “Language” is distinct from the most formal possible concepts, mathematical symbols, on the one hand, and from pictorial representation, on the other. In contrast to either of these extremes, language still retains both a classificatory and a mimetic element. (177)

What I claim in this chapter is that, when seeking to locate non-identity in Adorno’s work, it is necessary to pay special attention to the linguistic and mimetic elements of his writing. For this reason, a book like *Negative Dialectics* is not the most useful text for studying negativity (although it still bears the mark of Adorno’s vertiginous writing style) simply because its object, the negative dialectic, dictates a certain philosophical language for achieving a specific philosophical aim. In setting negative dialectics to be the conceptual goal of the book, Adorno posits a meta-concept in light of which the rest of the book is formulated. And although his dialectical thinking is not exclusively circular and affirmationist, the presence of a meta-concept, such as subject, knowledge, power, state, sense, and so on, seems to inspire circular conceptualizations more often than not. In other words, what I am interested in is Adorno’s *use* of the negative dialectic rather than his description of it. Compared to a work like *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, in which Adorno unremittingly directs, or at least attempts to direct, his attention towards the object (Kierkegaard’s work), *Negative Dialectics* remains a highly general and abstract work. The analysis of Kierkegaard’s texts lends precision and materiality to Adorno’s own writing, allowing the latter to come closer to the concretion that he professes to chase in *Negative Dialectics*.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, in *Hegel: Three Studies*, Adorno often achieves such absorption into the text under discussion that his own writing becomes the expression of the disintegration that he seeks to expose in Hegel. Moreover, Kierkegaard and Hegel are among the writerliest of philosophers: both develop highly distinctive styles in tandem with their conceptual work. This writerly element, reflected (or rather mimicked) in Adorno’s own writing, emphasizes the aesthetic dimension of philosophy while still maintaining a strong relation with abstract, rational thought. Thus, as Adorno traces “the affinity between concept and object”

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<sup>9</sup> In spite of his claim that “this largely abstract text seeks no less to serve authentic concretion than to explain the author’s concrete procedure” (Adorno 1973, xix), Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics* remains one of his more abstract works.

(Jarvis 1998, 178) in Kierkegaard and Hegel, I draw on Adorno's own aestheticized concepts, signs of linguistic disintegration, and the negative *rilievo* effect that mimesis helps create to reach beyond circular subjectivity and weak negativity.

### **CROSSING THE ABYSS: FRAMING AND MATERIALIST AESTHETICS**

As David Sherman explains in *Sartre and Adorno: The Dialectics of Subjectivity* (2007), “unlike the so-called orthodox Marxists, who offhandedly dismissed existentialism and phenomenology as bourgeois ideology, . . . Adorno was not unsympathetic to the concerns that motivated these philosophical movements” (13). It is mostly in opposing “idealism’s penchant for crafting systems in which the concept of a constituting meta subject (either transcendental or historical) dominates human beings and the objects of their experience” (13) that Adorno finds affinity with existentialist philosophers such as Heidegger, Husserl, and Kierkegaard. In spite of this declared affinity, Adorno maintains a critical stance towards existentialism, arguing that, as Sherman summarizes, “by trying to break out of Hegel’s totalizing system with the use of an exclusive category . . ., the modern philosophy that engenders this exclusive category cannot reconcile it with its socially mediated remainder, and thus the philosophy collapses of its own weight” (14). The “exclusive category” acts as a replacement of the first principle and, by excluding the sociohistorical dimension, ends up replicating the totalizing drive of the Hegelian dialectic. At the same time, the type of exclusive category used by existentialist philosophers “is ultimately an undialectical positing of transcendence that circumvents the ‘negative’ labor which drives Hegel’s dialectic” (15). Therefore, although Adorno is positively inclined towards existentialist philosophies due to their critical engagement with Hegel’s work, he ultimately rejects the emphasis on the subject and the absence of dialectical tension between the subject and the object that he finds in existentialist works.

Starting with his first book, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic* (1989), based on his *Habilitationsschrift* titled *The Construction of the Aesthetic in Kierkegaard* (Sherman 2007, 13, 17), Adorno uses the dialectical method to short-circuit a subject-based dialectic by following the subject’s processes up to the point at which the subject itself turns into its own opposite.<sup>10</sup> Thus, unsurprisingly, Adorno is critical of

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<sup>10</sup> This method seems to contradict Adorno’s claim that negative dialectics is an object-focused approach. However, unlike Hyppolite, who follows the subject’s processes until the subject turns in on itself, in a

Kierkegaard's focus on the subject, arguing that "Kierkegaard has a notion of subjectivity in which all meaning devolves onto the subject, thus causing the loss of the world" (9). Objectless subjectivity (or the subject who has lost the world) is, for Kierkegaard, the sovereign, self-identical concept upon which his entire conceptual system is founded. In his studies of Kierkegaard, rather than taking for granted the Danish philosopher's polemical engagements with Hegel's philosophy, Adorno starts by pointing out the traces of German idealism in Kierkegaard's work. In the first chapter of the book, Adorno argues that Kierkegaard's work remains dialectical,<sup>11</sup> though without commenting on Kierkegaard's use of the principle of identity or the subject's dominance to the detriment of the object, which ultimately maintains the circularity of subjectivity. Adorno then covers a series of themes that will become staples across his oeuvre. These themes include: the disintegration of the systematic structure of the work; the focus on the object and its materiality; the historical content of the image; false immediacy and the return to materiality by the collapse of nature in art; the culmination of philosophy in aesthetics and the spirit's transcendence in art; the weight of bourgeois ideals on the philosopher's work; the constant danger of reification that conceptual work faces in a capitalist socio-economic context; and others. Written in true Adornian fashion, this book exhibits all the traits of the German thinker that we have come to recognize, such as the enormous conceptual apparatus, the purposefully frustrated process of synthesis, and the concealed framing device. Finally, the book is Adorno's attempt at employing the negative dialectic, which involves reaching the moment of the emergence of truth by uncovering the dissonance and antithesis at the heart of Kierkegaard's writing, and, more generally, the use of a writing style oriented towards objectivity.

In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Crumbs* (2009), Kierkegaard maintained, in what was later to become a general existentialist trend, that, contrary to the Hegelian dialectic, the subject's consciousness should not be determined by its interplay with the objective world. Instead, the internality of the subject exists in

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method that places alterity at the core of subjectivity, Adorno pursues the subject's dialectic until the object is reached, at which point the subject disintegrates. In his writing, Adorno often tries to maintain the focus on the contradictions and the disjointedness that make up the world of the object, delaying or frustrating the integrating tendencies of the subject.

<sup>11</sup> However, as I will discuss in the following pages, not dialectical enough, as the object remains subsumed to the subject.

isolation and can depend only upon itself to establish meaning in the world.<sup>12</sup> However, according to Adorno, in spite of Kierkegaard's attempt at maintaining an objectless subjectivity detached from the world (or objectivity), the social and historical context permeates the enclosed subject by means of language: "Even the objectless 'I' and its immanent history<sup>13</sup> are bound to historical objectivity. Kierkegaard makes this plain with regard to language. For language is materially and qualitatively dependent on the objective historical dialectic" (Adorno 1989, 34). Thus, the "'infinitely negative' subject" (Sherman 2007, 26) in Kierkegaard is, for Adorno, an occasion to show that Kierkegaard's conception of the subject is, in fact, a positive (in the sense of affirmationist, totalizing) one. Adorno then follows through by revealing the inconsistencies at the heart of Kierkegaard's affirmationist subject, which cast it as a dialectical, fragmented, and self-contradictory one, despite Kierkegaard's thought maintaining the structure of the theory of identity.

If we follow Adorno's (1989) argument, Kierkegaard's subjectivity without an outside, which depends exclusively upon its own, immanent dialectic, leads, at first glance, to "objectless inwardness" (27). The concept of inwardness is the point of inflection in Adorno's own dialectical work. Commenting on the subject's objectless inwardness, Adorno writes:

The world of things is for [Kierkegaard] neither part of the subject nor independent of it. Rather, this world is omitted. It supplies the subject with the mere "occasion" for the deed, with mere resistance to the act of faith. In itself, this world remains random and totally indeterminate. Participation in "meaning" is not one of its potentials. In Kierkegaard there is [as] little of a subject/object in the Hegelian sense as there are given objects; there is only an isolated subjectivity, surrounded by a dark otherness. Indeed, only by crossing over this

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<sup>12</sup> Kierkegaard associates the objective with the trivial matters of the world, in which the individual may get lost, while he argues that "the task of becoming subjective is supposed to be the highest set for every person, just as, correspondingly, the highest reward, an eternal happiness, exists only for the subjective; or rather, comes to be only for the person who becomes subjective" (2009, 137).

<sup>13</sup> Adorno uses the term "immanent history" to describe an essentially ahistorical, immaterial, and undialectical dimension of subjectivity. Immanence is opposed to transcendence as well as materiality. According to Adorno's (1989) interpretation, Kierkegaard's dialectic is an immanent one because objectivity is not involved in the process and the subject, in its search for meaning, does not move outside of its interiority: "Kierkegaard bestows the term 'dialectics' on the movement that subjectivity completes both out of itself and in itself to regain 'meaning.' This cannot be conceived as a subject/object dialectic since material objectivity nowhere becomes commensurable with inwardness. This dialectic transpires between subjectivity and its 'meaning,' which the dialectic contains without being merged with it, and which does not merge with the immanence of 'inwardness'" (30).

abyss would subjectivity be able to participate in “meaning” that otherwise denies itself to subjectivity’s solitude. (Adorno 1989, 29)

In the above quotation, the idea of the subject’s infinite negativity becomes clearer, as the subject’s total omission of the world leads to “a dark otherness” (29) that is seemingly without material and historical connections, as if the subject, a beacon of self-meaning, were floating in a vast sea of nothingness. Adorno, however, shows that, in his philosophical language, Kierkegaard cannot escape the determinate negation of objectivity, symbolized by the image of the *intérieur*<sup>14</sup> of the bourgeois apartment, concretely the apartment of Kierkegaard’s childhood. Thus, although Kierkegaard does not “cross over [the] abyss” of otherness, Adorno does so in order to recover the meaning of an otherwise indeterminate negativity.

Adorno (1989) crosses over Kierkegaard’s abyss of subjectivity by reconfiguring the focus in Kierkegaard’s writing in order to recover its negativity. He does so by paying attention to what is “pragmatically implicit” (41) in Kierkegaard’s writing, such as Kierkegaard’s image of the *intérieur*. Adorno’s own writing style, the medium for shifting Kierkegaard’s writing towards negativity, is (in)famously ambiguous; as the reviewers quoted by Hulot-Kentor (1989) put it, the style is “dictatorial, ranting and mannered” (xiii), a view that may be the result of readers’ resistance to the kind of focus on the object of philosophical analysis that Adorno demands. After reading Adorno’s first book, the critics referred to his “peculiarly swirling and swimming” (xiii) style, which makes reading difficult. Indeed, as many readers of Adorno have complained, his texts take it upon themselves to demonstrate precisely the kind of dialectical thinking that Adorno celebrates, weaving through the inconsistencies of languages until the fissures become more and more apparent, until the void, as the saying goes, stares back. When reading Adorno’s text on Kierkegaard closely, it becomes apparent that Adorno’s dialectics, rather than fixating on concepts

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<sup>14</sup> The *intérieur*, from now on unitalicized, is, for Adorno, the sociohistorical dimension of Kierkegaard’s inwardness, which marks the language of objectless subjectivity that the Danish philosopher seeks to maintain. Although the image of the *intérieur* in Kierkegaard was not commented on by scholars before Adorno, it becomes a productive concept for Adorno (1989) in terms of recovering the negative (or the objective) aspects in Kierkegaard’s writing: “[The sociohistorical dimension] is to be found in the imagery of the apartment interior, which, while it discloses itself only to interpretation, demands interpretation by its striking independence. It is the bourgeois *intérieur* of the nineteenth century, before which all talk of subject, object, indifferenciation, and situation pales to an abstract metaphor, even though for Kierkegaard the image of the *intérieur* itself serves only as a metaphor for the nexus of his fundamental concepts” (41).

or working through a set of simple propositions, swirl at the edge of the philosophical sea that becomes a maelstrom before the reader's unsuspecting (and often blurred) eyes. The philosophical reader's mind, used to belabouring demanding yet analytically ordered texts, is caught in the midst of a multiplicity of problems and not allowed to identify, systematize, and map the text conceptually, as it is used to doing. Synthesis is not forbidden but pulled from under the thinker's feet.

Adorno abides by the rules of the game, as he deals with fully developed concepts in traditional philosophy, but in the middle of the great game called the dialectic, he changes the rules. As Adorno reiterates in *Negative Dialectics* (1973), it is the object rather than an infinite objectivity devoid of concreteness (as is the case with Kierkegaard's dark and infinite otherness which does not touch the subject) that must become the most important element of a reconfigured philosophy: "[The] substance [of a changed philosophy] would lie in the diversity of objects that impinge upon it and of the objects it seeks, a diversity not wrought by any schema; to those objects, philosophy would truly give itself rather than use them as a mirror in which to reread itself, mistaking its own image for concretion" (13). In his commentary on Kierkegaard's *intérieur*, Adorno uses his unique weaving style—using minute descriptions, attention to a wide range of details, and conceptual dissections—to trace the boundaries of a structure that should provide a home for the object. However, all this effort is rendered inconsequential by the shifting sands of his writing style. Inconsequential as it may seem, the effort to dialectically frame the bourgeois *intérieur* leads to the notion that the aesthetic—a position to which Kierkegaard, in his "aversion to art" (Sherman 2007, 23), was blind—is that which "comes closest to reality" (Adorno 1989, 66), that is, in Adorno's conception, closer to objectivity and negativity. In short, Adorno, who sets out to cross the dark sea that isolates the existentialist, Kierkegaardian subject from objectivity, discovers not the promised land of the dialectic but the realm of the aesthetic.

Adorno's position is that objects deserve to be studied "according to the truth they release in their own process of disintegration" (Hullot-Kentor 1989, xv). His structural readings of great philosophers, such as Kierkegaard or Hegel, or his study of art, are representative of the beginning of structuralism's integration of negativity in the twentieth century, further advanced by French thought in the 1960s, especially by thinkers such as Jacques Derrida and Maurice Blanchot. By extracting himself from the

texts that he studies while still relying on the movement of the dialectic, Adorno distinguishes himself from thinkers like Kojève whose authorial voices completely drown out the source. At the same time, Adorno does not follow the kind of position adopted by Hyppolite, whereby interpreters dissimulate their presence to arrive at “the real” text. Instead, when commenting on texts, Adorno performs interventionist readings. Take, for instance, his commentary (1989) on Kierkegaard’s self-proclaimed aestheticism:

Kierkegaard . . . referred to himself as *flâneur* and thereby fostered a corporeal similarity of his own image to that of the Baudelairian dandy. But it is precisely in the dense nexus of these similarities that the differences make themselves sharply apparent. Aestheticism is no “deportment,” to be assumed at will. It has both its hour and place: the early history of the metropolis. It is there, like artificial street lighting, in the twilight of incipient despair, that this strange, dangerous, and imperious form emits its beam to eternalize, garishly, life as it slips away. Kierkegaard’s writings never attained this arena. The noisy earnestness of a narrow private life that accompanies the promulgation of Kierkegaard’s aestheticism; the lack of any evident experience of the social landscape, the terrain of the *flâneur* and the dandy; the confines of a small town in which a seduction must search out its victim in a cooking school—this ensemble results in a parody of an intended dandyism. To take it at face value would obscure the true seriousness of his philosophy. (10)

Here, Adorno discusses the aestheticism<sup>15</sup> to which Kierkegaard subscribed while subtly “correcting” it. Adorno quotes his sources at length, to such an extent, in fact, that it is often difficult to distinguish, in a sequence, whether the line of thought belongs to Kierkegaard or Adorno. It is unclear, therefore, whether the most prominent conceptual image in the book, the *intérieur*, is borne out of Kierkegaard’s tension with the society of his small town, the “noisy earnestness of a narrow private life” (10), the frame into which Kierkegaard needs to collapse the historical, the aesthetic, and the material to achieve objectless subjectivity; or if, on the other hand, such interiority is Adorno’s construction, in which the subject and object can, by means of language, be isolated in their tension. Adorno’s search for the outside, for that which is omitted from the circle of the subject in Kierkegaard, meets its opposite in Kierkegaard’s inwardness, where the external world, and all objectivity along with it, is extinguished in absolute subjective isolation. Adorno intervenes in Kierkegaard’s writerly inwardness with

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<sup>15</sup> I am using “aestheticism” to denote an undialectical, art for art’s sake approach to art, which Adorno criticizes.



irony, as above. Moreover, he follows through with the deceitful dandy's indeterminate negation until it becomes determinate.

Thus, having intervened to establish that Kierkegaard is, after all and unwittingly, a dialectical thinker, Adorno then focuses on the moment of closure, in which the external world is omitted from the *intérieur*: the moment when “the ‘I’ is thrown back onto itself” (Adorno 1989, 29) and the very concept of the *intérieur* is conceived. As Adorno argues, the result of the moment of closure, for Kierkegaard, is that “the objectless dialectic subsumes all qualitative determinations under the formal category of ‘negation’” (32). In spite of Kierkegaard's insistence on an exclusively inward and objectless dialectic, built by means of internal contradictions and devoid of history, Adorno sees the Hegelian historical dialectic as constituting the core of Kierkegaard's internal monologue, which is especially recognizable in the historical character of “the choice of the choice itself” (32), whereby interiority is necessarily bound with exteriority:

Kierkegaard did not “overcome” Hegel's system of identity; Hegel is inverted, interiorized, and Kierkegaard comes closest to reality where he holds to Hegel's historical dialectic. Indeed, Kierkegaard himself conceives the dialectic exclusively according to the schema of internality. But in this schema he is continually confronted by history as it in truth is. (32)

By choosing the *intérieur* as the core concept in his work on Kierkegaard, Adorno is, in fact, bringing back Hegelian historical dialectics, with a stronger focus on objectivity, by means of Kierkegaard's opposition to objectivity. All of Kierkegaard's resistance to the contingency and alienating abstractness of the historical world is interpreted by Adorno as a reaction to (and therefore as still being entangled with) the external, historical world. For Adorno, the Kierkegaardian *intérieur* is the subject's reaction to the degeneration of the external world, aided by the Danish author's “knowledge of the reification of social life, the alienation of the individual from a world that comes into focus as a mere commodity” (39). In the subject's leap into an objectless abyss, Kierkegaard seeks a return of pure immediacy, away from “the distress of incipient high capitalism” (39). But Adorno's interpretation of the *intérieur* also maintains the material aspect of “the bourgeois *intérieur* of the nineteenth century” (41). Adorno depicts Kierkegaard as the bourgeois *rentier* isolating himself in his small apartment “under the sign of the fortress as that of the primordial past” (43), finding that the decorative objects are taken out of the circle of high capitalism and, in the closed immanence, are divorced

from their use-value but still imbued with their historical materiality, from which the subject cannot escape. Framing Kierkegaard's conceptual apparatus in the apartment, Adorno creates the optimal structure for juxtaposing subject and object, interiority and the corrupt outside world, the natural and the historical. All of this is possible, however, due to the framing work that Adorno has done by *distorting* Kierkegaard's text by means of his (Adorno's) own writing style—a weaving and shifting, as well as simultaneously meticulous and expansive, interventionist commentary—which, by altering and estranging a text, in this case Kierkegaard's text, lends it the missing negative dimension. In Kierkegaard's case, this negative dimension was the objectivity he had lost by too strongly internalizing Hegel's totalizing subject in the form of the isolated individual consciousness surrounded by a sea of nothingness.

David Sherman (2007) argues that, in spite of Adorno's vehement rejection of Kierkegaard's failure to complete the dialectics, as a result of which he “does away with the object, external history, and nature, thereby leaving the individual in objectless inwardness” (30), Kierkegaard and Adorno do meet in their commitment to negativity. The negative, for Kierkegaard, is “the source of our freedom” (33) and also “reflects our essential existential position in the world” (33), which keeps us “trapped in a negative relation between the rock of being and the hard place of thought” (33). The subject's duty is to “keep the negative tension alive” (33) in order to fully exist. Adorno, while endorsing the negative tension of the dialectic, refers rather to “the dialectical relation that constitutes such linked dualities as subject and object, individual and society, and nature and history” (33), which is at odds with Kierkegaard's subject-centred understanding of the negative. Adorno, therefore, does not place the subject in between thought (philosophical work) and the objectivity of the world, as Kierkegaard does. Instead, he frames thought and world by means of aesthetic negativity.

Ultimately, the true content of the “objectless inwardness” (Adorno 1989, 63) that Adorno finds in Kierkegaard's figure of the *intérieur* is aesthetic experience, characterized as antinomic or in “definitive opposition to ‘existence’” (66). Insofar as Kierkegaard's inwardness deals with images conjured up from the external world, images that are estranged from their original context, Adorno designs, out of Kierkegaard's fragmented internal monologue, an aesthetic structure that bears a strange resemblance to reality and in which the struggle with the external world can be carried forth, albeit on different grounds. Moreover, for Adorno, the rational is implicit

in the reality of existence, as Kierkegaard argues that the existence of an individual (and through this, his interiority) has nothing to do with the abstract doctrine of the Fichtean and Hegelian object-based identity, which is simply “a mathematical point which does not exist” (quoted in Adorno 1989, 70). All objective reflection, for Kierkegaard, leads the subject towards distance from objectivity and indifference to images, while, as Adorno argues, inwardness only brings back objectivity by means of images and semblance. The relative autonomy of aesthetic experience is, for Adorno, an occasion to intensify the subject/object dialectics and to expose the crisis inherent in the individual. In the words of Sherman (2007),

while Kierkegaard could no more escape the reality from which he sought refuge in “inwardness” than in his childhood apartment, the attempt itself . . . reflects the social truth of his time (i.e., the increasingly perilous fate of “the individual” in industrial society). For Adorno, the appropriate response to this levelling reality is to move toward “the aesthetic,” not away from it, as Kierkegaard does. This means adopting a dialectically informed materialist aesthetics that might induce the recognition that, historically, both external and internal nature had been sacrificed in the name of self-preservation, but that the perpetuation of this sacrifice had outlasted any of the objective demands that might have precipitated it. (24)

By launching a relentless critique of the crisis of thought and the inevitable circularity of the subject, which is vulnerable to reification<sup>16</sup> and the conceptual checkmate of institutionalized philosophy, Adorno sets up his own framing device maintained by his non-linear writing style, which *exemplifies* dialectical thinking instead of schematizing it. In *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic* (1989), Adorno assembles the fragile (but persistent) structure of the “dialectically informed materialist aesthetics” (24) using

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<sup>16</sup> In Adorno’s œuvre, *reification* is a significant recurring concept with a floating meaning. In texts inclined towards social criticism, such as *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, reification retains its more traditional Marxist character, whereby capitalist market-driven economy disconnects commodities from the social relations involved in their production and presents commodities as if they were autonomous, self-manifesting entities. In Adorno’s more philosophically inclined texts, such as *Negative Dialectics*, reification refers to thought that is disconnected from the dialectical thinking process. For example, a history of facts without their social context is an example of reified thinking, as is philosophy that celebrates either the mind or the world without the other. On many occasions, the social and philosophical meanings of reification overlap. The case of Kierkegaard is a good example: for Adorno, bourgeois subjectivity, conditioned by the capitalist mode of production, imagines itself to be autonomous from the world that produces it (much like commodities are presented without links to the social relations of production), which results in individualist bourgeois philosophy such as existentialism (a philosophy that supposedly ignores the dialectical relation between subjectivity and objectivity). Adorno finds redeeming features in Kierkegaard’s philosophy, but only through his own interventionist reading, which restores Kierkegaardian philosophy to its full dialectical splendour.

the elements, images, and scraps of thought from Kierkegaard's text, all the while intervening to save Kierkegaard's self-identical subject from infinite closure into itself.

### **HEGEL AND THE ART OF DISOBEDIENT LANGUAGE**

Later in his career, in 1963, after teaching at the Goethe University in Frankfurt, Adorno was preparing one of his main works on his signature philosophical concept, the negative dialectic. However, before the publication of *Negative Dialectics* in 1966 (first translation into English published in 1973), he turned, once more, to Hegel<sup>17</sup> and published three essays on different aspects of Hegel's work in a book titled *Hegel: Three Studies* (1963/1993). Using a framing device similar to the one in his study of Kierkegaard, Adorno persistently chases the object of inquiry, which turns out to be as internally divergent as any other object of Adorno's intellectual pursuits, rejecting, from the start, the possibility of a totalizing stance. Adorno means this quite literally: he claims that the whole, textually as well as conceptually, cannot be grasped because "the whole realizes itself only in and through the parts, only through discontinuation, alienation, and reflection—through, in short, everything that is anathema to Gestalt theory" (4). From the outset, therefore, Adorno rejects any reading of Hegel that extracts the superiority of the subject as state or spirit and thus undermines the circular character of the dialectic.

In the *Three Studies*, the text's internal dialectic is distinctly negative for several reasons. First, Adorno's dialectic, as it emerges from the *Three Studies*, is negative because it is opposed to positivist notions of truth; the dialectic is marked by internal contradictions and is critically disposed towards reified thought. Second, as discussed above, Adorno insists on the negative aspect of dialectics by emphasizing Hegel's own focus on objectivity, which ultimately undermines a circular subject-object relationship, revealing that "dialectics is the consistent sense of nonidentity" (Adorno 1973, 5) in

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<sup>17</sup> Scholarship on Adorno's reception of Hegel and German Idealism is abundant. Most scholars agree that, although Adorno maintains a critical distance to Hegel's work, he holds on to several of the main premises of Hegelian Idealism. As J. M. Bernstein (2004) noted in "Negative Dialectic as Fate: Adorno and Hegel," "while Hegel is occasionally the object of Adorno's thought, . . . he is more routinely and emphatically present as its orientation, its method, approach, style, or *conatus*. An extreme way of stating this claim would be to say, flatly, that Adorno was a Hegelian, that however he departs from Hegel, he accepts the rudiments of Hegelian idealism" (19). More important than labelling Adorno as Hegelian or not is to understand how his approach to Hegel's work differs from that of other thinkers from the same era, such as Kojève and Hyppolite. In that sense, it is clear that Adorno, while accepting the premises of Hegelian sociohistorical and mediated dialectics, moves away from the fundamental aspect of Hegelian Idealism by completely rejecting its totalizing aspects (which Kojève and Hyppolite uphold).

which negativity is associated with insoluble contradiction and absence—that is, with that which is not identity (non-identity).<sup>18</sup> Related to this point is Adorno’s own focus on objectivity, exemplified by his emphasis of the material, experiential, and even personal elements involved in dealing with texts, such as Hegel’s famously dishevelled and exhausted appearance, as described by one of Hegel’s students, H. G. Hotho. Finally, similar to Adorno’s account of the Kierkegaardian *intérieur*, the dialectic becomes negative through its aesthetic and even literary characteristics, with Adorno focusing on those parts of the text that depart from the conceptual and abstract notions of the Hegelian dialectic. As I will discuss, the concept that emerges from the constant return to the text by means of aesthetic framing is *mimesis*—a distorted kind of mimesis that fundamentally undermines self-identity and representation even beyond Adorno’s declared philosophical intentions.

### ***Truth and Criticism***

Adorno (1989) opens his book on Kierkegaard by claiming that “all attempts to comprehend the writings of philosophers as poetry have missed their truth content” (3) and then argues that the “real” or the “truth content” of a work is determined “by the degree to which the real has entered into concepts, manifests itself in these concepts, and comprehensibly justifies them” (3). The “real” in this context represents objectivity, determined by its historical and spatiotemporal determination, as well as by the exteriority of nature and all that does not belong to the human social world. Despite rejecting the idea of philosophy as a type of poetics, Adorno ultimately upholds the notion of the experience of philosophy as aesthetics. The difference is that, in the first case (in the attempt of “comprehending the writing of philosophers as poetry” [3]), the conceptual work is effaced and the object of philosophy—which is both concept and language—is lost; meanwhile, in accounting for the aesthetic experience of philosophical writing, concept and truth are reworked dialectically by their material determination in language. The idea of truth that Adorno seeks in Kierkegaard’s work and, later, in Hegel’s (as developed in the *Three Studies*) is not the propositional truth of logic or the so-called intuitive truth (even less the truth based on common sense), so

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<sup>18</sup> As noted in the previous section, it has become customary to formulate Adorno’s reworking of Hegel’s formula as “the non-identity of identity and non-identity”: “Whereas Hegel’s speculative identity amounts to an identity between identity and nonidentity, Adorno’s amounts to a nonidentity between identity and nonidentity” (Zuidervaart 2015, np).

often employed in analytic formulations—the truth of “what simply is the case” (1993, 10). Rather, Adorno is after a truth that is dialectical, or, as mentioned above, a truth that “has entered into concepts” (3), resulting in the breakdown of the subjective circle by empirical saturation of the system. As Bernstein (2004) argues, Adorno turns the aspiration of the Hegelian dialectic into concreteness, which results in the opposite of the subjective dialectic:

Adorno’s defense of Hegel turns on the idea that Hegelian dialectic, despite the fact that it is a subjective subject-object dialectic (it expresses the semantic thesis of idealism), despite the fact that it disowns the significance of language, despite the fact that it aimed at conceptual closure, and despite the fact that the closure aimed at transpired as the closed system of late capital, nonetheless, in its very attempt to conceptually exhaust the world, to make concept and world be at one, to utterly bind thought and being, transcends itself. (40)

In other words, what Adorno counts on is the intrinsic negation present in Hegelian dialectics, which, if intensified, collapses the rational by over-saturating it with the empirical.

The Hegelian text is suitable for elaborating a dialectical notion of truth opposed to the Kantian identity-based understanding of truth<sup>19</sup> and to any transcendent concept meant to encompass an absolute truth. Adorno thinks that Hegel advances a notion of truth understood as “the dynamic totality of all the propositions that can be generated from one another by virtue of their contradictions” (Adorno 1993, 12). Further, Adorno understands Hegel’s thinking as a philosophy that takes idealism at face value, which is to say that it understands idealism in its “purest” form, as positing the infinity of the subject as the principle out of which everything else (e.g., the material world) can be deduced. He then interprets this position to mean that the dynamic and contradictory aspect of the subject prevails, turning idealism on its head and reaching, by means of this contortion, the opposing principle—that of non-identity. Adorno sees Hegel’s idealism-taken-to-the-extreme as the latter’s utmost commitment to the object—to

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<sup>19</sup> Sally Sedgwick’s *Hegel’s Critique of Kant: From Dichotomy to Identity* (2012) presents both Kant’s theory of the identity of subjectivity, together with his idea of truth of things in themselves, and Hegel’s critique and alternative position to Kant. As Sedgwick explains, “the manifold of given representations ... ‘would not be one and all my representations did they not all belong to one self-consciousness’” (104). Moreover, when dealing with the empirical world, to which the subject does not have access directly, the subject relies on reflective judgement to “[reduce] the variety of the given sensible particulars to identity, [to seek] some general concept or universal under which to subsume the diversity of species” (30). Overall, Kant’s idea of truth is a transcendental one, based on the subject’s synthetic a priori knowledge, which is independent of experience. For Hegel, of course, there is no unified idea of truth, as he takes as separate the truth of things and the truth of the subject to be different.

reality's becoming, whose internal logic Hegel follows, reproducing its movement from truth into non-identity. The essence of Hegel's engagement with the world and "its own substratum, society" (30) is not only the reproduction of the utter disintegration of the principle of identity and truth in society but also the critique of society:

Hegel's philosophy is indeed essentially negative: critique. In extending the transcendental philosophy of the *Critique of Pure Reason* through the thesis of reason's identity with what exists and making it a critique of what exists, a critique of any and every positivity, Hegel denounced the world, whose theodicy constitutes his program, in its totality as well; he denounced it as a web of guilt [*Schuldzusammenhang*] in which, as Mephistopheles says in *Faust*, everything that exists deserves to perish. (30)

Unlike Kojève and Hyppolite, who seek to arrive at a stable notion of the Hegelian system in its realization as absolute knowledge and differential sense, respectively, Adorno insists on affirming "the non-identity of subject and object, concept and thing, idea and society" (31) in Hegel's work, without seeking a reconciliation of the contradictory elements and a reaffirmation of positivist notions of truth. The only commitment that Adorno maintains when commenting on Hegel's text is to the object of the dialectic and critical thought: "In that it ultimately disintegrates in absolute negativity, [Hegel's philosophy] nevertheless also redeems its promise and truly becomes identical with its ensnared subject matter" (31–32).

Adorno uses Hegel's philosophical legacy to build a critical stance against a range of ideas, some materialized in societal trends, such as the entire contemporary entertainment industry or occult practices like astrology and the so-called New-Age arts,<sup>20</sup> and others ossified in philosophical thought. One of the most frequently encountered notions against which Adorno mounts his criticism is reified thought. In fact, it would not be an overstatement to claim that the entire project of the negative dialectic is an attack against the perniciousness of reification.<sup>21</sup> Similar to French post-structuralist thinkers, Adorno targets traditional metaphysics in his almost literal over-

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<sup>20</sup> Adorno's essays on occultism, mass media, and irrationalism at large, which he links to antisemitism in the collection of essays titled *The Stars Down to Earth* (2002), demonstrate that labelling him as a kind of mystical thinker, as Noys does in *The Persistence of the Negative* (2010, 119) due to Adorno's engagement with Hegel and his interest in aesthetics, is completely misguided.

<sup>21</sup> As mentioned previously in this chapter, Adorno's critique of modernity's reification is most directly approached in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where, along with Horkheimer, his "goal is . . . to elaborate an account of the conceptual underpinnings of the process of societal rationalization . . . , a process of which capital class domination and reification (as theorized by Marx) constitute the disastrous apotheosis" (Bernstein 2004, 21).

turning of the Hegelian logic (because he is reading Hegel against the grain, as he notes at the beginning of the *Three Studies*), arguing that “Hegel rejected the equation of philosophical substance—truth—with the highest abstractions, and located truth in the very specificities with which traditional metaphysics was too refined to dirty its hands” (1993, 35). Instead of positing truth in its absolute, transcendent form, as Kojève does, Adorno uses this concept as grounds for critiquing abstract and reified notions, such as being. However, truth is not rendered as a relative, subjective moment but is instead dialectically determined “as something ‘in and for itself’” (36). Thus, it is neither “mere relationship between judgement and objects” (36) nor “a predicate of subjective thought” but rather “mediated within itself” (37) and “contained in what is true, although it is not identical with it” (37). Finally, Adorno equates truth with the dialectical process (“process, that is, is truth itself,” 37), which occurs via the subject’s engagement with critical thought. Although truth is rooted in the subjective process, it also reaches beyond the subject, transcending subjective judgement (“truth transcends itself and becomes something in-itself” [39]). Therefore, the transcendent aspect is not a return to the ontological, traditionally metaphysical status of truth or an affirmation of the absoluteness of truth<sup>22</sup> but “thought that is absolutely without reference . . . , thought that removes all participation on the subject’s part and all anthropomorphism from the object” (41) while still being defined by its critical and negative core.

In Adorno’s work on Kierkegaard and Hegel, it is common for an argument to begin with a contextualization of the referenced text in its extant conceptual debates and to end with a point that applies to Adorno’s own context. All this is possible not because dialectics can be used to stretch concepts across the ages; rather, what Adorno sees as the core of Hegel’s negation is the criticism of reason inherited from Kant and taken further by turning it into a criticism of “the real” (1993, 77).<sup>23</sup> In Adorno, criticism is built up by an accumulation of a superabundance of details. The difference between Adorno’s method of engaging with the Hegelian text and that of other post-Hegelian

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<sup>22</sup> However, formulating truth as not determined by time and affirming that “for Hegel time becomes a moment of truth itself” (Adorno 1993, 40) may lead the reader to question what exactly the transcending aspect of truth is if it is not something akin to the absolute.

<sup>23</sup> In this context, “the real” represents the formal categories proposed by Kant, which Hegel criticizes and supplements with the particularity of their sociohistorical determination. The full quotation reads as follows: “In Kant, critique remains critique of reason; in Hegel, who criticizes the Kantian separation of reason from reality, the critique of reason is simultaneously a critique of the real. The inadequacy of isolated particular definitions is always also the inadequacy of the particular reality that is grasped in those definitions” (Adorno 1993, 77).



thinkers is evident not necessarily in conceptual terms but in the fact that there is a refusal of synthesis—that is, of reaching a positive, conciliatory point at the level of both language and concept. The criticism of social and historical reality resembles said reality and cannot be neatly resolved into one concept. Adorno holds onto the negativity of the inherent contradiction within “thought-forms [that] are socially and historically formed” (Bernstein 2004, 40) (often referred to as experience), emphasizing contradiction as the underlying law in the functioning of society (Adorno 1993, 79), insofar as “society becomes a totality only by virtue of its contradictions” (79), a society whose consolidation “has resulted from the principle of domination, the principle of division itself, and it perpetuates itself” (79).

The problem with criticism in its popular form is that it may lead to thinking that is itself easily reified and generalized because, instead of pursuing the contradictions inherent in the object, such criticism aims to arrive at a positive statement of fact. As a result, criticism ends up serving the purpose of reification and becomes another face of positivism. Instead, for Adorno (1993), criticism is not the outcome of the negative dialectic, nor a method or an object of study, but “the ever-present consciousness of both the identity of and the inevitable difference between the concept and what it is supposed to express, a consciousness that animates all genuine knowledge” (71). Rather than being fixed, the resulting negativity itself becomes subjected to criticism because it reflects the negativity of Hegel’s object of study in the *Phenomenology*, namely consciousness (72). The point of critical negativity is not to redeem, against a negative concept, a positive one; rather, the negativity of consciousness is doubled, amplified, and distorted. The process is never resolved. Adorno’s own commentary acknowledges the dilemma of the overly general and abstract nature of negative criticism. The solution, for him, is determinate negation, described as “the central nerve of the dialectic as a method” (80), which “is based on the experience of the impotence of a criticism that keeps to the general and polishes off the object being criticized by subsuming it from above under a concept as its representative” (81). Along with the concept of determinate negation comes Adorno’s first critique of the Hegelian totalizing notion of knowledge, which entails a continuous process in spite of the discontinuities of experience. Unlike Kojève, Adorno does not subscribe to the idea of the overwhelming power of knowledge by inserting his own concept of negation as the missing link that enables the successful determination of both

the particular and the totality. Rather, Adorno's negativity never becomes a concept (negativity never *is*) but *remains a critical force* that does not allow the synthesis machine to take over. The specificity of philosophy is in the "positing" of the whole that does not aim to turn contradictions and discontinuities into positive conclusions but leads to the opposite, a negative whole with a foot outside of itself:

This is the truth in Hegel's untruth. The force of the whole, which it mobilizes, is not a mere fantasy on the part of spirit; it is the force of the real web of illusion in which all individual existence remains trapped. By specifying, in opposition to Hegel, the negativity of the whole, philosophy satisfies, for the last time, the postulate of determinate negation, which is a positing. The ray of light that reveals the whole to be untrue in all its moments is none other than utopia, the utopia of the whole truth, which is still to be realized. (87–88)

Adorno maintains, at all times, something of a line of flight<sup>24</sup> that allows him to avoid becoming an outright systems thinker, as there are occasions when, in spite of his insistence on the incohesive elements of the Hegelian dialectic, Adorno's negative dialectic is in danger of simply affirming a normative and traditional judgement, especially when applied to art.<sup>25</sup>

In "Critique and Deconstruction: A Preliminary Reflection" (2001), Christoph Menke mounts a defense of deconstruction, distinguishing it from a general definition of critique, which is "the operation of distinction and decision with reference to a normative aspect" (50), an operation that is "fundamental to normativity" (50). "By this definition," he continues, "deconstruction is 'anti-critical'—methodologically 'deconstruction' always means 'deconstruction of critique'" (50). To transcribe this using Adorno's Hegelian vocabulary, critique is necessarily subsumed by normativity, while deconstruction is doubly negative (but not, however, the negation of negation, which concludes in affirmation). Adorno's negative critique, I argue, can be likened to deconstruction rather than (normative) criticism. By always maintaining a line of flight, Adorno's work does not participate in upholding a normative practice because it also

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<sup>24</sup> The line of flight, a concept developed and popularized by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980/2005, 9), refers to the way in which a concept must maintain a degree of openness to become accessible to being thought. This degree of openness also means that the concept is never closed off to change. Accordingly, emphasizing lines of flight in concepts can be used as a philosophical strategy; I would argue that Adorno, who is vehemently opposed to reified (i.e., disconnected and hence falsely self-manifesting) thought, employs a highly similar kind of philosophical strategy.

<sup>25</sup> As Andrew Bowie (2013) calls it, Adorno's negative dialectic, especially when applied to art, can be read as "implausibly dogmatic" (135).

does not allow for the totalizing and reifying closure of the subjective (or conceptual) circle. Deconstruction always deconstructs itself at the same time as its object, just as Adorno's negative critique constantly delays and frustrates subjective enclosure. Criticism, powered by the force of knowledge, risks collapsing into a circular dialectic under the great, circular expansion of the subject. However, Adorno uses an element that is always outside the frame—*utopia*—to short-circuit the synthesizing force and the resulting reification.

Utopia is the concept that supposedly escapes the system and interferes with it from the outside, keeping the circle from closing, which turns criticism into deconstruction, or negative critique. Thus, determinate negation (the aforementioned “central nerve” of the dialectic), rather than being a philosophical formula, seems to be, for Adorno, a kind of gaze beyond the thinking process—philosophizing while keeping an eye on the horizon. Utopia, the never-realized absolute totality, acts as the never-actualized power of synthesis, whose role, instead of creating a seamless thread out of the discontinuities of reality, acts as a negating force. The framing of truth as critique is radically decentred by utopia—the totalizing whole is posited as absent. Adorno's (1993) strong statement at the end of the second essay in the *Three Studies* affirms the negative utopian moment when philosophy performs the work of determinate negation that does not allow for the final sublimation of objectivity into spirit:

By specifying, in opposition to Hegel, the negativity of the whole, philosophy satisfies, for the last time, the postulate of determinate negation, which is a positing. The ray of light that reveals the whole to be untrue in all its moments in none other than utopia, the utopia of the whole truth, which is still to be realized. (87–88)

Adorno's utopia moment is a flight from criticism as a tool of normativity and reification and serves as a deconstructive element in relation to Hegel's and his own text. Utopia is not the unifying whole nor the messianic moment of reconciliation. It does not bring final affirmations or syntheses. Rather, Adorno's absent utopia enables conceptual non-identity, or radical negativity, that escapes the mediating circular negation endlessly performed by the subject.

### *Thought and Objectivity*

Adorno's negative dialectic, as developed in his *Three Studies on Hegel* (1993), also relies on his idea of objectivity as central to the nature of truth, as both discussions, of objectivity and the nature of truth, are grounded in the subject's relation to the world. To begin, Adorno reverses the relation between idealism and objectivity by arguing that Hegel's idealism does not merely impose the supremacy of the subject over the world but confronts the Kantian transcendental aesthetic with its logical implications by emphasizing "that there can be no *constituens* and no generative conditions of the spirit that are not abstracted from actual subjects and thereby ultimately from something that is not merely subjective, from the 'world'" (1993, 9). From this, Adorno derives Hegel's disenchantment with *prima philosophia* and any idea of an ultimate (*ur-*)principle, which would lead to positing a grounding concept, such as the subject, as ὑποκείμενον (*hypokeimenon*), the substratum of the world. There is, however, still a deductive totalizing principle at work in Hegel, as Adorno also admits, in spite of the fact that Hegel's reliance on objectivity in the process of constituting the totalizing principle (the active spirit or absolute knowledge) leads to generating discontinuities that are more difficult to subsume under a totalizing subject.

Therefore, Adorno (1993) seeks to redefine the dialectic as "the permanent confrontation of the object with its concept" (9) and, by including in the dialectic the critical aspect of confrontation, argues that the "dialectic is the unswerving effort to conjoin reason's critical consciousness of itself and the critical experience of objects" (9–10). The dialectic is, on the one hand, the negative relation that the subject has with itself and, on the other, the relation that the subject has with the world. Adorno claims that the Kantian subject contains the knowing subject's need for supplementation, as the subject relies on the world for knowledge (14). However, in Adorno's view, Kant does not engage directly with this aspect of transcendentalism and dissolves into pure subjectivity all spatiotemporal dimensions by using the principle of the necessary unity of apperception. Then, with Hegel, Kant's "introspective naïveté" (14) is overcome, and the subject, no longer in a state of pure identity, contains the subject-object relation, and the subject's movement towards self-consciousness implies its confrontation with that which is beyond itself—namely, the concrete world. As opposed to attributing to Hegel a kind of subjectivism (an inflated subject, concerned only with its own extended domain), which would end with the same circularity that Kojève arrives at, Adorno

creates a subject-object dialectic in which the subject is so tied up with objectivity that the interiority (of the subject) makes no sense without exteriority. The result, instead of being abstractly circular, is negativity as ambiguity and indeterminacy:

The quintessence of the conditioned, according to Hegel, is the unconditioned. It is this, not least of all, that gives rise to the hovering, suspended quality of Hegelian philosophy, its quality of being up in the air, its permanent *skandalon*: the name of the highest speculative concept, that of the absolute, of something utterly detached, is literally the name of that suspended quality. (13)

Σκάνδαλον (*skandalon*:<sup>26</sup> a trap, an offence, a stumbling block) is, like the concept of utopia discussed earlier, another one of Adorno's deconstructive devices that allows the dialectic to remain suspended (i.e., without a synthesis), though in the case of *skandalon*, the line of flight becomes embedded in the object rather than posited outside of it. This deconstructive move also sheds light on the subject's major stumbling block, namely the moment of non-identity with itself. If the subject's other, its object and stumbling block, is embedded within the subject, the latter's pure identity, in Kantian terms, does not hold.

The flaw of objectivity, which Adorno foresees and addresses in the *Three Studies*, is that the focus on the object can be interpreted as a return to immediacy and as a reaffirmation of a positivist, identity-based understanding of the world. This would also mean that determinate negation would retain its normative and affirmative power through criticism and, eventually, would reinforce a functional, empiricist, and scientist system of thought. To resist this downfall, Adorno's insistence on non-identity is also strengthened every time he focuses on objectivity, either in relation to Hegel's work itself or in relation to the concepts that he advances separately, such as experience, *skandalon*, or determinate negation as critique. For Adorno, the key to overcoming the threat of positivist and empirical thought, with its tendency to generalize, categorize, and, ultimately, dominate knowledge, is Hegel's annihilation of immediacy (in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*) as ground for thought.

Hegel criticized the empiricist understanding of experience, rejecting the immediacy of the given as the basis of experience. Instead, experience always already implies the subject; therefore, it is always mediated: "This principle of Experience carries with it the unspeakably important condition that, in order to accept and believe

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<sup>26</sup> Used unitalicized henceforth.

any fact, we must be in contact with it; or, in more exact terms, that we must find the fact united and combined with the certainty of our own selves” (Hegel, quoted by Adorno 1993, 59). The object is never accessed without mediation, and the subject cannot be considered on its own, without relations to objects. Consequently, for Adorno, non-identity is what prevents Hegel’s dialectic from achieving perfectly circular closure because, even at the highest point of synthesis at the level of spirit, the immediacy of opposites is impossible. He pushes this point, defining negativity as non-identity, which prevails at the level of both the particular and the whole:

In all its particular moments Hegel’s philosophy is intended to be negative; but if, contrary to his intentions, it becomes negative as a whole as well, it thereby acknowledges the negativity of its object. In that ultimately the nonidentity of subject and object, concept and thing, idea and society, emerges, unpacifiable, in his philosophy; in that it ultimately disintegrates in absolute negativity, it nevertheless also redeems its promise and truly becomes identical with its ensnared subject matter. (31–32)

In the *Three Studies*, Hegel’s text is the centre of attention, and it is easy to overlook Adorno’s own contribution and the development, through Hegelian language, of the former’s method of the negative dialectic. Adorno insists that Hegel, in closely pursuing the object of his inquiry, not only achieves non-identity of subject and object but also follows the development of the world until it collapses (or rather, until it reaches “the ugly side” [31]). This approach to the object of inquiry accurately represents Adorno’s own method of framing the object by creating critical tension and following the traces of the internal dialectic of a text (or, as I will discuss in the third part of this chapter, the art object) until “it ultimately disintegrates in absolute negativity” (32).

Adorno’s approach to the Hegelian text is declaredly not meant to arrive at textual or conceptual accuracy—or rather than simply being commentary, it is an effort to encounter the “experiential substance” (Adorno 1993, 54) of Hegel’s thought and to follow through with the implications of “the compelling force of the objective phenomena that have been reflected in his philosophy and are sedimented in it” (54). This approach prompts Adorno to consider Hegel the person, along with his texts, as an object of study, though he does not regard Hegel as a genius philosopher or the last man, the thinker at the end of time, as Kojève does. In an attempt to escape the rigidity of the concept and the dominance of subjectivity in thought, Adorno seeks to flee to another layer of aesthetic detail. As Tom Huhn (2006) argues, Adorno sees that “thinking becomes not only opaque to itself but also rigid, like a thing, before it has the

opportunity to allow things to encounter it or for it to become something else” (3). By delving into piles of lecture notes and forgotten secondary sources, Adorno unearths the image of a dishevelled Hegel—the “something else” of philosophy’s concept—who, in becoming one with his writing, pours himself mentally and physically into his work, into his lectures and manuscripts, until he becomes the embodied concept of the non-identity of man and idea and until the concept itself becomes a disheveled “something else.” We can see once again that a material aesthetic analysis constitutes an indispensable deconstructive tool in Adorno’s arsenal, one which prevents critical analysis from collapsing into rigid, normative, and dogmatic thinking.

Although thought is bound up with objectivity, Adorno argues that Hegel resists (or rather is forced to oppose, by the implication of his philosophical commitment to “experiential substance” [Adorno 1993, 54]) the bourgeois line of thought that posits the moral integrity of the individual because the subject’s individualist isolation from the world, which “disintegrates in absolute negativity” (31–32), cannot be sustained. Adorno also rejects Kierkegaard’s and Schopenhauer’s vehement criticism of Hegel the person as “the comfortable professor lecturing, unconcerned, on the sufferings of mankind” (49). In doing so, Adorno presents Hegel as he himself would hope to be seen, if not by his contemporaries then by posterity: as a man whose praxis, rather than translating into direct political engagement, constitutes, instead, a deep and consuming engagement with thought and world; as a man who is “full of suffering, his countenance ravaged by thought, the face of one who has literally consumed himself until he is no more than ashes” (49–50). In this picture, man and thought, subject and object, are entangled, but the overall idea itself goes beyond a mere highlighting of the importance of entanglement. In fact, after his insistence on objectivity and “experiential substance,” Adorno works to dismantle the stability of the object by focusing on the inadequacy of objectivity in conveying ideas. In the case of Hegel, his writing, flawed and insufficiently clear, is “only a covering under which the concept lies concealed” (Hegel, quoted by Adorno 1993, 93). Thus, by prioritizing non-identity, the dialectic remains negative by not giving in to either the immediacy of the object or the positive morality of the individuated subject. The idea is always more than the man. In fact, the power of the idea, by its destructive force, drives the man to his grave, but the idea as such persists.

### *Aesthetic Negativity and Mimesis*

Adorno (1993) rejects the principle of textual and conceptual clarity on the grounds of it being rationalist and aprioristic, imposing itself “as though the object had to be a static mathematical object” (98). Accordingly, in framing the object of study, which is Hegel’s text, Adorno leans neither in favour of a reading that sides with the truth content as contained in the “material concreteness, definition, and fulfilment” (101) of a philosophical text nor exclusively in favour of a language-focused reading. Nor does he, in the third essay of the *Three Studies*, “Skoteinos, or How to Read Hegel,” turn to the text in order to extract a conciliatory framework that would partly resolve the tensions arising between the text, its interpretation, and its sociohistorical context. Rather, as the title of the essay suggests (*skoteinos*, ancient Greek for dark, obscure), traditionally the philosophical text is forced to accommodate the demand for clarity in relation to an object that is fundamentally unclear, that object being experience. Instead, Adorno chooses to amplify the obscure aspects of experience. Instead of performing a reconciliatory reading, he insists on intensifying the aporetic and critically deconstructive tendencies of the text, and it is exactly this increased pressure on the concept that leads to the third dimension of his conception of negativity: aesthetic negativity. Aesthetics provide the “outside” that philosophy can resort to in an attempt to avoid the constant danger of reification posed by philosophy’s necessary recourse to formalization. However, philosophy’s relation to aesthetics is not without peril, especially because Adorno claims that the realms of art and the concept are contradictory.<sup>27</sup> In fact, aesthetics is only useful to the negative dialectic in foregrounding the negative. In what follows, I will outline Adorno’s development of the negative dialectic towards the moment when it meets aesthetics and establishes a mimetic relation between the text and the aesthetic structure in the *Three Studies* in

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<sup>27</sup> In “Essay as Form” (1958/2019), Adorno emphasizes the constant tension between art (represented by literature) and philosophy. Regarding philosophy, he argues that, in believing itself to be superior in rationality, philosophy uses literary language by completely decontextualizing it, leaving it devoid of the very sociohistorical context that makes up literature: “Wherever philosophy imagines that by borrowing from literature it can abolish objectified thought and its history—what is commonly termed the antithesis of subject and object . . . it starts to turn into a washed-out cultural babble” (32). On the side of language, the rejection of reason and meaning results in empty positivism: “Language’s ambitious transcendence of meaning ends up in a meaninglessness which can be easily seized upon by a positivism to which one feels superior” (32). What Adorno ultimately argues for is the coexistence of the artistic (or literary) and rational elements in the work of art, without disguising the tensions that this coexistence implies: “From the violence that image and concept thereby do to one another springs the jargon of authenticity, in which words vibrate with emotion while keeping quiet about what has moved them” (32). Adorno is critical of “authenticity” that attempts to disguise the violence and tension at the core of the work of art.



order to defend a philosophical language that conveys the non-identity of subject and object instead of collapsing into one or the other.

Throughout the last essay in the *Three Studies*, “Skoteinos, or How to Read Hegel,” the focus is on Hegel’s writing. In content and presentation, Hegel’s philosophical writing responds with determinate negation to both the demand for clarity and the fact that the medium it uses, the language of philosophy, is already thoroughly reified. Clarity is negated in language by the opacity and ambiguity of language. Partly reified by the circulation of its constituent concepts and its interconnectedness with market production, language is in turn negated by exposure to the conceptual work, which abstracts it from its worldliness. The result is philosophy’s continuous self-negation; the only affirmation Adorno (1993) acknowledges in Hegel’s text is in the act of declaring its own inadequacy:

To the extent to which philosophy makes an ongoing effort to break out of the reification of consciousness and its objects, it cannot comply with the rules of the game of reified consciousness without negating itself, even though in other respects it is not permitted simply to disregard those rules if it does not want to degenerate into empty words. (101)

Philosophy, for Adorno, is a chiaroscuro canvas. Against common understanding, philosophy, much like a painting executed in the chiaroscuro style, presents the viewer neither with the darkness of the shaded areas (the obscure, vaguely contoured object of experience) nor with the sharply illuminated parts that assault the eye in their bold contrast with the tenebrous areas (the clearly-defined objects on which the empirical investigator’s eye fixes its gaze all too readily); rather, the philosophical text, like the chiaroscuro canvas, is the *framing* that sustains and heightens the internal tensions and inconsistencies between the shade and the light. Adorno compares “the true linguistic method” (107) used in Hegel’s text with the way immigrants learn languages, hard pressed to understand the language in context rather than meticulously checking the dictionary and finding the corresponding words for each concept, also constantly dealing with disorientation and embarrassment, as the words will not immediately be revealed by context but “will be long surrounded by an outer area of indeterminateness . . . until the words decipher themselves through the abundance of combinations in which they appear and do so better and more fully than would have been possible with the dictionary” (107). Although “constellation” could be used instead of the chiaroscuro canvas to describe the ambiguity and indeterminacy of the Hegelian text through a

configuration of moments, the issue with the term “constellation”<sup>28</sup> is that, in spite of Adorno’s warning, it tends to maintain the reference to totality and could become a synthesizing and resolving (positive) moment.

To avoid being reified, even the concept of framing itself must be exposed to the negative dialectic and non-identity; otherwise, it risks becoming the new absolute that establishes synthesis and short-circuits the demanding dialectical process. Therefore, one of the most important features of Adorno’s framing of the aesthetic object is his sabotaging of the frame via his reaffirmation of the unfinished character of the work. For Adorno, Hegel’s writing is an example of an ongoing, never-finished process. Adorno uses several art forms as analogies for Hegel’s philosophy being “in permanent *status nascendi*” (1993, 121), in which static (i.e., positivist and reified) concepts are negated in favor of a nomadic structure,<sup>29</sup> to use the term of Adorno’s French contemporary, Gilles Deleuze. With the assertion that “Hegel’s publications are more like films of thought than text” (121), Adorno starts developing his concept of mimesis in order to rescue Hegel’s text from “the antilinguistic impulse in [Hegel’s] thought” (122), or Hegel’s crudeness and carelessness in language,<sup>30</sup> as Adorno characterizes the German philosopher’s approach to writing. However, what seems to be merely Adorno’s criticism of Hegel’s style is, in fact, an attempt at advancing his own theory of aesthetics, according to which mimesis replaces signification and the written work becomes “a kind of gestural or curvilinear writing strangely at odds with

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<sup>28</sup> As Adorno himself often states, for example in the *Three Studies* (1993), the constellation is not a rigid structure or one meant to reconcile the concepts brought together: “Constellation is not system. Everything does not become resolved, everything does not come out even; rather, one moment sheds light on the other, and the figures that the individual moments form together are specific signs and a legible script.”

<sup>29</sup> Nomadology is a concept developed by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980/2005, 351–423) that refers to activity which occurs at the edge of institutional structures. More specifically, nomadic thinking involves intensely focusing on and pursuing a problem without looking for a Yes/No solution to said problem. Usually, nomadic thinking involves a style of writing that exceeds the conventional standards of highly analytic academic literature. Given that Adorno advocates intense problem-driven dialectical thinking, opposes reified thought, and develops his own weaving and shifting style of writing, I believe he is a good example of nomadic thinking.

<sup>30</sup> In order to emphasize the contradictions and fissures in Hegel’s text, Adorno presents the Hegelian approach to the text as inadequate. Turning away from the conceptual content of the text, Adorno (1993) argues that, in terms of linguistic presentation, Hegel’s work does not have the richness and preciseness needed to satisfy the demands of the conceptual sophistication: “Hegel did not deal with [presentation] adequately. A lack of sensitivity to the linguistic stratum as a whole may be responsible for this; the crudeness of some things in his aesthetics arouses that suspicion. Perhaps, however, the antilinguistic impulse in his thought, which perceives the limits of any particular existing thing as limits of language, was so deep that as a stylist Hegel sacrificed the primacy of objectification that governed his oeuvre as a whole. This man who reflected on all reflection did not reflect on language; he moved about in language with a carelessness that is incompatible with what he said” (121–122).

the solemn claims of reason that Hegel inherited from Kant and the Enlightenment” (122).

Mimesis is a broadly used term by Adorno and has been studied extensively.<sup>31</sup> In its most basic form, the idea of mimesis refers to the imitating behaviour of animals and plants observed in nature. For example, certain animals can mimic the colours of their physical surroundings in order to blend in with natural environments. However, in Adorno, matters are never so simple. Jameson (1991) points out that Adorno, in spite of the term’s ubiquity in his works, never provides a clear definition of mimesis: it is “a foundational concept never defined nor argued but always alluded to, by name, as though it had preexisted all the texts” (64).<sup>32</sup> In fact, in Adorno’s work, mimesis is employed, as Huyssen (2003) shows, in at least five different registers,<sup>33</sup> and its use spans from his earliest published work until the last, posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory* (1970/2013), in which mimesis is treated most substantially. Thus, it is important, Owen Hulatt (2016) notes, not to take every instance of Adorno’s use of mimesis as a straightforward application of the term because mimesis is “a problematically oversubscribed term in Adorno’s work” (137). More importantly, Adorno’s development of mimesis in relation to the work of art is related to his negative reworking of the concept of subjectivity, as Tom Huhn (2006) argues:

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<sup>31</sup> Adorno’s concept of mimesis has been the focus of many studies. Aside from the studies mentioned in this chapter, see also Michael Cahn’s “Subversive Mimesis: Theodor W. Adorno and the Modern Impasse of Critique” (1984) and Martin Jay’s “Mimesis and Mimetology: Adorno and Lacoue-Labarthe” (1997). For a creative and historical exploration of mimesis drawing on Adorno’s and Benjamin’s theories of mimesis, amongst others, see Michael Taussig’s *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (1993).

<sup>32</sup> Jameson (1991) goes on to argue that mimesis (much like Benjamin’s concept of the “aura”) is used by Adorno as a means of expression of “the unique and the particular, which free an extraordinary universalizing thought and language to go about its business” (64). Nevertheless, Jameson is unsatisfied with the term “mimesis” and suggests that the term “narrative” is more appropriate and productive in terms of analyzing the involvement, at the level of the phrase, that philosophical language maintains with the world at large, thus relieving the reader of the “laborious detour through the language system by which [philosophical sentences] are produced, a detour that ultimately involves a comparative view of the various possible structures of human language” (67). However, reducing mimesis to micro-narratives is, in my opinion, an injustice to the negative implications in Adorno’s mimesis, some of which I am exploring in this dissertation.

<sup>33</sup> “[Mimesis] partakes in at least five different yet overlapping discursive registers in the text: first, in relation to the critique of the commodity form and its powers of reification and deception, a thoroughly negative form of mimesis . . . ; secondly in relation to the anthropological grounding of human nature . . . ; third in a biological, somatic sense geared toward survival as Adorno had encountered it in Roger Caillois’s work . . . ; fourth in the Freudian sense of identification and projection indebted to *Totem and Taboo*; and, lastly, in an aesthetic sense that resonates strongly with Benjamin’s language theory” (Huyssen 2003, 123).

Artworks and the aesthetic judgments that follow them are mimetic reproductions of thoughts and objects which themselves are deadened bits of subjectivity. . . . Thus we might understand reflection as the further unfolding of subjective possibility. . . . Mimesis is not then the copying or imitation of what has been but the continuity from reflection to reflection, of the multiple aspects and movements of subjective possibility. (7)

Mimesis, as the mapping of the various reflections in the work of art of living or “deadened ends of subjectivity” (7), is meant to maintain the dialectical tension between the subject and object by maintaining the subject’s rootedness in its sociohistorical determinations.

Despite the inconsistent and even whimsical use of the term—in fact, Robinson (2018) claims that Adorno’s “understanding of mimesis is regulated by the changing constellations in which it appears, which govern whether it functions according to a logic of compulsion or of playfulness” (86)—mimesis is one of the most daring concepts that Adorno advances in his work because it is fundamentally opposed to the very possibility of establishing a relation of identity between an object and a concept. In *Adorno’s Poetics of Form* (2018), which examines Adorno’s development of mimesis in relation to the theory of form, Robinson discusses the complications between mimesis and identity-based representation. In line with Huhn’s (2006) image of mimesis as the reflection of “the multiple aspects and movements of subjective possibility” (7), Robinson’s (2018) commentary acknowledges the dialectical tension that mimesis creates at the core of the subject as it frames both similarity- and difference-based relations between subject and object. As he states,

the distinction between mimesis—or more accurately, the mimetic comportment of expression—and semblance consists in the fact that this mimetic comportment survives, if not in unaltered form, from before the rigid separation of subject from object, a separation which is not only a prerequisite for the existence of semblance, but also one that is reinforced by it. . . . Insofar as it predates the separation of subject from object, mimesis does not share the rigidity of semblance: mimesis does not attempt to imitate a reality that it conceives as external to itself but rather to make itself the same as this reality of which it is a part (92).

Although it is set up to resist the structures of conventional, identity-based representation, mimesis still relies on a kind of (twisted) likeness between the representation and the represented object in order to function. The implications for radical negativity of mimesis will be further discussed in the third chapter of this

dissertation, in relation to the work of Roger Caillois. In this chapter, to cut through the complexity of Adorno's multiple uses of mimesis, I will focus on the three forms of mimesis he deploys in relation to structures of negativity in works of art and philosophical thought.

Adorno uses mimeses to place the philosophical text in relation to several concepts as a way of creating a conceptual constellation out of which, I argue, a negative figure emerges. In relation to the philosophical text, mimesis functions in the following three ways:

1. Mimesis constitutes an arena for the development of the internal tension between the work's formal and conceptual aspects. Although in other works (e.g., in his book on Kierkegaard), Adorno argues against a direct analogy between the artwork and philosophy, in the *Three Studies*, as well as in the *Aesthetic Theory*, he claims that philosophy should be seen as art in order to incorporate, dialectically, the process of extracting the objects (phenomena) out of their natural context and developing them towards self-examination. Unlike scientific examination, which keeps the object fixed and renders it inactive, the artwork, like philosophy, problematizes the truth of the object, eliciting an understanding that is not immediately available. Regarding the writing medium, in the *Three Studies*, Adorno (1993) insists on the closeness that the Hegelian text maintains with the form of expression, especially insofar as it keeps philosophy from falling into rationalist and scientific patterns of thought:

Just as there is a tension between expression and construction in works of art, so in Hegel there is a tension between the expressive and the argumentative elements. All philosophy that does not make do with an unreflective imitation of the scientific ideal is of course familiar with this tension in a less extreme form. In Hegel the expressive element represents experience; that which actually wants to come out into the open but cannot, if it wants to attain necessity, appears except in the medium of concepts, which is fundamentally its opposite. (137–138)

The internal struggle between form and concept is indicative of the non-identical element at the heart of the work. However, the philosophical text is tasked with an additional burden: that of consciously opposing the dominant ideology, in this case that of scientific positivism. Positivism is manifested in language precisely when language seems devoid of ideological inflections: paradoxically, in the expressiveness of the literary (and philosophical) text. As language itself must accomplish the critique of positivism while, in its expression, still carrying the seed of that which it criticizes,

language must overcome itself or be a critique of itself. Language is no longer allowed to perform a simple operation of semblance; rather, instead of working with the categories of truth and untruth, the philosophical text acts as the work of art by generating a truth that transcends experience in its immediacy.

As O'Connor (2004) explains, for Adorno it is an imperative that philosophy reject positivism—the doctrine that “accurately captures the nature of things” (7), in spite of the fact that “its methodologies are historically developed, and hence are not pure ahistorical ways of apprehending objects” (7). Philosophy can criticize positivism and reject the ahistorical immediacy imposed on it by an increasingly aggressive turn towards scientism<sup>34</sup> by engaging in critical self-reflection and constituting itself in light of what is outside of itself, “outside the norms of rationality” (8). Art, by its constitution, also relies on something that is both inside and outside of itself: on its materiality, its embodied otherness. Adorno (1973) wants philosophy to return to language in its details and materiality: “The crux is what happens in [philosophy], not a thesis or a position—the texture, not the deductive or inductive course of one-track minds” (33).

2. Mimesis functions as the negative relation between the work and experience (or reality). Adorno (1993) insists on the tension between Hegel's work, in which the process or labour of thought is made visible—a work that is never a finished product. As a result, it cannot join the world of commodities, whose value on the exchange marketplace cannot be evaluated—and the world that deals in quantities and objects as “congealed labour” (126). The bourgeois reality of the marketplace expects its fully reified products. Hence intellectual work where the subject is still present, where “one notices that the labor is that of human beings” (126) is deemed unfit for circulation, is not considered rigorous according to the rules of the science-based market, and so on. For Adorno, the philosophical text cannot become a fetishized product, or a property that is delivered from one owner to another (126). However, a key feature of the tension between the work of art or the work of philosophy and the reality of the marketplace is that the former incorporates the latter: there is no work that does not reflect the world

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<sup>34</sup> Adorno connects the positivism of philosophy with the subsumption of philosophy by scientific disciplines in “The Actuality of Philosophy” (1931/1977). According to him, contemporary philosophy has stopped reacting critically to the turn towards scientism.

of experience—therefore there is no philosophical text that does not bear the marks of the market.

3. Lastly, the third negative mimetic relation is between the work and its public, whose task of receiving the work of art is made much more difficult by the composite nature of the work. The work of philosophy, likewise, places tremendous pressure on the reader, whose work of understanding “has to find a foothold in the gap between experience and concept” (Adorno 1993, 139). Adorno does not see the philosophical text as a medium for the direct communication of simple truth, for a commonsensical “tell it how it is.” Truth is not a something that can be directly communicated; rather, it emerges from the work:

Direct communicability to everyone is not a criterion of truth. We must resist the all but universal compulsion to confuse the communication of knowledge with knowledge itself, and to rate it higher, if possible—whereas at present each communicative step is falsifying truth and selling it out. (1973, 41)

To explain this point, Adorno resorts to the analogy between reading philosophy and listening to a multidimensional work of music, which requires prior preparation and knowledge acquired before the listening process. Adorno likens the listening of music to the dialectical process. Music expresses one of the core principles of reading dialectically through its temporal foundation, whereby “time can be articulated only through distinctions between what is familiar and what is not yet familiar, between what already exists and what is new; the condition of moving forward is a retrogressive consciousness” (1993, 136). Negative dialectics are, by default, retrogressive instead of progressive in assessment (since there is no synthesis as such in negative dialectics). Adorno opposes resolving the movement of the musical movement or the process of conceptual engagement with the experience in writing by means of a “positive,” future-oriented conclusion—a moment when everything would be clear. The knowledge of the “whole,” in the case of art and philosophy, is indispensable for listening or reading dialectically, as Adorno often reiterates, but the whole, instead of being a generalized abstraction of the work, is the impossible utopic moment—the deconstructive, negative utopia that acts as an agent of disintegration of the whole. In practical terms, listening to Beethoven presupposes that the listener should know the movement as a whole and should have studied the composition, the sequence of the moments, and the overall “architectonic” of the piece of music. The awareness of the formal aspects, which have become familiar, has to be combined with the attention to what is new—what reveals

itself when the listener is deeply involved in the texture of music, listening to its totality and its every moment at all times. But the whole of the piece is never realized because full understanding is not possible. The preliminary understanding of the piece in its technical fullness is undermined by each subsequent listening and by the focus on each movement in its particularity. As Bowie (2013) explains, the truth of the work of art can be grasped only “from the ‘constellation of a whole sequence of moments’ . . . rather than being something which can be immediately identified” (35). However, as I stated earlier, the constellation does not represent the whole or aggregate distinct elements into a system; rather, it is supposed to keep the parts in constant tension with one another.

To complete the analogy between music and philosophy, Adorno (1993) insists on reading Hegel “against the grain” (139), which he means quite literally (as in allowing the reading of each moment to be informed by the reality encountered in the text, with all its discontinuities and inconsistencies). The tensions within the text also inform the relation that the reader develops with the text by means of a mimetic relation with the text’s exteriority and the tensions internal to it—relations informed by negativity. Thus, in a philosophical work, “the conception of totality as an identity immanently mediated by nonidentity” (137) pressures the reader to do the work inversely, “in such a way that every logical operation, however formal it seems to be, is reduced to its experiential core” (139). Adorno warns against interpreting his reading-against-the-grain method as a type of reading centred on the biographical, whereby the reader tries to figure out what the author wanted to say, what Hegel was inspired by, and so on. The type of engagement that Adorno argues for requires the work of imagination, which allows one to understand the work as “a progressive self-correcting of such projections through comparison with the text” (139) in which the projections are the reader’s specters, and the text is lifted from the page but remains a product of the content of the text itself (not a product of whatever we imagine Hegel’s convictions and life to have been). Rather, reading is an engagement with the reader’s own reality: “Whatever experience the reader may register has to be thought out on the basis of the reader's own experience” (139). Hence, the work of understanding, which is what reading is, enacts another mimetic relation, that between reader and experience (or reality), but always retrogressively, as “understanding has to find a foothold in the gap between experience and concept” (139). Understanding is not a point of synthesis and totality but a constant re-enactment of the negative relation between identity and non-



identity. Finally, one must not forget that philosophy deals with concepts and that Adorno has no intention of disposing of philosophy's heavy machinery, though he does call for a complete remodeling and expansion of the old apparatus of thought. He does this by turning to art, which brings to light the aesthetic negativity that is vital to his negative dialectic.

By way of summary, I will say that although Adorno may be evasive in describing how this concept functions, mimesis plays a crucial role in his formulation of the non-identical, whose purpose, as Buck-Morss (1977) points out, is "to resist repeating in thought the structures of domination and reification that existed in society, so that instead of reproducing reality, consciousness could be critical, so that reason would recognize its own nonidentity with social reality, on the one hand, and material nature's nonidentity with the categorizing consciousness that passed for rationality, on the other" (189). It is true that the critical aspect of consciousness, as I discussed earlier in this chapter, is an essential part of Adorno's insistence on the negative. However, as his insistence on a return to objectivity proves, Adorno's final aim is not to endorse the Kantian triumph of reason over society, nature, and experience. For Adorno, "the structures of domination and reification" (189) are integral parts of experience and, therefore, of philosophy. The subject, armed with a critical stance or not, cannot, by its own agency, refuse to repeat the structures embedded in society and experience. This is why Adorno insists on pointing to Hegel's ultimate mistake in charging forth at the head of reason's heavenly chariot, only to realize that the carriage is itself made of mundane materials and the charioteer is an inebriated small-town official from a Chekhov play. The point Adorno presses is this: nothing is above experience, not even reason, or rather, especially reason. Adorno's ambition in the *Three Studies* is to read Hegel against the latter's betrayal of his own project, in which "the expansion to the apparatus of thought, often censured as being mechanical and coercive, is proportional to the force of the experience to be mastered" (1993, 138). Hegel's insistence on conquering conceptually the *oinos pontos* of experience is where Adorno's criticism is the harshest while still retaining his characteristic gentleness: "There is no way to make the intellectual experience expressed and the medium of thought irrelevant to one another. What is false in Hegel's philosophy manifests itself precisely in the notion that with enough conceptual effort it could realize this kind of irrelevance" (138). The mimetic relation

between the philosophical text and experience/nature is where Adorno's negative philosophy reveals its internal structure and its deconstructive potential.

### **SUBMERGED: IT RISES STILL**

The use of mimesis as a mediating ground between the world of experience and the work of art (or philosophical text read as a work of art) sets the ground for a philosophy that, in many ways, uses the methods of artworks to build, layer upon layer, a multidimensional work. I am taking the example of chiaroscuro in painting as an analogy for how Adorno approaches the object of critique and builds up the work dialectically. In chiaroscuro, the contrast between the light and dark areas is the most striking aspect for the observer, but the painting would lack depth and three-dimensionality if the painter had focused only on rendering light and dark objects on a flat plane. Likewise, the dialectical process applied to the development of concepts is the process of carving out the concept by creating the illusion of depth on a flat surface (that of the metaphysical tradition which philosophy's concepts are informed by). In chiaroscuro and Renaissance art in general (and, by analogy, in philosophy), the process of figure-making on a flat surface is effected by means of *rilievo*,<sup>35</sup> which translates as "relief" and, in painting, stands for the use of techniques such as linear perspective (since its demonstration, in the fifteenth century, by Filippo Brunelleschi), shading and highlighting, texture, volume, plasticity, and composition, to form a three-dimensional object, which stands out from the surface, on a two-dimensional canvas.

The techniques mentioned above point to an additive process of creation—an accumulation of information, which the artist, by means of craft and understanding, shapes in a specific direction, as much as the material allows: either as a concept in a work of philosophy or as a scene in a Renaissance painting. In *Aesthetic Theory* (2013), Adorno acknowledges the rilievo-like character of artwork: "Artworks detach themselves from the empirical world and bring forth another world, one opposed to the empirical world as if this other world too were an autonomous entity" (2). Leaving aside the negative aspects discussed above, the mimetic relation between empirical reality and the artwork is positive in that artworks rely on the empirical for their content. But this positive aspect also hides a negative core. Art brings forward what it appropriates

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<sup>35</sup> Used unitalicized henceforth.

from the empirical world, presenting it in a fresh and autonomous manner, affirming the existence of that which is not present in the material alone, creating the space for the empirical to resume the life that was expelled from it in its integration and circulation in the society of consumption, in the play of expectations and demands from which nothing is excused.

Previously in this chapter, I discussed the way in which Adorno reaffirms the power of experience in the philosophical work—how the subject of German Idealism, in its totalizing affirmation over and above the logical bearings of traditional metaphysics, instead of closing the circle of spirit and state, exposes the inconsistencies and inadequacies of the system, affirming, if anything, only the negation of critique and the deconstructive power of a utopic future-past. Reflecting on the work of art in its relation to the world, Adorno (2013) acknowledges art’s power to bring forward a world and the inescapable, in his view, affirmative power of art: “In empirical reality the negation of the negative is hardly ever affirmation, yet in the aesthetic sphere this dialectical maxim bears some truth: The power of immanent negation is not shackled in subjective artistic production as it is externally” (48). Here, Adorno points to the other side of the work’s existence, outside of its relation to material or empirical reality: the artistic work’s participation in the world of production, in the development of taste and artistic movement, and in the culture industries. Works of art, while creating a world, also participate in negating other works, currents, ideas, or arrangement of matter. For Adorno, the consequence is that “art threatens to become allergic to itself; the quintessence of the determinate negation that art exercises is its own negation. Through correspondences with the past, what resurfaces becomes something qualitatively other” (49). Immanent negation is the coexistence, in the same gravitational curvature, of the determinate negations that art performs. Art is in continuous negation of the immediate, of what simply is, because it appropriates a material and has the power to completely reinterpret it. But this form of material negation demands the critical gesture of self-negation in order for art to perform its radically negative function of negating itself, if it is to have any claim to autonomy, to not being completely co-opted and reified by the system of production: “Art must turn against itself, in opposition to its own concept, and thus become uncertain of itself right into its innermost fiber” (2).

Johanna Malt (2018) provides an insightful analysis by juxtaposing Adorno’s negative aesthetic theory with negative theology texts, such as those written by Pseudo-

Dionysus the Areopagite. In this quote from the Christian theologian's *Mystical Theology*, rilievo, this time in sculpture, is conceived as a negative metaphor:

If only we lacked sight and knowledge so as to see, so as to know, unseeing and unknowing, that which lies beyond all vision and knowledge. For this would be really to see and to know: to praise the Transcendent One in a transcending way, namely through the denial of all beings. We would be like sculptors who set out to carve a statue. They remove every obstacle to the pure view of the hidden image, and simply by this act of clearing aside they show up the beauty which is hidden. (Quoted in Malt 2018, 202)

Pseudo-Dionysus uses this expressive analogy to evoke a process of removing that which is obstructing the essence of the material (the pure form as rilievo), rather than a process described positively as a working or transformation of material. As Malt describes it, “Form is revealed in an act of negation or denial of that which is not it, but which accumulates around it and thus defines it negatively” (202), pointing also to Pseudo-Dionysus’s use of the Greek ἀφαίρεσις (*aphairesis*), from the verb ἀφαιρέω (*aphaireo*), meaning “to take from (a person),” “to remove” (Middle Liddell Greek-English Lexicon), translated in the quote above as an “act of clearing aside.” For Adorno, unlike Pseudo-Dionysus, there is no pure form in art, nor is there a transcendent idea that inheres in art’s material.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, the analogy functions by art’s negative identification of that which forms it: the same forces, the very elements that resist being incorporated or that even turn against art itself. As Adorno reiterates, in relation to modern art, “the violence done to the material imitates the violence that issued from the material and that endures in its resistance to form” (69). The self-negation at the core of the work of art is the work of rilievo, the carving out of the “beauty which is hidden” (202), in Pseudo-Dionysus’s words.

Adorno’s project in *Aesthetic Theory* is to complicate the one-dimensional dialectical tracing of the negative and the affirmative in a work of art, carried forward in abstract terms, with art falling in the same category of expression as philosophy and literature. He considers the work to be integrated into the circle of production, yet to remain relatively autonomous. Adorno aims, rather, to complicate the negative-

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<sup>36</sup> Adorno (2013) sees “aesthetic form as sedimented content” (6), but this does not liken his position to Pseudo-Dionysus’s idea of art as incorporating a pure, transcendent entity. Adorno insists on the constant mediation that artworks effect in their relation to the empirical world, which they contain and also negate: “Art negates the categorial determinations stamped on the empirical world and yet harbors what is empirically existing in its own substance” (6). The work of differentiation—that of carving out the figure that works of art expose—is done by constant communication with the empirical reality.

affirmative structure internal to the work of art to such an extent that, under the weight of the excess of negative determinations, art's very structure would collapse, uncovering its own instability. Regarding the relation between philosophy and the art object, Malt (2018) states the following:

The accumulation of propositions creates a limit, a place where the discourse comes up against the absence of its object — against art's "not saying." Adorno continually reapplies his language to that place, accumulating new metaphors which displace without replacing the old, shifting the ground from which his critique speaks, multiplying the angles of approach in order to map the surface of that absence. His language is negative, but it does not negate its object . . . so much as it negates or continually modifies itself. (212)

Although Malt collapses the discussion of the work of art into the matter of negative philosophy and critical language alone, I would like to insist that Adorno develops an understanding of art in which, while critique is important for pushing the self-negating aspect of art to the limit, art achieves what philosophy cannot (at least not yet) perform: the total collapse of all the material and productive forces that it incorporates, in its relation of false semblance to the world. Speaking about modern art in particular, Adorno (2013) argues that art, by its nature, absorbs the accelerated modes of production and discards the old, obsolete forms, which pedants might cling to. Unlike philosophy, which operates with rigid logical operations, which it cannot discard, the work of art, when it is authentic and autonomous, always has something of the new and opposes the *Zeitgeist*, while also bearing the scars of its past reconfigurations. Unlike philosophy, art does not have reason, order, and clarity inscribed in its content but rather opposes discursive modes of thought and bears truth and criticism in its core. Modern art carries forward the disintegration of what it contains not least by turning against itself, against the forces of accelerated production which it appropriates: "The murderous historical force of the modern is equated with the disintegration of all that to which the proprietors of culture despairingly cling" (47). An illustration of this point is the importance of the ugly in modern art, by which Adorno sees art's power of assimilating what resists it, the amorphous, the material, the banal, the non-transformable. Adorno's concept of mimesis sustains the point of unreifiable negativity of which he offers glimpses in his aesthetics. The relation between art and nature is at the core of the *Aesthetic Theory*, in which his earlier understanding of a deceitful mimetic relation of the text and the outside/reader is expanded to intensify the deconstructive components.

### *The Autonomy of the Aesthetic*

Regarding the mimetic relation between art and nature, Adorno places himself in a tradition of configurations of Kantian and Hegelian thought. In *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790/2002), nature shapes Kant's concept of the aesthetic judgment of taste in relation to both subcategories of judgments of the beautiful and the sublime. An important aspect of the aesthetic judgments of the beautiful and the sublime is their disinterestedness (meaning that they are not determined by a particular interest),<sup>37</sup> as opposed to the judgements of the agreeable and the good, which are conditioned by subjective purposiveness. Natural beauty, originating in the indeterminacy of the natural object, shows the subject that its cognitive faculties are superior because their natural (indeterminate) form is in conformity with reason. Artificial beauty (man-made art) does not accomplish the same in relation to reason because no domestication is needed—art lacks the indeterminacy and vibrancy of nature. Unlike the beautiful, which concerns form, judgments of the sublime deal with the formless, which escapes the faculties of imagination and understanding. Without going into much detail on the functioning of judgments of the sublime, the feeling of awe that both the mathematical sublime (which, through its magnitude, defies our ability to estimate) and the dynamically sublime (that which overwhelms our power of will through force and power) awaken in us proves the superiority of the faculty of reason as a super-sensible faculty (and thus its superiority over determination and sense perception). As the rational subject is confronted with its inability to determine and control natural phenomena like volcanoes, stormy oceans, and impressive waterfalls, it also discovers the strength of reason to go beyond the power of mere nature. The experience of the sublime is a negative one because it overpowers the subject and forces it to face its own finitude, while reason works against nature's determination, discovering, in the process, freedom in not being under the dominion of nature's forces.<sup>38</sup> For Kant, nature and not

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<sup>37</sup> According to Kant in the *The Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790/2002), one feature of aesthetic judgment (or judgments of taste) is its disinterestedness: beauty is pursued without considerations of its usefulness; in other words, aesthetic judgments do not belong to the realm of ends. Subsequently, the Kantian position has been criticized by multiple schools of thought, such as Marxism (for disconnecting aesthetics from social and material conditions), psychoanalysis (for disconnecting aesthetics from desire), and critical historicism (for disconnecting aesthetics from historical developments). Perhaps the clearest antithesis to Kant is Pierre Bourdieu, according to whose *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984/1979) the primary purpose of judgments of taste is to establish and maintain class differences.

<sup>38</sup> In Kant's *The Critique of the Power of Judgment* (2002), in the context of the dynamically sublime, the freedom that the subject experiences emerges as a result of the dominion over the great power of

art is capable of invoking reason's superiority and the subject's freedom due to it. According to Sebastian Truskolaski (2016), Adorno's approach to nature is indebted to Kant in what concerns "the extra-conceptual character of aesthetic judgement. Indeed, natural beauty is related to what Adorno calls the 'non-identical,' that is, everything that is repressed in the historical process. At the same time, Adorno will turn out to be critical of the fact that—on his reading, at least—Kant's account of natural beauty (like much else in his philosophy) ultimately stands to affirm the sovereign reign of reason over nature" (123). Thus, for Adorno (2013), "extra-conceptual" or, in fact, "nonconceptual language" (106) is the only notion that can still express, albeit negatively (since "[a]rt attempts to imitate an expression that would not be interpolated human intention," 106) an idea of transcendence, sometimes called by Adorno "divine creation," sometimes "magic," though probably "utopia" is the most truthful name for it. However, Adorno resists a return to a *prima philosophia* or to an onto-theological articulation of the negative dialectic. The magic of the extra-conceptual or utopia is not to reduce art to its theological past but rather to challenge the ground on which the conceptual is built.

In rejecting Kant's deterministic account of natural beauty as that against which reason ascertains its limitless power and partially accepting Hegel's prioritization of art over nature, Adorno (2013) also rejects Hegel's "static definition of the beautiful as the sensual appearance of the idea" (70). The issue with Hegel's universal articulation of beauty as the aesthetic manifestation of the idea is that nature is reduced to its role as the first seat of the idea, in its immediacy and "undifferentiatedness." Unlike his earlier positive reception to Hegel's understanding of the subject as all-encompassing, which he interprets as leading to the destabilization of the subject, in *Aesthetic Theory* he challenges the "static definition" of beauty as totalizing concept because it "arrests the aesthetic dialectic" (70), neutralizes the object (nature), and mimics Kant's rationalist thesis—that of nature as the lesser in relation to reason. Beauty, for Hegel, accomplishes the same as Kant's faculty of reason:

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nature that initially instills fear in the subject. Dominion is the realization that the subject is "superior to the resistance of something that itself possesses power" (143). Kant then defines the dynamically sublime as follows: "Nature considered in aesthetic judgment as a power that has no dominion over us is dynamically sublime" (143). Subsequently, representing the power of nature in art results in the realization of the superiority of the subject over nature and the freedom it has in representing such power: "We gladly call these objects sublime because they elevate the strength of our soul above its usual level, and allow us to discover within ourselves a capacity for resistance of quite another kind, which gives us the courage to measure ourselves against the apparent all-powerfulness of nature" (144–145).

The image of beauty as that of a single and differentiated something originates with the emancipation from the fear of the overpowering wholeness and undifferentiatedness of nature. The shudder in the face of this is rescued by beauty into itself by making itself impervious to the immediately existent; beauty establishes a sphere of untouchability; works become beautiful by the force of their opposition to what simply exists. (70)

However, Adorno does not argue for a return to a relativistic notion of beauty, where each current and era has its own idea of beauty, socially defined or even personal (as in the maxim “beauty is in the eyes of the beholder”). Instead, he calls for a dynamic, negative understanding of beauty, according to which natural beauty is not dominated and repressed as an undifferentiatedness or immediacy which has been dialectically overcome by art and against which the subject has declared its freedom: “The truth of such freedom for the subject, however, is at the same time unfreedom: unfreedom for the other” (85–86). Art, which is man-made, represents the complete other of nature, though, as in any antithetical relation, the two concepts are in a mutually referential position and, in fact, presuppose one another. Therefore, according to Adorno, Hegel thinks art objects in relation to natural beauty in the same line of thought as Kant, where “nothing in the world is worthy of attention except that for which the autonomous subject has itself to thank” (86). The subject of the *Phenomenology* asserts itself as spirit through the unfreedom of nature. At the same time, Adorno, in his signature maneuver of accelerating thought towards the paradoxical, recognizes “the immeasurable progress [the dominion of art over nature] made possible in the comprehending of art as spiritual” (86). The spiritualization of art in Hegel carves out a dignified place for art. In contrast, for Kant, art as that which is crafted by man, in imitation of nature and for his own benefit, is not powerful enough to result in reason’s realization of its superiority and freedom. Only the force of nature can produce such an effect.

While Adorno’s notion of the non-conceptual, which is central to his negative dialectic and is carried forth in his theory of aesthetics, relies on art maintaining its autonomy from nature, society, and the economic system, he also claims that art’s reconciliation with nature is essential to this very autonomy of art and to art’s critical position in the specific context of a fully-industrialized, post-war, capitalist society, after the dissolution of the avant-garde into the reified culture industries. There are, however, two distinct understandings of aesthetic autonomy that Adorno operates with, which must be clarified lest the following discussion falls into ambiguous



generalizations. Christoph Menke (1999) distinguishes between art's autonomy, according to which "aesthetic experience represents just one element among the various discourses and modes of experience making up the differentiated realm of reason" (vii) and the second form, which he calls "sovereignty," in which "aesthetic experience is ascribed a potential that exceeds the limits of reason of nonaesthetic discourses" (vii). Menke then argues that the simultaneous validity of these two articulations of aesthetic autonomy is impossible, as the sovereignty thesis implies that aesthetic experience is more than and above nonaesthetic discourses grounded in reason and in a way even incorporates such nonaesthetic discourses. Therefore, it cannot coexist amongst them as another element.

The antinomy between art's autonomy and sovereignty that Menke formulates is key to understanding the stakes in Adorno's aesthetic negativity, which Menke (1999) postulates as a solution to a possible reinterpretation of aesthetic experience that does not fall upon the false resolution of thinking the artwork as serving an extrinsic telos, such as providing relief for the trappings of hierarchical structures of capitalist modernism or as a site for freeing repressed tendencies. "What art actually is, is contradiction, rejection, negation" (3). This does not mean that art's position can be reduced to difference or coexistence with the nonaesthetic in a heterogeneous system. Rather, aesthetic experience in art is both the negation of understanding as such (see the discussion above on Kant's reaffirmation of the power of reason over the power of nature and the experience of the sublime) and the grounding in the object of negation: reason itself. As Menke explains, the particular form of negation that Adorno formulates to address aesthetic experience's antinomy is determinate negation:

One of the meanings of determinate negation is, according to Hegel, its grounding in the negated. In acts of determinate negation, we do not reject something from without, but rather ground our negation in the immanent negativity of the negated itself. This also holds for the aesthetically experienced negation of understanding: it does not negate from without, but rather grounds itself in its immanent negativity. (25)

Therefore, although Adorno accepts the Kantian premise that aesthetic experience is borne out of the negation of understanding, he maintains the conceptual in the background even in the exploration of the work of art. Adorno never leads his readers towards the cathartic explosion of sensory stimuli in art; there is no burst of unencumbered joy in his aesthetic theory; no overwhelming disjunction that flips the

world upside-down; no feel-good rhetoric of liberation, in spite of his positing that a return to natural beauty is a “vindication of what capitalism has oppressed: animal, landscape, woman” (Adorno 2013, 87). And no, the affirmation of death or pure negativity as the avowal of the infinite into which all things return is not sustained either, as Adorno is allergic to all artworks which, disguised as authentic and tragic, affirm in death “the meaning of suffering” (39). Instead, artworks of this sort actually hide their claim to *prima philosophia*. Such works, instead of doing *the work* of negativity, only fetishize, through death, a “bad” infinity that Adorno does everything to interrupt. In attempting to escape their own flawed and transient nature, along with their tyranny over nature itself, such works “suffer from their sickness unto death: The veneer of inalienability that they draw over themselves at the same time suffocates them” (39).

## CONCLUSION

On September 22, 2001, Jacques Derrida gave a speech, later published under the title “Fichus” (2001/2005), when accepting the Theodor W. Adorno prize in Frankfurt. Derrida frames his speech by a first paragraph, read in German, where he declares that “language will be [his] subject: the language of the other, the visitor’s language, the foreigner’s language, even the immigrant’s, the émigré’s, or the exile’s” (164). Following this paragraph comes another, delivered in French, where he recounts Walter Benjamin’s dream, in which Benjamin was saying to himself, in French, « Il s’agissait de changer en fichu une poésie » (“It was about making a poem into a scarf”) (165). Derrida then proceeds to fold his own speech into a dream (“At this moment, speaking to you... it’s all *as if* I were dreaming” [165]), while also stepping into his forever-paranoid bandit clothes (“Even if the bandit or smuggler doesn’t deserve what he gets, as in a Kafka narrative—the bad pupil who thinks he has been called, like Abraham, to be top of the class—his dream seems happy. Like me.” [165]). The happy bandit, speaking from Benjamin’s dream, asks the Adorno Prize public in Frankfurt:

What’s the difference between dreaming and thinking you’re dreaming? And first of all who has the right to ask that question? The dreamer deep in the experience of his night or the dreamer when he wakes up? And could a dreamer speak of his dream without waking himself up? Could he name the dream in general? Could he analyze the dream properly and even use the word dream deliberately without interrupting and betraying, yes, betraying sleep. (165)

I will take a step back from where Derrida starts and ask: Is there any dreaming without thinking? When, in the mind of our millions of ancestors, did it become clear that one is indeed thinking and not dreaming? When did dream material start to migrate into what we call thought? Or was it the other way around? In a letter to Benjamin, offering criticism on a draft of the *Arcades*, Adorno (1940/1999) writes: “If you transpose the dialectical image into consciousness as a ‘dream’, you not only rob the concept of its magic and thereby rather domesticate it, but it is also deprived of precisely that crucial and objective liberating potential that would legitimate it in materialist terms” (105). The artwork is the only place where nature can come back, although it returns in a modified form. This is not to say that art is a natural thing, spirit working its way up through manifestation. Rather, art is only art when it becomes *second nature*, when artworks “step outside of themselves” (2013, 87). The appreciation of natural beauty is the thinking that one does while dreaming. The dream is only possible because thought is its second nature, which is to say that thought is a kind of dream where dreaming is destroyed. Dreaming, then, only exists inside thinking, though thinking is entirely impossible without the dream. The mimetic relation is not between thinking and dreaming in the sense that the dream is reproduced in thought as an image, as Adorno reduces Benjamin’s dialectical image in his interpretation. Rather, the mimetic relation is between thought and itself, where the dream figures negatively but also materially, as it provides the material of thought. Likewise, nature, the empirical basis for art, is only nature when art turns towards it, parceling it out, speaking in its place, ventriloquizing that which does not exist. Verlaine’s « La mer est plus belle que les cathédrales » (1891) (“The sea is more beautiful than cathedrals”) should read, instead, « La mer est la plus belle *des* cathédrales » (“The sea is the most beautiful *of* cathedrals”).

In two-dimensionality, rilievo is an illusion, though without this illusion there is no actual painting to speak of. The poem, likewise, becomes a scarf, which it always was, so that it can fold itself in a million ways around the neck or hang itself on the back of the armchair and be forgotten there. But the rilievo that inhabits the painting, sometimes quietly, other times forcefully, much like the poem that lives in the scarf, speaks through its captive canvas: the nonconceptual or the utopian projection that can only be reached negatively. Truskolaski’s (2021) analysis of the similarity between art and philosophy for Adorno brings him to the same conclusion:

Art, in other words, is *like* the philosophical language of judgement insofar as it “synthesises a manifold” of materials *qua* form; however, it is *unlike* the philosophical language of judgement insofar as its syntheses do not subsume their compositional materials in a manner that curtails their irreducible particularity. Formally accomplished works of art “speak” in terms of “judgementless” (*urteilslos*) judgements, which model a relationship between their elements that might be described as the “state of differentiation without domination” . . . That is to say, art enacts Utopia negatively and in full awareness of its un-reality. (143)

This insight, which a careful reading of *Aesthetic Theory* opens up, is Adorno’s attempt to materialize what he calls the negative dialectic—a concept that errs on the side of generalized conceptual swinging in the eponymous book. A fleeting and ambiguous image of the negative thought is only grasped when the frustration resulting from the accumulating failure to frame the objects of thought in order to dissect them in their particulars, the amorphous colossus of materials, references, concepts, the whole world that Adorno puts in motion over and over again, never allowing conclusions, syntheses, a burst of joy, or even death—this wine-eyed sea, between two flares, opens up to reveal, in its depths, the infinite dream of the cathedral that it truly is, the cathedral that never was.

### Chapter 3:

## FROM THE OUTSIDE: WRITING FOR THE NIGHT

Look around:  
 See how things all come alive—  
 By death! Alive!  
 Speaks true who speaks shadow.

(Paul Celan 1955)

### INTRODUCTION

The discussion on negativity in the previous chapters was marked by the highly unstable nature of the concept, which rapidly became entangled with other concepts. Most of my attempts to clarify the concept of negativity led to it being paired with other notions, especially when weak negativity was involved. For instance, Kojève approaches negativity through his interpretation of the master and slave dialectic, formulating a critique of social development at the top of which he places the state. In this formulation, Kojève employs the concept of negativity to advance an inflated (though also rusty and eroded, befitting the post-war moment in which it was conceived) concept of the universal subject. Hyppolite emphasizes negativity in relation to alterity, then irons out the negative excess into a dual relation between sense and structure. Adorno, in turn, relies on a vaguely defined dialectical method centred on negation to painstakingly deconstruct every formal dualism that he comes across in text or social context, such as interior/exterior, philosophy/literature, formal logic/creative writing, mimetic art/self-critical art, and so on. As negation is incorporated into the dialectic and often ends up supporting dual relations, Adorno often employs another, transcendent element, such as utopia or the artwork, to deconstruct the resulting binary relations from outside of the structure. However, utopia, which acts as a line of flight, serves the merely strategic function of interrupting totalities and thus, at most, supports only an operational concept of negativity that does not allow for an exploration of more radical forms of negativity. Meanwhile, a focus on the artwork, which, by means of mimesis, distorts representation, enables Adorno to dispel subject-based notions of interiority, but in considering the

historical aspects of the artwork and the tense dialectic between the artwork and the world, Adorno himself ends up bringing back a modified version of the inside/outside binary and the accompanying subject. Negativity is given its own ground, if only briefly, in the artwork's turning in on itself (in the material content being emphasized by the artwork's expression)—when the artwork's internalized tension between its materials and its resistance to its own materiality severs it from a representational relation with the world. In Adorno's aesthetic theory, this moment is not defined as a negative one and, though essential, remains only a minor point.

This chapter attempts to reverse the dialectic of the subject and negativity observed in previous chapters, whereby negativity is treated as secondary and subordinate to the subject. With this in mind, I am advancing a concept of negativity as related to the concept of the outside, whereby negativity is not equated with the outside but appears as what sustains, from the outside, the creative act. More specifically, I introduce two forms of conceptualizing negativity, which are based on Adorno and Horkheimer's concept of language and Roger Caillois's work on mimesis and the praying mantis. These two forms—I call them “embodying the void” and “worklessness”—entail a way of conceiving the relationship between negativity and the subject beyond dialectics. Negativity as expressed in these two forms refers to a position according to which vacuity, depersonalization, and the dissolution of the self are not countered by a tendency towards unification, circularity, or reification. In order for these two models of negativity based on mimesis, largely inspired by Caillois's study of insects and other organisms in nature, to fit with my discussion of negativity, several conceptual moves have to be performed. First, I accept almost at face value Caillois's analogy between the role of mimesis in nature and in human aesthetic behaviour, an analogy that is further expanded by Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, William S. Allen, and Paul North, among others. The role of language in this analogy is central, especially in showing how mimesis differs from reproduction (as the repetition of the same) and, instead, relies on non-identity.<sup>1</sup> Second, in this chapter, I often switch back and forth between several terms, such as death, exteriority, the void, and the outside. Although these terms are not equivalent, they all represent different aspects of negativity in various conceptual schemes. As radical negativity still maintains a

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<sup>1</sup> I discuss this point regarding language, aesthetic representation, and the non-identical in the second chapter in relation to Adorno's aesthetic theory (pages 79–81 and 92–94).

negative relation to other aspects or concepts by means of worklessness (see pages 141–146 in this chapter), different aspects of negativity emerge, requiring specific, context-dependent expressions.

In the second half of the chapter, the principal conceptual apparatus depends on two French thinkers of the twentieth century: Michel Foucault and Maurice Blanchot. For reasons of space, instead of summarizing the entirety of the corpora left behind by these two thinkers, I refer to specific texts as they relate to the account of negativity developed in this dissertation. What these texts have in common, in addition to engaging with negativity in various forms, is their treatment of *literature as a form of thought* in which language focuses on its own form. For Blanchot and Foucault, both strongly influenced by Mallarmé, Baudelaire, Kafka, Rilke, Artaud, and other modern thinkers, writing literature means turning towards language in a way that acknowledges language’s power to make things disappear in their worldly form, while making them appear in representation. It is on this understanding of language that a concept of negativity as related to the notion of the “outside” can be built. The essential aspect of literature as the site of negativity is that the subject ceases to be the central, dominating concept. In this schema, the subject is a weak factor whose tools of self-articulation, such as interiority, work, desire, and so on, are constantly undermined.

### **NEGATIVITY AND MIMESIS: THE LANGUAGE-LIKE QUALITY OF ART**

In *Aesthetics of Negativity: Blanchot, Adorno, and Autonomy* (2016), William S. Allen discusses Adorno’s understanding of “the dialectic of mimesis and rationality” (159), as developed first in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* and later in *Aesthetic Theory*. Allen argues that for Adorno, the work of art is informed by both conceptual and non-conceptual aspects, meaning that it incorporates both rational and material elements, respectively. The conceptual, or rational, elements refer to things that are articulated, while the non-conceptual, or material, aspects refer to the mimetic relations that art maintains with the sensuous world, represented in *Aesthetic Theory* by nature. Adorno calls this dialectical characteristic of the work of art its language-like quality (*Sprachähnlichkeit*) (Allen 2016, 159; Wallenstein 2021, 186).<sup>2</sup> Language becomes a

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<sup>2</sup> While the work of art has a language-like quality, language is also likened to art, as discussed in the second chapter of this dissertation. As Wallenstein (2016) argues, “language becomes art precisely as ‘writing’, i.e., through a moment of self-reflection, opacity, and refusal of meaning that transforms it into an enigma and calls for a particular type of interpretation” (186).

locus of mediation, in which art and nature are brought together in their likeness and difference: “As a human language that is both organizing as well as reconciled, art wants once again to attain what has become opaque to humans in the language of nature” (Adorno 2013, 104). Thus, the opacity that the otherness of nature brings back into the work of art is communicated via language. Adorno, however, neither develops a theory of communication nor considers the linguistic turn, which Speculative Realism sees as largely informing the correlationist trend in continental philosophy. Relying on Habermas’s notion of communicative action,<sup>3</sup> Albrecht Wellmer (1984) criticizes Adorno for the persistence of a “paradigm of a philosophy of consciousness which must explain the world-disclosing function of language on the basis of an asymmetrical subject-object model of knowing and acting leaves no room for the communicative moment of mind” (98). Moreover, for Adorno, according to Wellmer, “all that matters is the genuine experience of works of art and unravelling this experience philosophically” (100). Ultimately, Wellmer considers that Adorno does not go beyond “a one-sided interpretation of the ‘negativity’ which he attributes to the ‘shattered unity’ of the modern art work” (104), adding that “Adorno . . . saw in great works of art an increasing disintegration both of meaning and the subject in social reality” (104). To sum up, Wellmer criticizes Adorno for not turning strongly enough towards communication and linguistic theory in his conceptualization of language and aesthetics. At the same time, as Wallenstein (2021) points out, Adorno outright rejects a reading of art as a tool for communication precisely because he resists a subject-based hermeneutical interpretation, which deprives the work of art of its opacity. Adorno (2013) thus contends that “the task of aesthetics is not to comprehend artworks as hermeneutical objects; in the contemporary situation, it is their incomprehensibility that needs to be comprehended” (163). If there is anything to be communicated in Adorno’s aesthetic theory, it is precisely the non-conceptual, non-identical negativity at the core of the work of art.

The strategies of refusal and negation of which Wellmer accuses Adorno do not originate in the latter’s falling back on a metaphysical and circular theory of consciousness-based aesthetics. Commenting on Goethe’s poem *Wandrer’s Nachtlied*,

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<sup>3</sup> As Bohman and Rehg (2014) note, Habermas argues that “communicative action rests on the idea that social order ultimately depends on the capacity of actors to recognize the intersubjective validity of the different claims on which social cooperation depends” (n.p.).



Adorno writes that it “is incomparable not because . . . the subject speaks—as in all authentic works, it is, rather, that the subject wants to fall silent by way of the work—but because *through its language the poem imitates what is unutterable* in the language of nature” (99, my emphasis). In this case, then, there are two stages of falling silent: one for the subject, whose engagement with its object—the work—breaks the subjective circle and arrests the weak negation that would otherwise be involved in a subject-centred act of communication; and the second stage of falling silent by means of the language of the work (in this case, the poem), which becomes a terrain of similitude between the human-made art object and nature. Accordingly, the language-like quality of the work of art can no longer be seen as the expression performed by a subject; rather, “art’s intentionless language” (Adorno 2013, 252) and what it transmits (the truth of its innermost silence) is what “passes through the subject, and is neither simply without it, nor can it be reduced to it” (Wallenstein 2021, 186). As William S. Allen (2016) contends, the notion of art’s language-like quality is accentuated when Adorno writes about artworks that are already linguistic—that is, literary works. Writing about Paul Celan’s poetry, for example, Adorno (2013) articulates the priority of the object in the work—in Celan’s case, suffering. Since suffering is cast as external to subjective experience, the object (suffering) resists its sublation into a unitary superstructure such as circular subjectivity:

[Celan’s] poetry is permeated by the shame of art in the face of suffering that escapes both experience and sublimation. Celan’s poems want to speak of the most extreme horror through silence. Their truth content itself becomes negative. They *imitate a language beneath the helpless language of human beings*, indeed beneath all organic language: it is that of the dead speaking of stones and stars. (422–423, my emphasis)

The truth content, which is no longer the truth that metaphysics postulates,<sup>4</sup> is here represented by negativity—not weak negativity but rather the radical negativity of the outside.<sup>5</sup> This brief and evocative account of Celan’s poetry comprises all the key points

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<sup>4</sup> On the concept of “truth content” in Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*, Wallenstein (2021) writes as follows: “What Adorno calls the ‘truth content’ (*Wahrheitsgehalt*) of a work is not a propositional content that can be extracted (or communicated), and cannot be identified with intentions or themes; truth belongs to movement of the ‘intentionless’ (*das Intentionslose*), which passes through the subject, and is neither simply without it, nor can it be reduced to it” (186).

<sup>5</sup> The notions of “outside” and “exteriority” will be discussed in more detail further on in this chapter. More specifically, I am framing the notion of the outside as a manifestation of negativity, with which the subject can relate through art or literature.

touched upon above: a language under language, here the “shame of art” (422), pervading the language of poetry; a language of the dead, speaking of suffering and helplessness; and the absence of language or that which is “beneath all organic language”—the “stones and stars,” speaking their silence and the unspeakable in the language of art. The silence speaking through poetry is the language of radical negativity which, as Adorno shows here, relies on imitation (or mimesis) in order to permeate the language of poetry.

### ***Mimesis and Self-Preservation***

In *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, mimesis provides the point of contact between the subject and the environment (or nature in its particularity). According to Allen (2016), in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, human behaviour in its relation to the natural environment originates “from the sense of adaptation found in archaic responses like playing dead (akin to the mimicry of plants and animals), which acts as a mode of self-preservation by suppressing identifying differences and granting protection through invisibility” (165). Thus, mimesis involves suppressing the differences that particularize an individual and allow the individual to stand out, potentially becoming a target for predators. There are two key implications here. First, mimesis as the work of suppressing differences entails *the prior existence and identification* of differences. Second, in its basic form, identity, or the collapsing of differences, is a defensive reaction dictated by self-preservation. Consequently, fear, the affect of self-preservation, plays a key role in ensuring an organism’s survival and becomes the basis of the organism’s self-expression, as Adorno and Horkheimer (1989) maintain: “The dualization of nature as appearance and sequence, effort and power, which first makes possible both myth and science, originates in human fear, the expression of which becomes explanation” (15). Thus, the organism’s language (or expression) is marked by the operation of fear, which both identifies dichotomies *and* strives to neutralize them via identity.

Language, as Allen (2016) summarizes Adorno and Horkheimer’s argument, is marked by this “tautology of terror” (168), which is the doubling of nature into essence and of appearance (or identity-to-itself and non-identity-with-itself, which the cry provoked by the terror of the unknown brings forth) into language. According to this line of reasoning, the organism, by means of language, constantly undergoes the negative dialectic of becoming identical with itself via the non-identical. The interplay between language, the language-like quality of a work (or more generally, expression),

and the mimetic instinct, which is split between representation and distinction, is typical of Adorno's procedure of introducing a dimension of alterity into the discussion of categories of thought in order to problematize the legitimacy of those categories themselves. However, Hulatt (2016) argues that the conceptual division that lays the foundation for human language was "occasioned by a fearful confrontation of the consciousness with phenomena it could not control. . . . This aroused the fear of the self-preserving drive. . . . Mimesis, an assimilative comportment that produces no abstract knowledge, and allows for no control of its object, cannot provide the means to assuage this fear. It is self-preservation, then, that drives the generation of conceptuality" (141). Therefore, while mimesis is often identified with self-preservation, its function is, in fact, distinct from it. Adorno and Horkheimer, as well as Allan and other commentators, tend to collapse mimesis and self-preservation (or mimesis and fear—the marker of self-preservation) in spite of the fact that there are moments when mimesis appears to be decoupled and, in its original form, contrary to self-defence. In this dissertation, I will be mostly focusing on mimesis as separated from the self-preservation instinct.

To be clear, for Adorno and Horkheimer mimesis becomes associated with self-preservation only by means of magic. Although I do not have the space here to develop the relation between mimesis and magic, it is important to note that Adorno and Horkheimer need to involve a third element—magic—in order to bring mimesis and self-preservation together, as mimesis is later developed by Adorno, in *Aesthetic Theory* for example, as an essential mechanism to access and maintain the focus on the object in the negative dialectic. Hulatt (2016) explains the moment of merging self-preservation and mimesis:

When magic is hit upon as an epistemic strategy, we see mimesis and self-preservation become intermingled. Mimesis is essential for contact with the external world. It is that which drives epistemic contact with particularity. As particularity is directly required for the sustenance of the human body (in the need for food, and so on) self-preservation retains and employs mimesis's intrinsic openness, but lends it a structure that can serve to make possible control of the external world. It is here that mimesis, in being intermingled with self-preservation, acquires its structured and substitutive form of activity. (142)

Mimesis plays the role, opposed to self-preservation yet instrumental to it, of bringing together distinct realms not by means of differentiation (that is what fear institutes) but by similarity. As Adorno and Horkheimer's understanding of mimesis develops, it

becomes increasingly difficult to press mimetic behaviour into a simple sociological narrative justified by an evolutionary and adaptation-based model. In this dissertation, I am following the development of mimesis as decoupled from self-preservation, especially as is the case in the work of Roger Caillois. Instead, I am drawing out the dark side of mimesis, as sustained not by fear but by negativity.

***Mimesis as a Bizarre-Privileged Item***

In fact, similar to Adorno's description of Celan's poetry in *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno and Horkheimer's (1989) idea of mimesis, isolated from the instinct of self-preservation, represents a return to a primal, undifferentiated state of the organism, as exemplified by the condition of the criminal:

The ability to stand apart from the environment as an individual, and at the same time to enter into contact with that environment—and gain a foothold in it—through the approved forms of communication, was eroded in the criminal. He represented a trend which is deep-rooted in living beings, and whose elimination is a sign of all development: the trend to lose oneself in the environment instead of playing an active role in it; the tendency to let oneself go and sink back into nature. Freud called it the death instinct, Caillois "*le mimétisme*." (227)

The criminal represents the mimetic instinct in its most basic form, as Hulatt (2016) describes it: "An impulse toward inactivity and assimilation, but also an intrinsic source of epistemic openness to the particularity of one's environment" (138). However, as opposed to Adorno's description of the negativity of truth content in Celan's poems, the criminal's return to a primal state does not concern radical negativity. The difference between the two forms of sinking into nature lies in art's ability to engage in mimesis that maintains art's tense relation to *that which comes from the outside*. In other words, art actively involves something other than itself without reducing it to the subject's knowledge, sense, or desire. For the figurative criminal, mimesis is an abandonment of one's "active role" in the environment; that is, a surrender of action. And although one could say that such abandonment does interrupt the circle of subjectivity and weak negation—remember, with Kojève, weak negation was the action of transforming nature, or the environment, into the discourse of knowledge—this kind of interruption of circularity functions as a privation, a giving over of oneself to the environment being mimicked. Unlike this passivity, Celan's poems actively "imitate [the] language . . . of the dead speaking of stones and stars" (Adorno 2013, 423). The criminal's anti-social

behaviour is a passive abandonment of one's condition as an individual in society<sup>6</sup> and therefore of one's existence as subject. The process of mimesis in the case of the criminal is "devoid of epistemic or somatic motion. It is not a drive to activity, but rather a basic open comportment to the world, which simply aims to assimilate itself to, and relapse into, the natural world" (Hulatt 2016, 140). Adorno and Horkheimer thus equate the criminal's sinking into nature with Freud's notion of the death drive<sup>7</sup> while setting up a conceptualization of mimesis opposed to the instinct of self-preservation. However, Adorno's understanding of mimesis in relation to art, much more elaborate than the initial account in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, leads, as discussed in the previous chapter, to an entirely different set of considerations. What remains mostly unexplored in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* and in Adorno scholarship is the tripartite connection Adorno and Horkheimer make in the quotation above between the anti-social behaviour of a criminal seeking to return to bare life, Freud's death instinct, and Caillois's notion of mimesis. While the former two issues are beyond the scope of this dissertation, Adorno's affinity for Caillois's intriguing work on mimesis, in which he describes mimesis as being a constitutive part of organic life and its development, provides a significant clue for the idea of radical negativity that I am pursuing here.

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<sup>6</sup> This example, of course, should not be taken literally. Adorno and Horkheimer adopt a problematic, evolutionist discourse, probably inspired by Sigmund Freud's late sociological works, such as in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. I am following Adorno and Horkheimer's logic here for the sake of their understanding of mimesis while disagreeing with this point in most respects. Criminality is defined by historical, social, and personal determinations and can surely, in certain contexts, be interpreted as an act of double negation: for example, as the paperless migrant writing the death that he has witnessed. In fact, Paul Celan and Walter Benjamin were, before their deaths, considered paperless subjects, or criminals in the eyes of a criminal state.

<sup>7</sup> Although this dissertation does not discuss Freud's death drive in relation to negativity, Adorno's terminology is thoroughly influenced by Freud. Indeed, Adorno and Horkheimer's account of mimesis in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* is shaped by Freud's idea of the death drive as the organism's tendency towards the inorganic. The instinct of destruction, or the death instinct in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920/1961), includes the general definition of an instinct as "an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things which the living entity has been obliged to abandon under the pressure of external disturbing forces" (Freud 1961, 30, repeated on pp. 31 and 51). Adorno and Horkheimer's description of the criminal discussed above is similar to Freud's terminology. Thus, the death instinct represents "a kind of organic elasticity, or, to put it another way, the expression of the inertia inherent in organic life" (30). The organism dies for "internal reasons" (32), having inscribed at the cellular level the force compelling it to return to an inanimate state. Behind the famous dictum "the aim of all life is death," one can find, thus, an entropic principle that characterizes all living organisms. Given that the state towards which the death instinct aims is one of inertia and disintegration, the opposing instincts—the sexual (or libidinal) instincts that aim towards keeping the organism from death—create the conditions for repression, which is nothing but the affirmation of life over death or life-preserving partial neutralization of the death instincts and the final aim of life—death. It is important to note that for Adorno and Horkheimer (1989), the impulse to "sink back into nature" (227) is also a drive towards objectivity and particularity (provided by nature) which, nevertheless, ends in the annihilation of the individual's particularity.

As Hulatt (2016) explains, “Adorno and Horkheimer draw on Frazer, Mauss and Hubert, and Caillois’s work in elaborating *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*’s account of mimesis. In particular, they draw on Caillois’s two articles, *La Mante Religieuse* and *Mimétisme et psychasthénie légendaire*” (138). Roger Caillois was a twentieth-century French intellectual who, while deeply engaged in discussions with some of the main voices of French postwar theory, remained somewhat isolated and marginal, especially as far as the reception of his work is concerned. As Paul North (2021) also notes, “the critical literature on Caillois is unbelievably thin” (309). Most of his works are unknown even in France, and Caillois is mostly known to Anglo-Saxon readers for his participation in the Collège de sociologie, “which he codirected with Georges Bataille from 1937 to 1939, after a brief passage in the Surrealist movement during his student days at the École Normale” (Frank 2003, 1). Caillois’s work is difficult to synthesize due to the interdisciplinary and enigmatic quality of his corpus. Furthermore, as Claudine Frank attests, he obstinately fought against being definitively associated with any of the intellectual schools and currents that he was involved with at one time or another. Caillois was, in fact, constantly engaged in polemically and publicly declaring his difference from the various groups while integrating elements from their thought into his own heterogeneous work. Caillois was known as a somewhat conservative thinker, often in contrast with Bataille, who was considered the avant-garde thinker of secrecy and alterity. Frank (2003) argues that this view of Caillois arises from a misunderstanding of the latter’s method:

If [Bataille’s] name is thus synonymous with “transgression” and “heterogeneity,” Caillois, on the other hand, is often cited as the totalizing thinker, wielding the menace of scientific “homogeneity.” Some commentators cite his strong need for mastery over the irrational, unconscious drives and, more generally, mystery. But even at the height of his voluntarist attitude in the late 1930s, as he later recalled, Caillois thrived on the challenge of obstacles: “Apollonianism is first and foremost a victory, but it presupposes monsters—it does not do away with them.” And he was always seeking out new monsters. More important, I view as an intellectual project—and not merely as an emotional, or emotionally driven one—Caillois’s lifelong quest to integrate *savoir* and *non savoir*, lucidity and affect, the intelligible and the unintelligible. (5)

It is, therefore, not strange for Adorno, a thinker of negativity, to take inspiration from Caillois, who, while seeking to establish the fundamental operations of the collective imagination whose correspondences can be found in quantifiable phenomena of nature,

employed the “art of juxtaposition” (North 2021, 247) to assemble collections of peculiar elements found in nature that invite uncanny associations aimed at creating disorientation in the thinker. Like Adorno, Caillois does not propose the eradication of reason (or Apollonianism) or of the subject and its categories. In fact, not only does he not do away with monsters, he invites them to the table.<sup>8</sup> These monsters, also named “bizarre-privileged items in the universe” (Caillois 1970, 350), serve, as Caillois argues in “The Natural Fantastic” (1970), “as objective guarantors for lyrical emotion and the poetic image at the same time” (350). He also mentions that such items were “already implicit in [his] very early study, *La Mante religieuse*” (350), which this chapter will briefly consider. Paul North, whose book *Bizarre-Privileged Items in the Universe: A Logic of Likeness* (2021) conceptualizes the discipline of homeotics (a discipline defined by likeness, rivalling and overlapping with ontology), describes bizarre-privileged items as “those entities, double, triple, quadruple, that bring near traits from otherwise opposed categories, entities at whose insistence homeotic circuits light up in vicinities” (101). Mimesis is one such bizarre-privileged item, or a monster of reason, that occupies a privileged place in Caillois’s cabinet of curiosities.

In “The Praying Mantis” (1934), Caillois uses the praying mantis insect as an exemplar of a bizarre-privileged item because “the mantis overlaps with a human fear and a human desire, the fear of death and the desire for sex, turning the figure that results into a ‘bizarre’ amalgam of human and animal, nature and psyche and culture, will and being, an eccentric conjunction among the most disparate regions” (12). The overlapping between the insect and human realms is made possible by mimesis and a play of *correspondences*,<sup>9</sup> according to which Caillois develops his analogical

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<sup>8</sup> To the figurative table, of course, though also to the table of Mendeleev. As Frank (2003) attests, Caillois “turned to the Mendeleevian combinatorial chart of the elements, which he described as the scientific counterpart to his own inquiry into the myriad permutations of the perceptible world” (51). In an essay written as part of his late work, titled “The Natural Fantastic” (1970), Caillois argues that in a finite world, defined by unity, which he bases on Mendeleev’s periodic table, the fantastic is present “even in the realm of the inanimate” (156) when “cycles and symmetries, homologies and recurrences” (156) are observed. It is by discerning the fantastic in nature that one can discover, by paying attention to the symmetries, overlaps, bizarreness of elements singling to each other, the poetry or imagination at play in nature: “The signs avariciously conceded by the natural fantastic do more than stimulate the demon of analogy. They show it the way. They precede it and nourish its mania for interpretation. They fulfill it by revealing, or at least by allowing it to presume the existence of an underlying imaginary that is part of the real” (157).

<sup>9</sup> Baudelaire’s poem “Correspondances” (1857) illustrates a set of principles according to which aspects of nature, such as smell, movement, colour, number, form, and force, *correspond* to poetic expression and human imagination. *Correspondance*, with its Romantic, Symbolist, and discernable mystical tones, can be likened to an ambiguous type of translation. However, *correspondance* is much more than

understanding of the biological substratum of the world and human expression in poetic language and imagination:

The core of my thought is that since the world is finite, things necessarily recur, tally with each other, and overlap. And that is what allows for poetry, which is the science of the redundancies . . . in the universe; it is the science of these supercharged, and hence privileged, points and moments. . . . It is possible because the elements making up the world are finite in number and thus necessarily signal to one another [*se font des signes*] that is respond to one other. This view is close to Baudelaire's "correspondences." (Roger Caillois quoted by Frank 2003, 51)

Overlap, juxtaposition, analogy, and correspondences work, in Caillois's thought, towards reducing differences and, paradoxically, do not aim at intensifying the distinctions in the world but at tying them together in order to allow mimicry<sup>10</sup> to carry out its magic and draw in the monsters.<sup>11</sup> However, although Caillois's world is a finite unity, as North (2021, 253) notes, it is not uniform. The "supercharged, and hence privileged, points and moments" (Caillois quoted by Frank 2003, 51) are only mysteries when observed from the point of view of the human subject. Otherwise, they are simply phenomena and tendencies inscribed in nature. This may suggest a return to a subject-centred outlook in Caillois due to the focus on anthropocentric appearances. However, he focuses on the anthropocentric manifestations precisely to emphasize the "hold on human emotions" (Caillois 1934, 73) exercised by appearances such as the praying

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animism combined with anthropocentric projection. Calling on the remarkable power of language to invoke nature and memories at the same time, Baudelaire (1857) addresses, by bringing together the subjective and expressive faculties, while invoking the objective manifestation of nature, the conditions of possibility of aesthetic experience. Benjamin describes *correspondance* as "an experience which seeks to establish itself in crisis-proof form" (2006, 198) as he argues that Baudelaire's expression of synesthesia in the poem is the creation of a transcendental concept of art. Caillois uses his own method of *correspondence* to advance hypotheses, adapting Baudelaire's concept to the study of human and aesthetics in relation to external stimuli.

<sup>10</sup> While *mimicry* is the term Caillois uses to describe imitative behaviour in nature, I adopt Adorno's wide understanding of *mimesis* as an ontological, behavioural, and linguistic/poetic tool that mediates between a concept and its other.

<sup>11</sup> Paul North (2021) argues that, like Caillois, "the homeotician's aim is to lessen distinctions and allow the surroundings to bleed into them. The darkness of the occult is an emblem for the strategic loss of distinction. It is fair and right to call this an 'occulting' science, heading for the end of vision as distinction making. And yet, you can still see in the dark. You see homeotically" (250). North's idea of seeing homeotically illustrates the opposite of Adorno and Horkheimer's conceptual splitting of the world due to the instinct of self-preservation. Seeing homeotically is, rather, comparable to the case of inertia that *mimesis* brings about, such as depicted by Adorno and Horkheimer's example of the criminal sinking back into nature.



mantis, which Caillois uses in order to access the objectively lyrical quality of nature in which he sees both human and insect as equally integrated.<sup>12</sup>

### *Caillois's Mimesis I: Simulating the Impossible*

Adorno and Horkheimer's interpretation of Caillois's two essays on the mimetic behaviour of the praying mantis develops, for their own purposes, the correspondence between structure and exteriority. Caillois describes two aspects of mimesis. First, in "The Praying Mantis" (1934), he observes that the mantis simulates death in the face of danger and, what is most extraordinary, that the mantis can carry out a number of complex operations after its partner decapitates it, including playing dead, which prompts Caillois to draw the following conclusion:

Above and beyond its jointed rigidity, which recalls a coat of armor or an automaton, it is a fact that there are very few reactions the mantis cannot perform in a decapitated state—that is, without any center of representation or of voluntary activity. In this condition, it can walk; regain its balance; sever a threatened limb; assume the spectral stance; engage in mating; lay eggs; build an ootheca; and (this is truly frightening) lapse into feigned *rigor mortis* in the face of danger or when the peripheral nervous system is stimulated. I am deliberately expressing myself in a roundabout way as it is so difficult, I think, both for language to express and for the mind to grasp that the mantis, when dead, should be capable of simulating death. (79)

As Allen (2016) argues, the ambiguity of the phenomenon observed by Caillois has to do with the fact that one cannot decide whether the behaviour exhibited by the mantis is a survival mechanism developed to provide protection when facing extraordinary dangers, or if the behaviour is its "remorseless submission to necessity in which the mantis is only able to carry on living in the guise of the living dead" (169). Put otherwise, it is difficult to distinguish which force is the prevailing one and imposes itself first: the mantis's agency or the force of the exterior represented by the necessity that drives the mantis to adapt. Adorno and Horkheimer draw an analogy between Caillois's example of mimesis at work in nature and the alienation intrinsic to capitalist modernism, according to which the subject's survival is premised on its denial of life. The analogy, following Adorno's usual method of proliferating double concepts, places

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<sup>12</sup> As he argues in a note at the beginning of the essay "The Praying Mantis" (1934), Caillois only uses anthropomorphic appearances as another aspect of all-encompassing mimesis: "I am merely stating that as both these insects and mankind are part of one and the same nature, I do not exclude the possibility of invoking the insects to explain, if need be, people's behavior in certain situations" (69).

death at the core of the subject, which becomes conditioned by its own denial. However, Adorno and Horkheimer's use of mimesis is premised on alterity<sup>13</sup> rather than negativity, resulting in the ambiguous position discussed in the second chapter, whereby the subject becomes a self-eroding structure without, however, effectively severing the circularity of the subjective process. Without radical negativity, the subject truly becomes the counterpart of the dead yet surviving mantis: effectively decapitated by Adorno and Horkheimer's scathing criticism, but still maintaining itself "in motion," as it were, through the circular structure of weak negativity.

To sidestep the circular structure, it is key to acknowledge Caillois's original *double* negation—a nuance that Adorno and Horkheimer do not pick up on. The simulation of death involved in the process of "the mantis, when dead, [being] capable of simulating death" (Caillois 1934, 79) is not a simulation of a positive state; rather, it is the death beyond death, or performing ("simulating" is the term Caillois uses) the impossibility of an impossible act. Here, the negation of negation does not result in positivity but in the positing of a gap between the signifier and the signified (in this case, the praying mantis as a living organism and the death it simulates, or the exteriority of inanimate matter)—a void that conditions the whole structure, exposing its radical futility. When performing, or simulating, the impossible—the death beyond death, the language beyond language—neither the performer nor the performed are key; both are displaced in importance. Instead, what becomes simulated is the void: what "comes through" is the radical negativity that, as Caillois noted, is so difficult to grasp via representation. The difference between Adorno and Horkheimer's "tautology of terror" (Allen 2016, 168) discussed above and the language premised on negativity that emerges from Caillois's account (and partly from Freud's, whose concept of the death drive in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* inspires Caillois) is that, with Caillois, another dimension is added to mimesis: radical negativity as something that is actively sustained by the mimetic process.

When it is premised on fear, mimesis involves a negation of the subject (performed by the subject itself, as in the case of Adorno and Horkheimer's figurative criminal) for self-preservation, which depends on the separation between the self and

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<sup>13</sup> I am using alterity, in this context, as related to weak negativity in Hyppolite's work, as discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation. Alterity, as opposed to negativity, is easily subsumed by a unitary structure, such as circular subjectivity.

its surroundings and which strengthens the subject's interiority. Paradoxically, in such fear-based mimesis, the subject relinquishes its active power of manipulating nature to meld with the environment, but the goal of this procedure is, in fact, a strengthening of the subject's survival (and hence of subjectivity). However, as discussed above, in art—for example, in Celan's poetry, according to Adorno—mimesis functions in reverse: instead of emphasizing the separation between subject and environment in order to collapse it for the safety of the subject, it actively intensifies the likeness between the subject and what it is not to reduce the subject's power of weak negation that incorporates otherness on the subject's terms. When this negative dimension of art and language is brought to the fore, the aspect of non-identity-with-itself (e.g., Celan's expression of "the dead speaking of stones and stars" [Adorno 2013, 423] and Caillois's dead praying mantis, "when dead, capable of simulating death" [Caillois 1934, 79]) is no longer merely part of a structure of alterity but becomes the primary aspect that defines the situation. Thus, the inorganic nature becomes primary in relation to the already-dead subjects speaking in Celan's poetry, and the twice-dead praying mantis becomes dominant in relation to the living mantis.

Radical negativity does not come from within the subject, as weak negativity does, to undermine, consume, and integrate into circular subjectivity everything with which the subject comes into contact. Nor is radical negativity the outside, a transcendent entity that lies just beyond reach and promises the end of history, salvation, and endless life for the subject. Rather than emanating from within the subject or being the outside as such, radical negativity is *that which comes from the outside*. In other words, negativity is something from another place, a place that is not part of the subject's circuits of absolute knowledge, alterity, and desire. Radical negativity is something that comes in touch with the circles of weak negativity without necessarily having to be included in and hence subdued by these circles. It *could* be included—in fact, weak negativity often does precisely this, incorporate that which comes from the outside into its field of intelligibility—but it does not *have* to be. To include radical negativity into subjectivity is to annihilate it. And it is for this reason that we should not define radical negativity in the full, because then we are performing the work of weak negativity, of domesticating what is radical for the subject. The most that radical negativity can have is a partial definition: a beginning of knowledge, but one that leads, perhaps, towards an aesthetic-philosophical encounter with that which comes from the

outside instead of a positivist one. To offer such a partial definition, I would say that radical negativity is non-identity-with-itself—one that comes from the outside and that is evidenced by mimesis in art. Thus, while Adorno and Horkheimer’s discussion of mimesis already problematizes the model of circular subjectivity and hints at radical negativity, the work done by Caillois and late Adorno further develops this direction.

### *Caillois’s Mimesis II: Legendary Psychasthenia*

To better understand how negativity ties in with exteriority and non-identity, I turn to the second aspect of Caillois’s study of mimetic behaviours in nature, namely “depersonalization by assimilation into space” (1935, 100). In “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia” (1935), Caillois develops his idea of the “inertia of the *élan vital*” (102), based on Freud’s concept of the death instinct, expressed in art (e.g., in Salvador Dali’s early paintings)<sup>14</sup> and nature as “the mimetic assimilation of animate beings into the inanimate realm” (102). For organisms in nature, Caillois argues, the mimetic behaviour they present is symptomatic of their tendency towards complete self-effacement: “The search for similarity presents itself as a means, if not as an intermediary. It seems that the goal is indeed to become assimilated into the environment” (98). Seeking to understand the imitative mechanism at play in the behaviour of animals and insects that come to resemble their environments (an animal hunting or a chameleon imitating the colours of their habitat), Caillois rejects as inadequate chance, adaptation, and other survival-based hypotheses advanced by biologists.<sup>15</sup> Morphological mimicry in nature

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<sup>14</sup> In spite of breaking his connection with the Surrealists, Caillois was inspired by the foundational ideas of the group throughout his life. Joyce Cheng explores Caillois’s connection with Surrealism in “Mask, Mimicry, Metamorphosis: Roger Caillois, Walter Benjamin and Surrealism in the 1930s” (2009). Cheng traces Caillois’s interest in the praying mantis to the latter’s involvement with Surrealism during his youth, which inspired him to look outside of the human environment to explore the idea of automatism and desubjectification: “By identifying the praying mantis and mimicking animals as nature’s automatons and masquerades, Caillois begins to formulate in his peculiarly naturalist fashion what it would mean to act and create without the intervention of the sovereign ego, that magnificent artifact of the modern west that surrealism and the avant-garde have taken such drastic measures to counteract. Automatism, the well-known exercise in poetic thinking that Breton devised to free the human mind from rational constraints, is taken to a radical level by Caillois, whose impetuous remedy against human subjectivity is to dispense with the human altogether and to look into the insect and animal world for models of alterity” (72).

<sup>15</sup> It is important to note that, although he does at times use the language of evolutionary theories, Caillois does not intend to present a systematic evolutionary argument in his early essays. As North (2021) points out, “Caillois argues every way he can against the casual logic underlying evolutionary theories of mimicry among animals and plants. To his antieconomic ear, nature’s reasoning has to be luxurious, excessive, decorative, and desiring; the reason of nature is not only or not even primarily about defense, efficiency, and fitness; it is not, in other words, a parsimonious logic, not an economy, but an ecology. He calls the correct principle ‘dangerous luxury’ and through this juxtaposition of distant words

is, according to Caillois, not a defense tactic but “a disorder of spatial perception” (99), for which he coins the expression “legendary psychasthenia” (100), described by North (2021) as “a malaise of the mind that lets parts flow together and objects merge with their environment” (247). Rapidly shifting, by means of correspondence (Caillois 1935, 98), from biology to psychology and aesthetics, Caillois compares the behaviour of animals in nature with that of individuals who are unable to distinguish themselves from the space surrounding them. He notes the following:

When asked where they are, schizophrenics invariably reply, *I know where I am, but I don't feel that I am where I am*. For dispossessed minds such as these, space seems to constitute a will to devour. Space chases, entraps, and digests them in a huge process of phagocytosis. Then, it ultimately takes their place. The body and mind thereupon become dissociated; the subject crosses the boundary of his own skin and stands outside of his senses. He tries to see himself, from some point in space. He feels that he is turning into space himself—dark space into which things cannot be put. He is similar; not similar to anything in particular, but simply similar. (100)

What Caillois calls “depersonalization by assimilation into space” (100) is loosely based on his observations in the area of biological psychology. Jacques Lacan, amongst other thinkers of the time, showed interest in Caillois’s hypotheses. He recognized “morphological mimicry as an obsession with space in its derealizing effect” (Lacan quoted by Frank 2003, 90). This aspect of de-selfing (or “depersonalization,” in Caillois’s terms) is summarized by Allen (2016) as follows: “[Caillois] concluded that [an animal’s] development was not solely due to the need for more effective defensive or hunting strategies but, at a more basic morphological level, betrayed a seduction by space, which presented itself in the movement toward invisibility” (170). Mimetic behaviour, rather than self-preservation, prompts the organism to perform its absolute other—the space that envelops the organism and into which the organism becomes dislocated. Although this tendency is latent in most organisms, in the case of “dispossessed minds” (Caillois 1935, 100), it becomes dominant. For the dissociated individual, dislocation into space informs the ambiguous boundary between the organic and inorganic. If, like Lacan, Allen, Adorno, and Horkheimer, we accept Caillois’s premise of archaic mimicry as observed in nature and, at its most pronounced, in neurodivergent individuals, as one of the roots of aesthetic behaviour in humans, the

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postulates another mode, a becoming like for its own sake, or better, becoming like for the sake of nothing other than generosity among the furthest outposts of being” (249).

layer that the space relation adds to the organism's experience of itself and its environment is one of simultaneous obscurity and materiality. That is to say that the subject, confronted with what is outside, undergoes a process of self-effacement, allowing itself to be "digested" by space and losing its boundaries.

In other words, Caillois's concept of mimesis sustains different (sometimes overlapping) features, amongst them the following: mimesis without evolutionary references, mimesis without self-preservation, mimesis in favor of de-selfing, and finally mimesis that reveals the void, the language of language, the night of the night: the void mimicking itself through being. Notably, out of Caillois's study of the praying mantis there emerges a concept of language borne out of an unsynthesizable double negation (the negation effected by non-identity); with Caillois's study on legendary psychasthenia, the negation becomes radical in the subject's dislocation into space, built upon the organism's mimetic relation to space itself.

***Reversed Mimesis: Worklessness***

Allen (2016) points to the implications of the mimetic relation between space and organism that Caillois's article uncovers:

Such self-effacement thus has important aesthetic consequences . . . since it involves a disruption of the (literary) compositional field whereby the relation of a figure to its background is lost as the figure effaces itself, so that now there is only ground, but a ground that has a life of its own albeit one of worklessness, inertia. (171)

The two steps that Allen outlines in relation to the mimetic process in nature for Caillois involve a derivation of human aesthetic behaviour from mimetic behaviour in nature. The exteriority of the spatial background (nature) acts as a deconstructive, anterior element in relation to the organism and, by analogy, to the subject. Therefore, self-effacement is one of the dominant traits in mimesis when it is decoupled from self-preservation. As Allan notes, the aesthetic component which self-effacement emphasizes becomes prevalent in the organism's relation to space. However, self-effacement is not an action performed by the organism but rather involves the "compositional field" (171) and worklessness, which is an anti-action. Neither an active power of the subject based on weak negativity nor the passive melding with one's environment as in the case of the mimetic figurative criminal, worklessness is a kind of anti-action that relates the organism to space by means of mimesis unshackled from the self-preservation impulse. Thus, worklessness is fundamental for radical negativity, or

the non-identity-within, as the means by which radical negativity can be sustained in contact with the subject without being reduced to the subject's circular consumption of alterity by knowledge and desire. Below, I will unpack this concept in more detail.

The discussion of rilievo in the second chapter took as its starting point the two-dimensionality of the painting canvas, showing, first, how the flatness is challenged or “tricked” by the elements internal to the work of art to shape itself into a structure with depth and richness. Then, taking up Adorno's negative dialectic and his discussion of the deviant mimesis between the work of art and nature, I challenged this additive relation itself. The resulting negative configuration exposed the smoldering remains of the rational, logical structure of the work of art. Adorno's account of his aesthetic theory, read as a literary text, works to defamiliarize certain images, such as that of nature, and to plunge them into a dream-like dimension. This constant movement of the dialectic reveals the negative dimension of rilievo, showing at once the rational and the suppressed, the familiar and the uncanny, the imposed and the forbidden. The structure that rilievo is built on, in spite of the depth that it produces through the accumulation and constant shifting of material, is the two-dimensional canvas. In light of the aspects of mimesis uncovered through Allen, Adorno and Horkheimer, Caillois, and North, I incorporate a third dimension into the compositional field upon which the work of art is constructed: negativity as that which comes from the outside. If the figure is absorbed by the background, “so that now there is only ground, but a ground that has a life of its own albeit one of worklessness, inertia” (Allen 2016, 171), it is also true that when the figure effaces itself and becomes one with the background, the background disappears with it. Thus, the key to the work of art is what sustains background and figure in a tense cohabitation without this cohabitation becoming simply a relation mediated by the categories of the subject. This cohabitation is sustained neither by the background nor the figure but by a third dimension: radical negativity, whose “presence” in the work of art is effected by means of worklessness. Worklessness should not be confused with mere absence and should not be approached as the lack or the glitch within a work of art that supposedly ties the artwork together. Rather, worklessness entails an active maintaining of something in the form of an absence. In short, worklessness is a form of “*absencing*.” As I will show in the next section, one concrete form of worklessness, or absencing, is the process of “walling in”: for example, walling in a lover or a sacrifice. This kind of walling in requires, as does the general anti-action of worklessness, the

active de-subjectification on behalf of the subject of the “absenced” element—it is not simply the erasure of the object but an absencing and a mimesis of that absence that erodes the all-consuming power of circular subjectivity. Here, however, we are already approaching the limit of what can be extracted from Adorno and Caillois, as we move towards the limit of subject-based philosophy in favor of self-effacement through the creative act.

The worklessness of mimesis, the subject’s depersonalization by exposure to the outside, its assimilation by the outside, couples with the subject’s loss of the structure that sustains it—these are, no doubt, experiences of overwhelming intensity. But can they be said to be experiences of the subject at all? Is the subject even capable of experiencing what is beyond its circular structure, which allows it to reconfigure itself endlessly, ignoring the void at its core? And if so, what kind of work, made of what materials, can express these experiences of radical negativity? How can the subject communicate its emptiness, its de-selfing? What language<sup>16</sup> can allow one to communicate in a decapitated state—that is, to communicate, being dead, one’s own death? As in Adorno’s (2013) description of Celan’s poems, which “imitate a language beneath the helpless language of human beings” (422), indeed the language “of the dead speaking of stones and stars” (423), the language permeated by the outside does not rely simply on the intensification of its internalized differences; rather, such language mirrors the emptiness of the outside with the dissolution of the subject’s overwhelming drive to subsume the outside. The language of the dead exposes the homeotic relation that it maintains with the outside. It might seem that this kind of language should be somber and esoteric, or dramatic and intense, stirring the reader into remembering its

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<sup>16</sup> It is important to note that the understanding of language that Blanchot, as well as most French theorists of the mid- to late-twentieth century, operated with, had changed considerably from earlier iterations of the same notion due to the influence of Martin Heidegger. Gabriel Riera (2006) traces some of the important angles of Heidegger’s conceptualization of language in relation to being and its influences on Blanchot and Levinas. Thus, he notes: “If for Heidegger being is an immanent event that originates in itself, its relation must be secured in accordance with its modality of manifestation. Poetry and thinking must be up to the task of preserving the incommensurable advent of being; they must expose themselves to what is without measure and without object; that is, they must become ek-static responses that leap (origin, or *Ursprung*) into the uncanny or unfamiliar par excellence. This entails a radical redefinition of language, beyond its classical metaphysical determination and beyond its modern determination as the correlation of represented contents and the mind. . . . The enigma of being sustains language; it is the essence of language and can only unfold itself in language as the language of being” (3). Therefore, Heidegger already works in a mimetic (and homeotic) dimension of language, which Blanchot accepts, though not uncritically, as the background of his writing.



finitude. However, this is not the case, as demonstrated by the writings of someone who asked himself these questions throughout his career: Maurice Blanchot.

Blanchot's literary response to the political turmoil of the '50s and '60s was to insist on the uselessness of literature to defend a language that expresses the fragility and exhaustion of a subject that has been exposed to the conceitedness and self-glorification that direct political action so often entails. Blanchot's corpus in its entirety is a statement against affirmationism. His refusal to close the circle of the subject and his struggle against the reproduction of the subsuming structures of power and language are evidenced by his writing practice, as Just (2008) notes in his analysis of *Le Dernier homme*, one of Blanchot's many narratives in which language, along with the characters, appears to be withdrawing in a negative-rilievo effect: "[Blanchot] suggests that desubjectivisation is the only literary mechanism capable of fulfilling art's duty at the present historical moment. . . . Suspended deixis and diminished subjecthood served Blanchot to create a literary work in which communication, like the last man's speech, never gets beyond its moment of the beginning" (45). Desubjectivation is both a political and a creative strategy for Blanchot. Finding himself, after having lived through WWII, at a time of political conflict with a changing set of political demands, which, for him, required a significantly different strategy from direct action, opposed, in Just's account, to Sartre, who "urged for action in the name of a future, first, free man" (43). Instead, Blanchot advocated a minimized, weakened subject, whose "withdrawal from action [generates] a higher level of connectedness to [the] milieu. If this openness and connectedness is to be a prelude for the future, Blanchot believed that it must first take place in art" (45). Thus, instead of a glorified (though apparently self-effacing) subject asking for justice in the name of all, Blanchot proposes a subject decapitated of its will to act and to impose itself, who, perhaps, from this impossible position, would generate a type of anti-action (especially intellectual or artistic action) that would have more profound effects on thought and, why not, on society (Blanchot was not, in spite of being described so by many, an anti-political intellectual). It is to be noted, however, that in order for the withdrawal of the subject to not become a self-indulgent act, the focus, as Blanchot proposes, has to be on something outside of the weakened subject: an event or near-event that extracts the subject from its experience of its own fragility. This event, for Blanchot, is represented by the moment that occurs just before the beginning of writing.

The beginning of the act of writing is a reoccurring theme in Blanchot's work because this act is a defining one in relation to the subject. This moment reveals the subject in an impossible situation, in between its reality as subject and the (absent) world of the work in relation to which the subject defines itself (e.g., I am a writer because I have written or am writing a work). This absence of the work, however, is not entirely an absence (insofar as a minimum of presence is needed, in thought, for the work to be able to begin), though it is not a real presence either. In this in-betweenness, Blanchot's subject is decapitated, as it must trade its head for a writing hand, which will produce the work. In *The Space of Literature* (1982), Blanchot describes this space of extreme vulnerability in which the writer finds himself in at the start of the writing process:

The need to write is linked to the approach toward this point at which nothing can be done with words. Hence the illusion that if one maintained contact with this point even as one came back from it to the world of possibility, "everything" could be done, "everything" could be said. This need must be suppressed and contained. If not, it becomes so vast that there is no more room or space for its realization. One only begins to write when, momentarily, through a ruse, through a propitious burst of energy, or through life's distractions, one has succeeded in evading this impulse which remote control of the work must constantly awaken and subdue, protect and avert, master and experience in its unmasterable force. This operation is so difficult and dangerous that every writer and every artist is surprised each time he achieves it without disaster. And no one who has looked the risk in the face can doubt that many perished silently. It is not that creative resources are lacking—although they are in any event insufficient—but rather that the force of the writing impulse makes the world disappear. Then time loses its power of decision; nothing can really begin. (51)

The subject begins to write relying on a force exterior to itself ("through a ruse, through a propitious burst of energy, or through life's distractions" [51])—a source outside of its own directed will and desire (hence my use of the expression "decapitated subject"). Having experienced its decapitation, the subject is then submerged into the act of writing, which nonetheless continues to affirm "the force of the writing impulse" (51), which "makes the world disappear" (51)—the world of the subject, that is. In this situation, time is no longer a linear experience for the subject, according to which a decision to write was made in the morning and the act of writing followed in the evening. The writing subject is suspended in the impossibility (as well as in the immense possibility) of the creative act. The process of writing is "so difficult and dangerous" (51) because the contact with radical negativity, brought into the experience of writing by the suspension of time in the moment before the beginning of writing, is world-

shattering for the subject. The task, for the subject, of expressing the force of the negative in light of such liminal experiences requires rigor and formidable sensibility. Negativity promises access to everything while demanding unmitigated dedication and total sacrifice. This task, which occurs in a moment beyond time, does not depend on action and work, which are concepts and phenomena that belong to the realm of the fully-formed subject; rather, to return to the previous discussion of mimesis, the negativity between nothingness and reality can only be delivered by worklessness.

Blanchot uses the term worklessness (*désœuvrement*) in *The Space of Literature* (1982) and *The Infinite Conversation* (1993) to refer to the work of writing without a predetermined content, signifying its relation to the outside, and the suspended act—the leap that the act of writing necessitates and which is its origin. Theodore D. George (2006) argues that Blanchot employs the term as a rejection of Hegel’s concept of the work of spirit and against those who develop an idea of art and literature with Hegel in mind. Blanchot seeks “to differentiate himself from those who would reduce the value of the poetic word to the work it accomplishes” (39). In fact, more than this, he defines worklessness as a relation to absence. According to Blanchot in *The Infinite Conversation* (1993), worklessness, or “the absence of work” (420), is buried by an ideology that seeks “to designate as ‘madness’ what it rejects” (420). Using Foucault’s terminology, Blanchot writes, “*The absence of work, confined in the asylum, is also always walled up in the work.* The absence of the work nonetheless always cites the work outside itself, calling it always in vain to its own unworking and making the work re-cite itself, even when it believes it has its sights on ‘the outside’ that it does not fail to include – rather than working to exclude it” (420, my emphasis). Adding the dimension of the subject’s relation to exteriority that Caillois proposes, worklessness becomes negativity’s *modus operandi*, in this case, with the outside functioning as background. Adorno’s negative mimesis, Caillois’s double death by mimicry, Blanchot’s literary worklessness, Foucault’s notion of the outside, and finally Blanchot’s negativity in the form of “the other night” form a constellation of concepts which do not fully define but express negativity, in Blanchot’s (1993) words, in “the most rigorous and the most aleatory” (405) manner.

## **BLANCHOT ON KIERKEGAARD: THE WALLED-IN INTERLOCUTOR**

In the second chapter, I looked at Adorno's method of framing the Kierkegaardian universe in the literal interior of the bourgeois apartment. Adorno points to the connection between the structure of the text (in Kierkegaard's case, philosophy, literature, and intimate journals are all simultaneously present in his writing) and the world of experience that, for Kierkegaard, is mediated by the figure of the interior. Adorno then problematizes the truth relation between the interior and exterior, drawing an image of the interior not as distinct from the exterior but rather as a frame in which elements (e.g., objects in the house, often aesthetic elements of interior décor), marked by the history of their existence in the world, accumulate a different aura in becoming estranged from their historical and social context, which functions as the exterior world in this schema. In their alterity, objects facilitate a critical gaze towards the exterior world, where reification rules supreme, while at the same time not allowing the interior frame to close up, to become a subjective world completely separated from the outside. For Adorno, the work of the negative, insofar as it addresses Kierkegaard's interior, is carried out by the framing device, which allows the tensions between the resulting two sides to proliferate. It can be said that the framing itself, in this case, is where the negation is affirmed and allowed to do its critical work, but always as a function of the alternating elements within the frame.

Although his analysis is centred on the interior, Adorno takes the framing method one step further with the addition of utopia as the great absent exterior, which problematizes the structure of the interior along with its relation to the outside, annulling any possibility of opaque self-identity. The operational function of the negative is what constitutes the basis for Adorno's negative dialectic. However, it is with the accumulation of the material and the development of an artistic style that, eventually, the negative acquires enough force to emerge in the form of a latent aspect of a structure that breaks through to the surface and breaks apart the subject's circle. Adorno's approach to Kierkegaard's interior is significant because it encapsulates, in an embryonic form, the struggle of the negative dialectic to shape the negative itself into a coagulated form of thought—that is, into a concept. In what follows, I take up Blanchot's essay on Kierkegaard as a negative counterpart to Adorno's book. Like Adorno, Blanchot is equally interested in the biographical aspect of Kierkegaard's

writing<sup>17</sup> and uses it as an interpretative angle. In this dissertation, Blanchot's interpretation acts as a negative (in photographic terms) of the Adornian account regarding Kierkegaard. While also concerned with the interior/exterior dichotomy, Blanchot places exteriority first, leaving no possibility for the subject to reconstruct its closed internal circularity.

Blanchot's short essay on Kierkegaard opens the earliest published essay collection of Blanchot's career, *Faux Pas* (1943/2001). From the introductory paragraph, it becomes clear that Blanchot does not perform the same kind of framing procedure that Adorno relies on; rather, he moves quickly from the personal in Kierkegaard's work (real-life influences in the figures of Kierkegaard's father and his fiancée) to the impersonal, pointing immediately to the thought turned inwards and ending the last phrase of the introductory paragraph with a formulation that negates the previous two points while establishing an already-shattered dialectic as a foundation for what follows:

Kierkegaard's *Journals*, like all his work, are dominated by the two figures that the meditations of this extraordinary mind never abandoned: that of his father, a profoundly religious old man obsessed with the memory of a double transgression, and that of his fiancée, Regine Olsen, with whom he broke mysteriously after a year's engagement. Around these two images his thought never stops analyzing itself, and from them it draws a world, a tragic replica of the actual unintelligible universe. (17)

Blanchot writes as if he had already worked past the negative dialectic, which Adorno needs to arrive at and restate, over and over again. Here, the "tragic replica of an unintelligible universe" (17) is the point of departure, in light of which the rest of the paragraph is read retroactively. The figures of the father and the fiancée are set against the background of the "tragic replica" (17) of a world that is already opaque and unintelligible. What does a tragic replica of opaqueness look like? The worklessness of the background in Caillois's<sup>18</sup> illustration of the organism's assimilation to space is one

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<sup>17</sup> Blanchot engages with the work of many writers and thinkers, whom he uses to develop his own thought. In this aspect, Blanchot is Adorno's kin, who employs writings about literature to elaborate his own thought and develop his own style. As Cosmin Toma (2018) remarks, Blanchot "tends to devote his attention to writers or at the very least to thinkers who are noted for their sustained interest in language. After all, his own writing style, with its studiedly paradoxical turns of phrase, is inseparable from his thought" (27).

<sup>18</sup> Caillois and Blanchot crossed paths several times, notably by both being in the entourage of Bataille and, later, of Jean Paulhan, the director of *Nouvelle Revue Française*. Frank (2003) notes that there may have been "a muted rivalry in this regard—with radically opposed orientations" (42), referring to the approach each took to literary language. However, Frank's description of Caillois's stance describes a

such tragic replica of opaqueness—the negativity that maintains the figure in relation to exteriority (represented, in this case, by the “unintelligible universe”).

As Blanchot (2001) already hints at the opening of his Kierkegaard essay, he locates Kierkegaard’s interior not in the bourgeois apartment, like Adorno, but in the Danish philosopher’s journals, thus surpassing the separation between idea and experience. Blanchot sees in Kierkegaard’s journals “the combination of philosophy, theology, poetry, confessions, reveries, and dialectic inventions in which his most abstract thoughts seem blended together with his person, in which the idea, far from undergoing the accidents of life, locates its essence and its conditions, and in which the events of an existence that is far from rich in exterior upheavals are prolonged into interior developments of an extraordinary fecundity” (17). Blanchot’s focus is on a certain kind of introversion in Kierkegaard’s writing, though, unlike Adorno, Blanchot does not rely on splitting the world into interior and exterior spaces. Rather, Blanchot acknowledges the plenitude of spaces and worlds that infuse Kierkegaard’s writing, which are “blended together with his person” (17). This means that, even when he maintains an outside world of knowledge that permeates the person (the writer), even if “exterior upheavals” (17) and “interior developments” (17) can be conceived as separate and contrasting, Kierkegaard’s journal writing is not an activity like any other, whereby the world is reflected in the frame created by the work. Nor is the journal only one of the elements that compose the endless dialectic which falls apart and recomposes itself, as in Adorno’s writing on Hegel in the *Three Studies*, until the horizon of utopia saves it from closing up into the eternal circle. Writing is not “contingent,” even radically so, as it is supported in its leap into interiority by the idea and “locates [life’s] essence and its conditions” (17) in an effort that dislodges the personal from its own ground. For Blanchot, the core idea in Kierkegaard is the worklessness of the philosopher’s work, whose “most profound speech is the vertigo arising from the impossibility of speaking,

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vision that concurs with Blanchot’s understanding of literary language as essentially opaque: “Unlike Paulhan, and Blanchot, . . . Caillois never sought to cultivate the mysteries or paradoxes inherent in the virtualities or apprehension of language itself. He nonetheless pursued the model of literary oscillation between norm and transgression . . . . In so doing, he was seeking ways for the writer to capture this movement in a paradoxical form. For example, his remark that ‘a master piece . . . is often an inimitable banality’ hints at the combined effect of identity and difference, of habit and surprise: that is, the combined respect and violation of the commonplace or cliché” (42). There may seem to be a sharp contrast between Blanchot’s tragic expression of the impenetrability of writing and Caillois’s insistence on the banality of the extraordinary in nature and literature, but the two standpoints are similar in how they conceptualize negativity at the core of literature.

[whose] motive and the sole theme of this speech is its own impossibility” (Blanchot 1949/2008, 155), as he writes elsewhere. Kierkegaard’s journal writing is as violent and tragic for Blanchot as it is passive and banal (or produced by worklessness—the tendency to blend in with the impossibility and void that is its essential idea).

However, Blanchot’s commentary on Kierkegaard’s *Journals* cannot be said to be inspired by a singularly novel approach to personal writing or, more precisely, to the writing of the “I” in philosophy. French thinkers of the twentieth century—among them, notably, Blanchot’s close friends Georges Bataille and Emmanuel Levinas—were entangled in discussions on the implications and dislocations of the “I,” or rather, of the ethical turn in philosophy that takes seriously the concept of the other.<sup>19</sup> In “Literary Communism: Blanchot’s Conversations with Levinas and Bataille” (2002), Lars Iyer traces the way in which Blanchot responds to this ethical turn, arguing that Blanchot’s concept of literary language is a means of engaging with the thought of the other. Although Blanchot’s thinking resonates with Bataille’s and Levinas’s conceptions of the “I” and the “other,” its specificity lies in being deeply rooted in literary writing and thought. Blanchot’s conversations with Levinas are a starting point for understanding how, for Blanchot, language moves from interiority (or the negation of the world) to the impersonal, and then to community, while still retaining negation at its core. Iyer gives a clear account of Levinas’s position:

Levinas is adamant: the Other cannot be made the object of a theme; rather than speak of the Other, I *address* the Other. He presents the dissymmetrical relation between the “I” and the Other as a relation of language. It is only by attending to language that it is possible to bear witness to the Other. But is this witnessing not compromised as soon as one attempts to write of the infinite distance to which this speech responds? With Levinas’ claim that the original scene of language is an address to the Other, the question of relating this speaking or saying to the order of discourse, the said (*le dit*), moves to the heart of his thought. He confronts anew the ancient difficulty that faces the philosopher who has to express him- or herself in a natural language: for how can the philosopher become a writer when to write is to betray the “object” of discourse? (45)

The impossible distance between the “I” and the other that Levinas explores is one of the main points of inflection for Blanchot’s essay on Kierkegaard. In effect, he

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<sup>19</sup> I am adopting the lowercase version of the word in this dissertation. I do not make a distinction between the capitalized version of the term, as in Iyer’s work, and the lowercase version.

acknowledges the impossibility of reaching the other<sup>20</sup> while also bringing to the surface the strangeness between man and himself, thus forcing (rather than arriving at by means of the dialectic, as in Adorno's case) the leap out of interiority that necessarily prefigures the problem of true communication.<sup>21</sup> To write about oneself is also to communicate with an internal other, and, therefore, to be faced with the same impossible distance.

For Blanchot (2001), Kierkegaard's journals epitomize the difficulty of truly revealing the personal: "His works and his way of thinking are all formed from autobiographical episodes and seem destined to reveal his life, yet at the same time this life, so continuously transmuted indirectly in writings that show it in the form of the highest problems, seems essentially unable to be revealed in its truth and its profound drama" (18). Blanchot contends that Kierkegaard's act of revealing his personal life in the *Journals* is actually an act of "safeguarding of the secret" (18), or what provides the key to understanding his strangeness, his suffering, or his life's work. The secret is both what is completely absent from the work and yet produces itself throughout the work. Blanchot quotes Kierkegaard as writing, "On that which constitutes in a total and essential way, in the most intimate way, my existence, I cannot speak" (18). The inability to speak the secret,<sup>22</sup> to give the key to one's whole work and life, comes not from withholding it in communication but from the missing secret that constitutes, at the same time, the very condition of communication. Kierkegaard sets up communication as the refusal to treat common things as common. As Iyer argues regarding Levinas—"How can the philosopher become a writer when to write is to betray the 'object' of discourse?" (Iyer 2002, 46)—the difficulty of using natural

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<sup>20</sup> Although ultimately opposed to a reading of negativity as defining the space from which Blanchot sees writing as originating, Steven Shaviro (1990) remarks, in relation to the closeness between Levinas's and Blanchot's ideas of the other, that "Blanchot is close to Levinas in discovering intimacy at its highest pitch in the passive and neutral contact of the Face. The greatest feeling is also the most distant, since it is the one in which I am most removed from my own stable presence or being in the world. There is a strange blankness and tonelessness at the heart of passion, an 'absence' corresponding to what Levinas calls the 'nudity' of the Face. The Other intrudes upon my privacy, but with a featurelessness that always eludes my grasp" (157).

<sup>21</sup> I take "true communication" to be, as discussed in the first section of this chapter in relation to Adorno and Horkheimer, the act of communicating the impossibility and opacity at the core of language. This point will be developed in the following sections of this chapter.

<sup>22</sup> In a similar way to how Caillois conceives of mystery and secrecy in relation to literature and nature, Blanchot does not use the notion of the "secret" to signify information that the subject keeps enclosed in its interiority. Rather, the secret is what defines the work from the outside—it is, to use a suggestive example from physics, the electro-magnetic field in which forces operate. The secret is both exterior to and defining of the act of communication.



language for philosophical thought entails both the refusal to rely on the common sense of language, as this leads to falsifying the object, and the acknowledgement of “the dissymmetrical relation between the ‘I’ and the Other as a relation of language” (46).

*The Entombed Mystery: Olsen*

Kierkegaard’s life is veiled in mystery, a fact that brings attention to his autobiographical writings, though his personal papers do nothing but maintain the secret or the veil of silence that Kierkegaard refuses to lift. According to Blanchot (2001), this refusal, thoroughly accounted for by Kierkegaard himself, acts as a seductive dance of hiding and revealing at the same time: “He exposes himself and he protects himself. He uncovers himself but only (luring our minds by a veritable seduction) in order to put us in contact with the substance of his shadows and to refuse us that which would explain everything to us” (18). The act of ambiguity which Kierkegaard performs is the *address* that Levinas refers to in his attempt to define the unequal relation of language between the “I” and other.

Blanchot recognizes this inequality as the foundation of Kierkegaard’s communication with his fiancée, Regine Olsen. Moreover, Blanchot argues that the dissymmetrical, or inauthentic, relationship between the two before their separation is the problem that Kierkegaard addresses by instituting a regime of the secret, which results in him breaking off the engagement with his fiancée and continuing to communicate with her—in fact, the idea is that Kierkegaard puts an end to the relationship in order to be able to communicate authentically. Kierkegaard’s decision can be construed as a perverse act of seduction in maintaining his connection with Olsen after ending the relationship with her; by addressing her in his writing and creating a gestural universe of communication (the glimpses at the church, his demeanour when out in the world, the questions she asks their common friends, and so on), where every insignificant signal is oversignified, where the lover’s desire is amplified by absence and where the freedom of association with other partners that an unmarried life affords is enjoyed only performatively.

Kierkegaard himself was fully aware of this interpretation of his decision, which he explored in *The Seducer’s Diary* (1843/1999). However, following through with Kierkegaard’s own faithfulness to the work, it is clear that, even if the seducer’s game could be justified, ultimately seduction is only one aspect of his attempt at

communication. The other aspect is the temptation by the secret—the depersonalization of the writer by assimilation to the pure opacity of the untold secret (or silence). In this case, negativity does not coincide with the absent element, as negativity is still premised on negating an existing element; negativity, conceived on the basis of the positive, needs to maintain a minimal relation to that which is negated. On the other hand, negativity requires the exteriority of the other and the worklessness of authentic communication. Negativity is not the conceptual counterpart of the secret (the absent element in communication); rather, it is the *underlying force* determining the act of communication as an act conditioned by silence and condemned to become silence. Radical negativity sustains authentic communication when communication takes into account its other—silence.

Kierkegaard's breakup with his fiancée could be seen as a gesture that creates the frame for interiority and non-representational mimesis, which eventually, through critical engagement with the conceptual implications of the inside and outside (in this case, the "inside" would be the relationship in its duration, the shared gestures, the language of intimacy, while "exteriority" would be the world outside the couple's intimacy) calls for a process of analysis, or the negative dialectic, as in Adorno's account of Kierkegaard's bourgeois interior. However, the resemblance regarding the framing device between Adorno and Blanchot is only superficial: Adorno frames the object of analysis, which he challenges but never completely removes, because it is needed for his method of negative dialectics; Blanchot utilizes the framing device in order to isolate certain structures (e.g., Kierkegaard's secret within the structure of communication, or, as I will discuss later, the pure anguish in the act of writing), but the frame is instituted by a violent act of rupture and its futility is its defining feature. In the following quotation, Blanchot (2001) uses Kierkegaard's religiousness to leave behind the dialectics of the inside and the outside, between Kierkegaard the worldly seducer and Kierkegaard the ever-devoted lover of Olsen:

On the contrary, through rupture, by placing an impassable distance between his fiancée and himself, an image of transcendence, he tends to establish essential relationships. Not only does he continue to address her in his books that are indirectly dedicated to her; but he also offers her, by these very books that are an attempt at once to explain himself before her and to confuse the explanation, a procedure at the end of which he will have said everything to her without revealing anything to her. If these writings sometimes falsify the man who he really is, transforming him into an unfaithful seducer, but if they also allow us

to see the profoundly religious reasons that inclined him to rupture, it is so that his fiancée could triumph from ambiguity and, in the very unrevealed secret, communicate with him. There is no communication unless that which is said appears like the sign of that which must be hidden. The revelation is wholly in the impossibility of a revelation. (19)

The leap towards an authentic regime of communication creates the foundation for strained and ambiguous communication, where interpretation is the necessary reading glass, while a question mark hangs above every word. This leap is also a sign of worklessness—the subject’s active sinking into the opacity of the secret, which lies at the core of communication. Kierkegaard’s descent into the devouring force of the unrevealed secret exposes the alternative: the inauthentic relationship, the socially determined relationship in which “we are consumers or sellers, allies or enemies” (Iyer 2002, 45) of the other. Breaking the engagement supposedly leaves the interlocutor (Olsen) pining, questioning, calling in the dark, or rather from the dark, towards an unknown and silent other. Olsen, after all, is the imagined other for Kierkegaard. When the relationship ends, she has no agency or influence over Kierkegaard afterwards, though we do know from sources (Updike 1997, x–xi) that she attempted to persuade him to change his mind and suffered in a state of dejection for a considerable period of time. As she had no way of persuading him to change his mind, bound by her social condition to remain within the domestic realm, she could not be the driver of the communication, as Eurydice is not the player of the lyre but the one towards whom the lyre articulates. Communication is Kierkegaard’s address to Olsen by attempting to explain himself while simultaneously obscuring the explanation and the reason for the breakup. Journal writing proceeds from the essential and impossible relationship, as a desperate aesthetic act of self-effacement by the proliferation of manuscripts and pseudonyms. One can argue, indeed, that the entirety of Kierkegaard’s *œuvre* is circumscribed by the impossibility of his relationship with Olsen.

In his writing, Kierkegaard never gives a reason for suddenly breaking off the engagement with Olsen (it is possible that he did not have a well-defined reason), and in her late accounts, after her husband’s death, Olsen also admits that she never understood Kierkegaard’s reasons behind the decision to end their engagement, which had marked her life (after Kierkegaard’s death, she expressed regret at not having voiced her forgiveness of him and, in not doing so, at having “done him a great wrong” [Garff 2017, 254]). Their letters to each other, published partially by Joakim Garff in

*Kierkegaard's Muse* (2013) and *Soren Kierkegaard: A Biography* (2005), show that even in their later years, their communication was informed by the moment of rupture, though this is expressed in different ways by each of them: whereas Kierkegaard chooses to honor the altar upon which he had sacrificed a conventional engagement and marriage with an outpouring of writing, Olsen continually tries to map out the signs she receives from him and match them with the bourgeois environment that constitutes her worldly reality; she lives in the ambiguity of the distance that Kierkegaard's leap produces. In the end, communication is not the work of either of the two; rather, it is the work of the secret. It is also true that we, as readers, only really have access to Kierkegaard's communication in light of the secret, which must be acknowledged as an injustice and a continuation of the dissymmetry that the address carries. If we refer to communication as the dialectic between the "I" and the other, with the mediating—and negating—element of the secret which, in turn, is dialectically determined in relation to that which is being revealed in communication, we end up recreating the circle of the subject by positing the secret as the negative, amplifying element that is subordinate to the subject. As Blanchot argues, "Everything is dialectics with Kierkegaard because the only way to say the truth without unveiling it is to pursue it as if it could not be attained, in an effort that does not allow either completion or rest" (20). However, Blanchot's intervention redirects the course of the dialectic towards a point of no return.

One wonders how the truth would have been shaped if Olsen, the shaded figure in the background receiving the address, had been able to communicate on her terms, though still in her position as the other. What if the worklessness of authentic communication, its sinking into the secret's silence, had been measured from the other towards the "I" of the writer, even though the relation was still mediated by the secret? Explaining Levinas's idea of the address, Iyer (2002) notes the following: "Nothing allows the 'I' and the 'Other' equality or reciprocity; the face of the Other is not that of anyone I know; it is irreducible to a collection of features" (45–46). Perhaps, then, one can argue that the other engulfs the "I" in the act of communication, that is to say, within the web of communication produced by the secret. If Olsen cannot affirm her truth, it is because, in communication, she *is* the truth—the one who is revealed as the truth and as the only witness.

For Blanchot (2001), the witness, while being simultaneously covered up, exists "in a relationship full of danger, in which others, before this discredited witness, risk

losing themselves and can save themselves only if they also go down into themselves to assimilate the message in their deepest solitude” (20). Olsen, in her position as truth and witness, is also, I argue, the martyr in the configuration. Following Kierkegaard’s thought on the secret, which, in its call for depth and interiority, must necessarily be erased at the same time as it is being announced, Blanchot notes that “martyrdom . . . appears to him as a supreme means of communication” (21). A martyr, Blanchot writes, is the agent through which death speaks: “Men cause the being whom they persecute to speak in the death that they give him” (21). Olsen is sacrificed for the act of communication,<sup>23</sup> but that is only for her “to speak in the death” (21) done to her. Unlike in the previous discussions regarding symbolic or organic death, whereby the subject was either reconstituted or strengthened by death, the sacrificial death in Blanchot’s reading of Kierkegaard does not produce this effect. Instead of speaking in glory after death, “the persecuted one is a silent man, a walled-in man” (21), communicating his (or, in the case of Olsen, her) silence from the realm of death. Olsen, like the persecuted martyr, proclaims her death, her silence from inside the opaque secret in which she is engulfed, or walled in.<sup>24</sup> Communication, as a function of the secret, originates in

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<sup>23</sup> As Hélène Cixous remarks, “to write on, to talk on women, on the corpses of dead women . . . is one of the recurrent motives in Blanchot’s texts” (quoted by Martell 2018, 76).

<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, the walled-in bride is a common motif in South and Eastern European architecture myths. The myth of the architect sacrificing his wife is found in folklore poems in Greece, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania, as Eric Tappe notes (1984, 113), while more generally, the sacrifice of a beloved being (mostly a woman, often pregnant) to erect a monumental structure is a well-known motif in European mythology at least since the Middle Ages. For example, in a fundamental aesthetic myth in Romania, the master builder Manole, the most famous mason of his country, is tasked by the prince of his county to build the most beautiful monastery in the region—an actually existing monastery called the Cathedral of Curtea de Argeş. However, the project soon comes to a halt because the walls keep crumbling, and the king threatens to kill Manole and his whole team of masons if they do not complete the building. In a dream, Manole is told that he needs to sacrifice a woman by placing her inside the walls for them to hold, so the team decides that the first wife who comes to bring the meal the following day will be walled in. Manole’s pregnant wife is the first to appear in the distance, and she manages to arrive to the construction site in spite of all of the impediments that Manole prays for and that are delivered by natural forces to impede her arrival. A long section of the poem is then dedicated to the description of the act of building the monastery, along with the cries of the sacrificed wife, who is slowly dying under the pressure of the bricks laid upon her. In the most popular version of the legend, she names each body part as it gets walled in and crushed, in true Sadean manner. Her voice continues to be heard long after the erection of the wall and her death. At the end of the poem, fearful that the same masons could build a more impressive monastery elsewhere, the king of Wallachia (a principate of Romania) traps the masons atop the building, whence they jump to their deaths. From a feminist perspective, this legend, which every Romanian child learns in primary school, announces the trend of woman’s sacrifice for culture, consolidated by a complete exclusion of women from the world of arts, in a country known for treating its female citizens with excessive cruelty. Although this criticism is valid, it is also interesting to note the fascination that many cultures have with the act of performing death from beyond death. The act of walling in is not simply a sacrifice of the *munus* for the protection and immunity of the community, as in Esposito’s (1998) community-immunity paradigm. The walled-in woman does not embody the negative in order to make

martyrdom, which presupposes persecution. Thus, it can be said that Olsen, like Caillois's praying mantis, while dead, performs her death over and over. The wall that Kierkegaard builds around Olsen (the secret at the core of communication) is not the wall of consciousness, placing Olsen at the core of interiority; rather, the wall is the monumental sea of words that the compulsive Kierkegaard produces and which impels him to write. And so, in this case, instead of Adorno's cathedral taking shape above the moving dialectical sea, for Blanchot's Kierkegaard, it is negativity that speaks through all the constructions.

### *The Outside Walled Within*

Language, as Adorno shows, is not thought, it does not provide the groundwork for the subject's circle; it is at once a shifting structure and an impenetrable one. As discussed above, for Blanchot (with Levinas's influence), "the dissymmetrical relation between the 'I' and the Other [is] a relation of language" (Iyer 2002, 46). At the same time, language, in Adorno's iteration, represents the rejection of identity-based philosophy. The critical force of language is locked within its form, which bears the mark and the negation of thought in the instability that language maintains. For Adorno (2008), the name is not in a relation of representation with the object to which it refers; instead, language "approaches [the] name by negating it" (207). Language is the negation of presence as a positive concept. In the case of Blanchot's Kierkegaard, language is communication only insofar as communication is the production of language with the awareness of the absolute void that words have to wall-in. As Žižek (1997) articulates it, Olsen is "the void to which Kierkegaard addressed his words, a kind of 'vacuole' weaved by the texture of his speech" (156). In short, although it may appear that, in Kierkegaard's writing addressed to her, Olsen represents a heightened form of interiority—an imaginary projection into which Kierkegaard can retreat, Blanchot shows how the sacrificial act that Kierkegaard performs when severing his engagement with Olsen causes the sacrificed one (Olsen) to communicate the death dealt to her. Interiority would lead to an exacerbated subject, whereas, in the case of Olsen and Kierkegaard (in Blanchot's interpretation), the result is Olsen's "triumph from

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the community stronger. Rather, there is a double negation at play, as in the case of Blanchot's Olsen-Kierkegaard relation.

ambiguity” (Blanchot 2001, 19)<sup>25</sup> rather than the creation of an idealized version of her, produced by Kierkegaard’s outpouring of language.

With Olsen’s absence walled-in by the opacity of language, Kierkegaard’s writing cannot be read as a philosophical monologue; it is rather the communication of the void within—Olsen’s silence from beyond death. His words are addressed to the void of her absence, therefore the attention to presentation (to language) is too acute to allow for the conceptual rigidity of syllogistic sequencing. Kierkegaard’s writing, as received by Blanchot, being language pouring out towards the void, towards the absence of the dead woman performing death, is nothing but radical negativity sustained by worklessness. The walled-in lover is marked by the impossibility of responding with her presence; in turn, her presence is, in fact, her absence. Communication, couched in Kierkegaard’s writing, is the echo chamber—the echo response distorting the original call, exposing the distortion at the heart of communication—with Olsen’s absence marking every word. Kierkegaard’s writing is a double disappearing act—he disappears in language as much as Olsen does. In short, Kierkegaard mimics the active absence of the walled-in negativity. His own engagement with depth and solitude is a self-effacing rather than a subject-affirming act. As language expresses more and more the absence at its core, it also becomes less familiar. The space that the walled-in lover occupies is not interiority but a placeless place, or the radical negativity that informs language and communication. In fact, it is false to understand communication as an act carried out by Kierkegaard. As Blanchot conceives Kierkegaard’s writing, Olsen’s silence places all writing under the sign of the negative. Negativity circumscribes the writing act in its worklessness. The act of communication is thus defined by its worklessness (or *désœuvrement*, to use Blanchot’s term); it is what Caillois (1934) calls the assimilation of the organism (in this case, of the writer) into a “dark space into which things cannot be put” (100), equivalent here to the place of the secret. In line with Caillois’s idea of depersonalization by assimilation into space, Shaviro (1990) remarks: “The experience of language for Blanchot is that of a radical dispersion, an exteriority into which the order of significations disappears together with the subject that speaks” (113). Instead of being the active communicator, Kierkegaard is just as much subject to effacement as

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<sup>25</sup> “From” rather than “over” or “through” ambiguity because Olsen is built within the ambiguous structure and she is not meant to be either above it or to come out clean, on the side of purity, after having bathed in the sea of ambiguity.

Olsen. In communication premised on radical negativity, the activity of the communicating subject dissolves into a mimesis of the absent other, which also erases the communicating subject.

### **FOUCAULT: BLANCHOT AND THE OUTSIDE**

In *Maurice Blanchot: The Thought from the Outside* (1987), one of the few texts that directly approaches the notion of “outside,” Michel Foucault begins his discussion on exteriority by considering the power of the utterance “I speak,” which contains from the outset an unbridgeable gap between the speaking subject and the subject “I.” Foucault uses the Epimenides paradox<sup>26</sup> to differentiate between an obvious contradiction contained in the statement “I lie” and a concealed but much more effective opposition in exposing the gap at the core of language contained in the statement “I speak.” Foucault argues that “Epimenides’ argument can be mastered if, discourse having been slyly folded back upon itself, a distinction is made between two propositions, the first of which is the object of the second” (1987, 9). The two contradictory propositions contained in the statement “I lie” come to light when the truth content of the statement is questioned: the truth-related complication of the statement “I lie” arises due to the content implications of the statement and as a “result of a plain and simple fact: the speaking subject is also the subject about which it speaks” (10). Therefore, “I lie” is a paradox in and of itself; it does not call on external context for meaning or elucidation. It conveys its paradoxical content and brings a solution (the distinction between the two statements that it contains) from within its own frame.

On the contrary, in the statement “I speak,” there is no lie that would put into question the truthfulness of the proposition. Instead, the gap appears between the statement itself and that which is implied by the statement: “‘I speak’ refers to a supporting discourse that provides it with an object. That discourse, however, is missing; the sovereignty of ‘I speak’ can only reside in the absence of any other

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<sup>26</sup> The Epimenides paradox refers to a logical contradiction in a statement. The New Testament mentions Epimenides of Crete, who is said to have stated that “all Cretans are liars” (Beall, Glanzberg, and Ripley 2016). A simplified form of the statement above—the statement “I lie”—puts into question its own truth value. Considering that all lies are untrue statements, if the content of the sentence “I lie” is true, then the statement overall is untrue. If the sentence “I lie” is untrue (if I lie that I am lying), then the statement is true. At the same time, a statement is meant to communicate its content truthfully, so in that sense, the statement is also untrue. There is a contradiction between the truth content of a statement and its overall truth value.



language” (10). With the liar’s paradox, the problem was a redoubling of the statement; with the “I speak” paradox, the problem is an implied supplement, which undercuts the explicit self-referential power of the statement “I speak.” The presence of language, signaled in the statement “I speak,” is conditioned by the gap that referentiality opens—the gap between the statement and its supporting discourse.<sup>27</sup> In the case of Foucault’s “I speak,” the object of reference in the statement is the subject—the “I” who speaks—which “fragments, disperses, scatters, disappearing in that naked space” (10) that opens up when the self-referential utterance stops.

As Foucault argues, self-referential language, decoupled from a discursive background, only becomes fully activated in modern literature.<sup>28</sup> Prior to the spreading forth of language in its raw state in modern literature, “I speak” was always supported by the discursive “I think”—the circular subject enclosing the world within its interiority. What Foucault calls “discourse” in this context is the coupling of “Being and Speech” (1987, 16) that constitutes the home of the subject as “dazzling interiority” (16), to which the subject always returns, even if it reaches outside of itself, in order to immerse itself, before returning, in the world of experience. Without supplemental discourse, “I speak” is language turning in on language, chasing its own tail without being able to catch it; the “I” of this utterance, instead of reinforcing itself through negation, “fragments, disperses, scatters, disappearing in that naked space” (11), into the vast unknown of exteriority. I would extend Foucault’s commentary on self-referential language and its prevalence in modern literature to the visual arts, in which

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<sup>27</sup> In the first chapter, I briefly discussed a turn in Hyppolite’s interpretation of Freud’s negative judgement as the negation of negation. Instead of taking the double negation to constitute a spiral loop, resulting in a sublation (or *Aufhebung*) of an earlier moment, Hyppolite claims that the negation of negation employed in Freud’s essay “On Negation” (1925) constitutes a movement towards the outside, hinted at by the dislocation of the sign from its referent. In Freud’s essay, the “no” of negative judgement points to the presence of that which is not present, particularly in the case of the judgement of existence, whose function is that of attributing the reality of existence to an object through the presentation of that object, a presentation “to which its object no longer corresponds” (Hyppolite 1954, 295).

<sup>28</sup> In an excellent study of Blanchot’s use of epanorthotic retraction (the linguistic rendition of ontological double negation), Shane Weller (2014) argues that “one can only really appreciate the particularity of Blanchot’s linguistic negativism when one takes one’s distance from it and places it within this broader literary-philosophical context. When one does so, Blanchot’s [writing] can be seen to take its place, in all its singularity, within a European late modernism that includes the post-war works of Beckett and Celan, among others. While the work of each of these writers has its stylistic and tonal particularities, they nonetheless share a number of important features: parataxis, repetition, fragmentation, and, above all, a linguistic negativism that functions principally through the deployment of ‘unwords’. . . . Far from being driven by purely aesthetic concerns, Blanchot . . . commits himself for philosophical-political reasons to particular forms of linguistic negativism — culminating . . . in . . . the high-risk strategy of voidance — in order to try to speak of that which resists articulation, or what Beckett, in a text written at the end of the Second World War, names ‘humanity in ruins’” (44–45).

self-referentiality took centre stage when Impressionism's concern with painting's own object and medium—light and paint—became the focus of painting, replacing the mimetic relation that painting maintained with the world prior to Impressionism. Contrary to the exteriority that “I speak” exposes, the thinking subject—the subject of “I think”—whose circularity engulfs the whole world, is sustained by the interiorization that its own discourse produces:

“I speak” runs counter to “I think.” “I think” led to the indubitable certainty of the “I” and its existence; “I speak,” on the other hand, distances, disperses, effaces that existence and lets only its empty emplacement appear. Thought about thought, an entire tradition wider than philosophy, has taught us that thought leads us to the deepest interiority. Speech about speech leads us, by way of literature as well as perhaps by other paths, to the outside in which the speaking subject disappears. (13)

The “I” is reiterated by the chamber that thought produces. The language of literature does not produce the same interiority because, as opposed to the thinking subject, “it is rather language getting as far away from itself as possible” (12). In literature, language disperses, even in turning in on itself: “if, in this setting ‘outside of itself,’ it unveils its own being, the sudden clarity reveals not a folding back but a gap, not a turning back of signs upon themselves but a dispersion” (12). Thus, the self-referentiality of the “I” in “I speak” turns in on itself and finds only the originating void of language: “The ‘subject’ of literature (what speaks in it and what it speaks about) is less language in its positivity than the void language takes as its space when it articulates itself in the nakedness of ‘I speak’” (12). This insight brings me back to the difference between Adorno's and Blanchot's understanding of the Kierkegaardian writing of interiority: Adorno's manufactured Kierkegaardian interiority could have been sustained only if the dialectics of discourse—getting away from oneself in order to return—had been possible, only if his writing had been thought. On the contrary, Blanchot places the rupture at the core of Kierkegaard's writing by recognizing that the language of Kierkegaard's communication to Olsen is premised on “an impassable distance between his fiancée and himself” (2001, 19). With Olsen as the walled-in, impossible interlocutor, Kierkegaard's “I think” becomes “I speak.”

Foucault acknowledges the difficulty of accessing what he calls “the thought that stands outside subjectivity” (1987, 15) or “the thought from the outside” (16), the impossibility of establishing it as a discipline of study, with a history, categories,

operations, and its own terminology. The thought from the outside<sup>29</sup> is thought sustained by negativity. The outside, as a concept, relies on negativity in order to exist as exteriority. Such thought is liberated from the reign of the subject's circle while maintaining the positivity that knowledge requires (16). Foucault finds a certain grounding in the equivalence between exteriority as a category of thought and “experiences, encounters, and improbable signs” (24), specifying that it is by the “meticulous narration” (25) of such experiences that thought and discourse can remain truthful to negativity. However, his engagement with the outside of thought as experience is not the kind of phenomenological reduction that Husserl proposed. Nor should the experience that Foucault talks about be interpreted as mysticism, which he rejects emphatically, describing it as an experience premised on “the law of a Word” (53)—a different kind of silence, where the subject is petrified in eternal glory. Negativity as a starting point does not allow for such a regime of subordination to the subject. Instead, Foucault's attention is on the experience of what is imperceptible in language: “Language about the outside of all language, speech about the invisible side of words” (25). A certain openness or attentiveness to language is key to accessing the exteriority that language embodies. If the subject is not closed within its interiority, openness (also a form of worklessness) operates by bringing the subject nearer, in homeotic closeness, in Paul North's (2021) terminology, to what is missing in language: “A listening less to what is articulated in language than to the void circulating between its words, to the murmur that is forever taking it apart; a discourse on the non-discourse of all language; the fiction of the invisible space in which it appears” (25).

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<sup>29</sup> For a thorough explanation of the concept of “outside” as used by Blanchot, see Wasser's entry in *Understanding Blanchot, Understanding Modernism* (2018). For the purposes of understanding the term's relation to negativity, the following excerpt provides contextualization: “An element of non-relation, ‘the outside’ eludes the simple binary oppositions inside/outside, interior/exterior. Nonetheless, it is helpful to begin an explanation in these terms. Thus, we might say, ‘the outside’ refers to what is excluded from language; it can also refer to what is excluded from representation, from conceptual thought, from the work of art, from the law, from politics, or from a relation to the other. In each case, what is excluded relates essentially to what excludes it. And in each case, it is offered as a limit-experience, one that cannot be grasped by the senses or bound by space and time. The exteriority at stake in the outside, in other words, cannot be conceived according to a ‘tranquil spatial and temporal continuity’ . . . Rather, it has a time and space proper to it: its time takes the form of an absence of time that Blanchot calls ‘the interminable’ or ‘the dispersion of a present,’ and its space takes the form of an immediacy that Blanchot calls ‘fascination’ or ‘passion’” (315).

### *Language of the Void*

Does all of this mean that the subject—“what speaks in [language] and what [language] speaks about” (Foucault 1987, 12)—is excluded from the exteriority that language finds in literature? Foucault states repeatedly that there is such a thing as language without a subject, setting up two opposing concepts: “the appearing of language in its being” (15) and “consciousness of the self in its identity” (15). Thus, on one side, there is language without subject, and on the other side the subject in its identity with itself. As the two concepts stand in opposition, we are justified in asking the following: Is there a negative operation that produces the division between the two? Is there a prior concept out of which the two concepts emerge? Foucault positions the abyss at the core of language in relation to the subject, noting a change in the dynamic between the two: “We are standing on the edge of an abyss that had long been invisible: the being of language only appears for itself with the disappearance of the subject” (15). Consequently, although the abyss has always been present, it only “appears for itself” after the presumed sovereignty of the subject gives way to a new configuration.

Foucault’s use of opposing pairs, such as thought and speech, language and consciousness, and so on, seems to once more invite a dialectical configuration that would end with the reign of the subject—in my terms, with weak negativity. However, there are two considerations that prevent such a return to circular subjectivity. First, the externality that Foucault sets up in language is not countered by a positive concept that would actively oppose it. As the outside does not depend on presence, it is language itself that effects its own absence: “When language arrives at its own edge, what it finds is not a positivity that contradicts it, but the void that will efface it. Into that void it must go, consenting to come undone in the rumbling, in the immediate negation of what it says” (Foucault 1987, 22). Second, the reversal of the dynamic between subjectivity and negativity does not actually imply a dialectical process. Regarding Blanchot’s use of language in a manner that reveals the void towards which it is oriented, Foucault argues that because interiority, which is eradicated in the turn to language, is not used as a doubling and negating chamber where the circular subject could feed and grow its own mythology, the negativity of exteriority does not push language into another dialectical operation:

Blanchot’s language does not use negation dialectically. To negate dialectically brings what one negates into the troubled interiority of the mind. To negate one’s own discourse, as Blanchot does, is to cast it ceaselessly outside of itself, to

deprive it at every moment not only of what it has just said, but of the very ability to speak. . . . Not reflection, but forgetting; not contradiction, but a contestation that effaces; not reconciliation, but droning on and on; not mind in laborious conquest of its unity, but the endless erosion of the outside; not truth finally shedding light on itself, but the streaming and distress of a language that has always already begun. (22)

In the last phrase, Foucault seeks to replace the language of dialectics—reflection, contradiction, reconciliation, conquest—with processes that allow for the autonomy of the negative that is foreign to dialectics, even to Adorno’s negative dialectics. The autonomy of the negative as radical negativity opens the possibility for the subject to perform the worklessness that Caillois (1934) describes as the organism’s “depersonalization by assimilation into space” (100). In Foucault’s (1987) terminology, Blanchot’s language is defined by the “endless erosion of the outside” (22) which the subject cannot resist. Such worklessness (as the subject cannot be said to perform the action but rather is subjected to the outside in language) is representative of Kierkegaard’s writing towards the walled-in Olsen. The subject’s erosion is not achieved uniformly, it does not follow a progressive, linear timeline, and there is no messianic truth revealed in the synthesizing conclusion, as the erosion is endless. There is no greatness or glorification in the process, only an infinite range of expressing the erosion. In this sense, the subject’s effacement by language is similar to Freud’s description of the organism’s living towards death in that it allows for the existence of infinite configurations outside of the uniformity imposed by the subject when it is looked at by taking the inorganic (or exteriority) as the starting point. As soon as the subject is given free rein, often in tandem with its mythical origin and a glorified horizon, its performance is reduced to a few well-known narratives. Foucault calls for a reconfiguration of thought, allowing it “to be free for a new beginning” (22), though only for a beginning premised on a liberation coming from the past rather a return to an origin, because “what freed that void was the language of the past in the act of hollowing itself out” (22).

### ***The Void and the Sea of Language***

Foucault (1987) tells the story of the concept of attraction, which he finds in Blanchot’s prose, in the eerie texts that defy genre classification, such as *Le Très-Haut*, *L’Arrêt de mort* (2000), or his first novel, *Thomas l’Obscur*. Attraction, regardless of context, is a passing over to the other side of senses and of presentation. For Foucault (1987),

attraction is “to experience in emptiness and destitution the presence of the outside and, tied to that presence, the fact that one is irremediably outside the outside” (28), resonating with Caillois’s (1934) description of “depersonalization by assimilation to space” (100) in which “the subject crosses the boundary of his own skin and stands outside of his senses” (100). Like Kierkegaard’s sacrificed Olsen, the outside, being outside, performs its outsideness. For Foucault, the worklessness of attraction is an experience that language cannot describe; instead, it becomes lost in the ambiguousness of the sign or the gesture that draws one in. In *Thomas l’Obscur*, Blanchot describes the experience of negativity, of being drawn in by the void that the character, Thomas, becomes immersed in. Being caught in a storm at sea, Thomas almost drowns, reaches a point where he loses the sensation of his body, and becomes, instead of being grasped by the natural panic of death, one with the medium that surrounds him. From that state, which is close to death, he performs a state of depersonalization, which allows him to continue swimming and come out of the water:

Then, whether from fatigue or for an unknown reason, his limbs gave him the same sense of foreignness as the water in which they were tossed. This feeling seemed almost pleasant at first. As he swam, he pursued a sort of reverie in which he confused himself with the sea. The intoxication of leaving himself, of slipping into the void, of dispersing himself in the thought of water, made him forget every discomfort. And even when this ideal sea which he was becoming ever more intimately had in turn become the real sea, in which he was virtually drowned, he was not moved as he should have been: of course, there was something intolerable about swimming this way, aimlessly, with a body which was of no use to him beyond thinking that he was swimming, but he also experienced a sense of relief, as if he had finally discovered the key to the situation, and, as far as he was concerned, it all came down to continuing his endless journey, with an absence of organism in an absence of sea. (8)

As Blanchot describes it in suggestive terms, the experience seems, at first, comparable with what Freud describes in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1962) as the “oceanic feeling” (11),<sup>30</sup> of being one with the world outside—a preconscious stage devoid of the

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<sup>30</sup> *Civilization and Its Discontents* (Freud 1930/1962) starts with a discussion of the “oceanic feeling,” or “a sensation of ‘eternity,’ a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded” (11), “a feeling of an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole” (12). Freud considers this state to be embryonic for the human being and argues that on it depends the demarcation between the “inside,” or the subject’s unconscious, and the outside world, towards which “the ego seems to maintain clear and sharp lines of demarcation” (13). The oceanic feeling, which underpins the process of subject formation, resembles the state of the inorganic that the organism longs to return to, as described in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920/1961).

division that judgement effects. The momentary paralysis that overcomes Thomas, whose “slipping into the void” (Blanchot 1941, 8) comes with the pleasure of dissolving, of becoming one with the sea at first, reaches a turning point when the sea splits into the ideal and real sea. The real sea, of course, in which he is drowning, and the ideal sea, in which he dissolves as subject. The ideal sea—the most beautiful of cathedrals (and its most cruel sacrifice in Manole’s myth)—is nothing but the void at the core of the sea, which Thomas disperses into, “with an absence of organism in an absence of sea” (8). His becoming-sea is the process of self-effacement; at the same time, the sea itself is no longer sea, as it dissolves into Thomas’s absence.

The language that expresses the absence of the sea is the same language that acknowledges death, without falling prey to the eternalization of the subject beyond death. Foucault (1987) brings together death and origin in language, which, interchanging, maintain the primacy of negativity in language. The awareness of “what language is in its being” (57) is not an obsessive focus on form or content. It is not attention to structure and internal logic, nor giving in to the immanence of sense, as in Hyppolite, and definitely not the interiority of consciousness that allows language to speak in its negativity. The thought from the outside is the thought about language’s being, which recovers the tenderness, the gentle swaying of the absent sea, together with the gaze of death: “And what language is . . . is that softest of voices, that nearly imperceptible retreat, that weakness deep inside and surrounding every thing and every face – what bathes the belated effort of the origin and the dawn like erosion of death in the same neutral light, at once day and night. Orpheus’s murderous forgetting, Ulysses’ wait in chains, are the very being of language” (58).

In Blanchot’s *L’Arrêt de mort* (1948/2000), the gaze of death, which the narrator encounters, marks the entire text. The narrator, in this case, is not soothed by the sea but suddenly confronted with the sight of death in the presence of the beloved:

I leaned over her, I called to her by her first name; and immediately – I can say there wasn’t a second’s interval – a sort of breath came out of her compressed mouth, a sigh which little by little became a light, weak cry; almost at the same time – I’m sure of this – her arms moved, tried to rise. At that moment, her eyelids were still completely shut. But a second afterwards, perhaps two, they opened abruptly and they opened to reveal something terrible which I will not talk about, the most terrible look which a living being can receive. (20)

The horror of death in war, the fear of the moribund, the stillness and silence of experiencing death indirectly is what one has access to in common existence. However, Blanchot describes the experience of witnessing the void that the absence of death creates in the gaze of another. At the same time, as Foucault (1987) notes, “the narrator’s gaze into that gaze . . . exerts an extraordinary power of attraction” (44). The gaze of death—the story of Orpheus and Eurydice (or Kierkegaard and Olsen)—is not only a story in which negativity as the force sustaining the outside has primacy but also, in Blanchot’s reception of the story, an account of the betrayal that negativity requires in order to make itself known.

This dissertation has been a continuous attempt to arrive, with some clarity, at an idea of negativity, of stabilizing a concept that resists conceptualization and emerges sporadically, only to be lost again in the proliferation of terms and genres that fail to account for its elusive obscurity. However, one thing seems certain: negativity is a concept that begets the cracks in the structure, the worklessness in language, a certain kind of attention and sensibility which cannot be recreated at will. It not only begets these elements but is also dependent on their prominence in a structure. Negativity sustains frailty and, at the same time, relies on it. In one of Blanchot’s most powerful accounts of negativity’s power to sustain a world in its darkness, negativity requires betrayal, imprudence, and song.

### **CONCLUSION: THE HERO DOES NOT WRITE**

The way that Kierkegaard addresses Olsen, the only way in which he can gesture towards the emptiness that she is cast into, is by writing. In fact, “Kierkegaard” is merely one of the pseudonyms that appear throughout “his” writings. Consequently, Kierkegaard only exists within the space produced by Olsen’s sacrifice, just as Orpheus “is Orpheus only in the song: he cannot have any relation to Eurydice except within the hymn” (Blanchot 1955/1982, 173). Blanchot calls such space of creation “the Orphic space” (173). In the Orphic space, Olsen and Eurydice alike must perform their deaths over and over in order to sustain the work that sacrifices them. This setup is not one of immunity, whereby the community is made stronger by the collective sacrifice of the outsider. In the Orphic space, “his fiancée could triumph from ambiguity” (Blanchot 2001, 19) rather than being the space of configuration for the subject. Negativity, likewise, is only sovereign in the conceptual space in which it is allowed to parse, alter,



erode, efface, and frustrate the subject's weaving thread, without becoming the motor for a new, reinforced subject. Negativity gives life to the space where the subject effaces itself towards death. In Blanchot's interpretation of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, Eurydice, who gives life to Orpheus's song, is already lost and already dead when he descends into Hades to bring her back. Proust's Albertine, Kelvin's Hari (in Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris*), Gilgamesh's Enkidu, Aphrodite's Adonis, Isolde's Tristan, Achilles's Patroclus—a community of lovers already lost, simulating death while already dead in order to make a world appear in which they are once more killed by the gaze of the beloved.

The task of death is, for Blanchot (1982), double: "I must die a death that does not betray *me*, and I myself must die without betraying the truth and the essence of death" (128). However, being loyal to death does not mean facing death heroically and preserving the individual, the "I," from the ordinary reality of an anonymous death. There is a whole tradition in our culture of dying "authentically," so pronounced in times of war, which Blanchot identifies correctly as "a reminder of the need for immortality" (128). And while we know that there is no "I" after death, the image of burning up in flames in a way specific only to me—glorified, in Blanchot's words, as "the moment toward which 'I' propel myself as if toward the possibility which is absolutely proper to me, which is proper only to me and which secures me in the steadfast solitude of this pure 'I'" (128)—is unmistakably one of the more persistent images of the last century, one which confirms that addressing the myth of the circular subject has more than just theoretical implications. For Blanchot, to not betray and not be betrayed by death is to stretch life to include death, to stretch the "I" to its own limit, where it can face its own death, to fight the dreams of immortality and greatness that the circular subject holds on to.

Blanchot (1982) recognizes that there is a difference between seeing "death as the foreign and incomprehensible" (129) and making it "the other name, the other side of life" (129). He supports, thus, the shift of thought that would allow for an inclusion of death in life. The difference lies precisely in what Foucault sees as moving beyond thinking negativity dialectically and maintaining opposition as tension, without resorting to the opposition between the exteriority and interiority of consciousness. "Not contradiction, but a contestation that effaces; . . . not mind in laborious conquest of its unity, but the endless erosion of the outside" (1987, 22), Foucault proposes, in an

attempt to write about a category of thought that is unfamiliar to Western discourse and that can only be approached obliquely. Death, a much more familiar theme in our culture, is, nonetheless, difficult to draw into the sphere of life. Blanchot's words regarding the challenge of extending life to include death often ring too literally at the present time: "This concern becomes more pressing and more painful with the war. The horror of war sheds its somber light upon all that is inhuman for man in the abyss: yes, death is the adversary, the invisible opponent that wounds the best in us and by which our joys perish" (1982, 129). But while horror paints death as the inhuman other, and living with the anticipation of this horror results in an overwhelming dread that does not live up to what Blanchot is proposing (loyalty to and from death), perhaps horror in the face of the frightful side of life is what catches up with us when the "I" is still trying to live its individual and immortal glory. The stretching of life to include death, contesting the rejection of death, and carving "the generous space of the two domains' unity" (129) does not, however, need to end in a purificatory blaze for the subject, out of which it would be reborn, in a new form. Being loyal to death and, as a subject, being loyal to negativity, does not mean living life as an unburied corpse. Quite the contrary: it requires a work (the kind cultivated by worklessness) that one is ready to betray, such as the work of communicating with a walled-in lover or the expression of the work of art. The work, which is carried out in the space created by the void of death, comes from beyond the placelessness of the sacrificed other.

The worklessness of radical negativity, as discussed previously in this dissertation, is subdued at the slightest appearance of the subject's operations. However, this work of negativity, the work of the void of death, of the sacrificed lover's absence, this concept needs the interposition of a space, a medium upon which to work. Rather than calling it "mediation," which would imply a dialectical triadic structure, it would be more useful to think, in Blanchot's terms, of a process, such as writing or singing, that supports the work of negativity and allows for an encounter that is not head-on. Nor is the work of negativity to be interpreted as an experience of immediacy. A new language is needed to express this relation—a language from beyond language. The following passage in *L'Arrêt de mort* (2000) illustrates the role of the work in relation to two types of approaching death:

For some time I lived with a person who was obsessed by the idea of my death. I had said to her: "I think that at certain moments you would like to kill me. You shouldn't resist that desire. I'm going to write down on a piece of paper that if

you kill me you will be doing what is best.” But a thought is not exactly a person, even if it lives and acts like one. A thought demands a loyalty which makes any slyness difficult. Sometimes it is itself false, but behind this lie I still recognize something real, which I cannot betray. (31)

The writing and the thought of killing, which here are the same, are used to approach the sacrifice indirectly. On the other hand, the obsession with someone’s death, which does not materialize in any way, only creates the loop of the dialectic—the slyness which helps the subject grow into a self-glorifying entity. Being engrossed in the possibility of the other’s death, being terrified of it and desiring it at the same time, is as self-serving for the subject as is the dialectical work of negation. Writing down the killing brings it closer, makes it real: the act now exists on paper and in thought, it is not a mere abstract obsession. The work is created by the act of killing, though it is its absence at the same time. The work of writing down the act of killing “demands a loyalty which makes any slyness difficult” (31)—the slyness of one’s obsession with another’s death or suffering. At the same time, “sometimes it is itself false” (31)—in fact, very often, the work demands this falsity, the betrayal, while the actual death, that which created the work of writing down death, is recognized as real. That real death, which announces itself in the work by its absence, is what demands absolute loyalty. The work, especially in the Orphic space, can sometimes be false; it turns out, it almost always is.

In the case of Orpheus and Eurydice, the song that creates the space for the story of the lovers calls for betrayal. Orpheus’s work is not that of the slave in the master-slave dialectic. Likewise, Kierkegaard willingly sacrifices Olsen on the altar of writing. Losing Olsen is a precondition for his writing, though in writing he does no more than recall her in her absence, and more often than not, forgets about the work itself and loses himself in the sea of words. Orpheus, likewise, “loses Eurydice because he desires her beyond the measured limits of the song, and he loses himself, but this desire, and Eurydice lost, and Orpheus dispersed are necessary to the song, just as the ordeal of eternal inertia is necessary to the work” (Blanchot 1982, 173). Here, Blanchot speaks about the second loss of Eurydice, when, according to the myth, a suspicious and longing Orpheus turns back to look at Eurydice, who, existing solely in the work, is not herself but an apparition. Walking behind Orpheus, still in the realm of Hades, Eurydice belongs to the “other night” (164), the one in which “everything that has disappeared appears” (163). Opposed to the first night, the night of death and darkness and oblivion,

the other night is that in which the sacrificed lover is walled in. The other night is not, as its association with the Orphic song may make it seem, the space of boundless creativity, of endless engagement on neutral ground. As Blanchot insists, “the other night does not welcome, does not open. In it one is still outside. It does not close either. . . . Night is inaccessible because to have access to it is to accede to the outside, to remain outside the night and to lose forever the possibility of emerging from it” (164). The work, in fact, the worklessness of self-effacement, produced by “the ordeal of eternal inertia,” hangs upon Orpheus’s looking away and Kierkegaard’s abstaining from entering into direct contact with the scorned Olsen. But in being loyal to the first night—to death and negation—both Orpheus and Kierkegaard have to betray the work, “seduced by a desire that comes . . . from the night, that is linked to night as to its origin” (174). Thus, one has to not only sacrifice and hence betray the object but betray one’s own betrayal by looking back upon the sacrifice (as Orpheus looks back upon Eurydice and thus dooms her *and* himself): one must negate one’s own negation, which effaces the subject built upon the initial betrayal without culminating in a new, affirmative statement. What emerges from this betrayal of betrayal, or the sacrifice of sacrifice? The moment of the creative act, which Blanchot described—the moment when one can start writing, the moment that comes from the outside. The point is not to build the secret but to let it go along with oneself, drowning in the sea of words, as Kierkegaard does in his journals and books.

The work is not presence, it is the process of undoing and the placelessness of the outside. The work, belonging to the other night, is not the place of negativity; in it, Orpheus is “dead . . . of that other death which is death without end, the ordeal of the end’s absence” (172). However, Orpheus exists only in the writing. Eurydice, on the other hand, is dead twice—in the first night and in the second. As Olsen, Eurydice is unavailable and closed away “within the song that surpasses the song” (175). It is the betrayal of Orpheus, his turning back, his attraction to Eurydice, which frees negativity for a moment. A moment when the work is lost, though “united with its origin and consecrated in impossibility” (174). Like Orpheus, Kierkegaard looks back, only to kill the beloved’s ghost. This moment of forgetfulness is, for Blanchot, when writing starts, when the creative process begins.

The leap into writing, which could be extended to any creative act, is essential, and the writer risks everything: “Writing is nothing if it does not involve the writer in a

movement full of risks that will change him in one way or another” (Blanchot 1995, 244). But in order for this moment to happen, the work needs to be in place—the work of negativity, of the outside, where, however, negativity is not present as an entity. The ordeal of worklessness, the constant effacement of the boundaries with the outside, the sacrifice of the beloved—the work lays the ground for what Blanchot calls “inspiration’s leap” (1982, 176). There is no inspiration, I would add, because inspiration implies a power emanating from within the subject, a divine intervention from a transcendent other, or some mystical or aleatory quality. Instead, there is only the leap, precipitated by something that comes from the outside, into the night of the night: to write is to betray negation, to forget, to drown in the ideal sea, to be *no one*.

## CONCLUSION: MANOLO MILLARES AND NEGATIVITY IN TIMES OF WAR

Si te dijera, amor mío  
Que temo a la madrugada  
No sé qué estrellas son éstas  
Que hieren como amenazas  
Ni sé qué sangra la luna  
Al filo de su guadaña.  
Presiento que tras la noche  
Vendrá la noche más larga

(Luis Eduardo Aute 1975)<sup>1</sup>

The works of Manolo Millares speak from the place of *no one*. In doing so, they address the importance of negativity for the worklessness out of which community is born. Millares's sculptural paintings are full of vibrancy and contrast. They bring forth the thickness of the world through the use of heavy materials, such as burlap and wood, which are contorted, painted, cut, and sown. The texture of the materials is accompanied by charcoal black, simulating the scorched volcanic earth of his native Canarias, ivory white, reminiscent of blinding sunlight and death,<sup>2</sup> and deep red, the colour of a bloody civil war, which Millares could never forget and which was followed by the cruelty of the Franco dictatorship, whose end Millares never lived to see. However, as Deleuze (1981/2003) writes of the violence and the language of cruelty found Francis Bacon's work,<sup>3</sup> "these are overly facile detours, detours that the artist himself judges severely and condemns in his work" (x). Millares, too, rejects a reading of his work in terms of symbolism. Instead, he invites a literal and bare-skinned intimacy<sup>4</sup> with the work, a

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<sup>1</sup> "What if I told you, my love/That I fear the break of dawn/I do not know what stars are these/That wound like menaces/Nor do I know what makes the moon bleed/At the edge of its scythe/I sense that after the night/The longest night will come." My translation of Luis Eduardo Aute's famous ballad "Al alba," dedicated to the last five victims of execution during Franco's regime in 1975.

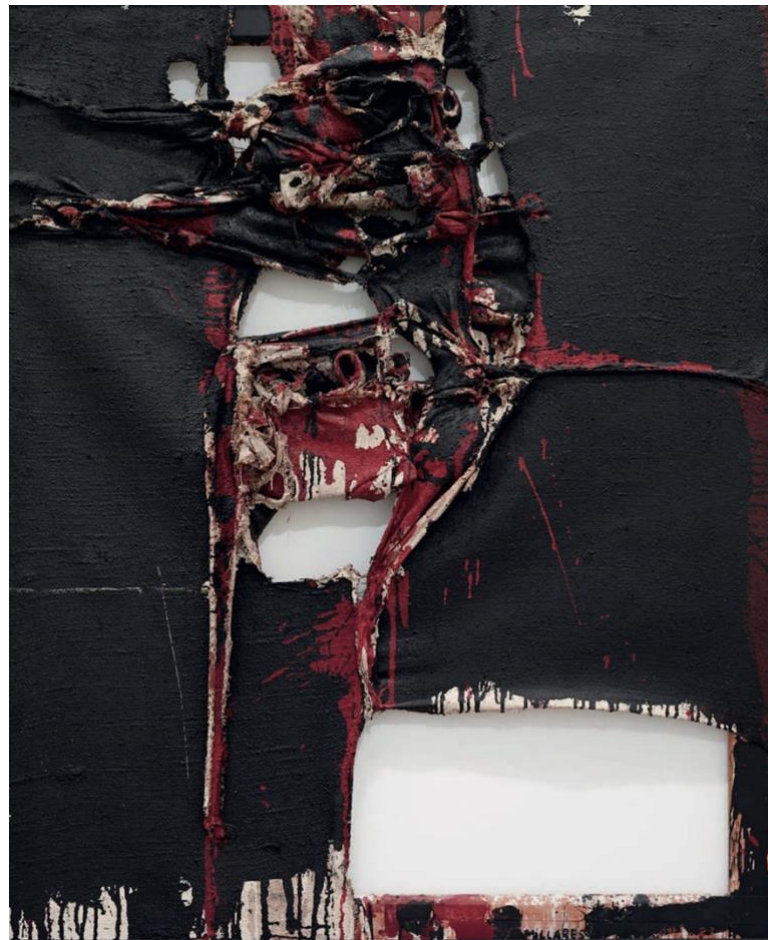
<sup>2</sup> Millares studied archeology and always drew on his aesthetic experience of the excavation site.

<sup>3</sup> Alfonso de la Torre (2015) brings the two painters together, suggesting that they were inspired by the same imagery of post-WWII public displays of cruelty, not only towards humans but also animals, in terms of their interest in the aesthetics of abjection and tragedy (43–45).

<sup>4</sup> Flesh and the entrails of the body are some of the elements evoked by Millares's burlap, as many critics and Millares's own writings confirm. Using an evocative analogy, Emmanuel Guigon (2003) suggests

closeness sustained through the stiffness of the layered fabrics and the cuts in the canvas. The apparent fragility of the ensemble, which threatens to break apart and disintegrate in front of the viewer, the austerity of the materials used, many of them found on the street or in the garbage dump, together with the stories they carry with them, are all revealed in an interpretation grounded in negativity.

Between 1958 and 1966, Millares paints his series *Humúnculo*, containing, perhaps, the works most emblematic of his style, though it is not the only one of Millares's series to focus on the figure of the human and its death.



**Figure 1.** Manolo Millares, *Homúnculo* (1960), VEGAP, Madrid, 2016.

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that in Millares's work, the exposure of what is beyond "the body" as representation shows that no matter how stripped-down the body is, its essence is not accessible: "In one of his stories Alphonse Allais tells a similar tale, of a pasha that was dying of boredom. One day he was brought a woman from his harem whom he observed with disdain. As was the custom he ordered his guards to strip her naked. With their sabres they cut the ribbons that tied her veils. Each time a piece of clothing fell to the floor the pasha said with indifference 'More!' After a short while the young girl was completely naked. 'More!' shouted the pasha and so the guards skinned the poor girl alive. This would be painting, the representation of a nude form that is naked to the point of showing its bowels. It could get underneath the skin, to reveal all that is inside us that masks us. It would be there, revealed in the depth of the abyss" (63).

Each of the homunculi possesses a body torn apart, revealing the realm beyond the painting, the outside, and simulating death while possessing the form of dead matter—in other words, performing the worklessness of negativity. How each body falls apart is not special in any way, but it is specific to each painting and each homunculus. All of the paintings in the series mimic, generally, the way that all bodies are torn apart in death (particularly in violent death), and there is nothing to indicate that the paintings refer to an individual subject. At the same time, while expressing the universality of violence and death and articulating an aesthetic message still relevant in the contemporary context, each homunculus is mangled differently and uniquely, and each painting bears with it the historical context and the social struggle of the time when it was conceived. Death spans the whole series of the paintings, present in its generality and particularity, expressing itself through the absence of work: each homunculus *is* disintegrating, which is neither a kind of working nor a passivity but a worklessness, yet each painting captures the process of death in a static, frozen frame.

After WWII, Europe was forced to come to terms with the physical, mental, and technological destruction witnessed during the long war and, subsequently, during the establishment of the new political regimes, especially in the southern and eastern parts of the continent. The reconfiguration of the continent, the end of whose effects we have yet to see, into the Western, democratic side and its Eastern antithesis behind the Iron Curtain, reinforced in 1955 by the Warsaw Pact, has served as a paradigm for most analyses of post-war Europe. Often forgotten in this post-WWII East–West divide, Spain was still coming to grips with its own bloody Civil War (1936–1939), which decimated the Republican movement, along with the anarchist, separatist, and communist factions. After the military coup organized by a nationalist military junta and the subsequent civil war, won by the coupists, Spain became closed off to the rest of the world—held down by the iron fist of the Falangist organization, supported by the Carlist (traditionalist) faction and blessed by the supreme authority of the Catholic Church—under the dictatorship of general Francisco Franco (aka *El Caudillo*). For the following three and a half decades, Spain suffered under severe censorship, repression, and control of politics and culture, enforced by acts of public violence like execution, torture, and military and police brutality. During the Franco dictatorship, Spain became a place from which no scream could escape. It was not the abstract potentiality of death or the glorification of the subject's valor in the face of it but the horror of concrete death,



that of one's closest, at the hands of incomprehensible cruelty that informed the thought and art of that time. Under Franco, Manolo Millares (alone or with members of the groups El Paso and Zaj) was one of the most radical avant-garde artists, who succeeded in piercing the wall of silence surrounding Spain. Millares's work uses an ensemble of materials and mixed media. It is influenced by Surrealism (whose traces can be seen in the asemic writing he sometimes used—a successor of automatic writing), Informalism, Arte Povera, and other currents, all of which he incorporated with a clarity that is particular only to him and which expresses the radically negative behind the intimate language of pain—the suffering he experienced and witnessed and the absolute outside of pain, the absence of thought or sensation—as well as the otherness that comprises the world of the human.

Traveling to authoritarian Spain from democratic France in 1954, writer Richard Wright (1957/2008) is driven by the following question: “How did one live after the death of the hope for freedom?” (“Life After Death,” 40). Wright's experience starts as a descent into the underworld: “The look of the world darkened; a certain starkness of mood hovered over the landscape” (“Life After Death,” 41). He wonders about the sense of the uncanny that he experiences in Spain: “Though Spain was geographically a part of Europe, it had had just enough Western aspects of life to make me feel a little at home. But it was not the West” (“The World of Pagan Power,” 371). In his travel memoir *Pagan Spain*, Wright describes a spirited world full of contradictions and oppressed by a set of conditions and institutions which, in his analysis, emerge out of a dark collective and “pagan,” or superstitious, unconscious. Perplexed by his experience and unable to fully comprehend his contact with a world so unfamiliar, Wright at first decides to abandon his analysis of “the diabolical gyrations of the Falange, the State, the Army, and the Church, for it was . . . clear that Spanish organs of power had been shaped by, and were drawing their vitality from, some deep irrational core that made up the heart of Spanish reality” (“The World of Pagan Power,” 371). Then, to find explanations when a rational analysis seems inadequate, Wright mythologizes what is unknown to him as the product of a primordial darkness inherent in Spanish culture, a violent mystical pulsation incarnated in a destructive (though aesthetically impressive) spectacle. We should not be too quick to take Wright's description too seriously. Blinded by his own understanding of the world that takes the Western subject as its point of departure, Wright misses what is right in front of him: the sense of community

that the spectre of death and war creates, an infinite and intense attention to the death of the other that cancels the isolation of the individual. This sense of community is not powered by circular subjectivity or weak negativity. Weak negativity is the dark mysticism that Wright reads into Spanish culture or the pleasurable violence of a society that uses the spectacle of bullfighting as a collective catharsis that is much needed when living under a dictatorship. Rather, what Wright unsuccessfully tries to grasp and what Millares conveys is a radical negativity, which Blanchot's concept of community helps unravel.

Responding to Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Inoperative Community* and Bataille's writings on the concept of community and its more or less tangible relevance in the world, Blanchot (1983/1988) states the following: "To write under the pressure of war is not to write about the war but to write inside its horizon and as if it were the companion with whom one shares one's bed (assuming that it leaves us room, a margin of freedom)" (4). Writing or painting under the companionship of war is possible when war signifies one's exposure to the destruction of a world—the death of the other. At the same time, when the subject projects war onto the magnifying screen of glory, producing a seemingly immortal collective subjectivity, writing is not done under the companionship of war. Instead, writing becomes an act pouring forth from the tyranny of the subject. It signifies that long after the war is over, after the victors have imposed their narrative, the intimacy that death creates by not being shared (your death is never also mine, though I "share the solitude of the event which seems to be the possibility that is most [your] own" [9]) constitutes the horizon by which writing has always been informed. Community according to Blanchot is built only on the worklessness that actualizes this shared intimate absence: "[Community] does not allow itself to create a work and has no production value as aim" (11).

Is war necessary, then, for worklessness to reveal radical negativity? No, although it is curious that the situations that bring the subject's glorification in its most heightened form also elicit the subject's greatest decrepitude. War is death-ridden, though it is the worklessness that death elicits that allows for a glimpse of negativity—the worklessness that the death of the other arouses is not centred on the subject (or on the fully-formed concept in traditional metaphysics). If it were, then death would belong to the subject's circle in the form of weak negativity, and it would serve only to elevate and glorify the subject. Instead, "Death, the death of the other, like friendship or love,

clears the space of intimacy or interiority which is never . . . the space of the subject, but a gliding beyond limits” (Blanchot 1988, 17). These limits, for Blanchot, do not represent the subject’s transcendence of death; rather, they mark the infinite alterity of a subject cut off from its process of circularity and from “an existence that puts itself radically and constantly into question” (8). It is important to note that, if interiority is to be subjectless, the subject “cannot of itself alone have that possibility which always goes beyond it” (8). Surpassing the limits of the subject’s circle involves maintaining the presence of the other as irreducible, while radical negativity, through worklessness, sustains this relation between self and other. It is in this respect that a negativity-based ethic/aesthetic surpasses the emptiness of mere nihilism.

Therefore, Blanchot (1988) (with Nancy, Bataille, and Duras, among others) premises the concept of community on the radical negativity foreshadowed by the presence of the other’s death. As I noted above, the death of the other is not, for Blanchot, one’s own death. It is not, in the end, about “me” and “my death”—the witnessed finitude of the other that supposedly reminds me of my own death, which, in turn, glorifies me as subject and, in dying with you, I surpass my mortality by means of our shared death (usually by means of a third concept, such as the state or justice). It is, rather, about the presence of the one who is becoming absent:

What, then, calls me into question most radically? Not my relation to myself as finite or as the consciousness of being before death or for death, but my presence for another who absents himself by dying. To remain present in the proximity of another who by dying removes himself definitively, to take upon myself another’s death as the only death that concerns me, this is what puts me beside myself, this is the only separation that can open me, in its very impossibility, to the Openness of a community. (9)

It is the unshareable, impenetrable secret at the core of the other’s death that makes remaining present in the intimacy of death a radical act at the core of community. Remaining present in the proximity of the other’s death means writing at the limit of the subject, in the intimacy of war/love/friendship. It also implies the betrayal of that intimacy, as is the case with Orpheus gazing upon the dead Eurydice. However, such betrayal is not the work of guilt, which attempts to reinsert the subject into the other’s narrative, to inflate and turn the other’s death into an event that can be challenged and whose constitutive absence is not recognized; invading the other’s death by guilt is not the work of radical negativity. Rather, the worklessness of negativity means “to take upon myself another’s death as the only death that concerns me” (9) and not to expect

to be seen or recognized by the other (or by the community) in their death. It is one's presence at the death of the other, without being able to share their death, that constitutes the worklessness of the outside. With it comes the realization that there is no work to be done. There is nothing to be exchanged in the absence at the core of community. One's presence at the death of the other creates a non-space of intimacy: a space that is never closed but constantly under the pressure of the outside, the non-space where the other can die over and over again.

Manolo Millares is one of the few artists who, under dictatorship and the pressure of the changing forms of art, insists on creating in the companionship of war and the lived reality of its consequences. However, Millares does not depict war, and his art does not serve to make a case against war either, as he rejects any kind of utilitarianism in interpreting his work. In a series of paintings that he created in Madrid after having moved from his native Canarias to the mainland in the last decade of his life (he died in 1972 at the age of 46), he expresses his preoccupation with a human reality beyond common sense. He is concerned with the objectivity of the work of art—the irreducible materiality of painting and death. Methodologically, he remains faithful to a type of Adornian negative dialectic, which he develops instinctively. His archeological training brought him close to the Guanches, the indigenous population of the Canary Islands, exterminated by the Spanish settlers, and he spent hours drawing and then excavating their remains.<sup>5</sup> This experience provided him with the memories and materials<sup>6</sup> which he later used in his sculptural mixed-media paintings allowing the dead to die over and over again in his works. The closeness of Millares to the main themes of his work (cruelty, war, crucifixion, and torture, all in some way connected to finitude and death) is rooted, first and foremost, in his material and historical preoccupations. As Cirlot (1968) argues, “the archeological element alludes to the ‘death of man’ not in the vein of post-Nietzschean philosophy, but as an encounter with the remains of thinking beings, shattered, unravelled, rummaged through, reduced to a materiality that can easily, at any moment, dissolve into dust” (44).<sup>7</sup> The materiality of

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<sup>5</sup> As Rivero Gómez (2020, 102) argues, although I do not agree with his commentary on Millares's discovery of his fear of death in his early preoccupation with the Guanches, Millares's work reveals a transformative art practice centred on the materiality of the dead and mummified body rather than a transcendent fear of finitude.

<sup>6</sup> Millares's favorite burlap, for example, was used in Guanche burials.

<sup>7</sup> My translation. The original text in Spanish: “Lo arqueológico alude a la ‘muerte del hombre’, no en el sentido de la filosofía posnietzscheana, sino en el sentido real de encontrar restos de seres pensantes,

his paintings, grounded in the sociohistorical context of his work, points to the encounter between those who cannot share one another's death.

Millares seeks the authentic concretion that allows his work to break with the generality of the abstract art piece. As Moreno Galván (here cited by de la Torre 2014), Millares's friend and art critic, confirms, the attention Millares paid to the process of finding different materials and objects for incorporation into his paintings is remarkable. Millares' effort was focused on including the materials in their bare materiality into his paintings without subsuming them into the overarching identity of the artwork. The painter thus becomes the homeotician who sees in the night,<sup>8</sup> whose inertia allows him to sink into the material world by which he is surrounded, such as the garbage dump:

In my field expeditions with Millares, I have traced with him the possible reunion of lost archeological traces—his great passion—though I have also seen him look through the garbage dumps in search of an old espadrille, a moldy and rotten spoon, or a decrepit hat, to weigh out the possibility of bringing them back to life by including them, as witnesses of life, into art. There, in that quest, there is no contradiction. What he looks for is always the similar. (Moreno Galván, cited in De la Torre 2014, n.p.)<sup>9</sup>

Millares, in his role as homeotician, privileges a desubjectified gaze, which brings to light the process of mimesis involved in creating artworks. The artist creates a common world for the found materials, though this commonness is not a synthesizing factor. Millares's works do not subsume the materials and objects that comprise them. Perhaps the resistance that the painting mounts in the face of aesthetic synthesis emerges from the overwhelming number of elements that constitute it. The varied textures, the thick threads that sow some of the pieces together, the fabrics contorted in myriad ways, imitating at times outstretched flesh, at other times nothing identifiable, the lost shoe, tubes, pipes, cables, and the unrelenting black, all stubbornly refusing synthesis, in spite of their harmony. The objects and materials, with their histories, preserve their autonomy, their outsideness in relation to the work of art. Millares (2003a) explains his focus on the object directly, invoking the problems of confinement and autonomy in the

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destruidos, deshilachados, revueltos, reducidos a una materia que fácilmente puede ya deshacerse en polvo: 'Homo humus'."

<sup>8</sup> See Footnote 11 in Chapter 3.

<sup>9</sup> My translation. The original text in Spanish: "En mis expediciones con Millares, yo he rastreado junto a él el posible reencuentro de perdidas huellas arqueológicas—su gran pasión—, pero también le he visto mirar por los muladares a la busca de una alpargata vieja, una cuchara mohosa y carcomida o un sombrero decrepito, para tantear la posibilidad de devolverlos a la vida incluyéndolos, como testigos de la vida, en arte. Ahí, en esa búsqueda, no hay contradicción. Lo que busca es siempre el semejante."

twentieth century: “When I use, for example, sackcloth, ceramic fragments, or soil, I force myself to conserve them exactly as they are, as the importance of the object or fragment, with its worth intact, finds in the expressive medium of my painting a fundamental right, the value of something that has not been violated” (111).



**Figure 2.** Manolo Millares, *Animal de fondo*<sup>10</sup> (1963), detail, Fundación Ant3nio P3rez, Cuenca, 2022.

The leap out of the painting into the materials that it uses is equivalent to the leap out of circular subjectivity into the world of experience in Adorno’s work. Millares uses authentic concretion to create the *rilievo* effect, whereby the objects’ concreteness and their (relative) autonomy are emphasized. However, the object’s “worth” is not appropriated by the work of art. His description captures the creative process that starts with an object and that does not erase or consume the object in question (just like Adorno’s negative dialectic, for instance, which, starting with non-identity, does not

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<sup>10</sup> The painting references the homonymous poetry book by Juan Ram3n Jimenez, published in 1949.

subsume it under identity) but allows it to partly retain its features. The shoe in *Animal de fondo* (see Figure 2) illustrates this point by being placed half inside, half outside of the painting. For the onlooker, the shoe forms part of the painting, elongating the tail-looking folds of burlap; at the same time, if read from right to left, even if just for a brief moment, the painting creates the impression of a leg, with its ligaments torn, though still shoed. Furthermore, the shoe can momentarily take centre stage as an object detached from the painting that maintains its heterogeneity and speaks of poverty, migration, genocide, horror, and death by execution, as well as of dedicated work, flânerie, cities with cafes, rhythms tapped on the floor absent-mindedly, and the concomitant joy and pain of running too fast.

However, the materials found in a painting, whose autonomy Millares preserves so effectively while incorporating them into the overall piece, are “materials” only when forming part of an artwork; otherwise, they are potato sacks, shoes stolen by dogs, suborn rope refusing to be cut by the dull kitchen scissors, plastic tubes on the Mediterranean beach... Without the work of art, according to Millares (2003b), there is “nothing else other than rubbish” (111). Rubbish, the material of the painting, its foundation, only becomes “material” when art incorporates and frames it, forcing it to speak. The “material” is only possible because painting is its second nature, which also means that its materiality is partly modified by its inclusion into the painting (upon inclusion, the material not only represents itself but also signifies within the painting and in relation to the other elements with which it comes in contact). The mimetic relation that sustains a work of art is not between the painting and the rubbish but rather between the painting and its materials. Thus, given that materials are always already included in the artwork, the mimetic relation is between the artwork and itself, though in the folds of the artwork there are material, aesthetic, and historical elements without which the artwork is not possible. Adorno (2013) describes art’s ability to expose itself and the processes folded within its materials as follows: “Those artworks succeed that rescue over into form something of the amorphous to which they ineluctably do violence. . . . The violence done to the material imitates the violence that issued from the material and that endures in its resistance to form” (69). The “amorphous” in Adorno’s text is Millares’s rubbish, which, in partly keeping its autonomy and history, cannot be completely subsumed to the work of art, or to form as such. The work of art, in its mimesis with itself (with the materials that constitute it), exposes this process and

along with it, its own outsideness (the fact that the material comes from rubbish, from the amorphous state that preceded it). Millares (2003b) instinctively expresses the folded mimesis that his paintings perform: “Beneath these canvases, beneath this disgusting antiaesthetic gash so similar to the bitter sack of caustic relics of an invented saint, someone waits for the miracle of an explosion of flowers precisely upon this very soil-shoe-in-tin-rag-rubbish that is raised upon this unspoken mound of our illustrious history” (111). What Millares (and Adorno in the quotation above) is missing in his description is the fact that, underneath the swaying waves in the sea of mimesis between the artwork and the colossal world that it mobilizes and generates, there is an incomprehensible moment, a moment of radical negativity that sustains this entire structure.

On the one hand, Millares’s paintings incorporate materials whose autonomy the work of art does not erase. On the other hand, the materials give up some of their traits in the world in order to be made to speak the language of the artwork. However, beyond the materials’ way of speaking, the shoe simulating the end of a leg or a tail, there is also the dimension in which the shoe falls silent, where it simulates the other side of the human/animal—the language “of the dead speaking of stones and stars” (Adorno 2013, 423). The figure of the homunculus is made to appear in rilievo by the ensemble of objects, materials, the frame, the background, and so on (the ensemble of materials and forms that we call the painting). The homunculus continues the work of mimesis with its background, while the background has a life of its own, making things appear and disappear, both within and beyond the painting. Torn apart, sown, cut out, the homunculus’s unexpressed screams fill the space of representation. But the background does its work, swallowing the figure back into its intense blackness, at the same time making the work appear in its raw materiality.

Contrary to a hermetic reading, Millares’s art maintains an active relation to the unknown. The homunculus screams and falls silent by means of the background, while the background loses its compactness in relation to both the figure that it sustains and the cuts that expose the wall behind the painting. The cuts in the canvas, of which Millares’s work makes extensive use, are, I have to say, poorly understood by critics as signifying some sort of infinity of the world. This is not the case. Millares was too humble an artist and too invested in making his work a part of the world in which he lived to allow himself such exuberant, transcendent divagations. He was also not a



religious artist. The cuts have no connection at all with infinity, God, black holes, or the universe at large. The cuts simply show the wall, the “outside” of the painting, putting in question the legitimacy of the artwork, the relation between the materials within the painting and those of the wall (or of the frame, which is sometimes visible). The cuts in the canvas (employed by several artists at the time, such as, notably, Italian Spatialist artist Lucio Fontana and Informalist Antonio Burri) are a clear “No” to the tradition of formalism in art and to the model of aesthetic unity.<sup>11</sup> And beyond all this, they are Millares’s commitment to the double negation that defines the artwork: the negation of the world in its play between background and rilievo, and the negation, from the outside, of the painting as an intact unity; and once more, the negation of the outside as such, by the power of the artwork to reach beyond itself, to allow the bare wall to come in and to claim it as one of its materials. In the play of mimesis, the work of art performs its absolute other—the space that envelops it and into which the work of art is dislocated.

As I discussed in the third chapter of this dissertation in relation to Roger Caillois’s model of the organism’s assimilation into space,<sup>12</sup> the double (and perhaps the triple) negation that the artwork (for Caillois, the organism) performs results not in positivity (e.g., an artwork open to the world) but in a gap between the signifier and the signified. In the case of Millares and his cuts, there are several possible interpretations. First, the wall and the painting materials become “aware,” in their mutual negation, that a third area (the space in between them) starts interjecting; there is always an outside of the outside, which starts pouring in through that opening in the painting. The elements that form the painting are, therefore, always at odds with themselves—always slightly offset in their identity to themselves (therefore, non-identical with themselves). When the negative dimension encroaches, the aspect of non-identity becomes defining for the work of art. Negativity is the agent that intervenes in the dislocation of the work of art in relation to itself. Second, the double negation is performed in relation to the work’s signification: the way it addresses, through its artistic language, the sociohistorical

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<sup>11</sup> Aesthetic unity, a term coined by the art critic and painter Roger Fry, is determined by a work of art’s formal harmony and its self-sufficiency in relation to its materials and its context in the world. In *The Artist and Psychoanalysis* (2014/1924), Fry states the following: “The form of a work of art has a meaning of its own and the contemplation of the form in and for itself gives rise in some people to a special emotion, which does not depend upon the association of the form with anything else whatever” (8).

<sup>12</sup> See pages 139–140.

world with which it comes into contact. In this case, Millares's (2003a) writing favours a negativity-informed reading of his paintings:

I reject the possibility of believing myself to be the conscious controller of these paintings that have emerged from inside me. I keep the new, the unseen in the lost dimension of rough sackcloth whose only parallel is the dark, intangible unknown. . .

Few artists dare to confess their ignorance when faced with their own work, thus demonstrating their lack of courage and sincerity. They forget that showing their nakedness, purely and simply, thus laying bare the only true necessity inherent in the creative act, is where the most precious authenticity can be found.

I have never been afraid—and I repeat it here—to say just how much escapes my comprehension. It does not frighten me because I have truly never felt the necessity to understand what I paint. Somebody is sure to accuse me of having no idea of what I'm doing. I don't care. It does hurt me however, when people say that I'm missing the point, that I am somehow avoiding the true reality of man.

To today's reality I freely add my voice of protest by tearing apart fabrics, with pockmarked textures, a chaos in rope, beauty wrinkled beyond recognition, an open wound in Mother Earth and the truly terrifying spectacle of the *homunculus* flowering amidst the humble willows reserved for such a day. (107)

Surely, Millares draws inspiration from the Surrealist's automatic writing practice as a way of decoupling the creative process from its signification. However, Millares's note about his work suggests that there is something more to it, especially given the denunciation of a criticism that he seems to receive (that of his art being too abstract, unengaged politically, and avoidant of the lived reality of Franco's Spain). For Millares, communication is a function of the work of art's incomprehensibility. The painting's incorporation of objects from the world (which he takes great care to describe in many of his texts), which bring their own history and signification, belongs to the same process of communication—communication towards the secret, that which is unsayable, and its betrayal (by making the materials speak). Millares realizes that the work of art speaks about the manner of representation and that there is only one truth beyond the work, which, in fact, is also “the true reality of man” (107): that beyond the death we know, there is another death. And it is to this second death, not by means of the subject and its circle of meaning, that the work of art, with its sacrificed homunculus, is faithful to. It is also on this second death—the death of the other or radical negativity—that community is built through worklessness. Millares knows that this is the only possibility for a new, radical form of protest; that from the death and violence

of his time, the only possibility for an authentic community would have to come from radical freedom, from beyond the limits of the subject. Radical negativity is not a mystical solution to an obscure problem, as Millares recognizes. The freedom to organize any kind of community, especially in times of terror and repression, that would not be incorporated into an absolutist or other narrative, or otherwise immediately collapse into the eternally repeating struggle for power; that would not grapple for the right to signification, dividing across its own sections and assigning ranks; that would not collapse under self-righteous destructive nihilism; this freedom can only come from the openness to that which calls each one of us into question most radically as subject.

Millares's realization is not a trivial one. It comes from his lifelong effort to make sense of extremely hostile circumstances by means of his abstract work of art. His striking and dynamic work, which has not yet been given the attention it deserves in Spain and elsewhere, attests to the fact that remaining close to the worklessness of radical negativity is imperative. Radical negativity should not be reduced to abstract ideation, or to quibbling about what does or does not concern us. For this and many more reasons, which in this dissertation have been left unexplored, insufficiently treated, or simply neglected due to sheer ignorance, at this dreadful time of war, negativity remains as relevant as it was in the last century. At least I hope to have shown that the subject, over which so many wars have been fought, in the academy and on actual battlefields, is not the end; that beyond the end of the subject, various bizarre-privileged phenomena emerge, such as mimesis and radical negativity, which cannot be grasped by positivism but which are available, to an extent, to philosophy and art. These phenomena defy the possibility of a scalpel-like definition, but, perhaps like Millares, we should not be afraid of saying that when working on the edge of the thinkable, only partial definitions emerge from the sea of words. The cathedral that rises from the depths, submerging itself into empty space, does not reveal to us its full splendour. But if we stay true to the death of absolute knowledge, if we betray the alterity of the supposedly temporary ignorance on the road to full sense and fulfilled desire, then, perhaps, by allowing the outside to effect itself upon the canvas of writing, we can make these bizarre-privileged objects speak, as if they spoke of anything other than the impending end of the subject of death.

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