

# Childhood experience and the image of utopia

## The broken promise of Adorno's Proustian sublimations

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At least since Aristotle, various conceptions of culture have valorized its pacifying role as an outlet for dangerous impulses and tensions. Sigmund Freud belongs to this culture-as-catharsis tradition, and accordingly radical intellectuals and artists have often been uneasy with his concept of sublimation, nervous lest their work be reduced to the drives channelled into it, and worried that the domestication of explosive impulses renders art conformist. For this reason, Joel Whitebook suggests, 'Adorno is led to reject the notion of sublimation.'<sup>1</sup> Certainly, Adorno does not mince his words: 'Artists do not sublimate.... Rather, artists display violent instincts, free-floating and yet colliding with reality, marked by neurosis.'<sup>2</sup> As in the later *Aesthetic Theory*,<sup>3</sup> Adorno prefers here the concept of expression to that of sublimation. But Whitebook casts Adorno's rejection of the concept of sublimation as polemic, for Adorno still uses it, providing an eloquent aphoristic version: 'Every work of art is an uncommitted crime.'<sup>4</sup> Perhaps every work of Adorno's is an unthrown Molotov cocktail, for he tries to turn righteous anger into the thought of what it would take to escape it: 'Whoever thinks is without anger in all criticism: thinking sublimates anger. Because the thinking person does not have to inflict anger on himself, he furthermore has no desire to inflict it upon others.'<sup>5</sup>

So, Adorno does sublimate, channelling the painful emotion which is the mark of genuine psychological openness in the direction of socially critical thought. Looking for something to blame instead of the victim, Adorno turns Freud's critique of the neurotic self into a critique of society. Adorno's rather caricatured early image of a repressive Freud has it that psychoanalysis champions a pseudo-rational logic of

adjustment, amounting to an uncritical internalization of the reality which insists that the infant must only enjoy that which is socially sanctioned. Children must progressively give up earlier forms of happiness and pleasure, which demand everything in an unsustainable blurring of the boundaries between subject and object, infant and adult, and male and female. Polymorphous pleasure gives way to reality, and, broken, we must learn to love it. Any remnants are disparaged as a perverse wrong turn, and the dashing of the promise of a more universal happiness is dressed up as normal maturation. Gratification is not only deferred and altered, it is distorted and denied, for under advanced capitalism aim-inhibition becomes total, and 'the diner must be satisfied with the menu'.<sup>6</sup>

Psychoanalysis reduces pleasure to a mere trick of the species deployed for its own reproduction, allowing the adjustment of the client to enjoy whatever is deemed compatible with the reproduction of a given society. The adjustment orientation of conformist psychoanalysis is supposedly dedicated to producing '[t]he regular guy' and 'the popular girl',<sup>7</sup> who purge their socially provoked tensions with sport, weepies and a healthy sex life.<sup>8</sup> Adorno instead puritanically insists that

a cathartic method with a standard other than successful adaptation and economic success would have to aim at bringing people to a consciousness of unhappiness both general and – inseparable from it – personal, and at depriving them of the illusory gratifications by which the abominable order keeps a second hold on life inside them, as if it did not already have them firmly enough in its power from outside.<sup>9</sup>

Adorno's concern with these repressed, negative erotics of existence is a distinctive feature of his work. He even goes so far as to allow fleetingly a positive extrapolation from them, hinting that something about pleasure could transcend its 'subservience to nature',<sup>10</sup> which, in a reality replete with a socially sedimented second nature, is always in fact subservience to society: 'He alone who could situate utopia in blind somatic pleasure, which, satisfying the ultimate intention, is intentionless, has a stable and valid idea of truth.'<sup>11</sup> This materialistic theory of truth consciously sublimates yearnings unknowingly repressed in the austere forms of philosophy which seek to purify thought from its infantile and somatic roots. The derivation of theoretical impulses from infantile demands for total satisfaction does not have to be a wholly regressive phenomenon. The perverse search for a pleasure beyond that currently available could be a source of resistance to existing society: 'Whatever qualities at present genuinely anticipate a more human existence are always simultaneously, in the eyes of the existing order, damaged rather than harmonious things.'<sup>12</sup>

Although the pull is there, Adorno's condemnation of socially functional gratifications should not therefore lead to the *direct* celebration of more subterranean yearnings, for 'what slips through the net is filtered by the net'.<sup>13</sup> Adorno's exaggerated critique of psycho-technics tries to avoid the celebration of a perverse resistance to cultural norms as a true other to repressive reason: 'In adjusting to the mad whole the cured patient becomes really sick – which is not to imply that the uncured are any healthier.'<sup>14</sup> Normality may be awful, but perversity and neurosis are not in themselves the promised land. All three are distorted adult organizations of repressed infantile material. Adorno resists the course of championing the flowers of evil which may spring from the adult persistence of infantile impulse: 'So much is true in psycho-analysis that the ontology of Baudelairean modernity, like all those that followed it, answers the description of infantile partial-instincts.'<sup>15</sup> Baudelaire tries to capture the potential energy of these drives, and is crucial in the history of modernism, but his addiction to the 'intoxication'<sup>16</sup> produced by his violent images bears witness to the danger of attempting a direct appropriation of the seemingly unsocialized force of dark sexual impulses.<sup>17</sup>

### Regression, perversion and utopia

In Herbert Marcuse's terms: de-repression is not the good negation of bad sublimation.<sup>18</sup> Like Mar-

cuse's, Adorno's immanent critique of psychoanalysis refines Freud's shaky division between repression and sublimation. According to Freud's remarks on the topic, repression problematically dams up uncivilized impulses, leading to their return in the form of symptoms, whereas sublimation supposedly puts those impulses into the service of civilization through their aim-inhibited discharge in art and science. Adorno has it that Freud merely 'vacillates, devoid of theory and swaying with prejudice, between negating the renunciation of instinct as repression contrary to reality, and applauding it as sublimation beneficial to culture'.<sup>19</sup>

Adorno theorizes the two concepts in a manner befitting our sexually saturated age, discussing the different attitudes towards sexuality of autonomous art, which sublimates, and of the culture industry, which represses: 'Works of art are ascetic and unashamed; the culture industry is pornographic and prudish.'<sup>20</sup> Direct representations of sexuality usually defuse the deeper meanings of desire, and reflection on Marcel Proust's restrained yet explicit account of the dark decay of love leads Adorno to conclude that 'de-inhibited sex is itself de-sexualized'.<sup>21</sup>

Against both normative prescriptions for a healthy sex life (or the sublimated aesthetic equivalent in pleasantly sensual art) and their naked reversal (unreflectively Satanic modernism), Adorno suggests that Proust's literary sublimation does not ameliorate our childish desire for something other to the social norm; it actually heightens the pain of renunciation, without forgoing it.<sup>22</sup> Proust's expressive power both endorses a Freudian interest in the uncanny echoes of infantile desires which can decentre adult consciousness, and acts as a critique of Freud's reification of the childhood experiences he so doggedly uncovered.

Freud's neglect of vital nuances of experience emerges whenever he betrays his respect for the particularities of the different modalities of childhood perception, which he overeagerly converts into a normative developmental theory. The hasty condemnation of vestiges of infancy as either regressions or perversions sometimes works against Freud's goal of using those vestiges to criticize adult repressions. Theoretically conserving the alien character of early experiences of pleasure and disappointment through nonconformist sublimation is therefore an important project for Adorno.

Rather than becoming a substitute gratification, such sublimation reminds the ego what it has lost in gaining itself. This concern is crucial in Adorno's critical theory. Grown-ups promise children that the painful sacrifices demanded by socialization will be

redeemed by their initiation into the mysteries of adulthood; mysteries they long to share, but which seldom yield the hoped-for satisfaction. We do not understand when we grow up. The failures of maturity, glimpsed by Adorno in the childlike content of Proust's regressive utopias,<sup>23</sup> are one concern of aesthetic comportment.

This painful individual ontogenesis recapitulates the phylogenetic experience of Enlightenment. The enlightened control of instinct promises a reconciled life of reason which it has yet to deliver. For Adorno, 'Freud's unenlightened enlightenment plays into the hands of bourgeois disillusion',<sup>24</sup> capitulating to the present. Disappointment forces instinctual longing deep underground, institutionalizing its rejection as unconscious irrationality. Adorno's theory seeks enlightenment, but speaks for this disparaged unconscious, not just against it, showing its scars to be a product of the social constraint of consciousness. Freud's supposedly primal id is actually the form inner nature takes when distorted by the action of social contradictions; Adorno takes it as both a symptom and a promise of something else. C. Fred Alford explains: 'The not easily satisfied libido becomes, in a sense, the locus of the promise of critical theory itself, the promise of happiness.'<sup>25</sup> The danger of this formulation, as Alford suggests, is that the isolation of the libido becomes the only guardian of its critical capacity. Its invocation is therefore utopian in the pejorative sense. But conformist sublimation is worse. It levels out the disruptive power of instinct by forcing its capitulation to existing cultural norms. Adorno's expressive radicalization of the concept of sublimation therefore has to include much that the traditional one rejects, refusing the task of ameliorating renunciation, without simply abandoning the psychoanalytic critique of the id.

One problem is that sublimation is normally unconscious, a screen for the discontent which drives it. Any *conscious* sublimation, for example, any artistic or theoretical expression, will therefore be disturbing, changing it from a brake to a spur. Although the ego is meant to be the agent of conscious rationality, adaptation to the reality principle involves submission to irrational social conditions, and the ego has to deploy unconscious defences, such as sublimation, to square the circle.<sup>26</sup> The strict division of id and ego is only a result of the reality which forces the use of the defences. If adaptation to reality really was a rational route to satisfying the needs of the id, the unconscious defences would not be needed. Under unimaginably transformed conditions, a sublation of the division could yield a psychic order in which differing impulses could grant each other independence

rather than fighting wars of colonization. Mental health would then be a psychological togetherness through diversity, rather than a hierarchical system with the ego dominating the id.

Freud does fleetingly concede the theoretical possibility of such a utopia, and is closer to Adorno's position than Adorno allows. According to Freud, the ego is, after all, an outgrowth of the id, an attempt to achieve the id's wishes through a realistic grasp of the world outside it.<sup>27</sup> Freud is well aware that defence mechanisms may become pathogenic processes, protecting the psyche from irrational demands which force the defences to imprison the ego they are trying to defend. Freud recognizes the problems of rigid egoism, stating that 'there is no natural opposition between ego and id; they belong together, and under healthy conditions cannot in practice be distinguished from each other.'<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, Freud's work makes it clear enough that this unity is currently only an unobtainable ideal. For reasons varying from family secrets to a client's class position, psychoanalysis may have little chance of achieving even its modest aim of converting neurotic misery into everyday unhappiness.<sup>29</sup> In other words, 'healthy conditions' do not exist, and psychoanalysis exposes the repressive impact of this lack on children. Freud even provides a forthright condemnation of class exploitation, and essentially concurs with Marx's predictions of revolution: 'It goes without saying that a civilization which leaves so large a number of its participants unsatisfied and drives them into revolt neither has nor deserves the prospect of a lasting existence.'<sup>30</sup>

Adorno, however, actually attacks Freud just at the point at which historically and materially determined revolt is invoked. Freud, like Marx, recommends looking reality in the eye and shrugging off the drug-like phantasies of religion. He thinks men have little to gain from imagining 'wide acres in the moon, whose harvest no one has ever yet seen', and that if they concentrated on this life,

they will probably succeed in achieving a state of things in which life will become tolerable for everyone and civilization no longer oppressive to anyone. Then, with one of our fellow-unbelievers [Heine], they will be able to say without regret: 'We leave Heaven to the angels and the sparrows.'<sup>31</sup>

For all its atheism, Adorno's heterodox Marxism does not want to give up on heaven<sup>32</sup> or the imagination so easily, and he detects in this passage an allegedly authoritarian antipathy towards pleasure and nonconformity which contaminates psychoanalysis (and, one could add, puritanical currents within Marxism). If



one is going to generate speculative ideals, that is, then utopia should surely be more than tolerable. Otherwise, even the revolutionary imagination finds itself duplicating the standards of this world.<sup>33</sup> Because psychoanalysis shows how the intense needs of childhood are transmuted into utopian conceptions of fulfilment and heaven, distorted remnants of hope, we find Adorno defending certain elements of both hedonism and theology against Freud's ideal of the pragmatically well-adjusted individual:

The place in the *Future of an Illusion* where, with the worthless wisdom of a hard-boiled old gentleman, [Freud] quotes the commercial-traveller's dictum about leaving heaven to the angels and the sparrows, should be set beside the passage in the *Lectures* where he damns in pious horror the perverse practises of pleasure-loving society. Those who feel equal revulsion for pleasure and paradise are indeed best suited to serve as objects: the empty, mechanized quality observable in so many who have undergone successful analysis is to be entered to the account not only of their illness but also of their cure, which dislocates what it liberates.<sup>34</sup>

As Adorno suggests, one can certainly find a condemnation of perversion in the introductory lectures, where Freud talks of 'these crazy, eccentric and horrible things'<sup>35</sup> and provides his perhaps nervous audience with expressions of his own strictly scientific interest in these matters. He also maintains a clearly normative attitude, with firm ideas about the importance of a mature genital sexuality.

But, in the same lectures, the scientific judgement as to what is perverse or normal is qualified by the observation that the social classification of sexuality varies across history and culture. Careful phrases such as 'what is described as normal sexuality'<sup>36</sup> alert us to the fact that Freud always rejected the easy classification of 'us and them' that was, and to a large extent still is, the medical norm. Freud says that when discussing the various forms of sexuality '[i]ndignation, an expression of our personal repugnance and an assurance that we ourselves do not share these lusts will obviously be of no help.'<sup>37</sup> A strict application of psychoanalytic logic would classify kissing as perverse, alongside coprophilia and masturbation, due

to its identical aetiology as a derivation from the infantile sexual stages (an oral, rather than an anal or Oedipal fixation).<sup>38</sup> Freud keeps the audience on his side by suggesting that in fact, as long as the perverse adult remnants of the infantile instincts are put into the service of genital acts, they can be considered as normal. Although Freud defends the theory that infantile sexuality has to be organized under the sign of reproduction, as well as repressed and sublimated to cement the wider ties of civilized life, he still criticizes the rigid prohibitions which insist 'that there shall be a single kind of sexual life for everyone' and which therefore become 'the source of serious injustice'.<sup>39</sup>

Freud's therapeutic tolerance is admittedly often only pragmatic (as his frequent use of the concept of 'normal people'<sup>40</sup> and associated preference for latent homosexuality reveals), and this conservatism is in the end ambivalently reproduced by Adorno, even as he robustly speaks up for the rights of homosexuals.<sup>41</sup> Freud radically defended the cultural contribution of homosexuality, whilst still preferring to be organized under heterosexual genitality. Similarly, Adorno appreciates the spiciness of the partial instincts, deploring a merely empty genitality, but would see the latter flavoured by the former, not overwhelmed by it. Adorno's clever dialectic of health and sickness would have it both ways. On the one hand Adorno would see Freud's 'repressive' pragmatism as a selling out of the deeper possibilities of the infantile impulses. In a less repressive world some of these impulses could be the basis for a more open and sensually material relationship, both between subjects and between subject and object. At the same time, however, Adorno's ascetic theoretical respect for the potentiality of that which currently seems perverse leads him into a few repressive gestures of his own. Despite, for example, his liberal attack on the German laws on homosexuality, in the same paper Adorno retains a pejorative use of Freud's already compromised conception of homosexuality as an infantile fixation, linking the modern infantilization of 'the erotic ideal' with 'an unconscious homosexualization of society'.<sup>42</sup>

It is perhaps possible – if precarious – to imagine a justifiable critical version of Adorno's pejorative

usage of the concept of homosexuality, which he turns on psychoanalysis itself, in a clever version of the old accusation that Freud reduces everything to sex. In a precursor to Luce Irigaray's attack on the homosexuality of patriarchal psychoanalysis, but using more problematic terms, Adorno suggests that while revolving around it, psychoanalysis misses the true import of sexual difference:

That large sensitivity to difference which is the hallmark of the truly humane develops out of the most powerful experience of difference, that of the sexes. In reducing everything it calls unconscious, and ultimately all individuality, to the same thing, psychoanalysis seems to be the victim of a familiar homosexual mechanism, the inability to perceive differences. Homosexuals exhibit a certain experiential colour-blindness, an incapacity to apprehend individuality: women are, in the double sense, 'all the same' to them.<sup>43</sup>

The sensitivity to sexual difference is crucial for critical theory, but Adorno here breaks the promise of his own critique of a greedy, orally incorporative reason. Most of his work condemns instrumental reason as the diner's gaze on the roast,<sup>44</sup> but here he casually implies that only the sexually interested man can understand what a woman is, as well as providing a more obvious slight to the cognitive and affective capacities of homosexual men.<sup>45</sup>

However, without underestimating the problems of these formulations, certain of Freud's remarks keep open the possibility that Adorno's real target here is not homosexuality *per se*, but the exclusion of women from the centre of civilization, which Freud celebrates as a sort of male club: 'The work of civilization has become increasingly the business of men, it confronts them with ever more difficult tasks and compels them to carry out instinctual sublimations of which women are little capable.'<sup>46</sup> According to Freud, the devotion of male energy to these tasks leads to a neglect of women that provokes their resentments, making them embittered opponents of civilization. In *Minima Moralia* Adorno does not necessarily dispute this, and provides horribly cutting criticisms of actually existing femininity, but also proposes a more positive reading of the situation Freud simply describes. He allows the possibility of reframing what appears to well-adjusted men like Freud a perverse female antipathy to civilization as a valid resistance to patriarchal hegemony, not least in its positive effects on children. Adorno suggests that the memory of primary ties with the mother might then indicate the possibility of a non-repressive order, 'the Utopia that once drew sustenance

from motherly love',<sup>47</sup> rather than simply feeding the bonds of existing society.

Freud should know that those utopian 'wide acres in the moon' invoked by the theological, hedonistic and perverse imaginations, and which seek for more than pragmatic toleration, cannot be mere phantoms. It is Freud who teaches us that the uncanny (which certainly includes the affect-charged cultural associations of moon-gazing: the mother, madness, ecstasy) is always the primally familiar.<sup>48</sup> Despite his monumental achievement in drawing our attention to the importance of such things, Freud's efforts to translate this material into the language of consciousness are too strenuous, and something is lost in the process.

### Through the eyes of a child

Adorno looks to literary models to supply the dimension missing from orthodox psychoanalysis. Freud actually often did the same thing himself, sensing the limits both of his young science and his own sensibilities. When discussing dreams, Freud tells us:

creative writers are valuable allies and their evidence is to be prized highly, for they are apt to know a whole host of things between heaven and earth of which our philosophy has not yet let us dream. In their knowledge of the mind they are far in advance of us everyday people, for they draw upon sources which we have not yet opened up for science.<sup>49</sup>

Following Walter Benjamin,<sup>50</sup> who was one of the first to translate Proust into German, Adorno thinks that the perceptions of children may be a model for a less diminished theoretical capacity, capable of engaging in a freer association with the objects of cognition than normal adult consciousness. This receptivity inevitably succumbs to the wave of repression that institutes infantile amnesia, for its most primal objects are hedged about with social taboos. Freud suggests that the intellect is retarded when socialization forces children to tame their sexual curiosity:

It is hardly to be believed what goes on in a child of four or five years old. Children are very active-minded at that age; their early sexual period is also a period of intellectual flowering. I have an impression that with the onset of the latency period they become mentally inhibited as well, stupider.<sup>51</sup>

Having opened this door on infantile intelligence, Freud closes it again with his overly dry focus on sexuality. Inhibited by the explosive nature of the material he was uncovering, Freud's struggle to achieve an unimpeachably scientific clarity ends up affronting the memory of childhood. The same tension is also visible

in those very accusations of sexual impropriety that Freud was trying to avoid. Because reality demands the same renunciation of the subtle erotics of childhood that Freud carries out, the disgusted protests of his readers can serve two mental currents at once, like all symptomatic compromise formations. The urge to repress gains satisfaction through the moralistic judgements, but the urge to rescue Eros is itself registered in the unease prompted by Freud's scientific reductions. Adorno refines Freud's recognition of the importance of infantile sexuality by conserving its otherness, which is abusively overlaid in Freud's haste to deploy an adult perspective:

His magnificent discovery of infantile sexuality will cease to do violence only when we learn to understand the infinitely subtle and yet utterly sexual impulses of children. In their perceptive world, poles apart from that of the grown-ups, a fleeting smell or a gesture take on dimensions that the analyst, faithful to adult criteria, would like to attribute solely to their observations of their parents' coitus.<sup>52</sup>

Adorno holds out hope that the theoretical recovery of this perceptive world could provide a critical lens through which to examine the adult one. Thus Proust, for example, 'looks at even adult life with such alien and wondering eyes that under his immersed gaze the present is virtually transformed into prehistory, into childhood'.<sup>53</sup> A recollection of the supercharged eyes of the child can produce in the adult an embarrassed recognition of what they have lost in gaining themselves:

[Proust] handles things every individual once knew, in childhood, and then repressed, things that now return to him with the force of the familiar. What seems so extremely individuated in Proust is not inherently individuated; it seems so only because we no longer dare to react in this way, or are no longer capable of doing so. Actually, Proust restores the promise of the universality we were cheated of. In his texts it makes us blush, like the mention of a name carefully kept secret.<sup>54</sup>

This account of the uncanny force of Proust's texts develops Freud's particular clinical suggestion that the memory underlying the uncanny be used as a critique of rigid adult experience. In this, Proust's art has a scientific rigour of its own. Marcel's painful attempt to recall his own life as a process, rather than as the adventures of a rigid subject, 'established the precariousness of all ego-identity'.<sup>55</sup> Identity-thinking is undermined through a psychology that reaches the social through its immersion in the phenomenology of individual experience, rather than by trying to get

outside it. This enacts the constellational dialectic of sociology and psychology to which Adorno aspires, seeking 'a reality which no view oriented toward mere psychological or sociological data for the sake of isolating them can grasp'.<sup>56</sup>

Although Freud's famous case histories are sometimes disparaged for having literary qualities, their related importance is that they force a similar consideration of a constellated totality of inner life and social reality. The links between the levels of analysis emerge like the analysand's chain of associations. Adorno may criticize the kind of medically mechanical free association that disables the critical faculty only to replace it with the ready-made formulations of the analyst,<sup>57</sup> but he still hints at the constellational component of Freud's early theories of free association and the dream work when discussing the difficulties of reading Proust: 'Proust should be read with the idea of ... dwelling on the concrete without grasping prematurely at something that yields itself not directly but only through its thousand facets'.<sup>58</sup>

In the Freudian and Proustian accounts of memory, the possibility of a radical critique of the contents of the mind relies on a disabling of the merely reflex self-criticism born of resistance. The link between psychoanalysis, the form of Adorno's aesthetics and Proust's artistic sublimations becomes clearer when Freud quotes at length from Friedrich Schiller to illustrate the idea:

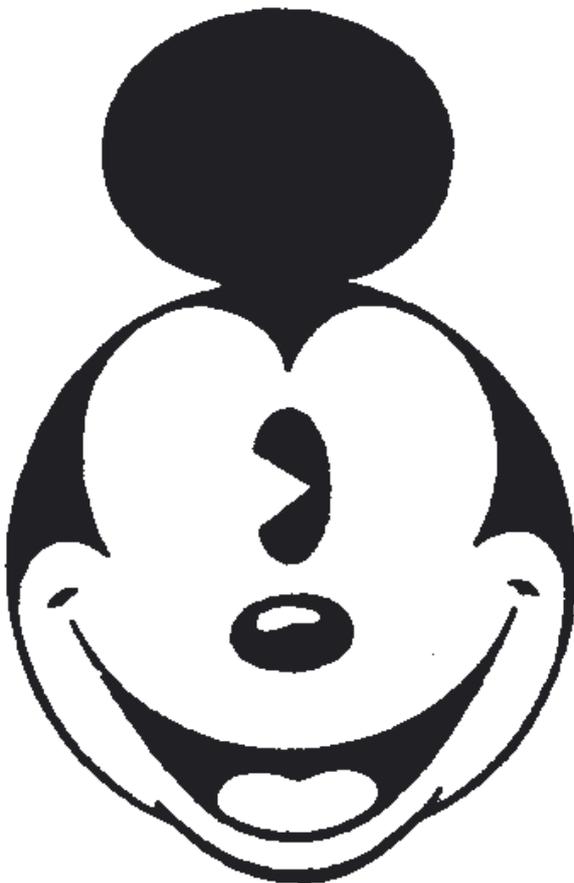
It seems a bad thing and detrimental to the creative work of the mind if Reason makes too close an examination of the ideas as they come pouring in .... Looked at in isolation, a thought may seem very trivial or very fantastic; but it may be made important by another thought which comes after it, and, in conjunction with other thoughts that may seem equally absurd, it may turn out to form a most effective link. Reason cannot form any opinion upon all this unless it retains the thought long enough to look at it in connection with the others.<sup>59</sup>

Proust deploys such a conjunction of thoughts, linking place, time and memory in multifaceted recollections of sensations which evoke particular modes of experience or relationship. In a passage on Proust in *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno suggests that it is not only in their phantasies that things whisper promises to receptive children:

To the child it is self-evident that what delights him in his favourite village is found only there, there alone and nowhere else. He is mistaken; but his mistake creates the model of experience, of a concept that will end up as the concept of the thing itself, not as a poor projection from things.<sup>60</sup>

But this open receptivity cannot make it through childhood. It can only be retrieved with a mature conceptual style which still dares to yearn for something beyond itself, without deluding itself that it can get there. This non-repressive literary-theoretical refinement of the concept of sublimation is meant to champion the drive it channels. The goal is not aim-inhibition, but the conscious development of the drive backwards, towards the utopian moment at the origin of its aim. At present such sublimation can do no more than highlight the lack of any real reconciliation of the ego and the id.<sup>61</sup> This highlighting is still a sublimation, but cannot unify what remains split apart, reminding us that Adorno's excursus to Proust does not undialectically counter Freud's rationalist account of childhood with a purely romantic evocation of it: 'The secret of aesthetic sublimation is its representation of fulfillment as a broken promise.'<sup>62</sup> Proust's effort to recall the promise is described like a process of free association, complete with resistance to what rises from the depths of the mind. Freud himself could not have bettered it:

I feel something start within me, something that leaves its resting place and attempts to rise, something that has been embedded like an anchor at a great depth; I do not know yet what it is, but I can feel it mounting slowly; I can measure the resistance, I can hear the echo of great spaces traversed.<sup>63</sup>



That the memories rising from the depths are often of women is significant, since we have seen how Adorno takes sexual difference as the exemplary model for all relations with an alien other. The complications of the unhappy boy's relations with his parents and other adults shows the poignantly utopian nature of Proust's carefully controlled regressions.

One of Proust's recollections captures the importance of Oedipal themes more convincingly than Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, showing that when trying to communicate the central importance of early experience, understated style may be more important than explicit scientific content. Proust recalls the way the smell of varnish on the staircase of his childhood home invasively encapsulated the nexus of emotions which dogged his going to bed:<sup>64</sup> the bottomless depth of his desire to remain with his mother overnight, and the concomitant depth of his partly projective fear of the father who threatens the childish wish. Proust recounts a pivotal bedtime drama which ensues one night when the presence of visitors prevents his mother from saying goodnight to him properly. Marcel disobediently waits up instead of going to sleep, and later ambushes his mother on her way to bed. She tries to shoo him away before his father catches sight of him:

But I begged her again to 'Come and say good night to me!' terrified as I saw the light from my father's candle already creeping up the wall, but also making use of his approach as a means of blackmail, in the hope that my mother, not wishing him to find me there, as find me he must if she continued to hold out, would give in to me, and say: 'Go back to your room. I will come.' Too late: my father was upon us. Instinctively I murmured, though no one heard me, 'I am done for!'<sup>65</sup>

In fact the fear is unrealized, and the boy is uniquely indulged. His mother stays up with him, reading out loud from a novel by George Sand, and sleeps in his room. But the promise of this situation is broken for both the mother and the child. The mother symbolically introduces a mystery to the heart of sex by editing out the love scenes as she reads, and the boy knows that in forcing her to give in to his demands he has somehow betrayed her hopes for him. That night is also the first night that his parents classify him as a nervous case, rather than blaming him for his unhappiness. He also knows that the intimacy of the undisturbed hours alone with his mother are an exception, since paternal jealousy may regard the mother's desire to share her affections with the children as promiscuity:

I knew that such a night could not be repeated; that the strongest desire I had in the world, namely, to keep my mother in my room through the sad hours of darkness, ran too much counter to general requirements and to the wishes of others for such a concession as had been granted me this evening to be anything but a rare and casual exception.<sup>66</sup>

The more permanent redemption of the potential of exceptional childhood moments has to wait for another reality, and the price of Proust's perverse refusal to renounce the childhood claim to total happiness is the loss of happiness in the present: 'Proust is a martyr to happiness.'<sup>67</sup> Adorno shares in this melancholy martyrdom. The broken promise stalks happiness as an uncanny spectre. Refusal to renounce the demands of that ghost can only manifest itself as a scar on the individuals who cannot bear to adjust themselves fully. Max Horkheimer suggests that social demands on the family condition the harsh division between maternal and paternal authority which underpins the Oedipal situation. One consequence is that 'the suppressed inclination towards the mother reappears as a fanciful and sentimental susceptibility to all symbols of the dark, maternal, and protective powers.'<sup>68</sup> There are grounds for seeing Proust, along with the whole Frankfurt School, as sharing this inclination, to both the benefit and the detriment of critical theory.

Adorno included in *Minima Moralia* a fragment, presumably autobiographical, entitled 'Heliotrope'.<sup>69</sup> This can be taken as a later development of the Proustian family scene, showing how the infantile desires persist, and how distant memories of them can be rendered close through the medium of other exceptional moments which fleetingly re-fulfil them. Such a rendering spurs on the will to make a better world. The fragment clarifies the contribution that infantile eroticism makes to later attempts to judge just what real pleasure in a relation with the alien might be. Childhood bliss at the energizing of the once familiar by the presence of the new is the primal source of Adorno's notion of a transformation in our relations with otherness. 'Heliotrope' dives into the heart of this notion through Adorno's recollection of what seems to have been a visit made to his childhood home by an exotic lady visitor. The title (loosely, 'sun-seeker'; both a general plant tropism and a genus of flower) makes it beautifully clear that the subject of the fragment is the life drive, Eros. Understood psychoanalytically, Adorno's theoretical memoir sublimates several Oedipal dynamics, but not always successfully. Artistically, Proust and Benjamin are Adorno's tutors:

When a guest comes to stay with his parents, a child's heart beats with more fervent expectation than it ever did before Christmas. It is not presents that are the cause, but transformed existence. The perfume that the lady visitor puts down on the chest of drawers while he is allowed to watch her unpacking, has a scent that resembles memory even though he breathes it for the first time....

The yearning to plunge into unformed joy, into the pool of salamanders and storks that the child has learned painfully to subdue and block with the frightful image of the black man, the demon who wants to take him away – here he finds it again, without fear.<sup>70</sup>

Having identified the repetition of desire for the mother and fear of the father alluded to in the fairy-tale and childish racist symbolism of the last passage, it would be possible to psychoanalyse it to death. Baldly stated, the process at the heart of the piece is a boy's rediscovery of the dashed utopia of unrestricted contact with his mother, through an early extra-familial love object – the lady visitor. With the regaining of the possibility of complete love, kindled by the indulgent attention the visitor bestows, the boy remembers what true pleasure was. The visitor reawakens the eroticism Oedipally repressed in the home, and with it the keen perceptive intelligence whose first model was sexual curiosity. The resurrection of the intensity of the boy's sense of smell by the woman's perfume is a testament to this reawakening of the erotic sensibility, for the human capacity for the repression of sexuality is founded in the atrophy of the sense of smell:

Freud expressed the facts of the matter with genius when he said that loathing [of the body] first arose when men began to walk upright and were at a distance from the ground, so that the sense of smell which drew the male animal to the female in heat was relegated to a secondary position among the senses.<sup>71</sup>

In 'Heliotrope', none of this is imprisoned in dead psychoanalytic jargon, which would kill everything Adorno manages to suggest with his deployment of a Proustian – rather than Freudian – conception of infantile erotics. The mode of expression is through a utopian regression. It is the lyricism of Adorno's prose that generates its uncanny affect, as Adorno prompts recollections of our own memories-of-memories of bliss and the echo of sorrow at its passing, all so easily lost in the bustle of civilized adult life.

The lady visitor treats Theodor as parents cannot, and that she exists keeps alive the hope of a love free of Marcel's feeling that his father is coming up the

stairs. We could say, even, that with the visitor, for the first time the scent of woman is not marked with the smell of his father's cigar. The visitor does not sleep with him, in a classically perverse transgression of generational boundaries, but her presence still charges the stale routine, providing a psychological hint of satisfactions to come: 'With the order of the day – perhaps tomorrow he will be allowed to miss school – the boundaries between the generations too are suspended, and he who at eleven o'clock has still not been sent to bed has an inkling of true promiscuity.'<sup>72</sup>

Like Proust's memory of the night spent with his mother, what Adorno describes has the status of an exception. The recollected exception proves the rule that usually denies it; its evocation, therefore, is melancholic. Just as potentially satisfying parent-child relations are distorted by the capricious rule of the father, the possibilities for a free society are scuppered by the unpredictable laws of paternalistic capitalism which reify the possibility of rational exchange. The promise which briefly glimmered during the night with mother or the lady's visit is broken. But the glimmering exception becomes the model of hope for a permanently reciprocal exchange.

### Conceptual utopianism

All this becomes in 'Heliotrope' a meditation on Benjamin's Proust-inspired auratic childhood dialectics of near and far: 'From the joy of greatest proximity she removes the curse by wedding it to utmost distance. For this the child's whole being is waiting, and so too, later, must he be able to wait who does not forget what is best in childhood.'<sup>73</sup> The boy's passion for the exotically distant woman who at last takes him seriously, who evokes the repressed early yearning for an unattainable maternal proximity, is one prototype for the theoretical drive of *Negative Dialectics*, written some twenty years after *Minima Moralia*. In the later book, Adorno famously speculates on what a differentiated reconciliation could be:

The reconciled condition would not be the philosophical imperialism of annexing the alien. Instead, its happiness would lie in the fact that the alien, in the proximity it is granted, remains what is distant and different, beyond the heterogeneous and beyond that which is one's own.<sup>74</sup>

This mature philosopheme of Adorno's further sublimates the dialectic of proximity and distance first worked out through the Proustian-psychoanalytic recollection of sexual difference. The link between *Negative Dialectics* and Freudian theories of sexuality

is clear – but only if read through the earlier formulation. Following this chain of associations, it seems reasonable to assert that *Negative Dialectics* yearns for what we might psychoanalytically interpret as an anaclitic theoretical relationship with objects, in opposition to the narcissistic type of object choice based on a projection outwards of an image of the self.<sup>75</sup>

Adorno's anaclitic theory tries to resist the philosophical narcissism which annexes the alien characteristics of otherness by modelling it on the self. This component of the conceptual utopia which glimmers behind the negativity of Adorno's dialectical sublimations can be used to counter the Habermasian charge that Adorno's only norm is an aesthetic theory offering scant basis for a critical theory of society.<sup>76</sup> The aesthetic is important as a psychoanalytic reminder of lost potentials that really existed in childhood, at least in a fragmented form. This dimension of Adorno's critical theory reveals the infantile and bodily roots of the uncanny hope for an undistorted communication with otherness, something from which the linguistic turn in Habermas abstracts too much.<sup>77</sup> The basis for social critique which Habermas requires could be in part provided by a critical consideration of the questions and answers prompted by Proust's utopian regressions and Adorno's 'Heliotrope'. By producing critical sublimations of broken promises and exceptional moments, these writers explain why it takes so much to open us to the lost memory of utopian wishes. And the question they raise – why adults still have to wait for the redemption of what was best in childhood – invites a political answer despite being prompted by aesthetic reflection. As Marcuse explains in a play on Proust and Adorno at the close of his own book on aesthetics:

Forgetting past suffering and past joy alleviates life under a repressive reality principle. In contrast, remembrance spurs the drive for the conquest of suffering and the permanence of joy. But the force of remembrance is frustrated: joy itself is overshadowed by pain. Inexorably so? The horizon of history is still open. If the remembrance of things past would become a motive power in the struggle for changing the world, the struggle would be waged for a revolution hitherto suppressed in the previous historical revolutions.<sup>78</sup>

That the theoretical and political limitations of Adorno's consciously problematic sublimations break their own revolutionary promise conforms to his negative logic. His anaclitic focus on sexual difference invites considerations of homophobia, and only partially defends him against charges of philosophical narcissism<sup>79</sup> and sexism, for it on occasion proceeds

from a self-centred perspective, rendering woman more object than subject. Adorno's manly psychoanalytic orthodoxy, which persists behind his critique of Freud, retains some of the best of Freud, but some of the worst, too. The trick now must be to sublimate our disappointment into immanent critique, not angry abstract negation, as Adorno has already tried to do with his equivocal critiques of Freud, Baudelaire and Proust. He is drawn by the dark side of modernism, the flipside of the infantile utopia of motherly love, but tries to render it critical. In the terms of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, we could say that as well as being one of the most penetrating interpreters of the dark writings of the bourgeoisie, Adorno is also touched by their shadow. The blind spots of his openly self-analytical and socially reflective critical sublimations could be turned into a case study on the spiritual situation of our age.

## Notes

Thanks are due to Sean Homer, Shierry Weber Nicholzen and Alison Martin.

1. Joel Whitebook, *Perversion and Utopia: A Study in Psychoanalysis and Critical Theory*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1995, p. 261. Where Whitebook thinks Adorno overdoes the critique of sublimation, Thomas Huhn accuses Adorno of not being critical enough. See Huhn, 'The Sublimation of Culture in Adorno's Aesthetics', in Ronald Roblin, ed., *The Aesthetics of the Critical Theorists: Studies on Benjamin, Adorno, Marcuse and Habermas*, Edwin Mellen, Lewiston NY, 1990, pp. 291–307.
2. Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott, Verso, London, 1978, pp. 212–13.
3. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, Athlone, London, 1997. See pp. 4–13 for discussions of sublimation.
4. *Minima Moralia*, p. 111.
5. Theodor W. Adorno, 'Resignation', in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, Routledge, London, 1991, p. 175.
6. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming, Verso, London, 1979, p. 139.
7. *Minima Moralia*, p. 58.
8. See Theodor W. Adorno, 'Sexual Taboos and Law Today', in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford, Columbia University Press, New York, 1998, p. 72.
9. *Minima Moralia*, p. 62.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
11. *Ibid.* Martin Jay cites this and says 'Adorno viewed psychology as the best guarantor of the individual's right to genuine corporeal gratification' (*Adorno*, Fontana, London, 1984, p. 88).
12. Theodor W. Adorno, 'Sociology and Psychology', trans. Irving Wohlfarth, published in two parts in *New Left Review*, no. 46, November–December 1967, pp. 63–80; no. 47, January–February 1968, pp. 79–97, p. 84.
13. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton, Routledge, London, 1973, p. 85.
14. 'Sociology and Psychology, Part One', p. 78.
15. *Minima Moralia*, p. 236.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 237.
17. Whitebook's *Perversion and Utopia* skilfully plays the moralistic condemnation of perversion off against its celebration, critically following the Frankfurt School lead as a guide to the maze of contradictory approaches in contemporary psychoanalytic theory.
18. Marcuse is so influenced by Adorno that he states '[m]y debt to the aesthetic theory of Theodor W. Adorno does not require any specific acknowledgement' (*The Aesthetic Dimension: Towards a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*, Macmillan, London, 1979, p. vii). Adorno actually felt that Marcuse was borrowing his ideas in a display of 'one-sided solidarity' (cited in Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School*, trans. Michael Robertson, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1994, p. 497). Judging from Wiggershaus's account, and Marcuse's many references to Adorno, the one-sided solidarity actually came from the jealous Adorno. The two men certainly make similar, but not identical, uses of Freud. In *Eros and Civilization* (Ark, London, 1987) and *One-Dimensional Man* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1964), Marcuse produces detailed concepts of basic and surplus repression, repressive de-sublimation, conformist sublimation and the perverse imagination. These have admittedly influenced my account of Adorno here, but fully detailing the differences between the two thinkers would take another paper. Important points would be that Marcuse makes direct use of psychoanalytic terms where Adorno sometimes only hints, and that Marcuse is more inclined to champion the immediate deployment of the perverse; for example, his appreciation of Baudelaire and surrealism seems less restrained than Adorno's.
19. *Minima Moralia*, p. 60.
20. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 140.
21. *Minima Moralia*, p. 169. However, Proust's ontology of modernity certainly followed Baudelaire's; perhaps more of Adorno's critique of Baudelaire should be applied to Proust than I here allow.
22. Discussions of Proust, promises and the broken good, together with an indication of forthcoming work on the promise in Adorno and Derrida, are provided in J.M. Bernstein, 'Why Rescue Semblance? Metaphysical Experience and the Possibility of Ethics', in Tom Huhn and Lambert Zuidervaart, eds, *The Semblance of Subjectivity: Essays in Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*, MIT, Cambridge MA, 1997, pp. 177–212.
23. Theodor W. Adorno, 'Short Commentaries on Proust', in *Notes to Literature, Volume One*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholzen, Columbia University Press, New York, 1991, p. 180. In *Perversion and Utopia*, Whitebook discusses 'The Progressive Uses of Regression' (pp. 207–15).
24. *Minima Moralia*, p. 60.
25. C. Fred Alford, 'Nature and Narcissism: The Frankfurt School', *New German Critique*, no. 36, Fall 1985, p. 191.
26. Gillian Rose discusses these thoughts on metapsychology in her *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno*, Macmillan, London, 1978, pp. 91–5. The key Adorno source is 'Sociology and Psychology'. See also Jessica Benjamin, 'The End of Internalization: Adorno's Social Psychology', *Telos*, no. 32, 1977, p. 43.

27. Sigmund Freud (1923), 'The Ego and the Id', Pelican Freud Library, Harmondsworth, 1990–93 (hereafter *PFL*), vol. 11, pp. 362–7.
28. Sigmund Freud (1926), 'The Question of Lay Analysis', *PFL* 15, p. 301.
29. Sigmund Freud (1915–17), *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, *PFL* 1, pp. 512–15.
30. Sigmund Freud (1927), 'The Future of an Illusion', *PFL* 12, p. 192.
31. *Ibid.*, pp. 233–4.
32. See my 'Through the Eyes of an Artificial Angel: Secular Theology in Theodor W. Adorno's Freudo-Marxist Reading of Franz Kafka and Walter Benjamin', in Philip Leonard, ed., *Trajectories of Mysticism in Theory and Literature*, Macmillan, London, 1999, pp. 198–218.
33. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 41.
34. *Minima Moralia*, p. 61.
35. Freud, *Introductory Lectures*, p. 347. Part of the problem is that everything from murderous necrophilia to homosexuality are perversely, in Little Hans's terminology, 'lumped' together.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 348.
37. *Ibid.*
38. *Ibid.*, p. 364.
39. Sigmund Freud (1930), 'Civilization and its Discontents', *PFL* 12, p. 294.
40. Sigmund Freud (1920), 'The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman', *PFL* 9, p. 399.
41. 'Sexual Taboos', pp. 79–80.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 81. Having criticized this infantilization, Adorno then to my mind comes perilously close to endorsing it with a critique of the laws surrounding minors, which underestimates the dangers adult sexuality may pose to children. The furor surrounding Freud's abandonment of the seduction theory could productively rock Adorno's critical theory too, especially if pursued through the work of Jean Laplanche as well as Jeffrey Masson.
43. 'Sociology and Psychology, Part Two', p. 96.
44. *Negative Dialectics*, p. 30.
45. On debates surrounding homophobia and sexism in Adorno, see Sabine Wilke and Heidi Schlipphacke, 'Construction of a Gendered Subject: A Feminist Reading of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*', in Huhn and Zuidervaart, *The Semblance of Subjectivity*, pp. 287–308; and Maggie O'Neill, ed., *Adorno, Culture and Feminism*, Sage, London, 1999; together with my review of these works ('Imagining Adorno: Critical Theory Under Review', *Theory, Culture and Society*, forthcoming). See also Andrew Edgar, 'Adorno and the Question of Schubert's Sexuality', *New Formations*, no. 38, September 1999. It is worth mentioning that Adorno may have had some sort of early affair with Siegfried Kracauer, and that his critiques of homosexuality are influenced by Proust's at times savage account of it.
46. Freud, 'Civilization and its Discontents', p. 293.
47. *Minima Moralia*, p. 23.
48. Sigmund Freud (1919), 'The "Uncanny"', *PFL* 14, pp. 335–76.
49. Sigmund Freud (1907), 'Delusions and Dreams in Jensen's "Gradiva"', *PFL* 14, p. 34.
50. See essays on childhood in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume One: 1913–1926*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1997; and also 'A Berlin Childhood ca. 1900', forthcoming in *Selected Writings, Volume Three*.
51. Freud, 'The Question of Lay Analysis', p. 315. For a model discussion of this theory as presented in Freud's study of Leonardo, see Whitebook, *Perversion and Utopia*, pp. 226–30.
52. 'Sociology and Psychology, Part Two', p. 90.
53. Theodor W. Adorno, 'On Proust', in *Notes to Literature, Volume Two*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson, Columbia University Press, New York, 1992, p. 315.
54. *Ibid.*, p. 316.
55. 'Sociology and Psychology, Part Two', p. 87.
56. Theodor W. Adorno, 'Short Commentaries on Proust', in *Notes to Literature, Volume One*, p. 177.
57. *Minima Moralia*, pp. 68–9.
58. 'Short Commentaries on Proust', p. 175.
59. Schiller (letter of 1 December 1788 to Körner), quoted in Sigmund Freud (1900), *The Interpretation of Dreams*, *PFL* 4, p. 177.
60. *Negative Dialectics*, p. 373.
61. Whitebook, critical of Adorno's refusal of synthesis, wants a concept of sublimation which can show the role of culture in working through the demands of the id, finding an autonomous but non-repressive channel for the drives. See *Perversion and Utopia*, p. 118.
62. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 140.
63. Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, Volume One: *Swann's Way*, Part 1, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff, Chatto & Windus, London, 1976, p. 60.
64. *Ibid.*, p. 35. Walter Benjamin provides exemplary remarks on memory and scent in Proust and Baudelaire, which surely influenced Adorno. See 'The Image of Proust' and 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, Fontana, London, 1992.
65. Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, p. 46. In Lacanian terms, this recalls the symbolic intrusion of the phallic law (the father's candle) into the world of the infantile imaginary (union of boy and mother).
66. *Ibid.*, pp. 55–6.
67. 'On Proust', p. 317.
68. Max Horkheimer, 'Authority and the Family', in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell et al., Continuum, New York, 1982, p. 121.
69. *Minima Moralia*, pp. 177–8. The piece does not use the 'I'; it talks of 'the child'. But it has the detailed patina of memory, and *Minima Moralia* characteristically combines private and theoretical reflection.
70. *Minima Moralia*, pp. 177–8.
71. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 233.
72. *Minima Moralia*, p. 178. On boundaries, see Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, *Creativity and Perversion*, Free Association Books, London, 1985. For discussions of her work in relation to the Frankfurt School, see Whitebook, *Perversion and Utopia*. The transgressive lure of blurred boundaries here pulls at Adorno, just as it becomes a disturbing force in Proust's novel. Their work is perhaps an attempt to keep the transgression uncommitted. This could be related to some of Adorno's potentially dubious remarks in 'Sexual Taboos'.
73. *Minima Moralia*, p. 178.
74. *Negative Dialectics*, p. 191.
75. Sigmund Freud (1914), 'On Narcissism: An Introduction', *PFL* 11, pp. 59–97. In this, I oppose Alford's contention that Adorno's utopian constellation of distance and proximity is 'an almost pure expression of the narcissistic ideal' (Alford, 'Nature and Narcissism', p. 187). Pure narcissism would collapse the distance into proximity.

76. See Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory*, Columbia University Press, New York 1986, esp. pp. 222–3.
77. See Whitebook, *Perversion and Utopia*, pp. 83–4, 166–7, 257; also Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School*, pp. 580–82.

78. Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, p. 73.
79. Lawrence E. Cahoone, *The Dilemma of Modernity: Philosophy, Culture and Anti-Culture*, SUNY Press, Albany NY, 1988.

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