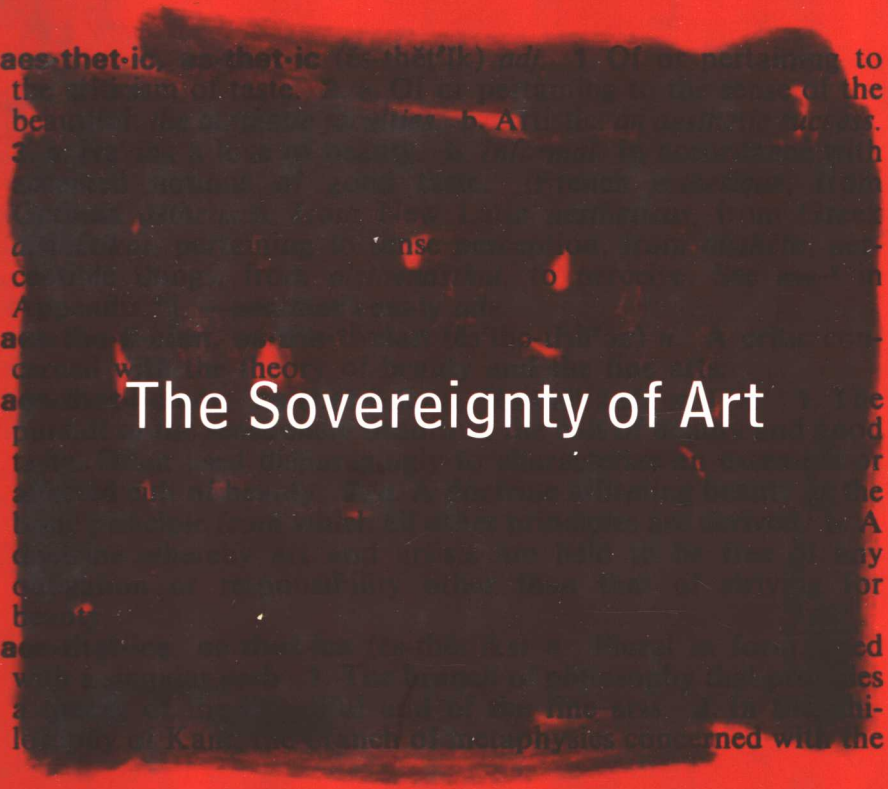

The Sovereignty of Art

Aesthetic Negativity in **Adorno** and **Derrida**

Christoph Menke translated by Neil Solomon

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Je suis mal à l'idée de prendre pour réussite ce qui est échec.
Georges Bataille

Introduction: Autonomy and Sovereignty

Characteristic of modern reflection on aesthetic experience is an unresolved ambivalence.[1] It manifests itself in the two lines of tradition that have shaped modern aesthetics from its outset. In one tradition, aesthetic experience represents just one element among the various discourses and modes of experience making up the differentiated realm of reason. In the other, aesthetic experience is ascribed a potential that *exceeds* the limits of reason of nonaesthetic discourses. Already intertwined in Kantian aesthetics, these two lines of tradition are even more enmeshed in their most recent confrontation: in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*. In his central thesis on the "antinomy of aesthetic semblance,"[2] Adorno claims that the clarification of this relationship is the real problem confronting aesthetics today. Moreover, he believes resolution of this relationship requires doing justice to the duality (*Doppelpoligkeit*) of aesthetic experience, without subordinating either of its two defining features to the other.

On the one hand, the antinomy of the aesthetic is defined by the concept of *autonomy*. Following Kant and Weber, we can take this term to describe the status of aesthetic experience generated by the modern differentiation of experiential modes and discourses. It is a phenomenon adhering to its own internal logic, and its autonomy vis-à-vis nonaesthetic discourses implies that it occupies its own place alongside these discourses within the pluralistic structure of modern reason. Accordingly, the validity of that which is experienced aesthetically is necessarily particular in nature: it is relative to the sphere

of experience that is delimited by its orientation toward the specifically aesthetic value of the beautiful. The nature and object of our aesthetic experience possess no negating or affirming powers over the object of our nonaesthetic experience and representation. That the autonomous form of the aesthetic is but one element *within* differentiated modern reason is demonstrated by the fact that it takes its place alongside, rather than above or below, the other discourses, each unfolding its own distinctive internal logic.

Only a theory that links this first model of the modern form of aesthetic experience, oriented as it is around the concept of autonomy, with a second one can satisfy the antinomy of the aesthetic. The core of this second model is defined by the concept of sovereignty. It reformulates the characteristic of differentiated aesthetic experience emphasized in the first tradition of modern aesthetics into a claim extending from Romanticism through the surrealist avant-garde movements: in Adorno's words, the promise that in art "the absolute is present."[3] On this view, aesthetic experience is sovereign insofar as it does not take its place within the differentiated structure of plural reason, but rather exceeds its bounds. Whereas the autonomy model confers relative validity upon aesthetic experience, the sovereignty model grants it absolute validity, since its enactment disrupts the successful functioning of nonaesthetic discourses. The sovereignty model considers aesthetic experience a medium for the dissolution of the rule of nonaesthetic reason, the vehicle for an experientially enacted critique of reason.

The central task facing philosophical aesthetics, once the two lines of its modern development are understood, is to connect these two lines in a logically consistent and comprehensive manner. By characterizing the relationship between aesthetic autonomy and sovereignty in terms of the Kantian concept of antinomy, Adorno links this task with a twofold claim: an adequate conceptualization of aesthetic experience must avoid sacrificing either of these two elements while simultaneously finding a comprehensive resolution of the tension between them.

The modernity of aesthetic reflection is defined by this refusal to sacrifice either side of the antinomy, and indeed by the insistence on granting full expression to both in all their mutual tension. This

thesis stands in contradiction to a widely held view that—since one of its two defining features is not compatible with the modern situation of the aesthetic, but is rather an expression of uncritical nostalgia—the antinomy resolves itself on its own. There are really two versions of this view, and each assumes that the antinomial conceptualization of aesthetic experience is no longer relevant: the shape of post-avant-garde art and its experience has shown, according to these positions, that aesthetics can only survive by opting for one of its two modern strands. The first variant opposes any insistence on an autonomous logic of aesthetic experience that radically distinguishes it from nonaesthetic experience. It considers such a logic to be a *reifying* way of cutting aesthetic experience off from nonaesthetic discourses, a path that manifests a nostalgic orientation toward a bourgeois ideal of aesthetic autonomy. It claims that this ideal—which has always been in contradiction with aesthetic practice—has been definitively overcome, moreover, by art in its avant-garde and postmodern forms. The second variant of the view that the antinomy of the aesthetic is based on a nostalgic projection challenges any insistence on a postulate of aesthetic sovereignty that ascribes to aesthetic experience the potential to mount a critique of reason. It sees this as a *heteronomous* overburdening of art that manifests a nostalgia toward idealistic truth claims, which, being irredeemable in nonaesthetic terms, are projected on aesthetic experience. According to this view, we have finally been freed from the pressure of these expectations, which have always placed too great a burden on aesthetic experience, by the failure of the avant-gardists in their hopes to transcend the realm of art.[4]

Each variant considers one of the two defining poles of the antinomy of aesthetic experience to be a nostalgic projection, that is, to be incompatible with the modern constitution of aesthetic experience as it has emerged out of the failure of the avant-garde movements as such. In claiming that the definition of aesthetic experience in terms of both autonomy *and* sovereignty no longer corresponds to the post-avant-garde situation, however, they both put forth a structural argument. They argue, namely, that aesthetic experience cannot be defined by both autonomy and sovereignty, since there is no way to coherently conceive of both of these qualities

holding at the same time. Both lines of criticism start with the assumption that any program claiming to provide a twofold definition of aesthetic experience via autonomy and sovereignty actually subordinates one of the defining qualities to the other. In the face of such criticism, it is not enough simply to characterize their interrelationship as one of antinomy. The twofold definition of the aesthetic by both autonomy and sovereignty can only be considered an adequate model, even for its most recent manifestations, if it can be shown in detail that the apparent contradiction between these two terms can be resolved without illegitimate compromises: that is, that it is indeed possible to conceive of the autonomy and the sovereignty of art at one and the same time. This, in turn, necessitates an account of the concept of the autonomy of the aesthetic that gives full due to its internal logic while leaving it compatible with the concept of aesthetic sovereignty. At the same time, it necessitates an account of the concept of the sovereignty of the aesthetic that gives force to its potential to provide a critique of reason without committing a heteronomous violation of the autonomy of that aesthetic. Only by successfully carrying out both of these tasks is it possible to defend the twofold definition of aesthetic experience against the charges of nostalgia brought against it.

Adorno's aesthetics can provide an orientation for the formulation of this antinomy of sovereignty and autonomy, which is central to modern art and its theoretical discourse. It is not so clear, however, that Adorno fully realized the urgency of providing an argumentative resolution to the antinomy he himself had formulated; the *Aesthetic Theory* largely holds to this antinomy without giving any real plausibility to the paradoxically formulated thesis that the autonomous semblance of art is precisely its sovereign truth.[5] But an even more serious problem is the lack of clarity in Adorno's efforts toward resolving the antinomy of the aesthetic. For his central aesthetic category, that of negativity, is much too imprecisely defined to serve as a convincing basis for redeeming this program. Nonetheless, a reconstruction of Adorno's antinomy of the aesthetic and its resolution can start with this category. For, when adequately conceived, aesthetic negativity is capable of completing the twofold task: by reformulating the internal logic of aesthetic experience in its full

scope, it gives force to the potential of aesthetic experience to provide a critique of reason without reshaping this experience to meet extrinsic ends. The concept of aesthetic negativity is the key to understanding the twofold definition of modern art in Adorno, of art as both one of several autonomous discourses and a sovereign subversion of the rationality of all discourses. If the realization or enactment of aesthetic experience is conceived as aesthetic negativity, it takes on a sovereign import that is premised on the autonomy of the aesthetic, rather than its curtailment.

The twofold achievement of Adorno's suggested concept of aesthetic negation in linking autonomy and sovereignty cannot be reconstructed simply in terms of an interpretation of Adorno's writings. The latter do pose the problem—in terms of the thesis of the antinomy of aesthetic semblance—and point to a possible direction for resolving it—in terms of the concept of aesthetic negativity. It is not possible, however, to solve the central problem left us by Adorno's aesthetics solely in terms of the conceptual and argumentative tools that this aesthetic theory supplies. For it does not provide us with a consistent way of conceiving of both autonomy and sovereignty in terms of an account of aesthetic negativity. Instead, a systematic reconstruction of this theory's basic concepts needs to be undertaken in light of and with the help of other theoretical approaches. Those positions with conclusions strictly at odds with Adorno's aesthetics of negativity but with very similar intentions can be expected to offer the most support in this effort. For confrontation with them allows one to give a more precise account of the basic idea underlying the concept of aesthetic negativity and, above all, to free it from misconceptions. Those theories collected under the rubric of deconstruction and marked especially by the formative influence of Jacques Derrida meet these two criteria. By coming to terms with them, one can help explicate the concept of aesthetic negativity in two ways.

The first gain involves the power of the concept of negativity to give an account of the autonomous process of aesthetic experience (see Part I). Deconstructive theories point out that aesthetic negation has to be reformulated semiologically. As such, they criticize the conflation often found in Adorno between aesthetic negativity and

types of nonaesthetic negation, especially that of social critique. In contrast, the basic thesis put forth by deconstruction is that the unique and peculiar logic of aesthetic experience can only be reconstructed if aesthetic negativity, which Adorno moved to the very center of his theory, is defined in terms of semiotic processes, in terms of the use and understanding of signs. Thus the first explanatory gain to be credited to the recourse to deconstructive theories consists in the freeing of Adorno's concept of negativity from its conflation with the negativity of social critique and in its explication as the subversion of understanding (chaps. 1 and 2).

Recourse to the deconstructive theory of the aesthetically enacted negation of successful semiosis, however, does not only remedy a deficiency in the explanatory model of the aesthetics of negativity: it also reveals a shortcoming of deconstructive theories. For the latter usually develop their basic theses in confrontation with inadequate countermodels. The most formidable counterthesis to a semiologically reformulated aesthetic of negativity is put forward by hermeneutics. Accordingly, the semiotic definition of aesthetic negativity achieved through reflections of deconstructive theory can only be defended by developing—on the basis of reflections from Adorno—both an immanent critique of hermeneutic aesthetics and a countermodel to its theory of the interpretation and evaluation of aesthetic experience (chaps. 3 and 4).

Moreover, the explanatory gain promised by the recourse to Derrida's deconstructionism is not limited to the definition of autonomy. It also applies to the conceptualization of the sovereignty of the aesthetic provided by negativity (see Part II). Deconstructive theories point out that the potential of the aesthetic to provide a critique of reason can only be conceived of as an internal subversion of nonaesthetically functioning discourses and their forms of reason. Here they criticize the traditional, "romantic" conception of the aesthetic critique of reason, which views aesthetic experience not as the site of the deconstruction of reason, but as the site where reason is overcome. In what remains to me his most important book, *Writing and Difference,* Derrida demonstrates how the avant-garde view of aesthetic sovereignty (in Artaud and Bataille) is still marked by this romantic idea of the positive transcendence of reason. He goes on

to show, though, that at the same time this view contains starting points for overcoming the romantic model. At the margins of the (surrealist) avant-garde, it becomes clearer that art is not a utopian transcendence of reason, but rather represents a crisis for and a threat to reason.

Nevertheless, recourse to the modifications made by deconstruction to the common romantic misunderstanding of the sovereignty of art also highlights the way in which the theory itself still shares in this misconception (chaps. 1 and 2). Deconstruction attempts to separate the subversion of the successful functioning of our nonaesthetic discourses that aesthetic experience achieves from the particular claim to validity involved in this enactment. It attempts to conceive of this experience instead as the object of a cognitive process that has universal validity claims. It participates in the romantic misconception that art *itself* is the vehicle of a critique of reason. In truth, when the problems of a radicalized critique of reason are more deeply considered—problems of which no one was more conscious than Adorno—it turns out that the potential for aesthetic experience to provide a critique of reason cannot be described as an implication of this experience, nor as contents separable from it, but only as an effect of it (chap. 3). Art is not sovereign in that it tears down the boundaries separating aesthetic and nonaesthetic experience, thereby proving itself to be the direct overcoming of reason. It is instead sovereign in that, as a discourse of merely particular validity, it represents a crisis for our functioning discourses. The aporias of the traditional romantic view of the sovereignty of art can only be resolved by combining two theses: (1) the deconstructive thesis that the aesthetic critique of reason is the subversion rather than the overcoming of reason; and (2) the thesis, which can be found in Adorno, that it is not the contents but the effects, consequences, or repercussions of art that are the foundations of this critique (chap. 4). Taken together, these two claims outline an understanding of aesthetic sovereignty—as an aesthetically generated critique of reason—that not only does not violate the autonomy of the enactment of aesthetic experience, but is actually premised upon it.

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I

On the Negative Logic of Aesthetic Experience

1

The Concept of Aesthetic Negativity

The basic thesis of the aesthetic of negativity rests on a simple equation: aesthetic difference, the distinction between the aesthetic and the nonaesthetic, is, in truth, aesthetic negativity. Only by conceiving of works of art in their negative relationship to everything that is not art can the autonomy of such works, the internal logic of their representation and of the way they are experienced, be adequately understood. The distinctiveness, the uniqueness of art, is that it sets itself apart, that it separates itself off. It is just as inadequate to explain the autonomy of art in terms of distinction, coexistence, or complementarity as it is to subordinate art to externally imposed ends. What art actually is, is contradiction, rejection, negation.

Determinations of this kind are basic to Adorno's aesthetics.[1] As soon as one takes up Adorno's texts, however, it turns out that the seeming simplicity of this basic equation actually harbors an array of enigmatic conclusions that permit the most diverse of interpretations. The only way to decide among them is to test their ability to resolve the problem at hand, that is, to provide an adequate account of aesthetic autonomy. For in spite of all the difficulties that arise for modern art and aesthetic experience out of the successful unfolding of art's internal logic as it differentiates itself from other realms of society, it is solely its autonomy that allows its unique and peculiar achievements. Naturally, these achievements do not stop aesthetic theory from pointing out the losses suffered by art in the course of its modern differentiation or from speculating on the state of a

postautonomous art. Nevertheless, the only adequate means of evaluating any theory of modern art is in terms of its success in grasping this autonomy. If Adorno's theory of aesthetics is viewed in terms of this question, it is quickly seen that even its basic explanations of the autonomy of the aesthetic in terms of its negativity are in danger of failing to satisfy this condition. For there are at least two different (though not equally explicit) conceptions of aesthetic negativity to be found in Adorno, neither of which is compatible with any effort to explain the concept of aesthetic autonomy. The first of these two (mis)conceptions deems the relationship between art and nonart as negative because it conceives of art as a critique of nonaesthetic reality. By contrast, the second characterizes the relationship as negative because it sees art as a place where the intensity of lived experience (*Erleben*) is increased vis-à-vis that of nonaesthetic reality.

If the first of these misconceptions of aesthetic negativity can be termed the social-critical misconception, the second can be designated the purist misconception. Both have left—with differing degrees of clarity—their traces in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*. Whereas the social-critical misconception of aesthetic negativity represents the neo-Marxist legacy in Adorno's aesthetics, the purist misconception represents its aestheticist heritage.[2] Out of their contrast, two images of aesthetic difference arise, mutually complementary in their incompleteness. The former misconception distinguishes art from society as its critical negation; in doing so, it implies the idea of potentially overcoming aesthetic difference. According to this interpretation, art brings to bear potentialities, capabilities, and insights, which, though still unrealized in society, can, in principle, remove themselves from the esoteric reality of the aesthetic and become incorporated into social relations. The equation of aesthetic and critical negativity occurs within the framework of a potential identity of that which is distinguished, art and society. In contrast, the purist understanding of aesthetic negativity insists on the insurmountability of the divide between the two. On this view, the intensification of lived experience that art promises retains its purity only through its indifference to social reality. Whereas the social-critical misconception conceives of aesthetic difference in terms of its po-

tential surmountability, the purist model rigidly establishes it as representing a static unrelatedness of distinct spheres.

The question is thus raised: to what extent do these two interpretations involve an inadequate explanation, an undercutting of the concept of aesthetic difference or autonomy? If Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* is regarded in terms of this question, the answer is initially unclear. For it is certainly true that both conceptions are continuously present in it; in fact, their combination creates the basic framework for Adorno's later aesthetics.[3] Adorno's effort to link them, however, is based on an explicit critique of both positions. The way this critique is mounted, though, provides no direct indication of a concept of aesthetic negativity that could avoid both pitfalls. For though Adorno's critique of aestheticism is directed against the separation of the aesthetic from the societal sphere, this critique is itself premised on a mirrorlike reversal, namely, the reduction of aesthetic difference to social critique. Similarly, when Adorno criticizes the equation of art with critical cognition, he does this in the name of a motif he finds exemplified in aestheticism: the irreducibility of the intensified character of the lived experience of art and the aesthetic pleasure associated with it. The relationship of *Aesthetic Theory* to both the social-critical and the purist conception of aesthetic difference appears to seesaw back and forth, a movement by which Adorno's writings typically allow inadequate positions to criticize, correct, and supplement each other. This makes the question raised even more urgent: does Adorno's adoption of different motifs from the pure aestheticist and social-critical positions involve merely an aporetic linking of their opposing definitions of the structure of aesthetic negativity, or does it suggest a deeper understanding of aesthetic negativity that avoids their complementary deficiencies?

This question, in turn, raises a further question: can Adorno's objections to the social-critical and purist misconceptions of aesthetic negativity be understood as outlining the basic and necessary conditions of a concept of aesthetic autonomy that any useful concept of aesthetic negativity must, at the very least, satisfy? If we put the question this way, the motifs that Adorno musters (in his attacks against the respective deficiencies of the positions put forth by the social-critical and purist conceptions of aesthetic negativity) at the