

Minima Patientia: *Reflections on the Subject of Suffering*

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It is the question whether one can *live* after Auschwitz. This question has appeared to me, for example, in the recurring dreams that plague me, in which I have the feeling that I am no longer really alive, but am just an emanation of a wish of some victim of Auschwitz.
—Theodor W. Adorno, *Metaphysics*

Suffering, Ex-pressed and Im-pressed

It takes a suffering subject to write on the subject of suffering. A subject whose suffering, at once idiosyncratic and universal, strange and familiar, will be sublimated in writing, in the medium that still grants asylum to the exceptional features of hospitality amid the overwhelming rule of homelessness. A subject who is, nonetheless, subjected even to its writing that may suddenly revert into a cruel injunction for house arrest, where the risk inherent in the expression of suffering only renders its load more oppressive. A subject who bears, often without dignity and forbearance, the dual burden of suffering and its expression.

Nothing, however, is more questionable than the subjectivity of the suffering subject. With a familiar gesture of exposing the subject's objective core, Theodor W. Adorno conceives of "the whole content of subjectivity" as

“a trace and a shadow of the world from which subjectivity withdraws.”¹ For Adorno, the subject does not come into contact with the world as something foreign but, rather, both reflects it and upholds it internally. Yet when a few pages later the agonizing thread of suffering tightly woven into Adorno’s theoretical work reasserts itself, little, if anything, subjective is left of a “living man,” whom “physical suffering . . . already places . . . among the corpses by reducing him to his body.”² Before the sufferer, the ostensibly “reduced,” confined, and confining grounds of the body unfold into a boundless territory of regression and rotting—the territory more objective than the subject’s own projection of objectivity.

The sentient corpse, gazing with its fixed stare into the night and at the reader (but what if the night *is* the reader?) from the pages of Samuel Beckett’s literary works, is half certain of its intolerable anguish. The pressure of its suffering may confirm, albeit without any guarantees, the existence of its various body parts, whose materiality is singularly registered at a moment when the subject senses the rate of their decomposition. This shattered subject “is” only when it is consumed by suffering, in which Asher Horowitz detects an “uncannily Levinasian” flavor;³ when it suffers, however, it is on the brink of not being. Not merely standing *at* a threshold, this subject already enunciates through its very subjectivity the threshold of existence/nonexistence. (From now on I treat the “subject of suffering” not in the sense of an ontological entity, or even as a phenomenological existent, but in the sense of a substratum *subjected* to the weight of suffering. Adorno hints at this notion of the subject in *Negative Dialectics* when he writes, “It is not by chance that the Latin word *subiectum*, the underlying, reminds us of the very thing which the technical language of philosophy has come to call ‘objective.’”)⁴

As the first and the most importunate (but never immediate) image of suffering, the living man reduced to his body stands for an exaggerated version of everything that still “preserve[s] a trace of vanished life.”⁵ The preservation of this trace exerts another kind of pressure on the living death that,

1. Theodor W. Adorno, “Trying to Understand ‘Endgame,’” in *Can One Live after Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone et al. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 268.

2. Adorno, “Trying to Understand ‘Endgame,’” 273.

3. Asher Horowitz, “‘By a Hair’s Breadth’: Critique, Transcendence, and the Ethical in Adorno and Levinas,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 28 (2002): 213–48.

4. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), 184. Hereafter cited as *ND*.

5. Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Verso, 1978), 59. Hereafter cited as *MM*.

in its infinite final moments, faces the difference between what could be and what is; feels the heavy burden of un-lived life; and mourns unfulfilled promises and desires, unrealized dreams and expectations. This inordinate pressure, channeled through the impression of a peculiar memory-trace, reinscribes and remembers the catastrophe and the loss. Remembrance retrospectively recognizes the catastrophe each time for the first time, each time too late to hold on to the life that left a trace not of itself but of its evaporation. From the standpoint of the afterlife, it is not the past's irreversibility that is bemoaned but the nonevent of life itself, of what vanished without appearing in the first place. The bare fact of the materiality of a bare body—its “being-there”—fails to yield any consolation, where all “movements of health resemble the reflex-movements of beings whose hearts have stopped beating” (*MM*, 59) and where even the convulsions of the death throes are more lively than the Pyrrhic victory of the exuberant “health.” Adornian suffering does not stand in a metonymic relation to unhappiness, yet the ineffable melancholy sadness of depression alone can be trusted if we are to keep a sense of truth, a sense, that is, of the real unrealization of life.

Suffering lingers. And with it lingers whatever remains of the subject who experiences the object's mass with every pore of its decomposing body. Two more images of suffering are discernible in this lingering: Homer's narrative of the hanging of the prostitutes and Kafka's photographic account of the medieval head-down hanging of the Jews. Neither fully in themselves, nor fully outside themselves, suspended between heaven and earth at the limits of life and death, the suffering victims inhabit a frozen but decisive moment bereft of any (psychic, dialectical, temporal) synthesis or closure. It is as if their remains were subjected to the interminable grinding between two rigid surfaces and two temporalities—the forever-no-longer of life and the always-not-yet of death. The “unutterable eternal agony of a few seconds in which the women struggle with death” and the “endless hours of their [the Jews'] dying” testify to the impossibility either of soberly articulating the unutterable or of repressing the horrible spectacle.⁶ Both Homer and Kafka linger with and preserve the trace of the frozen moment and mind the ethical limitations of its expression: the former by cutting short his coldly distant narration (*DE*, 79) and the latter by “photographing the earth's surface” upside down, “just as it must have appeared to these victims.”⁷

6. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1972), 80 (hereafter cited as *DE*); Theodor W. Adorno, “Notes on Kafka,” in *Can One Live after Auschwitz?* 236.

7. Adorno, “Notes on Kafka,” 236.

Suffering lingers, but, in spite of everything, it must be expressed. The idiom “to express suffering” requires a literal interpretation, according to which, ex-expression (*Aus-druck*, pressing out) pushes the pressure of suffering out of the subject. The model of such outward movement is schematically outlined in *Negative Dialectics*, where the “more” of nonidentity is centrifugally “pushed out” of the “what is” of identity (161). The clandestine pressure of ex-expression immanently applied against the pressure of suffering does not merely work to alleviate the subject’s anguish coupled with the unswerving demand for self-preservation; it also unravels the strange nonidentity of the world’s trace and shadow residing in the subject’s core. With the surfacing of the alien-constitutive core of the subject, its objectivity comes forward, exposing at the same time the objective character of its suffering borne as a share of the common social product (*MM*, 52). Therefore ex-expression necessarily entails estrangement, first, of the subject’s nonsubjective core and, second, of that which is instrumental in its incubation and suppression. No “individual” expression can be maintained at the strictly individual level, for above all it re(pro)jects the shadow of the world, sheltering the total social product of suffering.

Lifting the burden of suffering, if only temporarily, expression affords the subject a glimpse of its freedom: “Freedom follows the subject’s urge to express itself” (*ND*, 17). By expressing itself, the subject frees itself from itself and from the captured and reduced object concealed behind every unfulfilled need (*ND*, 92). Taken to the extreme, expressive absolution inaugurates one’s ecstatic existence outside oneself, the existence no longer encumbered by suffering under the objective weight of the world. This is not, however, the notion of freedom Adorno evokes. The ecstatically absolved expression will live on a repressed memory of suffering and, therefore, will passively sanction the promulgation of horror. The subject’s euphoric, irresponsible, and hence unethical self-abandonment that may follow the expulsion of suffering echoes the contradiction of freedom: “The collapse of individuality that helpless and disintegrated individuals confirm, approve, and do once again to themselves.”⁸

Regardless of its particular content, expression leaves a negative photographic imprint of the pressure of suffering. As Adorno puts it, “All expression is the trace left by suffering.”⁹ There are four corollaries to Adorno’s statement. First, expression, which is a second-rate derivative of suffering, retains the memory of its origin. In other words, the ecstatic movement (the ex-print)

8. Theodor W. Adorno, “The Aging of the New Music,” in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert, trans. Susan H. Gillespie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 198–99.

9. Theodor W. Adorno, “Heine the Wound,” in *Can One Live after Auschwitz?* 208.

of expression never abolishes suffering in its entirety but represents its diluted form. Second, expression is a trace of the trace; the memory of suffering is not a pure origin but something that recalls vanished life. As such, expression resonates with writing and thrives in its medium. Third, in the aftermath of the first and second implications, expression's fight assumes a quixotic dimension, insofar as the knight is unavoidably late on the stage of the event; he enters the scene once suffering has already "left" and comforts himself with confronting shadows and ghosts. Fourth and generally, the "expression of suffering" is a tautology, because expression cannot express anything but suffering, whose trace it projects.

Although the last two corollaries may appear to be mutually exclusive, they are equally consistent with Adorno's statement, where the copula binds "expression" and "the trace left by suffering." The predicate is a determinate negation of suffering, vacillating on the verge of being and nonbeing. Expression is and is not suffering. It is the braid in which the object's pressure is entwined with the dream of its removal.

While it is hard to overestimate the significance of expression, the stakes are further heightened in an all-too-common scenario, where expression is internally compelled to betray, erase, abnegate itself and the trace of suffering it carries. But, turning to Heinrich Heine and (again) to Kafka, Adorno discovers two closely allied ways promising to minimize the prospects of betrayal. In Kafka, each "sentence is literal, and each signifies," as expression breaks off from itself.¹⁰ The irreconcilable semantic rupture copies or mimics the lingering of suffering and the eternal, dying moments of the hanging victims transposed onto the body of language. The combination of literalness and signification in a frozen allegory, signifying the impossibility of signification, invites and repels interpretation without occluding the "gap between words and the thing they conjure" (*ND*, 53). What the unbridgeable gap between the word and the thing thus commemorates and foreshadows is the suspended moment of the victims' infinite suffering that invests language with a new potency, breaching all linguistic and literary boundaries.

In Heine, the inadequacy of language grants the poet a chance "to say what he suffered," while the exaggerated deviation of any expression from what it aims to express outlines the trace of suffering with a greater vividness and intensity. "Failure, reversing itself, is transformed into success."¹¹ Damaged and literal expressions—the latter standing not far from the broken

10. Adorno, "Notes on Kafka," 212.

11. Adorno, "Heine the Wound," 208.

mirror of the former—awaken from the slumber of figurative, ornamental language and regain the consciousness of suffering they ought to articulate. But, in addition to expressing, they generate the suffering of their own in a constant struggle with scanty words and irreconcilable meanings. Like the rotting parts that constitute the suffering body of a sentient corpse, literal and damaged expressions are compressed into the decomposing corpse of language, the site of language's afterlife and the source of its heaviness, rendered to some degree commensurable with what it still claims to signify. Only a damaged expression can be faithful (but, at the same time, is never completely adequate) to the "damaged life" it yearns to express.

From the possibly tautological expression of suffering we seamlessly shift to the suffering *of* expression. Any expression that does not suffer, whether from the inconsistency and meagerness of its own form or from its failure to measure up to the "abundance of real suffering" that "tolerates no forgetting," is bound to efface itself and to capitulate before the unbearable task of relieving the subject's burden.¹² The conflation of the signifier and the signified will only exacerbate the fundamental divorcement of the two. In its rush to remove the weight of the world from the tired core of the suffering subject, a hurried expression takes a shortcut or boards an express train of blind optimism; it grows weightless and immaterial in comparison with what it must ex-press. Its fateful destination, its terminal station, is its tacit invalidation by the suffering that exceeds it in breadth, depth, and gravity. The fading trace and the distant echo of the disaster will be quickly extinguished and forgotten in the perverse reaction-formation of happiness, unless expression *borrow*s the gravity of suffering and lingers almost passively at the limits of its capacity, depressively abutting its elusive target. This is precisely what Alban Berg alludes to when he evaluates "the bars in which he expresses situations of fruitless waiting" as the most important part of his work.¹³

By now it should be evident that significant portions of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* can be read as a cataloged inventory of expressions oblivious to their limitations or else intending to harness these limitations for the purposes of domination. In discussing ecstatic and forgetful expressions, I have already touched on at least two of the entries derived from this catalog. Ecstatic expression flourishes in the secret euphoric desire of enlightenment,

12. Theodor W. Adorno, "Commitment," in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York: Continuum, 1982), 312.

13. Theodor W. Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 143. Hereafter cited as *MCP*.

driving “an attempt of the self to survive itself,” to lose itself in an anticipation of its subsequent self-recovery (*DE*, 33). But, unlike the rapture of the subject longing for the unconditional and absolute freedom from itself, Odysseus’s cunning transcendentalism yields to expression on the condition that it will impress and reaffirm, at any price, the unquestionable priority of self-preservation, perpetuating both the self and its suffering. Forgetful expression, on the other hand, is personified in the lotus-eaters and their more recent incarnations, whose hope for “better circumstances” is based “on the lack of respect for all that is so deeply rooted in the general suffering” (*DE*, 225). In this instance, the successful self-abandonment of the subject, the apotheosis of absolute ex-pression, represses the memory of suffering and abdicates its most important, ethico-historical responsibility to “rehabilitate” the victims of the past. It is as two sides of the same counterfeit coin that forgetful and deceptively ecstatic expressions betray and erase the trace of suffering.

The list will not be complete without other kinds of repressive expressions entangled in the webs of the bourgeois division of labor, the frustration and dissatisfaction of needs, and the administered universe. What we may call “the administered expression” does not lift the suffering of mass culture’s consumers “but records and plans it” (*DE*, 151). “Frustrated expression” follows the allocation of the administered product to the dissatisfied subjects, whose dissatisfaction increases when the commodity they desire is consumed (*DE*, 139). The aporetic bourgeois self-expression amounts to a passive contemplative reflection (*DE*, 32), in which the sublimation and refinement of suffering reach their crest with the expressive taboo on expression. The common strand running through the different variations of these mutilated expressions (and there is an immense difference between mutilated and damaged expressions) is the reversion into their exact opposite. Instead of excising the pressure of suffering, they impress it on the subject with renewed strength; instead of pushing outward the qualitative “more” of nonidentity, they convert it into the quantitative “more of what is” of identity; and instead of exposing the subject’s objective core, they promote its further subjectivization under the sign of reification.

As soon as the last expression of suffering drowns in the sea of mutilated expressions, suffering without reprieve saturates everything in its path. With the absurdist expression of not-knowing, marking “a point where meaning and nonmeaning become identical,”¹⁴ the trace of vanished life is permanently etched, as the impression of presence, on “what is.” The distinction between

14. Theodor W. Adorno, “Art and the Arts,” in *Can One Live after Auschwitz?* 385.

justifiable and unjustifiable suffering dissipates along with the difference between meaning and nonmeaning. Onto-theo-teleological interpretations of suffering that presumably furthers the ends of progress (the suffering taken as a sign of the progression of progress, for—so the teleologic goes—if *there is* suffering, progress *must be* on its way) crumble in the dead end of absurdist expression.

Henceforth suffering leaves no more traces of itself, because it flatly refuses to leave. Were it to leave traces, suffering would already signal a relaxation of its relentless grip that realizes, to an unprecedented extent, the pernicious philosophical dream of total and undisturbed *ousia*. But neither does this inexorable presence confer an aura of obviousness on what is present. On the contrary, in the aftermath of its barred trace and expression, even the least recognition of suffering requires an intensified effort of distancing and meditation aiming at the nearest and the most immediate. Without such an effort, no critique of ideological constructions and apparatuses is feasible.

Brushing all precautions aside and surpassing the milestones of damaged and literal expressions, absurdist not-knowing draws especially close to the chaotic content of formless expression. Insofar as it merges (through a “pathological” renunciation of functional signification) with the incomprehensible tragedy of agonized existence, absurdist expression both mimetically falls back on and grows or rots out of the reduction of the living man to a body and, ultimately, a sentient corpse. The unidentifiable corpse rejects all relations of identification and embodies resistance to the aberrations of sympathy, compassion, and the “narcissistic distortions of pity” (*DE*, 103), the unidentifiable corpse rejects all relations of identification. By-products of the guilty consciousness are replaced with the “natural connection between the living [that] has now become organic garbage.”¹⁵

The community of suffering linked by this “natural connection” transcends the human species and the liberal fiction of the social contract. While it may appear that this notion of community ineluctably absorbs the residue of conservative organicism and socialist solidarity of the oppressed, it is, in effect, much narrower than the former and much broader than the latter. Everything that figures as a substratum on which the pressure of suffering is exerted, everything that leads to an afterlife of a sentient corpse, everything that has been discarded but is still used and abused qua discarded participates in this community. What is the place of “softness” and “tenderness,” which, according to Drucilla Cornell’s interpretation of Adorno, are the sen-

15. Adorno, “Trying to Understand ‘Endgame,’” 286.

timents provoked by the “grasp of our existence as the suffering physical” in such a community?¹⁶ Does not a certain hardening, rather, precipitate the sort of solidarity unaccounted for in the empathetic, well-meaning, liberal approaches to the oppressed? For, here, the “sufferings of men” (but not only of men) are paradoxically shared in a mode of “inviolable isolation” (*MM*, 26), which is to say, in a mode removed from the law of exchange. Standing in the chasm of the agony of the last expression and the expression of the last agony, the community of suffering comes together in coming apart and comes apart in coming together. In the words of a poet: “A net snared a net: / embracing we sever.”¹⁷

Art: Images of Suffering

There is something profoundly disturbing about artistic attempts to turn suffering into images. Precisely when the artistic images lend a voice to suffering, they also “wound our shame before the victims” (“Commitment,” 312). They recall us—the survivors privileged enough to lead an afterlife, to live through and beyond vanished life—to our sense of guilt before the victims and, at one and the same time, “wound” this very sense by provoking a patently cruel celebration of our privilege, drowning the ethical in the aesthetic. The memory of horror tempts its distant and proximate witnesses to rejoice quietly in the fact that the catastrophe has passed them over. Perhaps we are touched (literally, figuratively, or both) by what we bear witness to, but not without a tacit expectation that as long as “something” remains, we can go on living, rebuilding, making whole again (*MCP*, 111). The disturbing moment is one in which the expression of suffering in art is conceived as *nothing more than* an urgent appeal to the spectators, for whom any shame they may experience will instantaneously dissolve in the elation that undercuts it. When the suffering that presses on its victims is expressed for the sake of the survivors, the artistic endeavor commits a subtle injustice that puts it on the side of the disaster’s perpetrators.

Enveloped in the images of art, the unburied dead are no longer naked; meaning-making machines are busy preparing clothes for the corpses. Covered with the shreds of afterlife that define the contours of their privilege, the survivors are no longer naked; future-making machines are busy preparing clothes for them. An opaque double screen of meaning and life separates the

16. Drucilla Cornell, “The Ethical Message of Negative Dialectics,” in *American Continental Philosophy: A Reader*, ed. Walter Brogan and James Risser (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 169.

17. Paul Celan, “Promise of Distance,” in *Selected Poems and Prose*, ed. and trans. John Felstiner (New York: Norton, 2001), 24.

victims from the survivors. Wounded shame, the shame that wounds itself and becomes shameless as it enters the artistic image, banishes the unutterable nakedness of meaningless suffering. We are careful and decent enough neither to touch nor to be touched without our gloves and our clothes on, without the outer layer that hardens into a protective shield of style. But the unavoidable obliqueness of expression, wearing the mask of respect, is not the figure of innocence, either. The survivors' wounded shame is the catachresis of a healing wound. It is symptomatic of a desire to cover the victims' nakedness not in preparation for their vivisection, as Adorno says (*MCP*, 108), but in anticipation of their autopsy, of the second murder in which art is an accomplice. Thus, on the one hand, the curvature of shame triggers a sense of deference before the victims and, on the other, comes dangerously close to repeating their victimization styled as the image of suffering.

If artists are to harden "themselves against the chaotic expression of suffering," they must stylize their works (*DE*, 130), but in stylization the unthinkable appears "to have had some meaning; it is transfigured, something of its horror is removed" ("Commitment," 313). Following the adjuration of style, the artists will not allow themselves to be carried away by the powerful streams of suffering that overflow the boundaries of their work. Instead, they will abide by the levelheaded rules of engagement congealed in a hydraulic model of expression prescribing exactly how to regulate the levels of pressure through the dam of style, dammed-up style, stylized dam. But in stylization's willful blockage something is transfigured and lost or, better yet, transfigured *as* lost. This "something"—Adorno tells us—is an element of horror, its absolutely meaningless, infinite element that suddenly becomes meaningful and ready for an entombment within an image and, ultimately, for consumption ("commitment," 312). The artists' refusal to succumb to the chaotic expression of suffering produces the illusion that suffering succumbs to the stylized expression. Meanwhile, style conveys (more than anything else) its essential flaw, for the horror diminished in art rages with ample strength outside art. The dam of style is out of order. Whereas the banks and the embankments are flooded, the river runs dry.

Nonetheless, the orderly and organized enunciation of suffering is not the only function of style. It is equally the space of agon, in which the tension of content and form and the encounter of tradition and modernity unfold: "Only in this confrontation with tradition of which style is a record can art express suffering" (*DE*, 130–31). To approach tradition indirectly through the stylistic medium is to bring to memory a record, an imagistically written testimony, a historical register of art that failed to live up to its *raison d'être*,

of art that produced, in Fredric Jameson's words, "determinate 'failures'" by refusing to reconcile or to harmonize the universal and the particular.¹⁸ The memory encapsulated in style assumes the burden of actual—accumulated and unreleased—suffering and, in conjunction with damaged and literal expressions, fashions a formal counterweight to the content of expression. Situated in the crevices between suffering and its expression, the memory of style does not mediate between them but "presents humanity with the dream of its doom so that humanity may awaken, remain in control of itself, and survive."¹⁹

Tradition, in the Benjaminian and Adornian sense of the term, is irreducible to the monuments of past achievement to the extent that it keeps an eye on the index of failures and ruins underneath these monuments. Unless, through a tireless consultation with the record of tradition, art expresses the suffering of all the victims it has abandoned, forgotten, or maltreated, its continued existence cannot be justified. In Beethoven's late style, Adorno recognizes "the fragmentary ruins of convention" that depose creative subjectivity "touched by death." Relating to suffering out of the subject's own mortality and wandering deep into the memory of the ruins, Beethoven's last works of art implode form from within and attain the intensity of expressionless expression "so as to cast off the appearance of art."²⁰ In the same way, the determinate negation of tradition translated into the death of style and read, as mediately immediate, in belated modernity sheds the appearance of (past) presence, wholeness, and continuity.

The possibility of casting off the appearance of art always arises late and follows in the footsteps of powerful expressions that are closed to this possibility. But, in addition to the subjective explanation of this necessary sequence, early expression is tolerated objectively, precisely because the way out of its obliqueness and inflection must pass through a series of mediations if it is to arrive at something like the mediated immediacy of suffering. The materialist "ban on images" resurrecting, in the same breath, unimaginable flesh and a crucial theological principle (*ND*, 207) does not forbid the existence of art per se but negates its nonsubstantive component associated with the idealist spiritualization of suffering. In its dying moments, style internally destylizes itself, breaks the formal mirror of orderly expression, and liberates its content, which gushes out of the cracks of form.

18. Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno; or, The Persistence of the Dialectic* (New York: Verso, 1996), 164.

19. Adorno, "Art and the Arts," 385.

20. Theodor W. Adorno, "Beethoven's Late Style," in *Can One Live after Auschwitz?* 297.

In his essay “The Opera *Wozzeck*,” Adorno revisits the theme of expressionless expression, which “has its authentic application in the most powerful moments of the musical—where music attains *imageless presence*. All expressionless music that fails to attain imageless presence is nothing but the empty shell of something expressed that has remained absent.”²¹ The notion of “imageless presence” unmistakably supplements the materialist ban on images. What is new in this notion is the evocation of “presence” harking back to the relentless grip of suffering that refuses to leave traces and, refusing to leave, saturates everything on its path. Joining forces with damaged, literal, and absurdist expressions, “the most powerful moments of the musical” borrow the gravity of this grip. They supersede the “empty shell of something expressed that has remained absent,” that is, of something unable to pass through the dam of style that artistically diminishes the horror of the meaningless. But music’s “imageless presence” is not content with its correspondence to the presence of suffering; it proceeds to “pulverize substance into the tiniest particles” and to destroy the idea of coherence to such an extent that it “perceives totality itself as a transparent illusion.”²² Without surrendering to the temptation of the chaotic outpouring of suffering, the composer Berg nevertheless manages to defy its organized expression that secretly legitimizes that which is to be expressed. If Berg exposes totality as a transparent illusion, then it becomes quite clear that the logical (and, of course, the social) inner connections that form this totality are fallible and contradictory and that the attainment of the imageless presence in music does not blindly reproduce the *ousia* of suffering in art.

From the ruins of convention emerges modernity, broadly understood, as the late style of the survivors’ afterlives—the style that draws its last energy from the exhausted-inexhaustible trace of vanished life. “You must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go” are the last words of Beckett’s subject bequeathed from the abyss of the unnameable to the latecomers who, as sentient corpses, live and outlive destruction.²³ Art’s posthumous modern existence is inseparable from this impossible possibility and from the survivor’s eye opening onto the dust of tradition that, without settling, fills the air of history. Strangely enough, clarity of vision, if there is such a thing, is predicated on the maelstrom of debris occluding the stare of the Benjaminian angel of history and the gaze of the artistic subjectivity touched by death.

21. Theodor W. Adorno, “The Opera *Wozzeck*,” in *Essays on Music*, 620; emphasis added.

22. Adorno, “The Opera *Wozzeck*,” 621.

23. Samuel Beckett, *Three Novels: Malloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (New York: Grove, 1958), 414.

But the (stylized) end of style is not always honorable. At the other end of the end, culture industry eradicates style in the unbearably suffocating rigidity of expression and the unconditional elimination of refractory materials and forms (*DE*, 129). Under the auspices of the culture industry, the artist's self-hardening against the chaotic outpouring of suffering is extended to the absolute impenetrability of forms that subsume content without leaving a remainder. This abrupt termination of art's posthumous existence transcribes the image of suffering into a purely ideological ornament devoid of substance.²⁴ To be sure, for a long time the ideological side of art has haunted its substantive side that literally "stands under" (*sub-stans*) the weight of suffering. It is the hallmark of administered culture, however, to drastically desubstantialize its products with a sleight of hand that passes the suffocating rigidity of expression for its boundless flexibility. Here, the "expressionless expression" both imprisoned in and forgetful of style casts off the appearance of art so as to facilitate its commodification and blend into the background of the prevailing suffering and mediocrity.

Adorno detects further signs of art's demise in the interpenetration and, eventually, the fusion of various arts and genres.²⁵ Whereas the unity of art supplies a transcendental vision of reconciliation, the fragmentation of various arts and their "discontinuous relation" to one another reflect antagonistic empirical reality. A premature synthesis established with the dissolution of forms disengages from the persistent empirical fragmentation of social reality and fails to "become substance."²⁶ But, with regard to the total, all-permeating character of suffering, the "premature synthesis" need not entail a catastrophic spiritualization and erosion of art. This uninterrupted unity may be construed as another attempt (analogous to the effectuation of imageless presence in expressionless music) to find an expressive equivalent to the social product of suffering. Far from reconciling antagonistic reality in fantasy, art, like subjectivity, remains the trace and the shadow of the world from which it withdraws. The absurdity of art without the arts is the absurdity of meaningless, ever-present suffering without a break.

Philosophy: Signs of Suffering

Whether—in and through thought—Adorno reaches below, behind, or beyond thought and conceptuality, he invariably finds the demand and, perhaps, the means for an "objective expression of suffering" (*ND*, 17–18). Surprisingly,

24. Adorno, "Aging of the New Music," 191.

25. Adorno, "Art and the Arts," 382.

26. *Ibid.*, 383.

at the height of objectivity, the philosopher does not only transcribe suffering into a sign but also *becomes* the sign of suffering. Giving some clues to this transubstantiation, Adorno writes in his lectures on metaphysics: “It is the question whether one can *live* after Auschwitz. This question has appeared to me, for example, in the recurring dreams that plague me, in which I have the feeling that I am no longer really alive, but am just an emanation of a wish of some victim of Auschwitz” (*MCP*, 111). This ostensibly miraculous, quasi-mimetic transformation is an inversion of the traditional theometafysics where the world either unfolds as an inner process in the divine mind or follows the design of an evil spirit (*MCP*, 138). The survivor does not recall the victim but is summoned and recalled (we may add, “cited”) by the victim, by the future anterior of one who does not have a future. Removed from a retrospective, nostalgic yet paralyzed glance of Lot’s wife, remembrance assumes a prospective dimension, in which the survivor bears witness to the apparition of life that seemed to have disappeared without a trace. Prospective remembrance does not resurrect the victim but awakens the survivor, who recognizes, for the first time, the nightmare of the victim’s past.²⁷

Subjects who feel that they are “just an emanation of a wish of some victim” embody a passage for what came to pass and, in their own materiality, exude the traces of vanished life. Partaking of both life and death, of the wished for as well as of the wisher, Adorno forms an ex-pressive constellation with the victim and brings philosophy back to its senses in the place of the carrion whose stench of putrefaction is unavoidable (*MCP*, 117). More than a dream: this is the moment of awakening that holds on to the dream. The survivor’s feeling meets the victim’s wish in the finite, nocturnal space defined by Adorno’s cranial bones. Neither a cold tomb for the dead nor a nurturing womb that encloses and comforts the unborn, neither a mourning hymn nor a lullaby, thought is what allows the victim to lead an afterlife above and beyond a life cut short by injustice, to redress this injustice along with the suffering it produces, and, in some way, to reverse the irreversible. Where two surfaces and two temporalities of the forever-no-longer of life and the always-not-yet of death intersect, thought expressively empties the thinker into the figure of the infinite metaphysical passage and into the sign of lingering suffering. Yet, despite this emptiness, the possibility of ecstatic, evasive self-abandonment is closed to a thinker who, in and as himself, already constitutes the wish of the other.

27. This way of reasoning follows Benjamin’s reflections on the “now of recognizability” in “Convolute N” of *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 463–64.

The constellation of the survivor and the victim, of the particular present and the particular past, attains “in thinking what was necessarily excised from thinking” (*ND*, 162) and from empirical reality alike. Calling on a distinctly Benjaminian notion, it cites the past that, through the expression of suffering, comes to be for the first time only in the survivor’s present. While in the unfinished *Arcades Project* Benjamin interprets citation as a passage,²⁸ in his essay on the epic theater it is described as an interruption: a monadological entity is thrust out of its familiar context and reindexed in a new frame of reference.²⁹ On the one hand, citation is excitation and rupture, for it is in the form of unrest that the somatic element makes knowledge move (*ND*, 203). This reading finds its etymological corroboration in the Latin *cit re*. On the other hand, citation is continuation and complementation, for “the determinate flaw in every concept makes it necessary to cite others” (*ND*, 53). Synthetically, the constellation of the victim-survivor’s afterlife is a ruptured continuation of what has been detached from the context of finality and inserted into a new index of signification. Beyond all solipsism, it respects the “inviolable isolation” of the suffering subject and forges a connection between the absolute solitudes. Expression issuing from a constellation both breaks with and carries along the suffering it expresses for the sake of the victims.

But besides the unique constellation of the victim and the survivor, truth itself is anchored in a constellation of particulars bound by the ties of suffering: “One might almost say that truth . . . depends on the tempo, the patience and perseverance of lingering with the particular” (*MM*, 77). Although here Adorno does not explicitly name suffering, its connotations and undertones pierce every one of the carefully chosen words whose resonance is amplified threefold. In “patience,” “perseverance,” and “lingering” the thinker resists the urge to dissolve the particular in the general. Rather, as a guarantor of this resistance, the thinker enters the constellation and suffers *with* the particular *in* truth. Refusing to reproduce the idealist absorption of the object into the subject and the positivist displacement of the subject by the object, the thinker of the constellation contemplates the object “without violence” and situates himself in a “distanced nearness” from/to the object (*MM*, 89–90). The interval of

28. Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 837. If there is no difference between the citation and the passage, then it is tempting to conclude that *The Arcades Project* (*Das Passagenwerk*) could have comprised loosely tied citations even in its finished form. It would then form an index of passages extracted from their “familiar” context and slotted, as a constellation, into a new mediate immediacy of Benjamin’s text.

29. Walter Benjamin, “What Is Epic Theater?” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1973), 151.

proximity that is never proximate enough, of proximity whose infinite diminution (*diminuendo*) increases the “tempo” of truth to the point of a fast but faint whisper that requires a patient, micrological interpretation—this interval accords the particular its dignity and prevents thought from making amends with the reality of suffering and injustice. The deferral of reconciliation in a constellation fends off the artistic illusions inherent in style and the semantacist allergy to rhetorical expression (*ND*, 55).

Conversely, if philosophy is “unable to linger,” if it grants a “tacit assent to the primacy of the general over the particular” (*MM*, 74), then distanced nearness is all but erased, while *diminuendo* falls into absolute silence and the tempo of truth comes to a grinding halt. For a subject unable to linger with the particular, nothing is strange—and everything is strange—because the signifier of generality has conquered everything. Citation no longer excites but tranquilizes and entrances with its repetitive tune. And, in Benjamin’s terms, voluntary memory usurps the place of involuntary memory as it annihilates experience in an insomniac, albeit futile, struggle against forgetting. After the destruction of the constellation and the erasure of the signs of suffering from thought, the particular is treated as a transitory passage toward the general, of which it is a partial example fit for classification.

When cognition operates strictly in accordance with the categories and rules of classification, “the gap between us and the others [is] the same as the time between our own present and past suffering; an insurmountable barrier” (*DE*, 230). As such, classificatory cognition owes its existence to “the process of oblivion” and, more precisely, to the repression of our own past suffering and of the suffering (past or present) of others. Were it not repressed, the latter kind of suffering would have had the potential to summon us and to place on us the ethical obligation to respond to the conditions that perpetuate it. But, needless to say, the analgesic effects of classificatory cognition preclude the thinker’s metaphysical transformation into a sign of suffering, as well as any sense or awareness of the real unrealized of life. The subject subjected to the weight of suffering without feeling it, and therefore without feeling the urge to ex-press this weight, is the bourgeois subject situated in the arid space of the civil society, unbound from others and even from itself in the “semblance of its absolute being for itself” (*ND*, 146). Temporally, its deathlike life is experienced either in terms of a linear ruptureless continuity or as a series of ruptures that unconsciously (mythologically) repeat the past. The gap between the subject’s past and present suffering is “an insurmountable barrier” because it is a fissure between two nonsensations, two—neither conscious nor unconscious—impressions without expression and, therefore,

without memory. The gap between the subject and its others is equally insurmountable, because classificatory cognition decapitates itself (*ND*, 403) and, barring transcendence, prevents the subject from recalling and from being recalled or summoned by the suffering of others. Thus the anesthetization of the physical moment in cognition is a short-term palliative and a long-term poison for subjective experience and for cognition itself.

Indeed, following J. M. Bernstein's reading of Adorno, it is plausible to argue that, with the forgetting of suffering, experience itself, understood as the "arena of what we learn through 'suffering' . . . in its root sense of undergone, endured, passed through," is irretrievably lost.³⁰ On the same page Bernstein concludes that this loss is an outcome of the cultural devaluation of dependence and passivity. Nonetheless, much more is at issue than this initial devaluation may intimate. In the end, numbing itself to the suffering of others, the subject loses the sense of "passive activity," of passing through that passes over to the other, of what a moment ago I referred to in terms of "recalling and . . . being recalled or summoned by the suffering of others." This double passage combines memory and ethics—the memory of ethics and ethical memory—in the desire to express or to lift the suffering that weighs on others, thereby surmounting what, from the standpoint of classificatory cognition, appears as the "insurmountable barrier."

The oblivious subject suffers from a malady lacking any apparent, recognizable symptoms insofar as it is integrated into "the mechanism of domination" that "forbid[s] recognition of the suffering it produces" (*MM*, 63). In other words, while the mechanism of domination secretes the kind of all-permeating and undifferentiated suffering that is, for the most part, unrecognizable, the ideology of analgesics veiling this mechanism ensures that the suffering admitted to consciousness would be misrecognized. Althusserian "symptomatic reading" that reads the absences in the text is ineffective where suffering is relentlessly present, where both its underlying causes and its symptoms are distorted and hidden and where the subject has learned, as the title of Slavoj Žižek's book suggests, to "enjoy" its symptom, filling every absence with buzzing nonsense.³¹ Both the signifier and the signified are more obscure than ever, and it is this obscurity that necessitates a dialectical

30. J. M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 114.

31. Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: NLB, 1977), 28; Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

interpretation of “every image as writing” (*DE*, 24). In the vernacular of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, if we are to read the symptoms of suffering, these symptoms would, first, have to be wrested from myth and from the semblance of being that conceals the history of its becoming. Despite the destruction of aura in the age of mechanical reproduction, artistic representation still breathes the atmosphere of myth and retains the kernel of creation *ex nihilo*, of the iconographic, self-generated being without becoming. This is why compliance with the ban on images in philosophy is crucial for the continued existence of the latter: “A philosophy that tried to imitate art, that would turn itself into a work of art, would be expunging itself” (*ND*, 15).

The task of reestablishing the “distanced nearness” of the constellation is not trifling, but here I can allude only briefly to some of its numerous tributaries. It seems to me that on the completion of the “linguistic turn” philosophy must rechannel some of its energy away from the text and toward the context, or (to put it positively) toward the *way* in which the context incompletely passes into the text and leaves a negative photographic imprint on the textual corpus. To be sure, this redefinition of the philosophical project calls not for another “naturalization” of the text but for the recovery of its elliptical, referential, nonidentical edifice whose outlines emerge, for instance, in Adorno’s “Subject and Object.”³² That part of the context that does not enter the text, that is still absent from it or is yet to be cited, initiates the indispensable detour through nonsignification to signification. Elliptically undermining the curse of all-permeating presence, the unstable border separating the context from the text reassembles the constellation, which, in itself, is already signification: “The history locked in the object can only be delivered by knowledge mindful of the historic positional value of the object *in its relation to other objects*” (*ND*, 163; emphasis added). In its relation to other objects, each object figures as a sign, whose interiority (or “the possibility of internal immersion”) requires externality (*ND*, 163). The spark of the recognition of suffering is no longer reserved for the physician concerned with its occluded symptoms and causes, but for the metaphysician who scans the precise site where the subjective substratum meets the oppressive weight of the object and where the forever-no-longer of life touches the always-not-yet of death. This suspended, lingering moment both accentuates and interrupts the immediacy of the context. It signifies by resorting to citation, to the ruptured continuation and continued rupture (wound) of the text removed from its “original” context and

32. Theodor W. Adorno, “Subject and Object,” in *Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, 498.

indexed in the medium of a different constellation. Citation echoes the imageless presence of music, in that it also expresses mediated immediacy of suffering without blindly reproducing its iron grip in thought. In citation's rejoinder to music's imageless presence, the images and the signs of suffering form the economy of expression that resists the hypostatization of "each of the two isolated principles" and the ensuing "destruction of truth" (*DE*, 18).

Conclusion: In the Memory of Suffering

A persistent, though obscured, motif welds together Adorno's fragmentary observations on the subject of suffering—the motif of memory. From the retrospective and inevitably belated recognition of the disaster forming "world history," to the register of failure recorded in style, to the psychic impression that retains and simultaneously releases the trace of "vanished life," memory comes to mediate both suffering and its expression. The crucial role of memory furnishes another reminder about the lack of immediate access to suffering, to experience, to the shifting edge of the subjective substratum that bears the weight of the object. At best, one can hope for something like "mediate immediacy" that occasionally and unpredictably irrupts through artistic and philosophical practices, pointing toward the exteriority that they will never accommodate.

Besides precluding the immediate access to suffering, memory partakes of and, to some extent, enables the ethical relation. To recall the suffering of others is to feel the gravity of the silent and, therefore, all the more grave calls emanating from the past, from the victims of injustice who could not express the suffering they had to bear. This recollection, this recall, is already the first response addressed to the silent source of the call. Does it follow that memory stands, unequivocally, for responsiveness and responsibility? Not quite. Because of the silence that commands the source, our recall risks usurping (almost ecstatically) the seemingly vacant place of the call and, by merely voicing it, tacitly asserts the privilege of living survivors. Any attempt to surmount the barrier that separates the past from the present and one's own suffering from that of the others threatens intrinsically to transform responsibility into irresponsibility, and expression into ecstatic absolution.

It is in this context that we ought to understand Adorno's questions whether one can *live* or write poetry after Auschwitz. Such questions are certainly not framed in terms choosing to "embrace" life or to commit suicide, to write poetry or to renounce artistic practice altogether. Rather, they mark the sites where, on the unbearable contact with the memory of suffering, life

and poetry recoil to the regions of afterlife and after-poetry. The survivors plagued by this memory and its disquietude neither live nor die but linger on the frontier between past and present, between suffering and its expression, between self and other, between ethical recalls and unethical responses. A *merely* living subject is impossible especially after Auschwitz; even utter oblivion to the suffering of others is achieved at the cost of repression that “deadens” augmenting the loss of vanished life. Life as such is lived as a testimony to the loss of life, in the memory of suffering.