

NEW GERMAN CRITIQUE



Adorno's Siren Song

Author(s): Rebecca Comay

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *New German Critique*, No. 81, Dialectic of Enlightenment (Autumn, 2000), pp. 21-48

Published by: [New German Critique](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/488544>

Accessed: 12/02/2013 17:44

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



New German Critique and *Duke University Press* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *New German Critique*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Adorno's Siren Song

Rebecca Comay

Excursus on an Excursus

In a lengthy “excursus” or appendix to the first chapter of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* – a detour in a book which constitutes itself essentially as an extended patchwork of such appendages – Adorno reads Homer’s *Odyssey* as an allegory of the dialectic of enlightenment. Odysseus himself would be the quintessential figure of *homo oeconomicus*, his voyage an extended business trip, his passions the usual affairs men fall into when they have a devoted wife at home. So domesticated is Odysseus’s wanderlust, so conventional his calculations, that Adorno indeed reads the ancient epic as a modern novel, the bourgeois genre par excellence.¹

In his reading of the Sirens episode Adorno reckons sharply just what the costs of Odysseus’s enlightenment might be. If reason can only assert itself as the domination of an alien nature, this is in turn inseparable from a self-domination which becomes self-mutilation at its extreme. Reason becomes unreason when pushed to its conclusion: the attempt to free oneself from external bondage to the Other unleashes an endless ritual of sado-masochistic bondage games in which the subject has himself tied up tight. In the face of the Sirens’ singing – a voice of nature, a voice of pleasure, a voice of the past, and, yes, a voice of women – both the danger and the solution would be extreme. The Sirens are not the

1. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung, Gesammelte Schriften* 3 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1981) 64 (“Abenteuerroman”), 80 (“Robinsonade”). Hereafter cited as *GS*. In English as *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1969) 46, 61. Hereafter cited as *DE*. Throughout this paper I will be citing the standard English translations of Adorno with some modifications as indicated.

first or last women to try to seduce Odysseus. Calypso, Circe, even Nausicaa, in her own fashion, represent the “other woman” in all the essential ways. But if Odysseus could afford to succumb, provisionally, to the druglike charms of the other temptresses, this time he has to keep a grip. Always one to cut his losses, he wants to have it both ways: famously, he plugs up his sailors’ ears so they can row on undistracted while he has himself tied to the mast so as to listen in solitary safety. By Adorno’s reading, such a strategy would institutionalize the upright posture as the posture of domination. Expressed in the physical distance between Odysseus above (inert but “sensitive”) and the sailors below (deaf but active) is the founding opposition between intellectual and manual labor on which class society as such depends. The sailors with their plugged up ears are like the factory workers of the modern age: busy hands, strong arms, senses dulled by the brutalizing boredom of wage labor. Odysseus strapped to the mast in solitary delectation would be the bourgeois as modern concertgoer, taking cautious pleasure in “art” as an idle luxury to be enjoyed at safe remove.

Setting aside the question of just what it means for Adorno to be reading the *Odyssey* as an allegory – suspending, that is (though this is perhaps the ultimate question) the precise relationship between “philosophy” and “literature” – I’d like to consider what might have gone unread here. Let me propose that what is foreclosed in this reading may determine Adorno’s thinking at crucial junctures. What if the *Odyssey* chapter, far from being an episode contained within the larger economy of the work, in fact resurfaces just where it seems most safely set aside? If the “appendage” or “excursus” in fact absorbs the book? If Adorno is inscribed within the *Odyssey* rather than the other way around? If what is presented as a provisional excursus or diversion – an excursion with a fixed return – ends up being a sea voyage without an end in sight? If Adorno’s own *Odyssey* remains unfinished? And if, then, the Sirens’ song still haunts?

If I speak of “Adorno” here, I’m using the name partly as a metonymy (for the overly cumbersome “Adorno-and-Horkheimer” pair); partly because there is reason to think that the *Odysseus* excursus is in fact largely Adorno’s own work²; but mostly because the repercussions

2. Although Robert Hullot-Kentor argues that Horkheimer’s influence is evident in this chapter as elsewhere in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. See Robert Hullot-Kentor, “Back to Adorno,” *Telos* 81 (1989): 5-29.

of this reading are perhaps most visible in the discussion of the “culture industry” (music, technological reproduction, propaganda) which bears the unmistakable stamp of Adorno. But as we’ll see, Horkheimer’s writings on the family are not irrelevant to this discussion.

Antinomies of the Upright Posture

This cowardly and tranquil pleasure, this moderate pleasure, appropriate to a Greek of the period of decadence who never deserved to be the hero of the *Iliad*; this happy and confident cowardice, rooted in a privilege which set him apart from the common condition. . .

– Blanchot

What Adorno and Horkheimer leave understated is just how precarious Odysseus’s prophylactic remedy ultimately is. But perhaps they underestimate the Sirens’ real temptation. It was not simply the lure of “nature” which seduced Odysseus. And thus it was not just domination-over-nature-in-general which had to be reasserted. Nor was it just the temptation of a primordial past running counter to the work of civilization, with its major discontents and its minor triumphs. Perhaps that domination took a more specific form. And perhaps the real temptation remained unthinkable.

It was not simply the erotic promise which was so alluring. And it was not just that peculiar blend of sex and knowledge which was for Odysseus, as for so many others, irresistible. Nor was it simply sexual difference which represented the greatest danger. Perhaps even more dangerous for Odysseus than sexual difference was the possibility that this very difference might be subverted. Such a possibility would undermine the standard organization of such difference – opening the play of sexuality beyond the oppositional economy governing the conceptual space of work and power, to the point that “difference” itself might come to receive the name “indifference.” And by this I don’t mean neutrality.

What the Sirens threatened, perhaps above all, was the sexual identity of those who listened. Not that their own identity was all that secure.³ If their song was sweet and sensuous – “female,” according to

3. Early Greek representations of the Sirens show them as sexually ambiguous, frequently bearded figures. See John Pollard, *Seers, Shrines and Sirens: The Greek religious revolution in the 6th century* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1963) 140.

the terms of Homer's day (and ours) – what proved most irresistible to Odysseus was in fact the (“male”) promise of a knowledge so absolute it would rupture the bonds of finite subjectivity by assuming the impossible standpoint of the whole.

The promise of history is at stake here – history in its totality, as totality, in total recollection. The Sirens claim to “know all the pain the Greeks and Trojans once endured on the spreading plain of Troy.” To know, in fact, “all that comes to pass on the generous earth.”⁴ In offering Odysseus to sing “his” song – to let him hear the whole epic story of his heroic exploits⁵ – they had effectively offered him the total perspective on life which is, strictly speaking, only possible post-mortem.⁶ How could Odysseus, living, hear his own song? If all autobiography is, at its limits, allothanatography (to hear your own true story – the whole story – you must be someone other than yourself and you must be dead),⁷ the Sirens' promise would threaten to disturb the very economy of life and death on which the very order of narrative

4. Homer, *Odyssey, Homeri Opera*, ed. David B. Munro and Thomas W. Allen (London: Oxford UP, 1917); in English: trans. Robert Fagles (New York and London: Penguin, 1996) Book 12, lines 205-207. All references will henceforth be given in the text by book and line numbers only (Greek edition).

5. On the connection between the Sirens and the Iliadic Muses, see Pietro Pucci's remarkable rhetorical analysis in “The Song of the Sirens,” *Arethusa* 12 (1979): 121-31.

6. Cf. Jean-Pierre Vernant, “Feminine Aspects of Death in Ancient Greece,” *Diacritics* 16 (1986): 54-64.

7. Cf. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, “L'Écho du sujet,” *Le sujet de la philosophie. Typographies I* (Paris: Aubier: Flammarion, 1979) 217-303. It is striking that at the court of the Phaeacians, Odysseus speaks of his own heroic glory [*kleos*] in the first person (“I am Odysseus, son of Laertes, known to the world for every kind of craft – my fame has reached the skies” [9.19f]). Charles Segal remarks that it is unusual in Greek to speak of “my *kleos*” (*kleos* or fame normally enunciated only in the third person – not for a speaker to advertise about himself – and typically only after the hero's death). See “*Kleos* and its Ironies in the *Odyssey*,” in Harold Bloom, ed., *Homer's The Odyssey* (New York: Chelsea House, 1988) 128f. The trip to Hades in Book 11 (prior in the order of experience, posterior in the order of telling) has already given Odysseus a premature taste of death, a death before death, rendering him, as Circe aptly remarks, twice mortal [*disthanees*]: “doomed to die twice over – others just die once” (12.22). And indeed, in response to Alcinoos, Odysseus announces his tale, the story of his own *kleos*, as a mourning performance, a narrative grief which redoubles the grief which his life as such has, according to him, become. “But now you're set on probing the bitter pains I've borne,/ so I'm to weep and grieve, it seems, still more./ Well then, what shall I go through first,/ what shall I save for last?” (9.12ff). The very compulsion to narrate would seem to transgress the bounds of what “I” can say of myself, thus making the act of speech not only an act of mourning for the lost object but, indeed, a form of self-mourning, an impossible mourning for the lost subject.

depends.⁸ For the living Odysseus to hear of his own heroic *kleos* would be to transgress the very logic of self-consciousness. It would have been an invitation to his own funeral. A hypertrophic memory – Odysseus’s anticipation of his own posthumous reputation – would be indistinguishable from the lethal oblivion which would make a living death of every present.⁹

The “honeysweet fruit” [*meliedea karpon*] of the lotus-flowers (9.94) had made the men forget the voyage home. Circe’s beautiful song (10.221) and honeyed wine (10.234) made them forgetful of their fatherland. Calypso with her beguiling voice (1.56) voice and nectar (5.93) had promised immortality, but at the cost of fame. The Sirens’ “honeyed voices” [*meligerun op*] (12.187),¹⁰ in contrast, promise a kind of memory, but at the cost of life. Such fame – premature, private, fame which therefore contradicts itself as fame – would swallow up its listener, leaving only shrivelled skins and bone-heaps, the anonymity of the unmourned dead. By hearing his own fame, Odysseus would, in

8. Cf Odysseus’s urge to impart sequential order to his narrative of grief, a grief which in its excessiveness threatens precisely to explode such sequence, or render it arbitrary: “Well, then, what shall I go through first,/what shall I save for last?/ What pains – the gods have given me my share./ Now let me start by telling you my name. . .” (9.15-17).

9. On the mythological connection between the Sirens and the underworld, and the possibility that the Sirens themselves were seen at some point as mediating between the living and the dead (early Greek paintings represent the Sirens as birds, thus corresponding, perhaps, to the Egyptian *ba* or soul-bird), see Georg Weicker, *Die Seelenvogel in der alten Literatur und Kunst* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1902) and K. Buschor, *Die Musen des Jenseits* (Munich: Bruckmann, 1944). See also the critical discussion by Karoly Marot, *Die Anfänge der griechischen Literatur* (Budapest: Ungarische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1960) 106-87. For a good survey of the issue, see Siegfried de Rachewiltz, *De Sirenibus: An Inquiry into Sirens from Homer to Shakespeare* (New York: Garland, 1987) 254-75, as well as Gerald Gresseth, “The Homeric Sirens,” *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 101 (1970). It is worth recalling here that in the allegory of the afterlife in the last book of the *Republic*, Plato has the soul encounter the Sirens (eight of them, almost Muselike) presiding over the spindle of Necessity, singing the music of the spheres (616b-617-d).

10. According to at least one etymology, the word for Siren is related to the word *seirén* – “inherited from some Mediterranean language” – signifying a mantic bee. See Gabriel Germain, “The Sirens and the Temptation of Knowledge,” in George Steiner and Robert Fagles, eds., *Homer: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1962) 96. The association is particularly interesting insofar as the industrious bee was typically valorized in Greece as the very image of feminine virtue. See for example the Homeric hymn to Hermes and Laurence Kahn’s superb essay, *Hermès passé ou les ambiguïtés de la communication* (Paris: Maspéro, 1978).

fact, negate it.¹¹ If desire feeds on the narcissistic will-to-knowledge, the honeymoon would soon be over. Memory would become forgetfulness. Culture – song – would relapse into “nature.” Levi-Strauss reminds us that honey (an uncooked but processed food, “natural culture” at its most alluring) is structurally ambivalent from the start.¹² If honey is a traditional funerary offering to the dead (24.68, cf. *Iliad* 23.170) – a standard ingredient, too, of Greek embalming – in this case its “cultural” attributes would result in the excessive naturalness of an unmarked death: the corpse would be left to rot unremembered in the open air. The evidence of the rotting corpses [*andrôn puthomenôn*] (12.46) lying strewn on the Sirens’ flowery meadow – Vernant reminds us that “meadow” [*leimôn*] in Greek signifies also the female genitals¹³ – would be a warning to those who would ask too many questions [*puthomenôn*].¹⁴ Those who would hear an omniscient Pytho [*Puthô*] in the Sirens’ meadow would find, ultimately, just the snake in the grass which is the temptation of forbidden knowledge. Between Calypso’s (5.72) and the Sirens’ flowery meadow, between this blissful ignorance and that rapturous knowing, the distance would seem, then, to be quite slight. The woman who would sing back to Odysseus his heroic glory and the woman whose charm would make him forget all about it (thereby rendering him, in turn, forgotten) would equally subvert the narrative order of time and history, replacing epic remembrance with the premature recall which has oblivion as its end.

But if the Sirens promise omniscience – a “masculinity” so total it would end up paradoxically reducing its bearer to a heap of bones – their appeal is sexually ambiguous in other ways as well. What would it mean to seduce through song? Was the threat of the song not precisely that it

11. Pietro Pucci points out that the Sirens, despite the proximity of their attributes and diction to the (Iliadic) Muses, do not actually speak of *kleos* by name. See “The Song of the Sirens” 130 n9. Charles Segal makes the parallel point that, like Hesiod’s Muses, the Sirens speak not of memory but of a kind of immediate “knowing” (*idmen. . . idmen*, 12.205-207); see “Kleos and its Ironies in the *Odyssey*” 145.

12. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *From Honey to Ashes*, trans. John and Doreen Weight (New York: Harper and Row, 1973). On the semantic field of “honey” in early Greek literature, see Pietro Pucci, *Hesiod and the Language of Poetry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1977). See also Jan Hendrik Waszink, *Biene und Honig als Symbol des Dichter und der Dichtung in der griechische Literatur* (Opladen: Westdeutscher, 1974) and Kahn, *Hermès*.

13. Jean-Pierre Vernant, “Feminine Figures of Death in Greece.”

14. Emily Vermeule (*Aspects of Death in Early Greek Art and Poetry* [Berkeley & Los Angeles: U of California P, 1979] 203) relates the *andrôn puthomenôn* of 12.46 to the pun on the rotting Python at Delphi.

assailed the passerby through the ear, reducing his body to an open orifice, impregnated by whatever calls? In letting that viscous sweetness penetrate would not the man become, in effect, a woman?¹⁵ Understandably, Odysseus's only counter-spell to the Sirens' magic involves an emphatic reassertion of the phallic position. If the ear is in fact the essential organ of equilibrium and the erect posture, its labyrinthine confusion would render precarious the sense of balance and the upright gait. Hence the seasickness which accompanies every disturbance of the inner ear.

But what would be the force of Odysseus's strategy? Would it not reinstate the very ambiguity it was to cure? In filling his men's ears with wax, preempting the Sirens' aural rape by pressing the "honeysweet" [*meliedea keron*] (12.48) substance into their open orifices, he simultaneously both denies and confirms their sexual confusion. Not to mention his own. For in closing up those gaping holes he must first enter them, must therefore acknowledge what he would most deny, becoming, therefore, at once both female seductress to the sailor men and male rapist to the sailor women. Odysseus himself – who, moreover, is able to spellbind [*thelgein*] any audience with his own singing eloquence (e.g., 11.333, 17.514ff),¹⁶ who has administered "honeysweet wine" [*meliedea oionon*] (9.208) and "honeyed words" [*epessi melichioisi*] (9.363) to the Cyclops prior to mutilating him, and who has similarly soothed his own men with words of honey softness [*melichiois epeessi*] (10.173, 10.547) – this honeyed, honeying Odysseus becomes at once both seductive Siren and supreme victim of the Sirens' power.

What does it mean for Odysseus to reassert his phallic position by having himself tied to the mast with cords? Odysseus – who was taught all about knots from the sorceress Circe (8.447) – is no neophyte in bondage games. Earlier, to get the besotted sailors away from the

15. We know that Odysseus (who "does not resemble an athlete" [8.164] and whose "legs have lost their condition" [8.233]) is rather prone to cry at music. Upon hearing Demodocus's epic chant at the court of Alcinous, he was reduced to tears (8.86-93), compared, indeed, to a widow weeping over the body of her dead husband (8.521-29). At 10.410ff Odysseus's men cluster around him as calves around a cow. On the question of "role reversal" in general in the *Odyssey*, see Helene P. Foley, "'Reverse Similes' and Sex Roles in the *Odyssey*," in John Peradotto and J.P. Sullivan, eds., *Women in the Ancient World* (Albany: SUNY P, 1984) 59-78.

16. Odysseus is also compared to a bard at 11.368 and, indirectly, at 21.406-11. It is worth noting that in late antiquity Orpheus sometimes stands in for Odysseus in the Sirens episode. Apollonius of Rhodes has Orpheus outwit the Sirens by playing their own game – literally outsing them with his lyre. See *Argonautica* IV.891-92, trans. R.C. Seaton (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1912).

honey-sweet fruit of the lotus-flowers, he had dragged them back weeping to the boat and tied them, horizontal, beneath the rowing benches (9.99f).¹⁷ Now, above board and securely vertical, he insists that the plugged up men tie him hard. “Until it hurts” [*en desmô argaleô*] he says, a rather touching detail in no way necessary to the strategy and in any case not part of Circe’s original instructions. But what is this body pinned immobile against the mast, arms and legs helpless, torso reduced to a giant ear, like a sail growing swollen with the Sirens’ swell,¹⁸ like the “inverse cripple” of which Nietzsche writes:

An ear! An ear as big as a man! I looked still more closely – and indeed, underneath the ear something was moving, something pitifully small and wretched and slender. And, no doubt of it, the tremendous ear was attached to a small, thin stalk – but this stalk was a human being! If one used a magnifying glass one could even recognize a tiny envious face; also, that a bloated little soul was dangling from the stalk. The people, however, told me that this great ear was not only a human being, but a great one, a genius. But I never believed the people when they spoke of great men; and I maintained my belief that it was an inverse cripple who had too little of everything and too much of one thing.¹⁹

Odysseus, all ears for the Sirens’ song, stiff with the erection that masks a deeper fearfulness, Odysseus would be just this cripple.²⁰ Ptolemy Chennus, a satirist from the second century C.E., suggests that Odysseus’s nickname “Outis” (“nobody”) indeed comes from the fact that he had big “ears” [*ôta*].²¹ With ears like this does it matter what

17. The escape from Polyphemus’s cave similarly involved tying the surviving sailors (horizontally) onto the back of the Cyclops’s male sheep (9.429f), Odysseus himself having mutilated the Cyclops with a (vertical) beam the size of a “mast” (9.322). Later, back home in Ithaca, in a kind of parodistic redoubling of the Sirens episode, and in terms which semantically link the Sirens with the prophylactic remedy against them, Odysseus will have the treacherous cowherd Melanthis tied up with a “braided rope” [*seirên plektén*] and hoisted up a “high column” (22.175f).

18. On some of the psychoanalytic resonances of wind fertilization, see Ernest Jones, “The Madonna’s Conception Through the Ear,” *Essays in Applied Psychoanalysis*, vol. 2 (New York: International UP, 1964).

19. Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Redemption,” *Thus Spoke Zarathustra, The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Viking, 1968) 250.

20. Cf. Sigmund Freud, “Medusa’s Head,” *Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud* 18, trans. & ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1974) 273.

21. Or, even more suggestively, in Homeric Greek dialect, *ouata*. See John Winkler’s essay, “Penelope’s Cunning and Homer’s,” in *The Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece* (New York: Routledge, 1990) 129-67, here 144.

there is to hear? Kafka wonders whether the Sirens were not, indeed, quite silent; whether it was not Odysseus who seduced himself with his own drive to mastery; whether it was not indeed the cure itself which was in the end the real disease. Who could withstand the vertical exaltation [*Überhebung*] induced by the experience of the upright stance?

Against the feeling of having triumphed over them by one's own strength, and the subsequent exaltation [*Überhebung*] that bears down on everything before it, no earthly powers could have remained intact [*widerstehen*].²²

And what would be the effect of such a binding? What if the binding which was homeopathically to counter the enchanting song – for in Greek, as in other languages, “binding” and “spellbinding” share a common semantic thread²³ – was only to redouble its constricting power? If the Sirens themselves were stringing Odysseus along with promises as binding as they were untethered? According to at least one etymology, the word “Siren” relates to *seira*, the word for “cord” or “line” or “bandage”: the enchanters would be, then, the enchainers.²⁴ Suggesting, finally, that the binding power is from the outset split and doubled. A double bind.

Adorno's Sirens

I have experience, and I am not joking when I say that it is a seasickness on dry land. . . .

– Franz Kafka

Adorno of course had his own Sirens to contend with. By the 1930's the autonomous bourgeois subject had been, as he saw it, liquidated

22. Kafka, “The Silence of the Sirens,” *Parables and Paradoxes*, bilingual edition, ed. Nahum Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1961) 88f.

23. See Pedro Laín Entralgo, *The Therapy of the Word in Classical Antiquity* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1970) 21. Entralgo points out that when Odysseus's hunting companions “bind up” [*désan*] his wound and staunch the bleeding by means of a “charm” [*epaoidé*] (19.457) the medical and magical aspects of the cure are inseparable and indeed indistinguishable. Cf *Eumemides* 331-33 on the song of the Furies, “binding brain and blighting blood in its stringless melody.”

24. See August Friedrich von Pauly, *Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, Neue Bearbeitung begonnen von Georg Wissowa (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1927), Zweite Reihe, Bd. 3.A.1, cols. 289f. Other etymologies of *seirené* include *surizo* [“hiss,” “pipe,”] *seirios* [“scorching,”] and the Semitic *sir* [“song.”] See on this last point Gerald Gresseth, “The Homeric Sirens,” 204 n.

beyond repair, having succumbed to the fascinations of the culture industry, to the hypnotic spell of a power which no longer needs to mask itself as such. Such a submission would have already disrupted the possibility of every *nostos*, shortcircuiting every scene of recognition, preempting all return. If Odysseus is the figure of eventual return-to-self and homecoming, the modern exile is unable to find his way back home.

Odysseus was a scarred man, but the scar would have found its uses. Odysseus's scar had been the very locus of self-identity. Fully healed, full of memory of childhood, of family, and of tender convalescence, the scar also marked the place where immediate recognition (by the servant woman Euryclea) could first take place. It was a scar born in privilege, signifying the security of lordly pedigree, giving back to "Nobody" [*outis*] his proper name. If the scar recalls the "pain" or "trouble" which is *odussamenos Odusseos's* paternal destiny (19.407-409), its sutured smoothness would be a sign that all that pain had been put to work. Pain (in Hegelian fashion) is neutralized in the labor of the Concept; the event of recognition coincides precisely with the restoration of the *etymon* or proper name.

Recall the famous scene. Odysseus has arrived home in Ithaca, disguised as a beggar, stripped of heroic appearances, divested of his name. Nobody recognizes him except for his dog— who promptly drops dead (17.326) — and particularly not Penelope. His wife is kind to the old beggar anyway, and puts him up for the night, telling Eurycleia the nurse (Odysseus's own servant since infancy) to wash the stranger's feet. As Odysseus gets undressed, Eurycleia catches sight of a scar on his thigh (the hero's identifying mark) at which point there is a long camera freeze. Just at the point where the nurse is about to exclaim aloud in recognition, Homer indulges in a lengthy flashback, recounts how as a young man Odysseus had been gored by a wild bore while hunting at his grandfather's country estate, how well he was taken care of by his relatives, how many gifts he received, and so on. There is a second flashback contained within the flashback: the mention of the grandfather reminds Homer of how Odysseus was named at birth: his name means "troublemaker" or "troubled" (*odussamenos*, middle voice) (19.407). When Homer is through with these details, everything snaps back into position, the nurse utters her long deferred exclamation, and the recognition scene is consummated. In a sense the interruption, together with its narrative overcoming, functions structurally as a microcosm or synecdoche of the *Odyssey* as a whole.

The description of the scar in Book 19 would be the digression to end all digression: a little circle inscribed within the larger circle which is the hero's wandering journey home. Auerbach points out that the syntactical digression introduced by the scar's description – the steeplechase of reminiscence unleashed by Odysseus's unveiling of his leg, conjuring up name, ancestry, patrimony, property – in no way threatens the coherent narrative of the recognition scene. The relaxed economy of the epic present, he says, can tolerate such a digression without a strain.²⁵ Particularly, perhaps, when it is the patriarchal details of Odysseus's birthright which are being interpolated into the text, and particularly when it is a servant woman who is waiting in the wings.

Odysseus's scar thus is, and signifies nothing other than, the very image of the home. By contrast, the modern wound – unending, unhealing – would have made impossible any such economy of return. Adorno knew such exile. In America, he wrote: "every intellectual in emigration is, without exception, mutilated."²⁶ He went on to speak of this wound as the universal diaspora which marks modernity as such. Heine lived his exile as a wound. That wound, says Adorno, has become our own. "Now that the destiny which Heine sensed has been fulfilled literally . . . the homelessness has also become everyone's homelessness; all human beings have been as badly injured in their being and in their language as Heine the outcast was."²⁷

The threat of shipwreck has become a universal fact. Once more it is a question of distraction and dispersal. Once more a question of a premature and hence preemptive pleasure. Once more it is a question of an impossible relationship to death. Once more it is a question of seduction through the ear. The propriety of the phallic subject is once more threatened by an emasculating voice which penetrates everywhere because it is located nowhere in space and time.

Who are the modern Sirens? If music's very essence is to be the

25. Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis: The representation of reality in Western Literature* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1957).

26. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflexionem aus dem beschädigten Leben, Gesammelte Schriften* 4 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974); In English, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (London: NLB, 1974) §22. (Henceforth cited as *MM*).

27. Adorno, "Die Wunde Heine," *Noten zur Literatur, Gesammelte Schriften* 2 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974) 100; In English, "Heine the Wound," *Notes to Literature*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen 85.

“surviving message of despair from the shipwrecked,”²⁸ it is the sign of the times that it falls on deaf ears. Or rather: it is a degenerate form of music which would have already infantilized its listeners, reducing the alert, autonomous subject to the spellbound consumer, identifying with what he hears, acquiescent to whatever calls. “Vulgarization and enchantment, hostile sisters, dwell together”²⁹ in the reified productions of mass music.

Benjamin suggests that by Kafka's day, the Sirens have fallen silent because music as such – the last “token of hope” – has been permanently gagged.³⁰ This will not prevent them, perversely, from exerting a certain hypnotic spell. In “Josephine the Singer” (Kafka's final testament, written on his deathbed while his own voice, was, under the impact of tubercular laryngitis, disappearing³¹) the mass mouse audience fails to appreciate the pathetic squeaking which nonetheless, they insist, “enchants” them.³² Having missed out on proper childhood, these rodent exiles – “nearly always on the run” – are at once too “childish” and “too old for music,” and hardly notice when the enchanting Josephine, on strike for better working conditions, stops singing.³³

Music for Adorno epitomizes the degradation of modern culture. As the “most immediate expression of instinct,”³⁴ it both carries the greatest emancipatory potential and would be therefore the most vulnerable to distortion. As the least obviously representational of all the art forms (a “non-mimetic mimesis”) music would seem to have the supreme advan-

28. Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, trans. Anne Mitchell and Wesley Blomster (New York: Continuum, 1985) 133. I cannot resist citing the rather free translation. The original is more sober. “Sie ist die wahre Flaschenpost.” *Philosophie der neuen Musik GS 12*: 126. (Hereafter cited as *PMM*.)

29. Adorno, “Über den Fetischcharakter in der Musik und die Regression des Hörens,” *GS 14*: 28; In English, “On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Hearing,” in Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt, eds., *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader* (New York: Urizen, 1978) 281. (Hereafter cited as *F.*) (Translation modified.)

30. Walter Benjamin, “Franz Kafka,” *Gesammelte Schriften 2.2* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1977) 416; In English, trans. Harry Zohn, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1969) 118.

31. Ernst Pawel, *The Nightmare of Reason: A Life of Franz Kafka* (New York: Vintage, 1984) 443.

32. Franz Kafka, “Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk,” *The Complete Stories* (New York: Schocken, 1971) 362.

33. “Josephine the Singer,” 364, 369. See Laurence Rickels's suggestive essay, “MUSICPHANTOMS: ‘Uncanned’ Conceptions of Music from Josephine the Singer to Mickey Mouse,” *Sub-stance* 58 (1989): 3-24.

34. *GS 14*: 14; *F 270*.

tage in fulfilling art's utopian mandate which is the expression of the inexpressible. But in its privilege lies its weakness. Its very autonomy from signification, its "monadic" tendency to introversion, would entail a certain blindness to material origins which is the mark of every fetish. Insofar as music has to be performed in order to be realized, thus harbouring within itself its own congealed self-imitation or self-interpretation,³⁵ its production and its reproduction would be in logical symbiosis from the outset. It is in this sense half phantasmagorized from the start. It anticipates its own alienation in its inner form. It would thus seem to submit most readily to the commodifying force of capital, easily alienated from its own performance, easily cut off from its own source. Under the impact of sound recording, says Adorno, reproduction overwhelms production and thus the self-alienation of music becomes complete. Its components become interchangeable, abstract entities, like standardized parts on an assembly line,³⁶ like the commodities they have indeed become. Identifying with this process of abstraction, its listeners become the undifferentiated consumers whose life, says Adorno, has become a film. Processed music becomes the conformist, repetitive spell which turns its listeners into the retarded, children who keep on asking for the same old dish.³⁷ "Es ist babyfood."³⁸

Because of the listener's hallucinatory identification with the apparatus, it becomes unclear who is consuming whom. If the audience has been reduced to pure orifice – a "great formless mouth with shining teeth in a voracious smile"³⁹ – it is just as true, for Adorno, that it is swallowed by the junk it swallows. No less than the child devours the babyfood, mass culture (like Charybdis) devours him. "Being consumed, swallowed up, is indeed just what I understand as 'participation' [*Mitmachen*] which is so totally characteristic for the new psychological type."⁴⁰ It is equally unclear who is hearing whom. Delusional projection on the part of the listener strips him of the inner "voice of conscience" which provides the very possibility of self-reflection.

35. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, GS 7: 190f; In English, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Aesthetic Theory* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997) 125f. (Hereafter cited as *AT*.)

36. Adorno (with the assistance of George Simpson), "On Popular Music," *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 9 (1941): 19.

37. GS 14: 39; F 290.

38. GS 3: 305 (supplement not included in English edition of *DE*).

39. GS 14: 35; F 287.

40. "Notizen zur neuen Anthropologie," quoted in Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics* (New York: Free P, 1977) 189.

Lacking inner speech he now hears voices from the outside.⁴¹ The “alien” product, “cut off from the masses by a dense screen, . . . seeks to speak for the silent.” Lacking both voice and ear of his own, the modern listener finds the sirens providing an instant self-interpretation, predigesting what they offer, constituting their own audience before the fact. “The composition hears for the listener.”⁴²

If “human dignity” – for Adorno as for Bloch – consists of the “right to walk,”⁴³ the culture industry would have crippled the orthopaedia of the upright posture. Reification produces the “stiffness” or “rigidity”⁴⁴ which signify the compensatory erections of Medusa’s victims. Like Odysseus stiff against the mast, writhing in an ecstasy born of deepest deprivation, the spellbound listeners’ hard and jerky movements betray the impotence which is their fate. Adorno comments, somewhat tartly, that people no longer know how to dance. “As if to confirm the superficiality and treachery of every form of ecstasy, the feet are unable to fulfill what the ear pretends.”⁴⁵ Jazz listeners are the castrati who experience their own mutilation as an aesthetic pleasure. The “whimpering” vibrato⁴⁶ or “eunuchlike sound”⁴⁷ of the jazz singer croons the comforts of impotence – stepping out only so as to step back in line – expressing only the “premature and incomplete orgasm”⁴⁸ which keeps on cheating you of the real thing.

Circe’s magic had turned men into snuffling pigs (10.239). Civilization’s defense, Freud insisted, was to institutionalize the upright posture in its repression of the sense of smell.⁴⁹ But if the advertising industry would guarantee *homo erectus* his hard-won dignity in the form of

41. *GS* 3: 214; *DE* 189.

42. “On Popular Music” 25.

43. *GS* 4: 182; *MM* §102.

44. “Alle Phänomene starren. . .” See “Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft,” *Prisms*, *GS* 10: 29; In English, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber, “Cultural Criticism and Society,” *Prisms* (Cambridge: MIT, 1982) 34.

45. *GS* 14: 42; *F* 292.

46. Adorno, “Über Jazz,” *GS* 17: 99; trans. Jamie Owen Daniel, “On Jazz,” *Discourse* 12 (1989-90): 67. (Hereafter cited as *J*).

47. “Zeitlose Mode – Zum Jazz,” *GS* 10: 133; In English, “Perennial Fashion – Jazz,” *Prisms* 129.

48. *GS* 17: 98; *J* 66.

49. Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, *Complete Works* 2: 99-100 n.1. Adorno picks up this scent at *GS* 3: 209, 266; *DE* 184, 233, and refers it specifically to the Circe episode at *GS* 3: 90; *DE* 71.

“shining white teeth and freedom from body odor,”⁵⁰ Adorno reminds us that such vertical appearances can be deceptive. Beneath the surface of the upright subject would be the distorted creatures of Kafka’s imaginary – mice, moles, dogs, hunchbacks – until we come, finally, to Gregor Samsa, travelling salesman turned insect, crawling in grotesque rapture towards his sister’s violin.⁵¹ Adorno’s modern Circe has transformed men into “savages” and in turn into insects.⁵² In a sadomasochistic parody of sexual ecstasy (or, remarks Adorno, like the hideous convulsions of a wounded animal) the “jitterbugs” – in Adorno’s unusually vivid description – “whirl about in fascination.”⁵³ The siren-bonds are tight. The jitterbugs only “entangle” themselves all the more tightly in the net of reification the more frantically they try to break away.⁵⁴

According to a familiar Platonic formula, and with perhaps a similar gender subtext, the uncontrolled reproducibility of the artwork expresses itself as an infinitely regressive mimetic flux. A genealogical catastrophe would have disordered the very process of reproduction. Copy and original become indistinguishable, the voice becomes a simulacrum of itself, the original no longer holds. After the “birth of film out of the spirit of music,”⁵⁵ life itself becomes just like the movies. The “performance sounds like its own phonograph recording,”⁵⁶ the voice becoming like an imitation of itself,⁵⁷ the “hit song” becoming an advertisement for itself, sending out its own title as the only content it

50. *GS* 3: 191; *DE* 167.

51. Kafka, “The Metamorphosis,” *The Complete Stories* 130f. For Adorno’s response to the theme of animality in Kafka, see “Notes on Kafka,” *GS* 10: 254-287; In English, *Prisms* 245-271.

52. To twist the matter even further: recall that the Sirens themselves were, at least in one tradition, related to insects (cf n. 10 above). In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates, trying to speak against the background noise of the cicadas, warns Phaedrus of the narcoleptic temptation of their buzzing drone, which he refers to, indeed, as a “bewitching Siren song” (259a). The cicadas themselves are said by Socrates to descend from men who became so drunk with pleasure from the music of the Muses that they forgot to eat or drink and “died without noticing it” (259c). By such an allegory the “Sirens” would be, then, both the perpetrators and the first victims of musical seduction. See, for some interesting remarks on the *Phaedrus* myth, J. Ferrari, *Listening to the Cicadas* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987).

53. *GS* 14: 42; *F* 292. Adorno also refers to the “jitterbugs” in “Jazz – a Perennial Fashion,” *GS* 10: 132; *Prisms* 128.

54. *GS* 14: 41; *F* 292.

55. Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner*, *GS* 13: 102; In English, trans. Rodney Livingstone *In Search of Wagner* (London: NLB 1981) 107. (Hereafter cited as *W*).

56. *GS* 14: 31; *F* 284.

57. *GS* 14: 23; *F* 277.

would announce. "Today every giant close-up of a star has become an advertisement for her name, every hit-song a plug [*zum Plug*] for its tune."⁵⁸ "Only the copy" appears.⁵⁹ Utopia becomes "merely a gilded background projected behind reality"⁶⁰ – i.e., for those like Plato's prisoners, or perhaps for those in Calypso's cave.

In Homer, there was already a fine line between the song "itself" and its own announcement or replication. Odysseus's Sirens, promising to sing of "everything," sing of nothing other than the fact that they are to sing: a song about itself, says Todorov, a song about all song.⁶¹ A song, says Blanchot, directed towards a singing which is always "still to come."⁶²

... they burst into their high, thrilling song:
 'Come closer, famous Odysseus – Achaea's pride and glory –
 moor your ship on our coast so you can hear our song!
 Never has any sailor passed our shores in his black craft
 until he has heard the honeyed voices pouring from our lips.
 (12.183-188)

What would be the difference between the promising song and the song which is promised? Promising is of course the paradigm instance of the performative utterance of which the "saying" and the "doing," the announcement and the act, are indistinguishable. In Homer, the Siren's promise sounds as sweet as the honeyed voice it promises: certainly its allure is as lethal. The culture industry, by Adorno's account, would have transformed such a radical performativity into the teasing specular-ity of sheer performance. Radio assumes the phatic/phallic function of noise for the sake of noise, penetrating all orifices, invading all space. "The gigantic fact that speech penetrates everywhere replaces its content."⁶³ Sound becomes the echo advertising nothing but its own publicity: "Advertising becomes art and nothing else, just as Goebbels – with foresight – combines them: *l'art pour l'art*, advertising for its own sake,

58. *GS* 3: 187; *DE* 163 (translation modified).

59. *GS* 3: 165; *DE* 143.

60. *GS* 3: 166; *DE* 143 (translation altered).

61. Tzvetan Todorov, *Poetics of Prose* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1977) 56.

62. Maurice Blanchot, "The Song of the Sirens," *The Gaze of Orpheus*, trans. Lydia Davis (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill, 1981) 105.

63. *GS* 3: 183; *DE* 159.

a pure representation of social power.”⁶⁴ In an infinitely circular deferral, the ad promises the product, which in turn “incessantly reduces to a mere promise the enjoyment which it promises as a commodity.”⁶⁵ The spectacles of Hollywood reduce the consumer to Tantalus,⁶⁶ tantalized with a forepleasure so numbing it would preempt the greater urge to happiness. By stimulating a desire which it thereby frustrates (pornography in its essence), the culture industry makes the promise the very articulation of which would be its own denial. Art’s *promesse de bonheur* (“once the definition of art”⁶⁷) would have been eliminated. The “medicinal bath” of “fun” [*das Fun*]⁶⁸ scrubs away the last utopian traces of happiness. The menu replaces the meal:

The culture industry perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises. The promissory note which . . . it draws on pleasure is endlessly prolonged; the promise, which is actually all the spectacle consists of, is illusory: maliciously, all it signifies is that the real point will never be reached, that the diner must be satisfied with reading the menu.⁶⁹

In the totalitarian state, the promise preempts its own fulfilment: every promise becomes a threat, every invitation a call to panic. Sound becomes, indeed, a screeching siren, blocking hearing, blocking thought. The new sirens are described as follows:

The radio becomes the universal mouthpiece of the Führer; his voice rises from street loud-speakers to resemble the howling of sirens announcing panic – from which modern propaganda can hardly be distinguished anyway. The National Socialists knew that the wireless gave shape to their cause just as the printing press did to the Reformation.⁷⁰

Reproductive Aberrations

It is perhaps unnecessary to emphasize that there is a certain gender subtext underlying Adorno’s denunciations. According to a familiar Platonic logic, an uncontrolled mimetic series would be indistinguishable

64. GS 3: 186; DE 163.

65. GS 3: 185; DE 162 (translation modified).

66. Cf GS 3: 162; DE 140.

67. GS 14: 19; F 274. Cf. GS 7: 26; AT 12.

68. GS 3: 162; DE 140.

69. GS 3: 161; DE 139 (translation modified).

70. GS 3: 159; DE 159.

from the wanton propagation which makes potential bastards of every offspring. Even Telemachus is not so sure who his father is (1.216) Reproductive confusion at the aesthetic level suggests as always the fragility of the sexual contract. If the unproductive foreplay of the culture industry yields only the simulacral pleasures of false advertising, its demonic self-replication would both soften the virile "firmness" of every subject and corrupt the legitimacy of every birth.

The decomposition of the subject is consummated in his self-abandonment to an everchanging sameness. This drains all firmness [*Feste*] from characters. What Baudelaire commanded through the power of images, comes unbid to will-less fascination. Faithlessness and lack of identity, pathetic responsiveness to situations, are induced by the stimulus of newness, which already, as a mere stimulus, no longer stimulates. Perhaps mankind's renunciation of the wish for children is declared here, because it is open to everyone to prophesy the worst: the new is the secret figure of all those unborn. Malthus is one of the forefathers of the nineteenth century, and Baudelaire had reason to extol infertile beauty. Mankind, despairing of its reproduction, unconsciously projects its wish for survival onto the chimera of the thing never known, but this is equivalent to death.⁷¹

But the generational disturbance goes in both directions. If children have become the death wish of a fatherless society which has replaced authentic propagation with sterile propaganda, Adorno suggests that the genealogical relationship to the past is distorted along parallel lines. A "disturbed relationship" to the ancestors.⁷² A mourning gone astray.

Memory itself is at issue. In its complicity with mass culture, Wagner's music has the mnemotechnic versatility that writing once did for Plato – music "designed to be remembered, intended for the forgetful."⁷³ Berlioz's *idée fixe* puts the listener "under the spell of an opium dream."⁷⁴ The detached or morcellized musical "theme" impresses itself indelibly in our memory, thereby confirming our general amnesia, making us memorize what we cannot remember, idiotically inscribing what cannot be learned.⁷⁵ It is death itself, of course, which goes most unremembered. If mourning itself is, as Adorno says, the very "wound of

71. GS 14: 270; MM §150 (translation modified).

72. GS 3: 243; DE 215.

73. GS 13: 29; W 31

74. GS 13: 29; W 31

75. GS 14: 27; F 281

civilization”⁷⁶ – a pure purposeless activity which challenges the functional efficiency of every order – it would be naturally the first thing in an exchange society to undergo liquidation. That which is not put to rest by proper mourning, says Freud, will always keep coming back to haunt us. And this is just what happens, adds Adorno, in the recycled tunes of the music industry.

The atomized, spatialized time of serial music expresses just the rage against the past – Nietzsche’s “revenge” against the “it was” – which is the mark of inauthentic memory. (Nietzsche’s vengeful listener danced, if not the jitterbug, the whirling “tarantella.”⁷⁷) Regressed listeners “kill time because there is nothing else on which to vent one’s aggression.”⁷⁸ In their frantic need to be “*Uptodatesein*,” they ridicule that with which only yesterday they were most infatuated, hating the old and out-of-date as if to avenge the fact that their own ecstasy had been, to begin with, fake.⁷⁹ In a note “On the Theory of Ghosts,” Adorno relates the modern atomization of time to a radical failure of mourning. The hatred of the past is itself the inability to give proper burial. Immigrants wipe away all traces of their past life. Out-of-print books get set aside. The unburied bones on the Sirens’ beach become, for Adorno, the ornaments of the crematorium. The modern funeral with its “beautified corpse” and take-home bottled ashes suits the “hardened” survivor mentality of the guilty⁸⁰ – a reification of life which has continued even unto death, a cheating of the dead, a “homecoming without a home.”⁸¹

But let us not ignore the gender assumptions determining this whole discussion. According to Freud, some sort of misfired mourning leads directly to the phantasmagorias of “mass psychology.”⁸² What would proper mourning be? Oedipal autonomy – and Freud recognized no other kind – required the son’s internalization of the father’s prohibition: the acquisition of a super-ego would be the only proper monument to the dead. “Mass” psychology has no such memory. Lacking a proper father to bury, the sons project an archaic father imago before whom they fuse prostrate in helpless identification. The “leader” would

76. GS 3: 244; DE 216

77. See Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, “The Tarantulas.”

78. GS 14: 44; F 294.

79. GS 14: 45; F 295.

80. GS 3: 244; DE 216.

81. GS 13: 139; W 149.

82. See Freud, “Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego,” SE 18: 67-144.

be the simulacral supplement for the missing father, who can be neither mourned nor, therefore, overthrown. The group's ties would remain all pre-Oedipal⁸³: the incorporation of the mother's body rather than the introjection of the father's law. The prohibition on enjoying the mother's body has not been registered or internalized: the father's "No" remains unheard. From ear to mouth, from father to mother, from Oedipal to pre-Oedipal: on this triply regressive axis – body, gender, stage – mass psychology's perversions would seem to turn.

According to Adorno's almost verbatim transcription of the Freudian group psychology, the decline of the Oedipal family leads directly to the aberrant mourning patterns of mass culture.⁸⁴ If freedom presupposes the internalization of a prior authority, the adult capacity for resistance requires precisely that there be strong fathers to overcome. Jessica Benjamin has outlined the issue well.⁸⁵ By Adorno's and Horkheimer's gloomy reckoning, the decline of entrepreneurial capitalism would have dislodged the patriarchal order, turning the self-reliant businessman into the scrambling employee, replacing the authority of the father with the power of administration, replacing the self-legislating son with the compliant child who does whatever he is told. Replaced as well would be the traditional "warm and loving mother" whose very exclusion from the world of work and power had meant (imagined Horkheimer) a certain utopian transcendence of the principle of exchange.⁸⁶ The "professional mother" ("Mom"⁸⁷) turns affection into "hygiene."⁸⁸ Woman "bustles about after cultural goals like a social hyena."⁸⁹ And so on. (I parody, but only slightly – since I'm actually quoting – both the rhetoric and the substance of Adorno's and Horkheimer's argument.)

83. Cf Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, *Sexuality and Mind: the role of the mother and father in the psyche* (New York: New York UP, 1986) 81-91.

84. See in particular, "Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda," *GS* 8: 408-433; *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*.

85. Jessica Benjamin, "The End of Internalization: Adorno's Social Psychology," *Telos* 32 (1977): 42-64; "Authority and the Family Revisited: or, A World without Fathers?," *New German Critique* 13 (1978): 35-57. See also Klaus Theweleit, *Männerphantasien*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt: Roter Stern, 1977-78). Also, Patricia Jagentowicz Mills, *Woman, Nature, and Psyche* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1987) 93-116.

86. Horkheimer, "Authority and the Family," trans. Matthew O'Connell, *Critical Theory* (New York: Seabury, 1972) 114; "Authoritarianism and the Family," in Ruth Nanda Anshen, ed., *The Family: Its Function and Destiny* (New York, Harper, 1959) 390.

87. Cf. Philip Wylie, *Generation of Vipers* (New York: Rinehart, 1942).

88. Horkheimer, "Authoritarianism and the Family," 389.

89. *GS* 3: 288; *DE* 250.

Monopoly capital has dispensed, says Adorno, with the need for superegos. Governance no longer requires the internalization of social norms. The family is no longer necessary or sufficient to provide a buffer for and from the demands of civilization. The administration now works directly on its subjects, rendering the detour through (self-) repression superfluous and obsolete. With the erosion of the bourgeois family goes the last vestige of guilty inwardness – but at the same time, notes Adorno somewhat sadly, the final possibility of revolt:

When the big industrial interests incessantly undermine the economic basis for moral decision by eliminating the independent economic subject, partly by taking over the self-employed entrepreneur and partly by transforming the workers into the objects of a trade union, the capacity for reflection must also atrophy. . . . There is no longer an internal, instinctual or motivational conflict to be adjudicated, by which the tribunal of conscience is formed. Instead of the internalization of the social command which not only made it more binding and at the same time more open, but also emancipated it from society and even turned it against the latter, there is an immediate and direct identification with stereotyped value scales.⁹⁰

Although Adorno is not exactly nostalgic for the patriarchal bourgeois family – I must stress this lack of nostalgia and note that on this score he differs markedly from Horkheimer⁹¹ – he notes sharply that its demise would mean just the eclipse of the last opportunity for independent thought. “With the family there passes away, while the system lasts, not only the most effective agency of the bourgeoisie, but also the resistance which, though repressing the individual, also strengthened, perhaps even produced him. The end of the family paralyses the forces of opposition.”⁹²

In the absence of effective paternal prohibition we find an endless melancholic consumption substituting for the authentic work of mourning. In fascism, identification reverts to the pre-Oedipal, narcissistic cannibalism which subverts the (male) achievement of normal growth. In his essay on fascist propaganda, Adorno suggests that the relative absence of paternal authority in the present creates the projective phantasm of the “leader image.” Instead of internalizing a real authority, the

90. GS 3: 224; DE 198 (translation modified).

91. This lack of nostalgia becomes particularly clear in Adorno’s sharp critique of Huxley in “Aldous Huxley and Utopia,” 10: 97-122; *Prisms* 97-117.

92. GS 4: 23; MM §2.

orphaned masses simply absorb what they themselves put out: they embellish their own psychic overflow and go on to devour their own creation as an external thing. Like positivists, they “discover” what they have in fact “made” – and proceed to eat it.⁹³

Where legitimate authority has withdrawn – Adorno suggests thereby that it once existed – an amorphous (almost Foucauldian) “power” steps in to fill the vacuum left by the unmourned dead. But because the leader himself is only deputizing for the powerless individuals who have, in fact, invented him, the leader is just an actor, playing the role of “leader” to an enchanted public who cannot tell the real thing from the fake. “They look like hairdressers, provincial actors, and hack journalists,” writes Adorno.⁹⁴ The phantasmagoria of fascist demagoguery are the final dissimulations of a banished mimetic impulse, an “organized imitation of magic practices,” a “mimesis of mimesis”⁹⁵ “Group psychology” is just this fiction.⁹⁶

And what better figure for such a fiction than the figure of “the feminine”? Lacking a proper father whose authority they might internalize, the masses become, in the end, a woman. “Just as women adore the unmoved paranoiac, so the nation genuflects before fascism.”⁹⁷ Or again: “Now emotion is reserved to power conscious of itself as power. Man surrenders to man, cold, bleak and unyielding, as woman did before him. Man turns into a woman gazing up at her master. . . . The seeds of homosexuality are sown.”⁹⁸ And thus we find Adorno, finally, chiming in with the nineteenth-century male imaginary – mass culture as woman – the fantasy of a lethal lassitude or an oceanic engulfment, the fantasy of a watery grave. Andreas Huyssen has outlined the issue well.⁹⁹ From Nietzsche’s polemic against Wagner’s hypnotic effeminacies through Le Bon’s description of the sphinxlike crowd to Eliot’s depiction of the lure of mass society as a return to an encompassing womb, little is left to the imagination. Early Weimar film theory, too, was quick to pronounce on the dangers to hygiene

93. *GS* 8: 417–419.

94. *GS* 3: 270; *DE* 236.

95. *GS* 3: 209; *DE* 185.

96. *GS* 8: 432–33.

97. *GS* 3: 216; *DE* 191.

98. *GS* 3: 290; *DE* 252.

99. Andreas Huyssen, “Mass Culture as Woman,” in Tania Modleski, ed., *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986).

posed by the “dark hole” (Kracauer¹⁰⁰) of the movie theater: the stuffy air, the risk of disease, the blurring of class and gender divisions, the risk of sexual contact itself.¹⁰¹ If Adorno does not exactly reproduce these fearful fantasies, he doesn’t exactly dispel them either. Leaving us to wonder, finally, where this modern Odysseus has a leg to stand.

Penelope

When Ulysses and Penelope are in bed and telling their stories to one another, Penelope tells hers first. I believe a male writer would have made Ulysses’s story come first and Penelope’s second.

– Samuel Butler

Or is there another sexual economy at play? I haven’t mentioned Penelope – few do. Even in antiquity she was considered too boringly good to be mythologized. What was there to say? She was faithful, she wove, Odysseus came home. Later tradition turned her into a slut. By the Hellenistic period the fantasies were going full steam.¹⁰² Apollodorus speaks of her promiscuity, sleeping with the suitors, being sent away in disgrace upon Odysseus’s return.¹⁰³ As Hyginus tells it, she ends up marrying Telegonus – Odysseus’s illegitimate son by Circe, who appears one day in Ithaca to murder his father – and bearing Italus,

100. Kracauer, “Langeweile,” *Das Ornament der Masse: Essays* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977) 322. For an examination of some of the gender assumptions determining Kracauer’s film theory, see Sabine Hake, “Girls and Crisis – The other Side of Diversion,” *New German Critique* 40 (1987): 147-64.

101. This has become a central theme in feminist film criticism focusing on the Weimar period. See, in addition to Sabine Hake (cited above), Heidi Schlüpmann, “Kinosucht,” *frauen und film* 33 (Oct. 1982): 45-52; Miriam Hansen, “Early Silent Cinema: Whose Public Sphere?,” *New German Critique* 29 (1983): 147-84; and Patrice Petro, *Joyless Streets: Women and Melodramatic Representation in Weimar Germany* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1989).

102. For a survey of the classical literature, see Pauly and Wissowa, *Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, Erste Reihe, Bd 19.1, cols. 479-482.

103. *Epitome* VII: 36-38, in *The Library of Apollodorus*, trans. James Frazer (London: Heinemann, 1921). Apollodorus presents two alternative scenarios. In the first instance, Penelope is seduced by Antinous, is sent away by Odysseus to her father Icarius, and proceeds to get pregnant with Pan by Hermes. (On Penelope as the mother of Pan, see also Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* III.xxii.56, trans. H. Rackham [London: William Heinemann, 1933]). In the other instance, Penelope is seduced by Amphinomos and is killed in punishment by her returning husband.

after whom Italy was named.¹⁰⁴ (Telemachus meanwhile is said to go on to marry stepmother Circe, fathering Latinus in the process, but that is another story.¹⁰⁵) By the Renaissance, Penelope's web had become the very image of feminine prevarication, a sign of promiscuity and diversion, a spider's web, a trap.¹⁰⁶

But even in the *Odyssey* her identity was less secure than one tends to think. Agamemnon backhandedly compares her to a Clytemnestra (11.433f, 24.200f). Athena insinuates that she's just hunting for another man (15.20-23). Telemachus doesn't trust her to protect the family property in his absence (15.88-91). He complains bitterly that to the eager suitors she won't say yes or no (1.249f, cf 16.730). Penelope herself professes to understand Helen's adultery as, after all, a normal "error" (23.209-30). She dreams with pleasure about her collection of pet geese (19.537).¹⁰⁷ The men she feeds among the pigs become just like the pig-victims of Circe's magic.¹⁰⁸ Odysseus, who rarely sees fit to mention her on his travels, treats her with jealous suspicion on his return. His homecoming takes place while he's wrapped in a slumber so "sweet" [*hedistos*] it's compared to death (13.79-81). If homecoming is said to be "honeysweet" (as Teiresias puts it¹⁰⁹), its allure would be perilously close to the distracting exile it was to end.

Certainly the suitors see her as another Siren. Penelope too knows how to "enchant" [*thelgein*] men's hearts with "words of honey" [*meilichiois epeessi*] (18.283): she too knows how to "fan" and "inflare" their passion (18.160f) until their "knees slacken" and "hearts dissolve" (18.212). One of the suitors complains bitterly of the seductive trickery of her web routine (2.89). Her prevarication is itself the ultimate promise that so defers itself that it unravels its own point. The weaving

104. Hyginus, *Fabulae* CXXVII, ed. H.I. Rose (Lugduni Batavorum: A. W. Sythhoff, 1963).

105. Hyginus, *Fabulae* CXXVII.

106. Cf. Patricia Parker, *Literary Fat Ladies: Rhetoric, Gender, Property* (New York: Methuen, 1987) 26.

107. For a psychoanalytic reading, see Georges Devereux, "Le caractère de Pénélope," *Femme et mythe* (Paris: Flammarion, 1982) 259-70.

108. To tighten the identification still further, Calypso and Circe, conversely, are outfitted with looms (5.62 and 10.222), the latter of which is associated with the suspicion of a trap or snare [*dolos*] (10.232, 10.258) – the same cunning attributed later to Penelope's weaving (19.137) – and, throughout, of course, to Odysseus himself. See John Winkler, *Penelope's Cunning and Homer's* and Marcel Détienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society* (Sussex: Harvester P, 1978).

109. 11.100. Cf. Odysseus's own invocation of home sweet home at 9.34.

proves not only to be deceptive but to be quite fatal. The slaughtered suitors are described as fish caught in a net (23.384f).

In 1897, Samuel Butler reads the *Odyssey* and concludes that a woman must have written it. The telltale signs are numerous: the obsession with womanly matters; the trivial housewifely details; the various inconsistencies and bad logic¹¹⁰; and finally the whitewashing of Penelope's name. The "authoress of the *Odyssey*" has no feel, he complains, for what it's really like to be a man in love. It would have been easy enough for Penelope to get rid of the suitors if she had really wanted. "All she had to do was to bolt the door."¹¹¹ After all, she must have been a good forty, "and not getting any younger," Butler adds. "Did she ever try snubbing?" he asks,

... and then there was boring did she ever try that? Did she ever read them any of her grandfather's letters? Did she sing them her own songs, or play them music of her own composition? I have always found these courses successful when I wanted to get rid of people. . . . Did she ask [them] to sit to her for her web – give them a good stiff pose, make them stick to it, and talk to them all the time? Did she find errands for them to run, and then scold them, and say she did not want them? Or make them do commissions for her and forget to pay them, or keep on sending them back to the shop to change things. . . . In a word, did she do a single one of the thousand things so astute a matron would have been at no loss to hit upon if she had been in earnest about not wanting to be courted? With one touch of common sense the whole fabric crumbles into dust.¹¹²

But was not Penelope's weaving quite essential? Did it not represent a desire so vertiginous that it could not come to term? Penelope's "seductiveness" is in fact inseparable from her weeping. For like her weaving, Penelope's grief cannot end. When the bard Phemius charms the entire company with his singing (1.337-44), Penelope is the only one to resist his siren spell. Her "unforgettable sorrow" [*penthos alaston*] (1.342) (in her words) won't accept the drug of musical comfort; it is a sorrow which is "unforgettable" simply because it cannot come to term. Not knowing whether Odysseus is dead or alive – not knowing, therefore, the full measure of her loss – she can neither mourn nor abstain from

110. "I do not say that this is feminine, but I can find nothing like it in the *Iliad*. . . ." Samuel Butler, *The Authoress of the Odyssey* (London: A.C. Fifield, 1897) 151.

111. Butler 126.

112. Butler 130.

mourning. In this tension between mourning and desire, Penelope's own double bind now comes to light.

Neither mourning nor not-mourning, she does not in fact recognize her returning husband. Unlike the dog, the nurse, the son, the swineherd, and the father, this wife demands an infinity of proofs. Unseduced even when Odysseus appears in dazzling, greased-up splendour – the very charm that worked well enough on Nausicaa (6.230-35) – Penelope remains stony and inert. If Penelope's faithfulness is said to be the very condition of Odysseus's heroic reputation (24.192-202), if his glory requires that his wife wait patiently at home, it is ironic that Penelope herself won't participate in the general recognition she renders possible.¹¹³ Her reticence is at once both the condition and the limit of his heroic *kleos*: she withdraws from the intersubjective arena she opens up. Her son reproaches her for her hardheartedness (23.97-103). Her nurse reproaches her for being "untrusting" (23.72). The word in Greek is *apistos*: it means in fact both untrusting and untrustworthy. But could a wife in such a circumstance ever be fully *pistos*? To trust and to be trusted would seem here to be at odds. (In Homer, typically, it's only male companions like Patroclus and Achilles who get the familiar epithet of *pistos*.) Were Penelope to allow herself to be seduced too quickly by Odysseus, her trust would betray her real untrustworthiness. To trust and to be trusted are, for this woman, quite irreconcilable. The double bind of being Odysseus's wife.

Perhaps, at moments, Adorno himself had glimpses of this Penelope. In the *Aesthetic Theory*, he writes of the endless longing which feeds off an infinite loss. No comfort could assuage this. The stubbornness of its attachment introduces within mourning a desire which refuses the consolation of every partial nourishment and thus stakes a claim on a happiness outstripping every fact. In its tenacity would be its urgency, in its patience its greatest zeal. In *Prisms*, Adorno writes: "Like knowledge, art cannot wait, but as soon as it succumbs to impatience it is doomed."¹¹⁴ Such burning patience feeds on a grief which knows neither healing nor recompense. This grief would be, like Penelope's, quite "unforgettable" – endless precisely where it is most uncertain what exactly has been lost.

113. On Penelope's non-recognition, see Sheila Murnaghan, "Penelope's *Agnoia*: Knowledge, Power and Gender in the *Odyssey*," *Helios* 13 (1986): 103-15.

114. Adorno, "Arnold Schönberg 1874-1951," *GS* 10: 171; *Prisms* 165.

In *Minima Moralia*, Adorno writes that for “the one who no longer has a homeland,” writing itself becomes the only place to live.¹¹⁵ Such a place would be the non-place of a permanent wandering, an odyssey without a final end. But here Odysseus would have become none other than Penelope. His intransigence would have become just her expectancy: a kind of “seasickness,” as Kafka remarked, which now is felt everywhere on dry land. The bonds would loosen just where they would seem to be the tightest. In such a loosening, the text as such is formed.

“Properly written texts,” writes Adorno, “are like spiders’ webs: tight, concentric, transparent, well-spun and firm.”¹¹⁶ In the *Aesthetic Theory*, he writes of the special “cunning” of the artwork. It unravels its own will to mastery and incorporates its own failure to totalize as an essential moment of its truth. The paradigm of this cunning is none other than Penelope.

The unity of logos, because it mutilates, is enmeshed in the nexus of its own guilt. Homer’s tale of Penelope, who in the evening unraveled what she had accomplished during the day, is a self-unconscious allegory of art: What cunning Penelope inflicts on her artifacts, she actually inflicts on herself. Ever since Homer’s verses this episode is not the addition or rudiment for which it is easily taken, but a constitutive category of art. Through this story, art takes into itself the impossibility of the identity of the one and the many as an element of its unity. Artworks, no less than reason, have their cunning.¹¹⁷

In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard writes of the “infinite resignation” which sacrifices without hope of restitution. Such renunciation is not (yet) compromised by the consolations of religion, with its comforting hope of recompense. It thus installs a mourning which is not yet that of the knight of faith, whose leap – and this is of course precisely what Adorno was to find most irritating about him¹¹⁸ – involved the absurd conviction that he would somehow get his own back. “Infinite resignation” would have no such knightly confidence. Its melancholy would exceed the economy of every homecoming; in its rigorous hopelessness would lie its only strength. Kierkegaard writes:

115. GS 14: 96; MM §51.

116. GS 4: 95; MM §51.

117. GS 7: 278; AT 186f.

118. Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Konstruktion des Ästhetischen*, GS 2; In English, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989).

Infinite resignation is that shirt we read about in the old fable. The thread is spun under tears, the cloth bleached with tears, the shirt sewn with tears; but then too it is a better protection than iron and steel . . . The secret in life is that everyone must sew it for himself, and the astonishing thing is that a man can sew it fully as well as a woman.¹¹⁹

119. Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985) 56.