

FEMINIST INTERPRETATIONS OF THEODOR ADORNO

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“No Happiness Without Fetishism”

Minima Moralia as Ars Amandi

Eva Geulen

Theodor Adorno's greatest success is a book on failure, in which he famously decreed that “there is no right life in the wrong one.”¹ Numerous formulations play on *Minima Moralia*'s pervasive theme of inevitable failure. “There is no way out of entanglement” (27), for example, although perhaps less familiar, is certainly no less clear. However, *Minima Moralia* is also Adorno's most intimate book. The dictate “no way out” discloses a negative freedom in its own right; the categorical impossibility of any “right life” brings to the surface those mundane details of daily life that usually fall below the threshold of philosophical, or even literary, dignity. In the light of world historical injustice, Adorno seems to be able to

afford a worldliness that is missing in most of his other writings.² As with any good *vade mecum*, among the entries of *Minima Moralia* readers may hope to find something appropriate for any occasion. But Adorno's concern with individual experience also increases the level of exposure; nowhere else is he more vulnerable to critique and ridicule.

On the pain and glory of love, *Minima Moralia* proves to be a particularly rich, and particularly embarrassing, source.³ The somewhat dated slogan, according to which "the private is the political," can hardly legitimize prolonged indulgence in Adorno's rather ubiquitous romantic musings. Nevertheless (and, perhaps, even therefore) it is likely that many a line from *Minima Moralia* has found its way into lovers' discourse. A proposition such as "You are being loved only where you may show yourself weak without provoking strength" (192) strikes just the right balance between banality and profundity that is required of such tokens of love. In contradistinction to those few readers who are acutely in love, the majority of lucid professionals have long since unmasked Adorno's notoriously romanticizing speculations and banned them accordingly. Albrecht Wellmer, for example, stigmatized what he termed Adorno's "somatic" tendencies as remnants of dubious theologisms that ought to be surrendered.⁴ Most recently, Clemens Porschlegel heaped ridicule on the entry titled "Constanze," which portrays the loving couple as a dormant revolutionary cell: "Perhaps the secret of success of the young republic's best-selling author is nowhere more graspable than in his sentimental lines on love . . . 19th century through and through."⁵ Indeed. Not much can be said in defense of Adorno's anachronistic sentimentality. Moreover, he so unabashedly assumes the point of view of a male heterosexual that this perspective tends to cloud even his once poignant insights into the dialectics of the women's movement, the pitfalls of the so-called sexual revolution, and other potentially redeeming features of his thoughts on love in particular and gender relations in general.⁶

Yet the reasonable suggestion to forego further examination of the "somatic" underpinnings of Adorno's thought runs the risk of castrating the entire oeuvre. For none of Adorno's theorems—neither those pertaining to art and aesthetic experience or to history and social relations, nor those addressing problems of literary or musical expression—can be sustained at all if their roots in erotic desire are severed, "because even thought's remotest objectifications are nourished by the drives" (122). Nietzsche's claim that "the degree and kind of a man's sexuality extends to the highest pinnacle of his spirit" figured among Adorno's deepest

convictions (122). In particular, his scant, strained references to utopia tend to be modeled on sexual fulfillment: "Only he who could situate utopia in blind somatic pleasure, which, satisfying the ultimate intention, is intentionless, has a stable and valid idea of truth" (61). The very idea of happiness, Adorno suggests, is "sexual union" as "blissful tension" (217). Similarly, his most succinct formula for the specific quality of aesthetic experience unequivocally recalls the peculiarities of "la petite mort": "If anywhere, then in this respect, aesthetic experience resembles sexual experience, in particular its culmination. As the beloved image transforms itself, as petrification is united with the most vivacious, it is as if culmination were the incarnation of the original idea of aesthetic experience."⁷ The succession of mutually canceling terms in this sentence—"as if" (*gleichsam*) but "incarnate" (*leibhaft*), yet inaccessible and unverifiable as a platonic idea (*Urbild*) at the same time—underwrite Adorno's determined refusal to let anyone decide whether this "culmination" should be understood literally or figuratively. In fact, the momentary equilibrium of opposites is precisely at issue here. Adorno's description of the successful artwork as a fleeting instance of *Einstand*, or "balance," between utmost tension and complete relaxation also borrows its evidence from the same phenomenon. (But it is worth pointing out that on Adorno's view, an orgasm is not privy to the pleasure he likens to aesthetic experience. It belongs to the onlooker, who observes the rare coincidence of tension with its opposite. Even ecstasy requires distance: "Contemplation without violence, the source of all the joy of truth, presupposes that he who contemplates does not absorb the object into himself: a distanced nearness" [89–90].)

The point of these and countless other examples is not that Adorno's theoretical constructions are, in the final instance, reducible to sexual desire or sexual fulfillment, respectively.⁸ Equally crude would be an interpretation that casts sexual pleasure as the last bastion of resistance within the "totally administered world." Yet dismissing Adorno's persistent allusions as mere flourishes on hard-core theory obviously sells short what is overrated in the other scenario. And mapping Adorno's obstinate references onto a grand theory of desire (Lacanian, for example) clearly misses the point as well. The problem is that the sphere of sexuality has been so greatly expanded as to become an enveloping presence; it has become so diffuse as to saturate virtually everything. Sexuality's impotent omnipotence in *Minima Moralia* is intriguing enough to tempt one to experiment with a more systematic reconstruction of its theoretical significance.

Recourse to Freudian psychoanalysis proves to be of limited help in this endeavor—for Adorno himself drew the line that separates his work from psychological interpretation. Where Freud hovers, hesitating, on the border, Adorno plants himself firmly on “this side of the pleasure principle,” not because Freud underrated rationality, but “rather because he rejects the end, remote from meaning, pervious to reason, which alone could prove the means, reason, to be reasonable: pleasure [*Lust*]” (61). Since occasional references to Nietzsche cannot adequately explain the idiosyncratic privilege *Minima Moralia* accords to sexual experience, it seems heuristically sound to assume that in matters of love and sex Adorno went his own way.⁹ From this follows the method: to pursue Adorno’s obsessions with comparable determination. Rather than exhaustively cataloging all references to sexuality—and who is to say what qualifies in this respect?—one should understand that eclecticism is key. One best proceeds as if Adorno had left us with a fully developed theory of love. Against the backdrop of that hypothetical premise it becomes possible to measure the familiar against the unfamiliar. One must isolate those instances in which Adorno’s claims in matters of love extend beyond, run up against, or even clash with the accustomed theoretical paradigms of his thought: Nietzschean, Freudian, Marxian.¹⁰

Mimetic Desire

“Love is the power to see similarity in the dissimilar” (191). Not surprisingly, love in Adorno tends to appear in the context of mimesis, one of the thorniest theorems in his aesthetic theory, a quasi-anthropological constant in all his reflections, and, above all, a site of great ambivalence. For, on the one hand, mimesis belongs to an archaic level of experience that reason and abstraction have long overcome—at least this is how the story of mimesis is told in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where the Jewish imposition of the taboo on images thwarts the regressive tendencies of mimetic impulses.¹¹ On the other hand, all that has been lost, was abandoned, or remains, for either historical or structural reasons, inaccessible, exerts irresistible attraction over Adorno’s intellectual imagination. This latter aspect helps to account for the fact that a passage in *Minima Moralia* joins mimetic heritage and love in the name of humanity: “The human is indissolubly linked with imitation: a human being only be-

comes human at all by imitating other human beings. In such behaviour, the primal form of love, the priests of authenticity scent traces of utopia which could shake the structure of domination" (154). Adorno is ostensibly concerned here with the fate of the concept of authenticity; the chastised "priests of authenticity" include Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, Heidegger, and anyone else smacking of the existentialism Adorno abhorred, and which he treated in the *Jargon of Authenticity*. In the preceding passage, mimesis functions as antithetical corrective to claiming authenticity for one's self and one's identity. Mimetic remainders remind those who speak in the name of the self that no relationship to the self can ever be authentic. Even childhood, Adorno suggests, already teaches us about the inauthenticity of all attempts at self-relation: "They always contain an element of imitation, play, wanting to be different" (153). As a relationship between at least two, love supposedly articulates the dialectical truth of the one: an individual or subject is not itself but other than itself, and it is not available to itself except through the other whom it imitates. Any self always owes itself to an other. But only in love is this truth acknowledged. While strictly dialectical, this logic is by no means Hegelian in any straightforward sense.¹²

On account of the subject's dependency on the beloved other, love attains the status of a model. For the experience of the self in love has some bearing on the relationship between society and individual. Vis-à-vis society, individuals conceive of themselves in ways analogous to those in which the existentialist conceptions of the self are formulated. They also imagine themselves as originary biological units opposed to and separated from the social totality—Adorno argues, however, that society is in fact prior, and "not only is the self entwined with society, it owes [*verdankt*] it its existence in the most literal sense. All its content comes from society, or at any rate from its relation to the object. It grows richer the more freely it develops and reflects this relation, while it is limited, impoverished and reduced by separation and hardening that it lays claim to as an origin" (154). As the imitation of an other, love can serve as a model for what the relationship between self and society should be in Adorno's eyes. Rather than claiming distance from the other, love revels in imitation. The individual thus no longer claims a self but gains itself as another by mimetically laying claim to the other, by claiming the other in the act of imitation. If individuals could achieve that same affirmative relation with society, if they could mimetically emulate the mimesis operative in love, then—so runs the quasi-platonic logic of Adorno's argu-

ment—the political and moral pitfalls of the discourse of authenticity could be avoided and the presumed antagonism between self and society would turn into something like a love affair. His argument hinges on one essential premise: imitation somehow redeems the other as well as self, and it even redeems the banned practice of mimesis.¹³ Following Adorno's seductive suggestions on this point would yield the conclusion that love relationships are a role model for how individuals should relate to the social whole—and this in turn would entail the rather absurd and justly ridiculed concession that as role models, loving couples harbor revolutionary potential.

Yet it is precisely up to mimesis to mediate and mitigate such claims. Given that the mimesis presumably at work in love is itself still in need of being mimetically emulated, significant differences separate loving another person from loving society. To begin with, lovers are (at least) two, but society is one—because the many that make up society appear here only as the totality of society; and a totality is neither human nor easily imitated. Therefore, it can only be a question of imitating the *type of relation to mimesis* that Adorno attributes to lovers. This relation to mimesis alone can become the subject of mimetic practice.¹⁴ Lovers are in the unusual position to freely assert, even revel in, mimetic bonding, but such freedom is by definition lacking in the relationship between self and the social, where the individual is unwillingly and unknowingly mirroring the social whole. There is nothing particularly humane in this second type of mimesis. It would have to be substituted by imitating the type of mimetic behavior presumably familiar to lovers. Its strong humanistic overtones notwithstanding, Adorno's concept of mimesis proves to be more complicated even where it plays the relatively unambiguous role of a corrective to the discourse of authenticity. The unity of the concept of mimesis is jeopardized by the fact that imitating an other is not the same as imitating a relationship to imitation.

The *Urgeschichte* of Pleasure

The reign of ambivalence over the concept of mimesis manifests itself in other respects. Adorno's allusion to childhood experiments in self-reflexivity—"they always contain an element of imitation, play, wanting to be different" (153)—suggests an idealist trajectory in the tradition of

Schiller's dictum that man is human only where he plays. However, at other points in *Minima Moralia* the purportedly humane features of mimesis reveal rather violent underpinnings. Those passages suggest that the loving mimetic impulse is already a secondary formation, responding to the structurally and historically earlier experience of the encounter with a "recalcitrant object" (109). At this juncture, the positively accentuated concept of mimesis borders on Adorno's understanding of narcissism—that other highly problematic and fundamentally ambivalent theorem, which frequently figures as both a parallel and a competing model to mimesis.¹⁵ As such, it emerges in, among other places, section 72, titled "Second Harvest," in which Adorno denies the psychoanalytic idea of sublimated sexual drives and argues instead for the primacy of another affect: "Talent is perhaps nothing other than successfully sublimated rage, the capacity to convert energies once intensified beyond measure to destroy recalcitrant objects into the concentration of patient observation, so keeping as tight a hold on the secret of things, as one had earlier when finding no peace until the quavering voice had been wrenched from the mutilated toy" (109). For those unfamiliar with this scenario from their own childhood, Gottfried Keller has described it emblematically in the opening pages of one of his novellas, where he depicts two children mutilating a doll. In this kind of "primal scene," the relationship to the object is not yet mimetic but is ruled by destructive curiosity. Before mimesis can even enter as a human and humane, civilized and civilizing practice that foregoes destruction in favor of imitation, "aggression" (109) reigns supreme. Adorno's quasi-Nietzschean question at the end of that passage leaves no doubt about the origins of mimesis in destruction: "Might not everything conciliatory been bullied out of that which destroys?" (109). Anger and aggression are thus prior; and mimetic behavior already constitutes a step toward liberation, because it is a freer, "sublimated" relationship to the object, just as contemplation is the concentrated sublimation of the archaic cult of the fetish (see 224). In the final instance, which is to say in the beginning, it is "violence, on which civilization is based" (163). If Adorno knows a primary desire, it is not love or sex but rage.

Whatever one might think of Adorno's quasi-anthropological theorizations, the latent fiction of a quasi-Hobbesian state of unrestrained destructive impulses in *Minima Moralia* serves a very specific purpose: it allows for the historicization of seemingly primary affects, in particular the affect of pleasure (*Lust*). Along with mimesis, pleasure is "a late ac-

quisition, scarcely older than consciousness. Observing how compulsively, as if spell-bound, animals couple, one recognizes the saying that 'bliss' [*Wollust*] was given to the worm as a piece of idealistic lying, at least as regards the females, who undergo love in unfreedom, as objects of violence" (90). Pleasure, *Lust*, is mediated, deflected, and foregone violence, just as mimesis is mediated and deflected destruction.¹⁶ The gendering according to which men rape their "recalcitrant objects" and to which victimized women suffer from "archaic frigidity, the female animal's fear of copulation, which brings her nothing but pain" (90), is certainly stereotypical, but at the very least, neither (male) aggression nor (female) fear have their equal share in primordial violence. Fear of the object corresponds to the impulse to destroy the object: "[i]s not indeed the simplest perception shaped by fear of the thing perceived?" (122). And, impervious to the difference, Adorno adds, "or by desire for it?" (122). Even the mere perception of an object is ruled by impulses that defy the distinction between fear and desire, just as the distinction between destruction and desire must remain obscure because they co-originate in the very same dialectic of losing oneself to gain oneself that is operative in mimesis: "The capacity for fear and for happiness are the same, the unrestricted openness to experience amounting to self-abandonment in which the vanquished rediscovers himself" (200).¹⁷

What disrupts the tendency of all differences to dissolve in the murky *Urgeschichte* of pleasure as a constitutively "mixed feeling" is nothing other than social deformation, sometimes apostrophized as "pathological narcissism." It intervenes regularly to guard against any unreflected identification with the powers of pleasure. Almost sternly, Adorno reminds his readers that in this world nobody is actually capable of losing him- or herself. "The yearning into unformed joy, into the pool of salamanders and storks" (178) remains just that, desire without satisfaction: "[t]he experience of pleasure presupposes a limitless readiness to throw oneself away, which is as much beyond women in their fear as men in their arrogance. Not merely the objective possibility but also the subjective capacity for happiness, can only be achieved in freedom" (91). So much for pleasure; it is delayed, withheld, and postponed until some impossible utopian state: "Pleasure in this world is none" (175). But *Minima Moralia*'s imperative of failure is sufficiently reliable to ensure that abstinence and asceticism are no alternative either. "The transience of pleasure, the mainstay of asceticism, attests that except in the *minutes heureuses*, when the lover's forgotten life shines forth from the knees of the beloved, there

is, as yet, no pleasure at all" (176). The sentence significantly modifies the categorical impossibility of pleasure. From the "mainstay of asceticism" Adorno wrests a notion that allows him to reinstate the very prerogative of pleasure he had just negated. What saves pleasure is ultimately not that it is not (yet) "pleasure," but that *Lust* does not last.

Love and Death

Why (and how) could pleasure's transience underwrite its antiascetic affirmation? Initially, a pseudotheological logic seems at work. It suggests that pleasure's fleetingness holds out the promise of a type of pleasure that would never end. If that were so, the transient experience of love would function as the placeholder for infinity or, as Adorno would have it, transience would allegorically prefigure "reconciliation" or utopia. By the same token, but in stark contrast to the tradition of ennobling carnal love by imbuing it with transcendental significance, one could also argue that pleasure's transience alone sustains the life of pleasure. Pleasure's transience would then not stand in for something else but would signify an emphasis on finitude pure and simple. Since there is insufficient evidence to rule out one interpretive possibility in favor of the other, the question needs to be left open at this point.

But this indicates a good juncture at which to introduce two additional systemic features of Adorno's thoughts on love and desire that might help to further contextualize the issue. One of those dimensions—the power of fantasy—is well known beyond the limits of the present topic and recognized as a significant theorem in Adorno in general.¹⁸ The other, much less acknowledged, trait of his intellectual universe is an obsession with death and mortality, whose intensity rivals that of sexual experience in the widest sense.¹⁹

If "love is the ability to perceive similarities in the dissimilar," then in the extreme, love would be the ability to perceive similarities where there are none whatsoever. (A case in point is the ability of the lover to recognize his forgotten life in the reflection of a pair of knees.) Indeed, the very absence of any defining traits and marks of individuality can incite love, according to Adorno. Where there is nothing to imitate, fantasy steps in and makes plenty out of nothing. In a passage strongly indebted to the Romantic phantasma of heartless female beauty, Adorno writes:

"Imagination is inflamed by women who lack, precisely, imagination. . . . Their attraction stems from their lack of awareness of themselves, indeed of a self at all: Oscar Wilde coined the name unenigmatic Sphinxes for them" (169). While *Minima Moralia* contains many peculiar and, for a female reader, frequently irritating and occasionally enraging propositions about women, this remark deviates so little from the well-known stereotypes of female beauty that one might be inclined to write it off as just that: the unreflected reproduction of a stereotype.²⁰ However, Adorno immediately launches into a self-corrective maneuver by adding that such perception of women "does no justice to their needy empirical existence" (169). His proof comes by way of a novella by Theodor Storm in which the young Friesian boy's infatuation with the poor Bavarian girl from the traveling players is ignited not only by her relative exoticism, but also, and above all, by her poverty. Adorno comments: "Imagination gives offence to poverty. For shabbiness has charm only for the onlooker" (170). But in the same breath he asserts, conversely: "And yet imagination needs poverty, to which it does violence: the happiness it pursues is inscribed in the features of suffering" (170). While this is somewhat enigmatic, the remaining lines suggest that Adorno seeks to critically expose what he terms the "cycle of bourgeois longing for naïveté," the logic organizing the cultural fascination with exotic phenomena such as the North's stereotypes about the South or the bourgeoisie's investment in nomadic cultures. But under the cover, as it were, of this well-meaning enlightenment and critique, Adorno doggedly pursues his initial point about the erotic fascination with beauty that lacks a soul. The closing paragraph returns full circle to the beginning: "Love falls for the soulless as a cipher of living spirit, because the living are the theatre of its desperate desire to save, which can exercise itself only on the lost: soul dawns on love only in its absence. So the expression called human is precisely that of the eyes close to those of the animal, the creaturely ones, remote from the reflection of the self. At the last, soul itself is the longing of the soulless for redemption" (170). Love's attraction to the soulless reveals the lover as akin to Walter Benjamin's allegorist, who entertains a similar relationship to the dead objects of his learned fascination. In both, the soulless and lifeless advance to a cipher of something other than itself. No doubt, for Adorno, love attends to and tends toward not just the creaturely but, eventually, also the nonliving. And one should pause before subsuming the sex appeal of the dead under the Platonic-Christian dogma that love begets life. For it is dubious whether awakening the dead

to life is the point of Adorno's remark. His disdain for the cult of life is as deep-seated as his fascination with death.

Like Benjamin (in his 1921 essay "Critique of Violence"), Adorno voiced strong suspicions about the dogma of the sanctity of life. In a passage criticizing in no uncertain terms the vitalist tradition of philosophy, Adorno calls upon beauty to halt the course of life. Beauty "arrests life and therefore its decay" (77). The impression that beauty thus renders the transitoriness permanent is misleading: life needs to be arrested not because of its transience but because of its destructive furor. Life is violence: "[t]o hate destructiveness one must hate life as well" (78). The subsequent sentence elevates death to the utopian image of a nondestructive life: "[O]nly death is an image of undistorted life" (78). At issue here is not the religious doctrine that mortality guarantees eternal life, nor is it a matter of rendering fleeting life permanent. For Adorno, death (and beauty, which is akin to it) amounts to nothing less than a recovery from the sickness that is life. Adorno's inversion of Kierkegaard becomes explicit in the title of another entry: "The Health unto Death" (58). The same technique of symmetrical inversion makes it possible to expose "healthy" individuals as walking corpses: "[u]nderlying the prevalent health is death" (59). The Kürnberger motto of *Minima Moralia*'s "Life does not live" (19) points in the same direction. But Adorno's erotic interest in death is not exhausted by its dialectical constellation with the cult of life.

Adorno's reading of one of the most famous fairy tales tells a somewhat different story. Lovingly, he lingers on the image of Snow White in the glass coffin. "For deeper knowledge cannot believe that she was awakened who lies as if asleep in the glass coffin" (121). The poisoned apple lodged in her throat is not a "means of murder" but, rather, "the rest of her un-lived, banished life, from which only now she truly recovers, since she is lured by no more false messengers" (121). Only death grants recovery from the sickness of life. Moreover, Snow White's death also restores and recovers "her un-lived, banished life." This "un-lived life" is not eternal life but the life not lived because living one life excludes other possibilities and other, potential lives. Life, any life, is destructive above all because it produces, at every moment, countless other possibilities of life, all of which are sacrificed to the one lived life.²¹ In death, when no life whatsoever is possible any longer, a sort of justice has been done to the possible lives that were not lived at the expense of the lived life. For now this lived life has also become what the other lives were from the begin-

ning: nothing but a past possibility. The past as it was lived and the past possibilities that were not lived now share the same plane. This is Adorno's version of the affinity between pleasure and death. Incidentally, it also answers the question of why the lover can recognize his "forgotten life in the knees" of the beloved. The experience and the observation of pleasure afford the unique spectacle of death in life. Adorno has a very specific reason to privilege this phenomenon: in this experience the sequential order of time has been dissolved, the mutual exclusion between the facticity of lived life and the unlived possibilities it produces, only to abandon them, momentarily disappears.

In the particular case of "Snow White," the unlived life is not an abstract possibility but a very specific life that remained quite literally unlived: that of the Queen, who had been "wishing for her daughter, after the lifelessly living beauty of the flakes, the black mourning of the window-frame, the stab of bleeding; and then dying in childbirth" (121). The actual love between the reawakened Snow White and the Prince fails to redeem that original loss: "The happy end takes away nothing from this" (121). Like the Prince in the fairy tale, who fell in love with the beauty behind glass and only accidentally dislodged the apple when lifting the coffin lid, Adorno's own theorizations of love are, in the final instance, inspired by the eroticism of that which no longer lives. As a memento mori, the transience of pleasure is, then, not the placeholder for a life that would have escaped mortality, but a form of fidelity to the transitoriness of life. According to Adorno, the "minutes heureuses" of self-abandonment momentarily restore unlived possibilities.

1-800-Flowers

Flowers must be among the oldest symbols of love. The gendered symbolic value of breaking flowers, familiar from medieval poetry down to Goethe, still resonates in the term *defloration*. If one believes Adorno, a certain usage of the flower metaphor betrays the truth of female castration: "The woman who feels herself a wound when she bleeds knows more about herself than the one who imagines herself a flower because that suits her husband" (95).

But plucking flowers for the purpose of adorning the beloved was origi-

nally a different matter altogether: decoration, sacrifice, and reconciliation all at once. "Now that we can no longer pluck flowers to adorn our beloved—a sacrifice that adoration for the one atones by freely taking on itself the wrong it does all others—picking flowers has become something evil" (112). The logic of this passage is complicated and ambivalent. Who exactly is being sacrificed? The flower or the beloved? Given the intricate symbolic potential of flowers, probably both. Plucking flowers (rather than lovers) is a deflected substitute; primary violence has been displaced from a person to the adorning flower. However, as in any sacrifice, it not only deflects but also recalls and reenacts the original violence. This is why even this harmless sacrifice is in need of reconciliation or atonement. According to Adorno, this is achieved by acknowledging the injustice done to all those other possible relations by the adoration of this person and none other. Once again, the un-lived, possible relationships, the un-lived, possible lives, demand a justice that no court, human or otherwise, can extend, as Adorno's reflections on the betrayed or refused lover show. It is an "inalienable and unindictable human right to be loved by the beloved" (164) but no court can enforce this right because what the lover "desires can only be given freely" (164). In a distinctly theological vein, Adorno concludes that "the secret of justice in love is the annulment of all rights to which love mutely points" (165). In the passage on flowers, reconciliation consists quasi-Christologically in assuming guilt incurred by loving someone particular. While this might all seem dangerously close to a theology of love—although one may wonder whether there is any sustained reflection on love that would not be theological in some way—Adorno makes abundantly clear that plucking flowers will no longer do. "It serves only to perpetuate the transient by fixing it" (112). Despite the stern rejections, Adorno leaves one option open: "But someone in rapture who sends flowers will reach instinctively for the ones that look mortal" (112). Immortal memories turn into memories of mortality. The section titled "All the Little Flowers" makes explicit this very nontheological emphasis on transience for transience's sake. "The pronouncement, probably by Jean Paul, that memories are the only possessions which no-one can take from us, belongs in the storehouse of impotently sentimental consolation that the subject, resignedly withdrawing into inwardness, would like to be the very fulfillment he has given up" (166).

“Post Festum”

Adorno banned his final word on the matter of love and lust from the book proper. Whereas the official version of *Minima Moralia* concludes with the entry “Towards the End,” the appendix contains a section aptly titled “Post Festum.” Its subject is the inevitable decline of erotic relationships. Feared loss of love is not the only reason for the accompanying melancholy. Another factor at play is “fear of the transience of one’s own feeling.”²² It is not hard to guess that the entire section amounts to the clearest possible rejection of passion’s redemptive value—not because it does not last, not because this world knows no true passion, but because Adorno enters love unambiguously under the rubric of the “guilty cycle of all creaturely [*schuldhaften Kreis des Natürlichen*],” which has no way out. The only available option is “reflection on the closure [*Geschlossenheit*] of this cycle.” This is the end of Adorno’s love affair with love. It is as if he had sobered up, relinquished all quasi-theological passions, and dutifully subjugated his occasional excesses under the law of reflection. To be sure, the insight that every passion is relative in the big picture of reflection and hindsight is still considered “blasphemous,” but Adorno adds: “Und doch ist der Passion selber es unausweichlich, in der Erfahrung der unabdingbaren Grenze zwischen zwei Menschen auf eben jenes Moment zu reflektieren und damit im gleichen Augenblick, da man von ihr überwältigt wird, die Nichtigkeit der Überwältigung einzusehen” (293). The power of passion, it turns out, is no power at all, or, better, it is a power that is *nichtig*. And this very knowledge dawns on the lovers already in the very moment of rapture. Like everything else, passion is doomed to fail.

Adorno had good reason to exclude this “post festum”; it reverses his other speculations on love in *Minima Moralia*. Their implicit theoretical significance has been severely restricted. Post festum, Adorno seems to take it all back. However, he holds on to the failure of love with the same exclusionary, blind passion as that of a lover clinging to the beloved. The fireworks of pleasure and passion might be over. But then, as Jean Paul knew, the point of fireworks never was to illuminate the night, but to use it.

Notes

1. Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from a Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1985), 3. All quotations in the present chapter are from this work; page numbers are cited parenthetically in the text. Occasionally, the translation has been slightly modified.

2. The pieces written for television and radio are an exception in this regard. See Theodor W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). Yet, compared with *Minima Moralia*'s rich materials, even these works seem spare and ascetic.

3. On the topic of embarrassment and shame in *Minima Moralia*, see E. G., "Mega Melancholia: Adorno's *Minima Moralia*," in *Critical Theory: Current State and Future Prospects*, ed. Peter Uwe Hohendahl and Jaimey Fisher (New York: Berghahn Books, 2001), 49–68.

4. Albrecht Wellmer, "Wahrheit, Schein, Versöhnung: Adornos ästhetische Rettung der Modernität," in *Zur Dialektik von Moderne und Postmoderne: Vernunftkritik nach Adorno* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1985), 9–47.

5. Andreas Bernhard and Ulrich Raulff, eds., *Minima Moralia neu gelesen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003), 99.

6. The matter might look slightly different from a U.S. perspective, in that Adorno's reception skipped the formative political phase; in the United States, the very features disdained in Germany found a warm welcome in the 1990s. One of the few works offering a sustained engagement with problems on love is Tom Pepper's "Guilt by (Un)Free Association": Adorno on Romance et al., in *Modern Language Notes* 109 (1994): 913–37. For an important discussion of homosexuality in *Minima Moralia*, see Andrew Hewitt, "A Feminine Dialectic of Enlightenment? Horkheimer and Adorno Revisited," *New German Critique* 56 (Spring–Summer 1992): 143–70.

7. Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann et al. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1997), 263, translation my own.

8. In accordance with the logic of failure, fulfillment remains subordinate to longing. The fleeting experience actually seems primarily destined to renew longing. In that sense Adorno desires desire.

9. The biographical accuracy of this statement was amply underscored by the revelations that marked the recent centennial. They are obviously besides the point here.

10. In other words, Adorno's exaggerations on this point are not to be neutralized but, rather, engaged and exaggerated in turn. On the role of exaggeration in philosophy and in Adorno in particular, see Alexander García Düttmann, *Philosophie der Übertreibung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2004).

11. See Anson Rabinbach's lucid analysis in "Why Were the Jews Sacrificed? The Place of Anti-Semitism in the 'Dialectic of Enlightenment,'" *New German Critique* 81 (Fall 200): 49–64.

12. Hegel, for one, had little sympathy for love's universal aspirations. In his eyes, all love stories are misguided from the start in their sad attempt to stake the claim of universality on the contingency of "this woman" or "that man." Adorno's insistence on the powers of love is, to some extent, understandable as a compensatory posture assumed in defiance of Hegel's presumed negligence of the individual at the expense of the universal. Among those likely to take issue with this admittedly rather crude differentiation between Hegel and Adorno on love is Judith Butler. Already in her first book, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), she was able to locate in Hegel a mechanism of desire. This reading was substantially refined in the chapter on the master/slave dialectic and its aftermath in her more recent book *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), esp. 31–62.

13. The redemptive potential of mimesis is best illustrated by an anecdote. When taking leave from a party in Hollywood, Adorno found himself shaking the hand of a guest who had no hand but a prosthesis instead. Charlie Chaplin had observed the incident from nearby and immediately proceeded to imitate Adorno's gesture of horrified recoiling. The comical imitation, Adorno comments, released him (and presumably the guest with the prosthesis as well), from the shock of their encounter. The story is told in the volume *Vierzig Jahre Flaschenpost*.

14. It is tempting to argue that Adorno's thoughts are prototypical for what has been called

"performativity" in the wake of Judith Butler's reflections. But since this particular concept has become so ubiquitous as to have lost much of its meaning, sober asceticism recommends itself.

15. This is why the typological distinction between "good" and "bad" narcissism does not hold. See Deborah Cook, *The Culture Industry Revised: Theodor W. Adorno on Mass Culture* (London: Rowman and Littlefield), 1996.

16. The logic organizing such transitions is the dialectic of sacrifice, together with mimesis and narcissism the concluding pillar of the theoretical edifice on which the narrative of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* rests. In *Minima Moralia*, love is also called the "after-image" or "re-enactment" (*Nachbild*) of the sacrificial ritual (217).

17. The shadow of pleasure's violent *Urgeschichte* looms large enough to extend to other forms of pleasure as well, among them aesthetic production and experience. In *Minima Moralia* Adorno calls every artwork a "coerced malfeasance" [*eine abgedungene Untat*] (111). The expression is characteristically ambivalent, for *Untat* is the deed not done, but the prefix also connotes a particularly gruesome deed.

18. For a pertinent discussion of fantasy in Adorno, see Britta Scholze, *Kunst als Kritik: Adornos Weg aus der Dialektik* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2000).

19. One writer who has acknowledged this trait is Christoph Menke, who in *Die Souveränität der Kunst: Ästhetische Erfahrung nach Adorno und Derrida* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1988) remarks on Adorno's death-bound existentialism (214).

20. On representations of the feminine, see Maggie O'Neill, ed. *Adorno, Culture, and Feminism* (London: Sage, 1999).

21. That this is not an existentialist conviction is evident from Adorno's detailed discussion of the relationship between linear time and property relations in the entry titled "Morality and Temporal Sequence" (78ff.).

22. The appendix is not translated into English. All quotations in this section are from the German edition. *Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben* in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann et al. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003). All references are to page 293 of that edition; translations my own.