

“Wenn wir weiterleben wollen, muß dieser Satz widerlegt werden”:
Rewriting Adorno in the Debate on post-Holocaust Poetry

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In an essay that contains one of the most-quoted phrases in German literary history – “nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch” – Theodor W. Adorno argued that barbarity and culture had become intertwined to such an extent in modern society, that even a poem could not be written without being implicated in that barbaric reality (49).¹ The manner in which Adorno formulated this charge, however, caused it to be read as a straightforward prohibition of poetry, rather than as a proposition to be explored.² Poets, in particular, took a defensive stance, reading Adorno’s words as a direct attack on their creativity, on the “Legitimation des eigenen Schreibens” (Kiedaisch, Introduction 11). Adorno’s refusal to offer a solution to this apparently negative situation encouraged poets to seek such a solution, by searching for a form of poetry that may be written after Auschwitz.³ This essay explores two examples of the resulting translation of Adorno’s philosophy into poetics, arguing that this re-contextualization of Adorno’s thought in the sphere of aesthetics reflects more on the prevailing literary conditions, and on the individual writers’ approach to the relationship between art and reality, than it does on the meaning of Adorno’s dialectical argument. Moreover, this comparison of the first and last published responses to Adorno’s statement in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany reveals that little changed in the interpretation of Adorno’s statement over those decades. The first published response to Adorno’s statement appeared in an essay by Hans Magnus Enzensberger, “Die Steine der Freiheit.” This essay was written in 1959, before the Eichmann and Auschwitz trials of the 1960s made the Holocaust a prominent contemporary issue. The second response under discussion is Günter Grass’ 1990 *Frankfurter Poetik-Vorlesung*, entitled “Schreiben nach Auschwitz” (1990), which is set against the background of a Germany undergoing major changes as a result of reunification. The following analysis of these texts reveals that, while this transformation of Adorno’s philosophy can in each case be traced back to the cultural and political concerns of the writer, the responses have in common a tendency to transform Adorno’s dialectical argument

into a more straightforward consideration of how poetry may respond to the Holocaust.

Since both of these responses take Adorno's statement on poetry after Auschwitz out of the context of the essay in which it appears, I shall briefly explain the significance of Adorno's words within the whole text of "Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft." The extent to which Adorno's later comments on post-Holocaust art represent substantial revisions of his original position remains a point of contention.⁴ In his essay "Engagement" (1962), Adorno accepts Enzensberger's position in "Die Steine der Freiheit," yet he also asserts that this acceptance does not detract from his original statement on the barbarity of poetry. This apparent contradiction is possible because, in this later essay, Adorno shifts the subject of the debate from poetry after Auschwitz to poetry about Auschwitz. These later comments do not, therefore, detract from the integrity of Adorno's original concept of the dialectic of culture and barbarism.⁵ Moreover, as both Petra Kiedaisch and Peter Stein have pointed out, responses to Adorno's comments on this subject tend to focus on his first statement, in "Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft" (Kiedaisch, Introduction 16; Stein 498). Since my concern in this essay is primarily with these responses and their implications for our understanding of post-war West German literary history, I do not seek to enter into the debate on Adorno's varying positions, but to focus on this first statement, and on the way in which it has been interpreted.

"Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft": Reading Adorno's Statement in Context

Adorno's assessment of the role of culture after Auschwitz is predicated on his contention that society in the modern world has become totalized, in that all elements of society, including culture, have been subsumed under the dominant economic or political discourse. As a result of this ultra-conformism, the individual is rendered irrelevant, difference is suppressed, and each element of society is unable to stand apart from that dominant discourse, thus upholding the status quo.⁶ Cultural criticism commodifies culture and thus contributes to the integration of culture in existing society.⁷ Like any marketable commodity, culture becomes merely a component of material reality, and its resulting reification as an integral part of that reality precludes its traditional autonomy from the status quo. Yet, Adorno argues, cultural critics and artists continue to believe in their autonomy, and thus do not

act to prevent their reification in society.⁸ Adorno is, therefore, taking issue neither with culture per se, nor with particular forms or types of culture, but with the intimate relationship between culture and society, according to which each cultural product inserts itself into current reality and so contributes to the continuation of that reality.

Adorno's apparent attack on culture is thus revealed to be an account of the intrinsic dangers of total society, which integrates all elements, including culture, according to the dominant identificatory discourse that suppresses difference. Within this account, Auschwitz functions as the extreme example of the barbaric depths that total society, and therefore also culture, have reached. The concentration camp provides a concrete example of the lack of freedom in all society in the period before, during, and after the Holocaust. It exemplifies the "Freiluftgefängnis, zu dem die Welt wird" (Adorno 48).⁹ In Adorno's conceptualization, Auschwitz is thus emphatically not to be viewed as a break in the otherwise positive progress of civilization, but rather as an exemplifying moment within the process of total society and reified culture.

Just as the term 'Auschwitz' must be read as a synecdoche in Adorno's thought, so his phrase "ein Gedicht [...] schreiben" takes on a similar function.¹⁰ Since the form and tradition of poetry imply a radical autonomy, Adorno employs this genre as a paradigm of supposedly individuated and autonomous cultural production, an autonomy which he has proved to be an impossible proposition within total society.¹¹ His contention that any culture that believes in its own freedom from the status quo is ultimately supporting those existing conditions transforms poetry into the opposite of its implied meaning, the very antithesis of individual autonomy. Culture cannot detach itself from reality in order to change it, and so any comment on reality amounts to pure reflection: "Noch das äußerste Bewußtsein vom Verhängnis droht zum Geschwätz zu entarten." More disturbingly, by upholding the status quo, poetry is implicated in its barbarity: "ein Gedicht nach Auschwitz zu schreiben, ist barbarisch" (Adorno 49).

Immediately after this apparent assertion of the barbarity of poetry, Adorno states: "und das frißt auch die Erkenntnis an, die ausspricht, warum es unmöglich ward, heute Gedichte zu schreiben" (49). Yet in the context of the whole essay, this statement does not indicate the impossibility of writing poetry per se, but the inevitable implication of all contemporary poetry in the barbarity of society. When Adorno uses the term "unmöglich," he is referring to the impossible situation in which the cultural producers and critics find themselves, in

that they are unable to realize and thereby avert this lack of autonomy and resulting barbarity. Adorno's argument in "Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft" can thus be summarized as an attempt to elucidate the intimate connection between contemporary reality (including culture) and total society, which Auschwitz brought to light and yet which nevertheless neither began nor ended with the Holocaust.¹² As will be seen, Enzensberger's and Grass' representations of Adorno's statement take account only of one aspect of this dialectic: in Enzensberger's case, the impossibility of writing poetry; and in Grass' reading, the barbarity of the Holocaust.

Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "Die Steine der Freiheit"

A reader of the extract from Enzensberger's essay, "Die Steine der Freiheit" (1959), in Kiedaisch's volume may conclude that his essay is solely a response to Adorno's statement on poetry after Auschwitz, since the extract begins with a reference to that statement. The whole essay, however, reveals a different focus. Enzensberger's ostensible aim in his essay was to introduce the poetry of the German-Jewish poet Nelly Sachs to the German reading public, and to admonish the German literary establishment for the poor reception of her work.¹³ The following analysis of Enzensberger's essay reveals that the aspects of Sachs's poetry that Enzensberger emphasizes reflect a partial reading of Adorno's statement, which does not engage with the dialectical aspect of Adorno's argument. Instead, Enzensberger focuses exclusively on the element of impossibility in this dialectic, which causes him to rethink Adorno's statement as referring solely to literature after Auschwitz, rather than to the implication of all culture in barbaric reality. Enzensberger thus re-contextualizes the debate as a discussion of how literature may respond to the Holocaust, and he therefore refutes Adorno's statement by positing a viable post-Holocaust poetics, in the form of poetry about Auschwitz by the victims. As will be seen, a close reading of Enzensberger's essay reveals this victim-oriented aesthetics, by highlighting Enzensberger's tendency to identify the post-war German readers with the victims of the Nazi regime. Such a focus on victimhood reflects a wider social and political tendency, in the post-war decades, for West Germans to identify themselves with, or as, the victims of the Second World War. This historical contextualization of Enzensberger's essay suggests that his response to Adorno's statement

was heavily conditioned by his historical context, and that it therefore reveals more about that context than it does about the philosophical import of Adorno's statement itself.

Enzensberger's re-interpretation of Adorno's dialectical argument as stating the impossibility of poetry after Auschwitz is evident in his paraphrasing of Adorno's supposed argument:

Der Philosoph Theodor W. Adorno hat einen Satz ausgesprochen, der zu den härtesten Urteilen gehört, die über unsere Zeit gefällt werden können: Nach Auschwitz sei es nicht mehr möglich, ein Gedicht zu schreiben. (772)

The indirect quotation represents a truncation of Adorno's original text, removing the notion of barbarity so central to Adorno's argument and replacing it with the concept of impossibility which, as we have seen, takes its meaning only when read in context. By using the subjunctive "sei," Enzensberger both highlights the fact that these are not his words, thereby incorrectly suggesting that he is quoting verbatim, as well as implying that Adorno's judgment is suspect. Moreover, the misleading focus on the 'impossibility' of poetry makes the statement easier for the readers to reject. Enzensberger's phrasing of Adorno's statement suggests that a reader need merely accept the existence of Sachs's poetry in order to invalidate Adorno's statement.¹⁴ This presentation of Adorno's statement thus reflects Enzensberger's conceptualization of the Holocaust as a break in German literature, rather than as evidence of the barbarity inherent in modern society and culture.

The definition of Adorno's statement as an "Urteil" and the claim that it must be "widerlegt," which represent the phrase as a prohibition, both indicate further that Enzensberger overlooks the dialectical element of Adorno's argument: "Wenn wir weiterleben wollen, muß dieser Satz widerlegt werden" (772). As we have seen, Adorno's intention was not to pass a single judgment on poetry, but to highlight the intimate relationship between culture and barbarity, and the impossibility of culture producing knowledge of its own position. A similar misreading of the foundations of Adorno's argument is evident in Enzensberger's later reference to barbarity. Enzensberger sets Sachs's poetry (specifically, the poem "Schmetterling") apart from "eine Literatur von verblendeten Schmierfinken [...], die in den Zeiten der Barbarei vom Vergeißmeinnicht zu reden wagten" (773).¹⁵ In an ironic twist, the poet who writes solely of supposedly harmless matters such as

nature is represented as destructive, because of his failure to address the political and social issues of the time. Enzensberger argues that Sachs's poetry is fundamentally different, since she uses nature imagery in order to confront the atrocities and thus represents a more valid response to barbaric reality. Yet this approach reduces Adorno's argument to a discussion of a poem's subject matter and so displaces the focus of the original text. For Adorno did not argue for or against certain literary topics, but affirmed the implication of all culture, irrespective of its form or content, in barbaric reality. Enzensberger's essay thus reflects a desire to seek literary forms that respond appropriately to barbaric reality, rather than an attempt to change reality itself.

This failure to address the deep-seated issues raised by Auschwitz is further suggested by Enzensberger's identification of his readers with Sachs, and so with the victims of the Nazi regime. Having already established a personal tone in the essay by describing Sachs's home in Sweden, Enzensberger draws the readers into this personal matrix by using the pronoun "uns": "An wen ist dieses Gedicht gerichtet? An die Überlebenden, die 'das neue Haus bauen,' an die Nachgeborenen, die Jüngeren, an uns" (771). The term "uns" is used to describe the survivors of the Holocaust and "die Nachgeborenen," Enzensberger himself and his readers. By thus collapsing the distinction between the Jewish victim and the contemporary German reader, Enzensberger shows how Sachs's poetry makes possible the remembrance of the Nazi persecution. Yet such an identification may also prevent the readers from considering their own responsibility for the Holocaust. Enzensberger goes on to make the bold statement that it was "die Deutschen" (rather than 'die Nazis') who murdered the Jewish people: "Es handelt von den Konzentrationslagern, in denen die Deutschen ein Volk ermordet haben" (772). Yet this apparent implication of potential guilt on the part of the readers is countered by the readers' identification with the victims, and their resulting distance from the perpetrators, that has already been established in Enzensberger's essay.

This tendency to identify the reader with the victim is also evident in Enzensberger's treatment of the perpetrators. He argues that Sachs's poetry is so successful precisely because she ignores the perpetrators, refusing to give them any language. The "Henker" are a nameless, faceless collective, who are only present in the essay in their non-identification with the "wir" and in their absence from Sachs's poetry. Although Enzensberger makes concessions to a general German responsibility for the Holocaust, in the admission that 'we' were made

the “Mitwisser” and “Helfershelfer” of the perpetrators, these terms are anodyne in comparison with the harsh identification of the perpetrators as “Henker” (772).¹⁶ Enzensberger argues that, by ignoring the perpetrators in her poetry and focusing instead solely on the victims, Sachs portrays only those who have a human face: “Die Gedichte sprechen von dem, was Menschengesicht hat: von den Opfern” (772). Since the readers are sure to identify themselves as “Menschen,” this quotation effects a further and more final distancing of the readers from the perpetrators, as well as a complementary identification with the victims. When Enzensberger goes on to set up a directly oppositional relationship between Adorno’s theory and Sachs’s poetry, the reader is thus far more likely to side with the victim-poet, thereby accepting Enzensberger’s conception of a viable post-Holocaust poetics.

The focus on the identification of Germans with Jews is complemented in Enzensberger’s essay by a reconciliatory tone, which implies that Sachs’s poetry proves that the apparent symbiosis of Jewish and German culture has not been entirely destroyed by the Holocaust. Stein notes a redemptive tone in Enzensberger’s use of Christian vocabulary in the essay: “Opfer,” “Rettung,” “Erlösung,” and “Trost.” He argues that these terms imply an analogy between Christ’s redemptive suffering on the cross, and the Jewish suffering in the Holocaust, which now serves to redeem the German language through post-Holocaust poetry by the victims (492). Enzensberger compounds this redemptive approach by establishing a causal relationship between Sachs’s poetry and the development of the German language: “Ihrer Sprache wohnt etwas Rettendes inne. Indem sie spricht, gibt sie uns selber zurück, Satz um Satz, was wir zu verlieren drohten: Sprache” (772). This approach reflects the notion that the German language was damaged by its involvement in the Nazi regime, a concept that is expressed by such writers as Paul Celan, in his speech known as the “Bremer Rede” (1958). Enzensberger argues that the damage done to language may be reversed, attributing this redemptive power principally to poetry by a Holocaust victim, which makes no reference to the perpetrators. This absence frees the poems of any negative emotions, such as hate or revenge, thus purifying the German language of any such destructive negativity. This suggestion that the German language may only be recovered by passing over the reality of German perpetration reflects Enzensberger’s tendency in this essay to distance the readers from the perpetrators, and in doing so contradicts Adorno’s original concept of the barbaric nature of reality. For Adorno’s argument in “Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft” is that it is only through an engagement

with the very instruments of 'total society' that the dialectic between culture and barbarism may be overcome.

The equation of German and Jewish suffering that is implied by Enzensberger's elision of Holocaust victims and German readers has been identified by historians such as Moishe Postone (1991) and Robert Moeller (2001) as a trend in West German thought on the Holocaust. In an article on history and identity in the Federal Republic, Postone explores a tendency for West Germans, on both the political Left and Right, to identify themselves with or as the victims of the Nazi regime (239). He attributes this identification to the widespread suppression of a sense of responsibility for the Holocaust, which was the result of an attempt to master the past.¹⁷ While Postone's examples of this phenomenon are mainly from the 1970s and 1980s, Moeller identifies the same tendencies among West German politicians from the 1950s onwards. In his study of the role of the Nazi past in the construction of a post-war German identity, Moeller demonstrates that West German politicians often implied that Jewish and German suffering were equivalent, by comparing Jewish victims of National Socialism with German victims of Soviet Communism (32-33). This concern with victimhood among politicians has also been identified among West German writers of the 1960s and 1970s, as outlined by Stefan Krankenhagen (2001) in his examination of the reception of Adorno's statement (87). While it may appear extreme to accuse Enzensberger of this kind of suppression, considering that his post-war aesthetics did not shy away from the reality of the Holocaust, his preoccupation with victimhood nevertheless appears to reflect an attempt to reconcile the past with the present.¹⁸

This apparent obsession with victimhood in the abstract is also reflected in Enzensberger's tendency to transform allusions to the Nazi past into abstractions, by shifting them into the far less disturbing realm of aesthetics. Enzensberger claims that Adorno's statement belongs to the "härtesten Urteilen [...], die über unsere Zeit gefällt werden können." This use of the term "Urteil" indicates a tendency to reappropriate terms redolent with meaning in the Nazi past, transferring them into the literary realm and so rendering them less contentious. By describing this judgment on literature as one of the harshest of the age, Enzensberger risks displacing other possible, contemporary judgments about real events, such as the reality of the concentration camps and the widespread complicity of the German population in the Nazi crimes. The repetition of this term in the literary realm replaces these connotations with aesthetic ones, thus redeeming the reader's

relationship with the damaged term "Urteil." A similar process seems to be at work in Enzensberger's use of the terms "weiterleben" and "Feuer." The phrase "wenn wir weiterleben wollen" represents survival as a metaphor, transforming the reality of millions of deaths, of a time when survival was by no means a question of the individual's will, into an abstract, aesthetic issue (772). Later in the essay, Enzensberger uses the metaphor of fire to describe the process that poems written after Auschwitz have undergone: "Durch soviel Feuer ist das Gedicht gegangen, das nach Auschwitz geschrieben worden ist" (773). This image reworks a term that has particularly horrific and evident meaning in the context of the Holocaust, placing it in a literary context in which it may once again be received as an inoffensive metaphor. Such a replication and abstraction of the concepts that defined the Nazi past is also identified by Postone as typical of the West Germans' reluctance to consider their own responsibility for the Nazi past. He argues that the suppression of potential guilt for the past led to a failure to address the specifics of the extermination of the Jews; yet that the parallel desire to be identified with the victims led to an obsession with victimhood in the abstract (Postone 246). Enzensberger's linguistic abstraction appears to represent an early example of such repression, compounded by his almost exclusively aesthetic approach to the subject. This aesthetic re-evaluation of Nazi terminology also indicates that Enzensberger considered it possible to dissociate these terms from the meanings that they took on during the Nazi period, suggesting that he conceived of the Second World War and the Holocaust as the exception, rather than the rule, of modern society.

Enzensberger's response to Adorno's statement thus reflects his explicit agenda of defending Sachs's poetry, as well as the historical and cultural background against which he was writing. His consideration of issues of victimhood and culpability, which arise from his understanding of Adorno's statement, resonate with the prevailing mood in post-war West Germany, and the tendency at that time to mitigate German responsibility for the events of the Holocaust. This response thus reveals that Enzensberger's aim was not to respond to the full philosophical scope of Adorno's argument, but to mold his reading of Adorno's statement to his concept of how poetry might successfully respond to the Holocaust. My analysis of Enzensberger's essay thereby shows that responses to Adorno's statement may retrospectively inform our understanding of the poetic concerns of the writer in question, and of the poetic currents of his particular cultural context.

Günter Grass, "Schreiben nach Auschwitz"

Grass' response to Adorno's statement reflects the forty years of debate since Enzensberger's essay, as Grass notes the tendency to take Adorno's statement out of context, to truncate it and so to misinterpret it as a prohibition: the "verkürzte[r] Adorno-Satz, demzufolge nach Auschwitz kein Gedicht mehr geschrieben werden dürfe" (14). Grass argues that the resulting re-interpretation of the statement as a dictum made it easy to reject: "unbequem wie jeder kategorische Imperativ, abweisend durch abstrakte Strenge und leicht zu umgehen wie jede Verbotstafel" (14). By placing the statement back in its original context, Grass claims that Adorno's words ought to be understood as a "Maßstab" rather than a prohibition (14). He therefore correctly indicates that Adorno's statement evaluated the contemporary status of culture and its intimate relationship to barbaric reality, as a means of engaging the literary establishment in a consideration of these issues.

Yet this incisive interpretation of Adorno's text and of the subsequent misreadings of the statement as a prohibition is ultimately compromised, even contradicted, in Grass' speech, since he fails to engage with the dialectical aspect of Adorno's argument. The following analysis of Grass' speech reveals that this approach is a result of Grass' cultural and political context. Firstly, Grass' intention is not, as the title of the speech may suggest, to consider Adorno's statement and the issues that it raises, but to explore the genesis and development of his own writing.¹⁹ The question of why Adorno declared the barbarity of poetry after Auschwitz is thus superseded by a consideration of how and why it was possible for Grass to continue writing after the Holocaust. Adorno's dialectical intertwining of culture and reality is therefore replaced by an investigation into literature as a response to reality. Secondly, Grass' anti-reunification stance leads him to focus almost exclusively on the notion of barbarism. Grass' speech thus engages two very different periods in recent German history - the immediate post-war period, and the era of reunification around 1990 - yet a close reading of the speech reveals that both of these periods exercise a similar influence over Grass' understanding of Adorno's statement: they each lead him to conceptualize the Holocaust as an absolute break in German history and literary history.

When Grass addresses Adorno's statement, in isolation from aesthetic considerations regarding his own work, his response shows a

subtle understanding of Adorno's intended meaning. Yet his attempt to apply Adorno's theory to his own works involves a consideration of form and style, reducing Adorno's wide-ranging argument regarding the relationship between culture and society to a consideration of aesthetic forms. Following the insertion of a dialogue from his play *Onkel Onkel*, written in Berlin in 1953, and of a short poem from 1956, Grass asks: "Ist das ein Gedicht, sind das Theaterdialoge, die nach Auschwitz geschrieben werden durften?" (22). This question as to what kind of literature was appropriate after the Holocaust positions literature as merely a response to reality, rather than indicating the implication of culture in the barbarity of reality, as Adorno argued. By thus re-framing Adorno's argument, Grass claims to have responded to it through his concept of "Askese," which he attributes to his works from the immediate post-war period (17). This ascetic poetics is represented by Grass' quotation of his poem from the immediate post-war period, entitled "Askese." This poem rejects all colors, replacing them with various tones of grey, thus indicating that Grass' post-war aesthetic program represented a renunciation of all decorative literary elements (16-17). This aesthetic program is described as a mistrust of all "Klingklang," of all timeless poetry such as that of the "Naturmystiker" of the 1950s. Such a reduction of Adorno's complex argument recalls Enzensberger's criticism of the "Schmierfinken, die in den Zeiten der Barbarei vom Vergißmeinnicht zu reden wagten"; and transforms Adorno's dialectical reflections into a more straightforward consideration of how poetry may respond to the Holocaust (Enzensberger 773).

Adorno's implication of culture in the genesis of such horrors as the Holocaust thus seems to be overlooked by Grass, who only considers literature as written after, and thus as a separate entity from, the event itself. This chronological approach is particularly evident in Grass' despairing question regarding the role that literature can play in the contemporary world, in the face of the continued and increasing suffering in parts of Asia: "Wo kann Literatur ihren Auslauf finden, wenn die Zukunft schon vordatiert und von statistischen Schreckensbilanzen besetzt ist?" (39). Despite showing an affinity to Adorno's thought by highlighting a connection between the role of literature and the barbarity of society, this rhetorical question treats literature as a separate category to future reality. Grass is thus responding neither to Adorno's identification of the intertwining of all culture and society, nor to his implication of culture in the horrors of that society.

This isolation of Auschwitz comes to a climax at the end of Grass' speech, as he uses his response to Adorno's words in order to warn of the potential dangers inherent in a unified Germany.²⁰ Grass states unequivocally that a unified Germany was a prerequisite for the Holocaust, and that consequently a reunified Germany should be treated with the utmost circumspection, if not avoided altogether: "eine der Voraussetzungen für das Ungeheure, neben anderen älteren Triebkräften, [war] ein starkes, das geeinte Deutschland" (41). Yet by thus relating his consideration of Adorno's verdict on poetry after Auschwitz to the specific German situation of 1990, Grass reduces the message that Adorno was attempting to convey, of the inherent failure of all culture to respond to reality. Moreover, Grass' appropriation of the Holocaust as the reason for opposing reunification instrumentalizes the genocide for political ends, depriving it of its status as a moment in its own right.

In the light of this political agenda, Grass' use of the terms "Zäsur" and "Zivilisationsbruch" in his speech may be understood as attempts to distance contemporary West Germany from the events of the Second World War. Grass' assertion that Auschwitz remains permanently present results not from a realization that, as Adorno implied in "Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft," the society that brought about the Holocaust is still in existence, but that the event cannot be understood: "Das wird nicht aufhören, gegenwärtig zu bleiben; [...] Auschwitz wird, obgleich umdrängt von erklärenden Wörtern, nie zu begreifen sein" (9).²¹ Grass goes on to conclude that it is this lack of historical comparison that leads Auschwitz to be conceived of as a caesura in the history of mankind. He attributes this notion of Auschwitz as an "unheilbarer Bruch der Zivilisationsgeschichte" to Adorno, in "Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft" (Grass 13-14). Yet it is precisely in this text that Adorno argues against the conception of the Holocaust as a break in civilization. His polemic is aimed, rather, against the society that caused such an event to happen, and against the culture industry that contributed to the horror by either failing to contradict the status quo or refusing to comment on it altogether. So by referring to Auschwitz as an example of the dehumanizing processes inherent in modern society, this event is presented in Adorno's text as an integral element of that civilization. To depict it as a caesura or, as Grass goes on to do, as a "Zivilisationsbruch," contradicts Adorno's position by essentializing and isolating the event in a way that excuses contemporary society from responsibility for it (Grass 41). This focus on Auschwitz as a unique moment reflects Grass' desire to attribute the responsibility for

the Holocaust to a unified Germany, in order to support his argument against anti-reunification.

That it was indeed Grass' political agenda of 1990 in particular that influenced his treatment of Adorno's statement is suggested by the change in his argument nine years later, when the issue of reunification was no longer so pressing. Grass' speech on receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1999 takes up and develops many of the ideas from his *Frankfurter Poetik-Vorlesung*, yet this time Grass engages with a different aspect of Adorno's dialectic (Grass, "Fortsetzung"). Grass' political agenda in this later speech is to protest against the prevalence of hunger in the developing world. Therefore, rather than emphasize the barbarity and uniqueness of Auschwitz as a warning against German reunification, Grass now highlights the fact that human suffering continues apace in the modern age and that 'Auschwitz,' as a symbol of such suffering and of the failure of bystanders to intervene, has consequently not come to an end. Having previously failed to engage with Adorno's notion that Auschwitz was an integral element of modern civilization, Grass now espouses this concept, seemingly because it now reflects his political concerns. This brief comparison between the two speeches thus throws into stark relief the extent to which Grass' response to Adorno's statement is influenced by his political context.

Reframing the Debate

Responses to Adorno's so-called dictum, as seen through the examples of Enzensberger and Grass, represent a radical de- and re-contextualization of Adorno's original thinking. The statement is removed from the dialectical context of "Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft," and relocated in the cultural and political context of the writers in question. The discussion that Adorno attempted to initiate, over the significance of Auschwitz as an example of totalized society, and of the complicity of culture in the barbarity of society, has thus been transformed into a consideration of the role of culture after the Holocaust, and after Adorno's statement. Günter Anders comments on precisely this inappropriate shift in the debate in his collection of reflections from his diaries, *Ketzereien* (1982). One section of the text is a reproduction of a conversation between Anders and an unnamed young poet about Adorno's statement:

“Gleichviel, mit der Erlaubtheit von Lyrik nach oder über Auschwitz beschäftigen sich allein Leute, die an die Sache selbst...”

“Auschwitz?”

Ich nickte. “...überhaupt nicht denken. Nur läppische Snobs.” (209)²²

Enzensberger’s and Grass’ responses converge in a failure to take account of Adorno’s fundamental concept of the dialectical relationship between culture and barbarism, in favor of a conceptualization of literature as a response to reality. Literature is thus freed from responsibility for the barbaric events of the past. The two responses under discussion, the first and the last in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany, thus suggest that the translation of Adorno’s philosophy into poetics necessitates a reduction of these wide-ranging philosophical reflections into the more pragmatic question of how literature may respond to reality.²³ The apparent refusal to countenance the notion that literature may be irreparably tarnished by its intimate relationship with barbaric reality indicates an unwillingness to engage with the implications of Adorno’s argument, namely that a complete overhaul of both culture and society is required in order to escape from the dehumanizing processes of total society, of which ‘Auschwitz’ was merely an exemplifying moment. Such approaches to Adorno’s thought have contributed to the decades of misinterpretation of the original text, which has in turn hindered a constructive engagement with the fundamental political, social, cultural and aesthetic issues that Adorno raised.²⁴ An engagement with these issues has been replaced by an understanding of Auschwitz as a clear break in history, and of literature as inherently separate from these barbaric events. This new orientation amounts to precisely the kind of denial that Adorno was attempting to prevent.

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Notes

- ¹ The text in which Adorno first commented on post-Holocaust art was “Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft,” written in 1949, published in 1951 in *Soziologische Forschung in unserer Zeit. Leopold von Wiese zum 75. Geburtstag*. Adorno’s principal utterances on this subject, and extracts of the main responses, are collected in Petra Kiedaisch’s volume. While providing a useful overview of the debate, Kiedaisch’s presentation of the texts may also perpetuate the misunderstandings that have plagued it. That each response is only an extract from a longer essay or speech is only evident on consulting the concluding list of contents. Without access to the full text, the reader remains unaware of the author’s intention (which was rarely principally to respond to Adorno’s statement) and so of the potential bias with which Adorno’s statement is approached.
 - ² Kiedaisch claims that Adorno’s words have been read as a “Verdikt” on poetry after Auschwitz; as a “Darstellungsverbot” of poetry about Auschwitz; and as a “provokatorisches ‘Diktum’” (Introduction 10). Since the problem of terminology is so central, I refer throughout to Adorno’s words on poetry after Auschwitz as his ‘statement.’
 - ³ Peter Stein considers this lack of a solution to be a result of Adorno’s embitterment, in 1949, at the failure of the West German cultural establishment to address the issues arising from the war and the Holocaust (490).
 - ⁴ Stein, Michael Rothberg and Klaus Hofmann have made the most detailed recent contributions to the debate. Stein outlines the ways in which Adorno modified his original statement, but asserts that he never revoked it entirely; Rothberg argues that there are discontinuities in Adorno’s thinking; and Hofmann asserts that all of Adorno’s utterances on this subject can be subsumed under a general dialectic which demands the existence of art while affirming its inadmissibility.
 - ⁵ See Stein for a more detailed analysis of how “Engagement” represents a weakening of Adorno’s original statement, but not a retraction (493-94).
 - ⁶ In “Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft,” ‘total’ society refers both to late capitalist society and to the Soviet state. In the former, all elements of society are subsumed under the identificatory logic of exchange value; in the latter, under totalitarian state structures. Rothberg asserts that Adorno’s experiences of American capitalism while in exile during the 1930s and 1940s led him to identify this form of total society with European fascism (37).
 - ⁷ Adorno states that by presenting cultural products either as entertainment, edification, or rarities, cultural criticism renders them marketable (35).
 - ⁸ According to Adorno, this failure to realize that culture is not autonomous results from the Enlightenment belief in freedom of expression; and from a belief that the escape from feudal oppression has led automatically to autonomy, when in reality the mind is now oppressed by the status quo. Cultural criticism contributes to this illusion of emancipation, for the action of criticism itself suggests an absolute freedom that does not exist (13-14).
 - ⁹ The fact that this notion of imprisonment is caused by society’s unifying totality is evident from the rest of this sentence: “In dem Freiluftgefängnis, zu dem die Welt wird, kommt es schon gar nicht mehr darauf an, was wovon abhängt, so sehr ist alles eins” (Adorno 48).
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- ¹⁰ Rothberg argues that Auschwitz functions as a synecdoche in Adorno's thought, while Rolf Tiedemann affords the same status to poetry: "Auschwitz takes on both metonymic and synecdochic significance in Adorno's phrase: the place-name refers both to events 'proximate' to it and to a totality of events of which it is one part" (Rothberg 28); "In Adorno's sentence, 'to write poetry' is a synecdoche; it stands for art as such and ultimately for culture as a whole" (Tiedemann, Introduction xvi).
- ¹¹ According to Rothberg, poetry's status as "a form of ostensibly free individual expression" renders it paradigmatic of Adorno's notion of illusory cultural autonomy (36). Most interpretations of why Adorno singles out poetry have, similarly, focussed on its status as "die individuierteste Rede" (Laermann 14). Detlev Claussen suggests that poetry is the epitome of art's isolation from society, as the 'verkitschter Inbegriff dieser gesellschaftsfreien Kunst' (18).
- ¹² Stein argues convincingly that the concept of the dialectic of culture and barbarism was also present in Adorno's pre-war thought, and that it was not limited to Adorno's philosophy, but was present also in the works of Walter Benjamin, Leo Löwenthal and Max Horkheimer (488).
- ¹³ Enzensberger only refers to the first two volumes of poems that Sachs published, despite the fact that by this time she had published four volumes: *In den Wohnungen des Todes*. Berlin: Aufbau, 1947; *Sternverdunkelung*. Amsterdam: Bermann Fischer, 1949; *Und niemand weiß weiter*. Hamburg and Munich: Heinrich Ellermann, 1957; *Flucht und Verwandlung*. Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1959. A play, *Eli. Ein Mysterienspiel vom Leiden Israels*, was published in 1951, and was broadcast for the first time in 1958, as a radio play, and as an opera in 1959. *Eli* was extremely badly received by critics, who invoked Adorno in order to attack Sachs for attempting to represent the Holocaust in an aesthetic form (Lorenz 134). It thus seems evident that Enzensberger's essay is a defensive response to these criticisms, yet by focusing on the early poetry and ignoring *Eli*, he does not address the specific source of the most strident criticism.
- ¹⁴ Hofmann notes the widespread tendency to interpret Adorno's statement as an assertion of the impossibility, rather than barbarity, of poetry: "[t]he plain announcement of cultural bankruptcy is easier to swallow than the painful judgement, passed on an ongoing poetic production, that it is 'barbaric'" (193).
- ¹⁵ Nelly Sachs, "Schmetterling," *Fahrt ins Staublose* 148. This quotation may be read as a direct allusion to the postwar *Naturlyrik* of German poets such as Wilhelm Lehmann.
- ¹⁶ The way in which Enzensberger formulates this charge also implies a reluctance to express individual responsibility. He refers to "allem, was uns zu ihren Mitwissern und Helfershelfern macht," the passive form gently shifting the blame away from the "uns" (772).
- ¹⁷ One of the principal examples that Postone gives for this equation of Jewish and German suffering is a law passed by the Kohl government in the 1980s, which made it a criminal offense to deny or speak lightly both of the Holocaust and of the expulsion of the Germans from the East in 1944/45 (239).
- ¹⁸ See Enzensberger's *Einzelheiten* essays from the 1960s, in particular "Weltsprache der modernen Poesie," for an exposition of the role of Auschwitz in Enzensberger's aesthetics from this period.
- ¹⁹ In his Nobel Prize speech, Grass describes his *Frankfurter Poetik-Vorlesung* as a kind of literary stock-taking: "Ich zog Bilanz, legte, Buch nach Buch, Rechenschaft ab" (Grass, "Fortsetzung" 307).

- ²⁰ Cf. Julian Preece: "While he would quite possibly have given it the same title and picked the same theme had he spoken the previous year, 'Writing after Auschwitz' now helped him to push home his anti-unification message" (172).
- ²¹ Adorno's belief that there has been no change in society is reflected in Hofmann's assertion of Adorno's "basic conviction of the improbability, or even the impossibility, of any fundamental change of human and societal conditions" (191).
- ²² Despite this incisive analysis of the debate about Adorno's statement, Anders's response also reframes the debate according to his own cultural and political context. Anders transforms it into an attack on religion, arguing that not poetry, but rather prayer and religious belief have been rendered invalid by the events of the Holocaust: "Beten darf man nämlich vor allem deshalb nicht, weil die Tatsache, daß Auschwitz geschehen ist, beweist, daß es Gott überhaupt nicht gibt" (Anders 211).
- ²³ For a summary of interpretations of Adorno's statement as asserting the impossibility of poetry after Auschwitz, see Hofmann 192-93. A comprehensive and thorough investigation of the responses to Adorno's statement that were published in the time between Enzensberger's essay and Grass' speech is necessary to reveal the extent to which Enzensberger's and Grass' responses can be seen as representative of the entire debate.
- ²⁴ The significance of these responses and their impact on the reception of Adorno's statement is evident, for example, in Lionel Richard's claim that the French reading public were only introduced to Adorno's statement through the French translation of Enzensberger's essay "Die Steine der Freiheit" in the 1960s (Richard 23).

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