

BETWEEN HOW THE WORLD IS AND HOW IT SHOULD BE: APHORISM, PARADOX, CRITIQUE AND PRAXIS IN THEODOR ADORNO'S MINIMA MORALIA

*Entre cómo el mundo es y cómo debería ser:
aforismo, paradoja, crítica y praxis en Minima Moralia de Theodor Adorno*

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ABSTRACT

The reflections of the aphorisms of *Minima Moralia* may often seem opaque or obscure, appearing to take indirect routes in their investigations. The objective of this article is to outline an interpretation of this way of proceeding by highlighting how it is entangled with particular critical intentions. By means of an in-depth analysis of aphorism 110, "Constanze", we shall seek to indicate how it strives to explore particular textual elaborations and effects in order to constitute an immersive reading experience, which not only theoretically grasps, but also practically overcomes the prevailing badness of everyday life, constituting a praxis that the reader can incarnate through the reading itself. Such reading experience, we argue, relies on textual immersive effects to realize the critical potentiality of the paradox as a mediating force between how the world is and how it should be.

Key words: Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, aphorism, critique, praxis, paradox, fidelity, irrationalism.

RESUMEN

Las reflexiones de los aforismos de *Minima Moralia* a menudo pueden parecer opacos u oscuros, pareciendo tomar caminos indirectos en sus investigaciones. El objetivo de este artículo es esbozar una interpretación de este modo de proceder, destacando cómo este se enreda con intenciones críticas particu-

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lares. A través de un análisis en profundidad del aforismo 110, “Constanze”, buscaremos indicar cómo este busca explorar elaboraciones y efectos textuales particulares para constituir una experiencia de lectura inmersiva, que no solo represente teóricamente, sino también supere prácticamente la violencia imperante en la vida cotidiana, constituyendo una praxis que el lector puede encarnar a través de la lectura misma. Argumentamos que tal experiencia de lectura se basa en efectos inmersivos textuales para realizar la potencialidad crítica de la paradoja como una fuerza mediadora entre cómo el mundo es y cómo debería ser.

Palabras clave: Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, aforismo, crítica, praxis, paradoja, fidelidad, irracionalismo.

1 INTRODUCTION

The reading of Theodor Adorno’s *Minima Moralia* may be often dizzying. As Alexander García-Düttmann strives to indicate in his book *So ist es*, instead of being built through transparent linear argumentation, the book is rather structured through a certain opaque form of gesturing, of showing, of pointing. A gesture, to which, compared to the step-by-step progression of argumentation, one may well attribute a “supersonic speed”, with which the text “accelerates back and forward” and to which it owes its persuasion power¹.

Assuredly, if in contemporary society “our perspective of life has passed into an ideology which conceals the fact that there is life no longer”, as stated in the first paragraph of *Minima Moralia*’s Dedication to Max Horkheimer², then, such attention to textual elaboration is connected to the consciousness of the contemporary social world’s opaqueness and inaccessibility. In other words, it arises from the awareness that the immediately given forms of textual expression seem to be of no use to unveil the truth of the violent hidden powers ruling our lives. And yet, at

¹ Cfr. Düttmann (2004), p. 30.

² Translations of *Minima Moralia* in this article are based on Jephcott’s version of it from 2005. Alterations were made only when considered essential, having been indicated and briefly justified in footnotes. In texts such as *Minima Moralia*, which are built through constellations rather than progressive argumentation, even the smallest details are important to the whole, with the reverberation of meanings depending on the interplay between such particularities. Quite accordingly, to some degree, the variations suggested here assuredly arise from a different interpretation of the text, which shall be presented in the last section of this article. In this regard, for a very insightful discussion about the difficulties of translating *Minima Moralia*, cfr. Gabriel Cohn’s afterword of his translation into Brazilian Portuguese (2008).

the same time, of course, one could hardly say that finding a form of expression capable of doing so is an easy task: on the contrary, as we shall attempt to indicate in this article, this issue is at the very heart of the challenge of producing transformative social critique. And, therefore, neither could one say that the risks involved are low: in the reading dizziness that accompanies such textual experimentation, there is a fragile fine line separating critical revelation from opaqueness and confusion.

In this article, then, we shall examine this issue by focusing on what kind of reading experience arises from such textual composition, seeking to understand its underpinning critical motivations and also the conditions of its realization. We shall do so by producing an in-depth analysis of “Constanze”, aphorism 110 of *Minima Moralia*. In the following section, we shall begin with an elaborated introduction of the whole fragment; after that, we will present two different and concurring interpretations of it, indicating what we believe to be their merits and their limitations; finally, we shall propose a different interpretation inspired by the considerations made about the other two.

Our main goal shall be to provide both a new interpretation of “Constanze”, and, more generally, some insight into the role that paradoxes play in the composition of Adorno’s aphorisms – and, possibly, in the genre of the aphorism as a whole. We shall argue that the use of such figure of speech is driven both by its epistemological objectivity in the grasping of a relentlessly paradoxical world and also by its potential practical power of producing within the reading of the text an experience that is good for concretely overcoming the instrumental – repetitive, work-dictated, argumentative – structure of contemporary everyday life.

2 “CONSTANZE”

The first lines of aphorism 110, “Constanze”, are “Everywhere bourgeois society insists on the exertion of will; only love is supposed (soll) to be involuntary, pure immediacy of feeling. In its longing for this, which means a dispensation from work, the bourgeois idea of love transcends bourgeois society”³. At a first glance, we may say that the passage takes us to the generally widespread notion of the

³ To avoid repetitive referencing, we here indicate that aphorism 110 is located on pages 197 and 198 of the German version by Suhrkamp, 2012, and on page 172 of Jephcott’s translation from 2005.

opposition between, on the one side, voluntariness, mediation, effort, work, coldness and society, and, on the other, spontaneity, immediacy, rest, leisure, love and individuals in love. How could we escape the seemingly omnipresent and continual social demand of focus and diligence, which tolerates no mistakes? The answer: love, which, untouched and untainted by the badness of society, should serve as the fundament upon which we could withstand social pressure, through which we could “transcend”, break free from society, and thereby achieve relief and happiness.

It is crucial, then, that for this notion the opposition between love and society corresponds to an opposition between two allegedly fully independent realms. On the one hand, we have love as a fulfilling and accomplished affection, while, on the other, there is the frustrating social world that opposes such form of affection. The next lines of the aphorism, nevertheless, challenge this notion:

“But in erecting truth directly (“unvermittelt”) amid the general untruth, it perverts the former into the latter. It is not merely that pure feeling, so far as it is still possible within the economically determined system, becomes precisely thereby socially an alibi for the domination of interest and bears witness to a humanity that does not exist. The very involuntariness of love, even where it has not found itself a practical accommodation beforehand, contributes to the whole as soon as it is established as a principle.”⁴

In this regard, one could criticize, for instance, the tale of the loving couple that struggles against society accusing it of serving as a façade of magic and beauty, which deceives us from the truth of social exploitation and coldness that lies behind it. This would be a critique of how such tale commercially explores the alleged purity of love in order to stun people and to hide from them the real badness of the world, serving as an “alibi” for social badness under the motto “life, after all, is not so bad, since we still have love”.

The aphorism, nevertheless, tells us that this is not the main issue here, that it is not simply a matter of detecting and escaping direct and somewhat intentional manipulation, of unveiling the truth from behind the façade. The problem goes deeper, since it is not just the case that the goodness of love may be commercially used as a means of deception. The issue is rather that, apart from its economical

⁴ “Within the economically determined system” here translates “im ökonomisch determinierten System” instead of “within the determined system of economy”, and “becomes precisely thereby socially an alibi” here translates “eben damit gesellschaftlich zum Alibi” instead of “precisely thereby society’s alibi”, since, in the passage, “ökonomisch” and “gesellschaftlich” are adverbs, not nouns.

manipulation, the purported involuntariness of love itself is questioned, which seems to undergo some sort of transformation into a “principle”, and that this contributes to society rather than opposes it.

The text, then, proceeds to better unfold the reasons for this:

“If love in society is to represent a better one, it cannot do so as a peaceful enclave, but only by conscious opposition. This, however, demands precisely the element of voluntariness that the bourgeois, for whom love can never be natural enough, forbid it. Loving means not letting immediacy be withered by the omnipresent pressure of mediation, by economy, and in such fidelity it becomes mediated in itself, as a stubborn counter-pressure. He alone loves who has the strength to hold fast to love.”⁵

While peace was not an option from the very start, since the issue was that love should defeat or at least resist society, we now know that love cannot do that carelessly and immediately, as if its presumed inherent magic would necessarily and effortlessly withstand society. On the contrary, it may somewhat actually turn from truth into untruth if it is not careful. In other words, love cannot be a “peaceful enclave”, but rather a place for “conscious resistance”.

In a peaceful enclave, love would be safe, stable, relentless; even though threatened by something coming from outside, its internal logic would remain intact. Nevertheless, the main threat here is not a manipulative evil from the outside, but rather the very instability of love itself. Love does not flow naturally and unopposed; it rather comes and goes and leaves us asking where it went and how could we bring it back. We fear, however, that if we have to look for it, then, it is no longer love, since it was because of its involuntariness, of the spontaneity of the feeling of falling in love, that we enjoyed it in the first place.

Here, of course, we, as readers, may be led to evoke the everyday experience of love, in which lovers are accustomed to having to fight against apparently all odds to keep their affection alive. Love is not there all the time in a loving relationship: more or less often, it seems to withdraw, then reappear, only to disappear again, leaving the individuals with the struggle to get it back, to search for it, longing for something lost. We are faced with a paradoxical conundrum: love cannot and does

⁵ Here “pressure” is used instead of “weight” for “Druck” to maintain the parallelism with “counter-pressure”, “Gegendruck”. Also, we opted for “it becomes mediated in itself” instead of “becomes itself mediated” to maintain the subtle, but crucial difference in meaning that the concept of love is torn within itself between mediation and immediacy, that it is mediated *in* itself (“wird sie vermittelt in sich selber”).

not sustain itself alone, always risking to wither and disappear, so it needs conscious help to be kept alive; nevertheless, if it is only good for not being conscious work, for being “natural”, how could conscious work save it in the first place?

The aphorism helps us, then, with more details of the struggle at hand:

“If social advantage, sublimated, pre-forms even the sexual impulse, using a thousand nuances sanctioned by the order makes now this, now that person seem spontaneously attractive, then, an affection once formed opposes this by persisting where the gravitational force of society does not want it, in advance of all the intrigues that the latter then invariably takes into its service. It is the test of feeling whether it goes beyond feeling through duration, even if as obsession.”⁶

“Economy” presses love, of course, by forcing the loving ones to go through a daily life of apathy, through the fear of unemployment, through the carrying out of repetitive and boring tasks at work, through the coldness that one needs to compete against others in the job market – and it is by no means an easy task to switch on and off such frigid mode of being as we leave for work and come back home afterwards to our beloved ones.

Nevertheless, such pressure into coldness goes well beyond the universe of work into the very way our consciousness is formed. The logic of compulsive consumption, with the continual change of objects of desire in the marketplace, appears here as applicable to people as well, turned into goods to be assessed in terms of how much they value regarding their sexual attractiveness through pre-given standards that the consumer must use to evaluate them – a process that social media, decades after the publication of the book in 1951, have assuredly intensified. Here, the continual change of objects of sexual desire constitutes the very form of desiring itself, with such fragmentary continual change of objects of attention constituting the very form of consciousness itself.

We can now see how internal to the realm of love itself the problem is: it seems to be socially programmed to fade away, so that one cannot count on its “naturalness”. Therefore, because the repetitive dynamic of applying criteria of attractiveness to evaluate the presented objects is nothing more than work, one might hope

⁶ “Gravitational force” translates here “Schwerkraft” and “duration”, “Dauer”, instead of “force of social pressure” and “permanence”. Not only are the terms more accurate, but also they contribute to the meaning reverberations of the text, as shall be shown further down. We also opted, in the first sentence, for the structure “If..., then...” for translating “Wenn..., dann...” instead of “Even though...,...” not only because it is more accurate, but also because it mirrors the logical, and, therewith, not “natural”, construction of fidelity.

that by insisting on one person as *the* loved one, it would be possible to actually stop the assembly line and achieve “dispensation from work”. Once more, as readers, we may be led to evoke the very widespread narrative of finding someone special to love amid the grey and undifferentiated crowd, the one person that stands out of the infinity of people that cross our way every day. In this regard, such a tale appears to derive its appeal from the unfulfilling character of the relentless flux of objects of consumption to which we are accustomed in daily life, from the wish to cease such flow of objects of attention that we must continually process also in the sphere of private affections.

To break away from such flow, nevertheless, of course, is very hard. So hard, that the aphorism puts the formation of our desire in parallel with an inescapable force, namely, the “gravitational force”, one that accompanies us even before we are born, permeating the discovery of our bodies and of the world through our bodies. In this regard, through this parallel with such natural force, the societal force is connected to the bodily discipline, which takes place in our taming of our senses for the adequate and most efficient processing of the various objects of desire that we are relentlessly offered. Furthermore, such analogy also hints on how natural such coercion may appear to us now, almost as the physical force pulling us down to Earth’s gravitational centre. In this sense, the “intrigues” that society “takes into its service” are not simply external obstacles, which the loving individuals must overcome in order to stay together for a true happy ending. They are rather internal to the relation itself, since desire itself pushes the lovers away from each other into seeking new objects of desire.

In this regard, the effort of keeping love alive as an effortless feeling gives birth to the daily testing of each relationship through the criteria of how long it can last. The persistence upon a same object of attention, then, strives to oppose the experience of fragmentary time arising from the continual change of objects of attention through a notion of continuation, of seamless time, under the motto that “love transcends time”.

Nevertheless, the same paradoxical conundrum we had before persists here: one remains continually attentive to time, in an effort of endurance, hoping to keep safe a feeling that is expected to actually suspend such effort of endurance. In this scenario, obsessive behaviour, the radically stubborn persistence on one object of desire, can be seen as the desperate expression of the attempt to realize love’s dreams of dispensation from work. Its exaggerated character, in which love as

obsessive devotion reveals its violent face, is only therewith the expression of the gigantic effort one must make to sustain the inner contradiction of persisting where one hopes to be free from having to persist.

Indeed, from such inner instability arises, then, a possible alternative:

“The affection, however, which in the guise of unreflecting spontaneity and proud of its alleged integrity, relies exclusively on what it takes to be the voice of the heart, and runs away as soon as it no longer thinks it can hear that voice, is in this sovereign independence precisely the tool of society. Passive without knowing it, it registers whatever numbers come out in the roulette of interests. In betraying the loved one, it betrays itself.”

The imagery evoked here through terms such as “proud”, “voice of the heart”, “roulette of interests” is very suggestive, resonating, for instance, the mythology of the freedom of the senses in parties as well as of the independence and power of the seducing bachelors and passionate, but non-attached lovers. And yet, once more, the paradox resists: by giving oneself to the variation of feelings, one is “proud” for being “spontaneous”, that is, one reaffirms oneself for something that denies one’s individual conscious effort; one seeks to dissolve its oneness by giving oneself “thoroughly” to the affections, and yet, one must keep alert to the possibility that such spontaneity of affection ends, that one may start lingering somewhere for sheer routine.

In this sense, by giving oneself to the constantly changing desires, one seems to seek to achieve a form of active individuality by denying the passive repetition of everyday life, perceived too in loving fidelity. Instead of repetition and duration, one seeks change, transformation, and variation. Nevertheless, as principled behaviour, such continual change, as indicated above, is already part of the daily routine as well, and the only activity possible therein is the passivity of registering and processing the data – the objects of desire – to which we are presented.

Because of this paradox, also the one who gives oneself to the constant change of objects of desire is continually latently hoping that an affection may arise that shall end the continual change of objects of interest. This dynamics echoes, for instance, the very widespread story of the implacable seducer, who eventually realizes to be actually afraid to love and, then, finds the opportunity of redemption within a loving relationship that must establish itself by fighting all the “intrigues” of society, that’s to say, the seducer’s compulsive tendency to run away from relationships. Crucially, it is part of this story of redemption that one realizes that by

running away from love one was actually running away from something one secretly desires, namely, “dispensation from work”, and therefore that one also realizes that “in betraying the beloved one” one “betrays” oneself.

At the beginning of the aphorism, we were faced with the problem of the opposition between love and society, reaching a conundrum about how to keep love and its critical power alive against the social pressures of everyday life. After two alternative failed attempts, through love fidelity and through, say, non-attachment, we arrive now at the conclusion of the text still hoping to find a way out. Despite the surface differences between the options given, established through criteria such as repetition and change, continuity and fragmentation etc, both options appear to be entangled in the same paradox of attempting to overcome work, but nevertheless also being forms of work, of effort, repetitive execution of principled behaviour. Our conundrum starts to take the form of a maze, from which we may not escape, with all hopes of salvation nearly lost. We reach, then, for the last sentence of the aphorism: “The command to fidelity issued by society is a means to unfreedom (Unfreiheit), but only through fidelity does freedom realize insubordination against society's command”⁷.

The opposition of love and society that places love as a realm outside the social world, say, as a “natural” and “involuntary” phenomenon, hides from itself how the social logic of work pervades already all realms of life, there being no safe haven that may serve as a stable basis for the resistance against it. So, despite the passage at the beginning of the aphorism that says that the bourgeois notion of love for a moment somewhat “transcends the bourgeois society”, at a first look, overall, what we appear to have in “Constanze” is a straightforward critique of that notion. Indeed, the critical aspirations of such notion are indicated to rely upon the idea of an absolute opposition between individual feeling and social logic, which the text proceeds to dismantle by indicating how the former actually turns into the latter “as soon as it is established as a principle”, which appears to be an inevitable part of the process which is also shown to shape our very desiring. Hence, the conclusion we are led to expect would be the discarding of fidelity as fruitful for social criticism. Until the last minute, accordingly, this seems to be the

⁷ We opted here for “The command to fidelity issued by society” to translate “Der Befehl zur Treue, den die Gesellschaft erteilt” instead of “The fidelity exacted by society”. Not only is it more accurate for keeping the moral and political resonances of the word “Befehl” (order, command), which is exacted upon the individuals, but it also maintains the parallelism of the passage, since “Befehl” is repeated on the second half of it.

conclusion of the aphorism: “The command to fidelity issued by society is a means to unfreedom”.

Nevertheless, we are then surprised by the affirmation that “only through fidelity” one can be free and, therewith, resist society’s rule. The element of surprise here arises from the fact that, on the one hand, the last sentence of the aphorism is built through a mirroring effect, being split into two halves that resemble each other and, yet, at the same time, make contrary statements, but, on the other, such dynamic of resemblance and difference has no clear and direct correspondence with what came before in the text. In other words, there isn’t, for instance, any explicit previous comparison between two concurring, similar and, yet, different forms of fidelity, to which this mirroring effect of the last sentence could refer. Therefore, this last part seems random, lacking any concrete support from the rest of the text, of which it is supposed to be a conclusion. We seem to face a paradox, in which fidelity is both a means to our domination, a command from society, and also a form of liberation, of rebellion against society. How could that be?

3 THE IMMERSIVE APHORISM

It feels as though the aphorism somehow tricked us, pulling the rug from under our feet. At first, we are somewhat led to believe that we will be dealing with a straightforward analysis of the critical potential of love. Therefore, we seek to attentively follow the sequence of sentences in order to understand a line of reasoning and argumentation in that sense. We adhere to the text believing it to be a step-by-step construct and expecting a conclusion in accordance with the steps taken, and “the command to fidelity issued by society is a means to unfreedom” would be a suitable one: love fidelity is nothing more than a social product, a numbing illusion that could never serve as basis for social critique.

Therefore, by introducing a paradox at the very last half of the last sentence, the aphorism seems to be attempting to make us change our way of approaching it. It seems to be indicating that we cannot simply rely upon the comprehension of a step-by-step concatenation of linear thoughts in order to decipher its meaning. Our attention is dislocated from the internal concatenation of contents to the form through which they are presented exactly because such internal concatenation of arguments unexpectedly fails, not due to internal incoherence, which we could attribute to bad argumentation, but rather due to a textual effect, which points to

something extra after the argumentation itself was successfully closed. That's to say, because of this last-minute inversion, approaching the text by engaging with it argumentatively, expecting transparent definitions, premises and conclusion, seems inappropriate as a mode of reading engagement, and, because of this, we first perceive it as a mode of engagement instead of simply automatically doing it.

It is as if the mirroring effect of the last sentence produced also a mirroring effect upon the aphorism as a whole, with "the command to fidelity issued by society is a means to unfreedom" compressing all the argumentation that came before, referencing denotative analysis, while "but only through fidelity does freedom realize insubordination against society's command" seeming, as an excess, to point somewhere else other than that. We are then therewith impelled to attempt to understand the sense of this last textual effect. And quite differently from abstract arguments, which allegedly rely on transparent networks of concepts and which therefore are purportedly reproducible disregarding the particular composition of its conveying text as long as the same structure of such networks is respected, the textual effect that we are considering here solely occurs in the particular composition of *this* text, demanding a certain form of immersion into its individual particularities.

Assuredly, this feature is not exclusive to Adorno's elaboration of the aphorism here, but rather a quality one might attribute to the genre in general. In his article "Note sull'aforisma. Statuto aletico e poetico del detto breve" ("Notes on the aphorism. Alethic and poetic status of the short saying"), Umberto Eco argues that a distinctive feature of the aphorism is that it makes use of astutely built expression to lead the reader away from the more immediate question of whether a content is true or false into the reflection about its conditions of truth or plausibility, of veridiction, drawing a parallel with poetry:

"Facing these poetic statements, we never ask whether they are true, or entirely acceptable, and we may be dazzled by a revelation and its contrary. We see them rising in their context, lashing us with their truth, which remains so even if we do not share the ethics or the politics of the poet, and in certain moments we ask them who we are and what we want, and in others we do not know what message they are conveying us, but we remain subjugated by their strength or their grace, as what happens with the epiphany. (...) And with this, another way of looking at the aphorism opens, not as a vehicle of wisdom, but as a poetic genre. And then we are able to accept also its bewildered improbability, the

sparkle of an intuition that goes beyond the paradox itself and pushes us into a continual hermeneutics.” (2004:165)

Textual effects, much as indicated above in the case of “Constanze”, drive us away from the more immediate reflection about whether something is argumentatively right or wrong, sufficient or insufficient, adequate or inadequate into an interpretative impulse, which leads to the examination of our very ways of judging and issuing judgements. The parallel with poetry is insightful in the sense that it indicates how the questions of what is said and of whether it is true or false are dislocated into or at least complemented with the questions of *how* it is said and what effects or implications this form of saying has for our given ways of expressing ourselves.

Of course, as Eco himself reminds us, there are many cases, in which such textual expressiveness in the short forms is only a means to simply reaffirm common sense, with its stylistic elaboration actually hindering any expansion or transformation of our worldviews or of our “world-viewing”. The issue now, then, is to understand more specifically the connection between “Constanze”’s immersive expressiveness and the critique it seeks to produce of our given modes of expression and the social badness of contemporary capitalist society.

4 AN IRRATIONALIST CRITIQUE?

One possible way of interpreting the textual effect at hand – and the critical stance it strives to produce – is to think of it as a form of irrationalism. In order to better understand this issue, let’s turn once more to the aphorism. As indicated above, at a first sight, its central concern seems to be the suitability of the concepts of fidelity and nonattachment for the construction of social critique. In this regard, these seem to aspire to achieve such critical perspective by focusing on the feeling of immediacy of the experience of falling in love that is supposed to oppose the social rule of disciplined work, that is, mediated effort. Furthermore, they represent opposite conceptions of such immediacy, with fidelity conceiving it as a form of immersion in a single object, and nonattachment defending that it is a matter of innovation, renovation, non-repetition. Nevertheless, as principles that describe and dictate general guidelines of behaviour, both of them fall in overt contradiction with themselves, since they strive to achieve involuntariness through voluntary action, effortless through effort, immediacy through mediation.

An irrationalist “Constanze” would arise from the conclusion that the problem here is that no principled discourse and behaviour could ever do justice to the goodness felt in the experience of falling in love, since this experience is good exactly for being somewhat unprincipled. In a way, such a perspective would be based upon the widespread conception of love for which this feeling is good because it is irrational, opposing therewith the rationality of disciplined effort in a society founded primarily on work. Nevertheless, this form of irrationalism would differ from simply reproducing the cliché that love is irrational, since it appeals to textual effects seeking to reproduce within itself the same sense of awe and immersion that it attributes to the goodness of phenomena such as falling in love. Indeed, by relying upon a textual effect and by abstaining from any further textual justifications or explanations, it seems to relate reason to transparent discourse and to strive, therefore, to achieve something beyond denotative meaning. That is to say, it would seek to textually perform the searched feeling of immediacy instead of simply discursively referring to it.

In other words, if what makes fidelity and nonattachment fail in their attempts of retrieving the goodness of love is that they are principles, this means that this goodness is somewhat in contradiction with the repetitive character of step-by-step guidelines of behaviour, including argumentation. Therefore, the form of irrationalism at hand would jump to the conclusion that this goodness is rather radically immersive, and that it cannot be analyzed and cut down into essential general features, the labeling of which could allow its mechanical replication. By focusing on its practical realization rather than solely on its denotative contents, this form of irrationalism seeks to reproduce practically a feeling of astonishment it deems to be irreproducible theoretically.

Gary Saul Morson, in the article “The Aphorism: Fragments from the Breakdown of Reason”, argues that this could be considered a distinctive trait of the short saying – although he himself does not overtly define it as a form of irrationalism. He indicates that the aphorism brings not only our worldviews, but also our viewing itself, our reason and language as a whole, to their limits. By drawing a parallel with the prophecies of Tyresias from King Oedipus, and much close to Eco’s position, he affirms that “The aphorism, like the god’s sign, does not contain, but points beyond itself, step by potentially endless step. It is a mystery” and “For the aphorist, the world does not give itself away. Searching for wisdom is like consulting the oracle, and each mystery begets another” (2003:413).

Much in line with the opposition drawn above between theoretical analysis and practical realization, he argues that

“Each tool we use to explore also partly deforms. All tools are defective, though not useless, so we must try many and see what results. A sort of uncertainty principle reigns, in which the way of investigation introduces its own distortions. Language points beyond itself, but we are never quite free of its entanglements. The Way that can be spoken of is not the true Way. But we may learn something by speaking of it, as Lao Tzu does. (2003:421)

With this reference to Lao Tzu’s aphorism “the way that can be spoken of is not the true way”, he seeks to underline that something lies beyond the realm of language, and that the latter distorts with its own rigid structure something that is fluid: “our picturing mechanism cannot work in describing the most important things, which are pictureless, since they are what makes the picturable possible” (2003:425). Nevertheless, he argues that, by bringing language to its limits, the aphorism makes us go through momentary experiences of revelation of such “pictureless”, and, in a way, our perspective of the world therewith broadens and changes.

In this respect, this interpretation of the aphorism as a genre of discourse comes very much close to the interpretation that James Finlayson offers of Adorno’s writing style in regard to its critical objectives. In “Adorno On The Ethical and The Ineffable”, he argues that, for Adorno, “To think philosophically is to think in concepts. One cannot think the good by means of concepts without identifying it and thereby doing it an injustice” (2002:11). In other words, he claims that, for Adorno, conceptual thinking is identical to instrumental reasoning, which seeks to achieve goals through principled action and which, nevertheless, as “Constanze” indicates, as an omnipresent form of reason, hinders any form of spontaneous experience.

We can see a concrete example of this dynamic in our aphorism: when we are faced with the experience of falling in love, since it contradicts an overwhelmingly predominant tendency of social life of work and effort, such experience appears almost as something magical, of miraculous rarity. Felt as something good against the badness of daily life, it makes us desperate to guarantee it doesn’t fade away, since spontaneous feelings tend to die within a world of constant effort. Nevertheless, since “everywhere bourgeois society insists on the exertion of will”, this form of disciplined engagement with the world is the only one that we really know. So

we intuitively seek to take hold of love, so that it doesn't disappear, so that it can be repeated again and again and, therewith, lead to a "better" society, a better life. And thereby, tragically, the same movement that seeks to secure such feeling from fading away – for instance, through principles such fidelity – is exactly the one that guarantees that its tragic fate is realized by making it disappear, since the effort of producing a general concept of such experience is already contrary to it, which fades away by losing exactly what made it so special in the first place: being spontaneous, relaxed, devoid of effort.

In this regard, Finlayson argues that Adorno's writing style strives to convey a form of experience that arises from being brought to the consciousness of the limits of conceptual thought and of language itself, which he accordingly calls an "experience of the ineffable". And this experience, he argues, would be opposed to instrumental experience because it would constitute an end in itself: "an ineffable insight is good, but it is not a conception of something, therefore, it is not an instance of identity-thinking and not part of the context of universal fungibility Adorno is criticizing" (2002:17).

Finlayson's argument, then, articulates the notion of the aphorism bringing the reader to the limits of reason and language under the specific Adornian preoccupation with the problem of the possibility of a critique of the prevalence of instrumentality in the contemporary world. According to him, this sort of experience of the limits of language would be valuable in itself, contrary to instrumentality, in which each experience is done for the sake of accomplishing something else. In this regard, this form of bringing language to its limits could offer something valuable to push critique forward, a basis upon which resistance against the pressures of society could be built. If we were to apply this reading, then, to the second half of the last sentence of "Constanze", the latter wouldn't be pointing to any other form of fidelity or anywhere else: its content would allegedly lie entirely on the effect it produces of undermining argumentation and bringing language to its limits.

Nevertheless, and although Finlayson in his article was seeking to actually reject the accusation that Adorno's style tends to a form of mysticism and irrationalism, we believe that the interpretation he provides would nevertheless also constitute a form of irrationalism. This is the case because conceiving the type of experience that arises from textual effects such as the one from the ending of "Constanze" as

one of the “ineffable” leads to an undifferentiated engagement with the world that is supposed to be criticized.

This is so, because it doesn’t matter what the issue is about, love, friendship, family or work, or even the particular events within these areas, such as how to behave on a first date, how to talk to the partner about something unpleasant or how to show affection. In all these matters, all that an irrationalist of this sort can do is to lead us to the conclusion that there is no satisfactory option available through some sort of performative act. And even if it may succeed in filling us with surprise and awe for a moment, this effect does not provide concrete directions about how to deal with the problems at hand exactly because it is elaborated as to avoid any direction by bringing all available directions to their limits.

In other words, an experience of the ineffable in these terms divides the world all too strictly into what can be thought and said, and what cannot be thought and said, and therefore these two worlds couldn’t actually communicate with one another and one could not provide directions of how to transform the other, of how love could realize its aspiration of founding a better society. Focus on practical realization reminds us that goodness must be enacted to overcome instrumental reason, but this must be in a way to concretely produce action *in the world*. If it does not do so, it would inevitably become a form of blind and mechanical performance. In this regard, although this form of performative irrationalism strives to rescue the qualitative character of good experiences such as falling in love by focusing on their immersive character instead of reducing them to empirically determinable and reproducible patterns of behaviour, without a concrete engagement with the world it also becomes a blind procedure. Although Finlayson actually does argue that Adorno seeks to bridge such experience of the ineffable with the production of critical states of being, such as those of “Mündigkeit”, humility and love, it is hard to see how this would concretely work in actual everyday life circumstances, since these require specific action, elaboration and resolutions – and this specificity is dissolved under the generalizing gesture of pointing to the general insufficiency of language and reason.

Furthermore, how to differentiate such a gesture from, for instance, “obsession” – and, of course, therewith, possessive behaviour –, which follows almost quite logically from the notion of fidelity? After all, demonstrations of obsessive behaviour often justify their violent character as a good thing by implying that they actually echo the irrationality of love itself. From the impulsive gestures of love, going

through obsessive behaviour to outbursts of violence, all these are often seen and therewith even excused and tolerated as expressions of the limits of reason and language. In this regard, behaviours that would in other occasions be considered absurd or even offensive are often excused with the assumption that its performative absurdity is actually in accordance with the irrationality of love, as a sign of faithful devotion and of, therewith, being faithful to the irrational nature of love.

Now, this does not mean to argue against Morson that there aren't aphorisms that actually are composed in a way to incarnate this form of irrationalism; he himself offers a vast list of examples that are. Neither does it mean to argue against Finlayson that Adorno himself never makes use of this form of textual effects. It means, though, that, as critique, this critical stance is self-undermining. And we do believe that in "Constanze" and elsewhere in Adorno's work we may find an alternative to it.

5 THE "LESS WRONG" INTERPRETATION

It becomes clear that what underlies the irrationalist interpretation's impetus towards an allegedly "ineffable experience" is the feeling that everything within the realm of the effable, that is, everything within society is not only bad, but systematically and, therewith, equally bad. And this, as we indicated above, is problematic since it makes critical insight and practical realization, that is to say, praxis, impossible by dissolving the whole world into a grey undifferentiated continuum where the subject cannot practice judgement since, after all, it would all be taken beforehand as the same. In this regard, let's now take into consideration a concurring interpretation, which, instead of identifying a continuum of badness in the social world, believes to be possible to differentiate, within Adorno's perspective, the bad from the worse.

We believe Jay Bernstein's commentary of "Constanze" in his book *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* to be an example of this approach. For him, the aphorism is rather an argument favouring fidelity as a less wrong option against the idea of giving oneself to the "voice of the heart". According to his interpretation, the centre of the problem lies in that "fidelity's willing explicitly contradicts the presumed good of love's involuntariness; but this good is betrayed even more by a lack of willing. If there is no fidelity to the good of love except through fidelity, then the good of love is sustained only by what explicitly opposes it" (2001:51). In

other words, for him, the aphorism is attempting to show how, in a world of socially produced hectic desire, giving oneself to it could not really produce any form of freedom, but rather solely randomness. So, although the voluntariness of fidelity as a principle contradicts the alleged involuntariness of the experience of falling in love, it would still be better than the concurring alternative since it at least would conserve the impulse of actively acting against the social tendencies to preserve such goodness of love rather than dissolving into sheer passive randomness.

As much as with the case of performative irrationalism, from which we praise the attention to practical realization against the impotence of sheer theoretical reference, but with which we do not share the idea of “ineffable experiences”, there are aspects of this interpretation that we find valuable while also disagreeing with its general conclusions. Let’s start with the disagreements.

Its main limitation, we believe, is that it relies on a rather non-dialectical construction of the notions of activity and passivity, which keeps them separate as static and pure oppositions. In other words, it seems to presuppose that there is such a thing as pure activity and pure passivity, whereas we believe that not only “Constanze”, but *Minima Moralia* as a whole, seek to dismantle such static constructions. As much as one can argue that fidelity, as a principle, commands and regulates some form of activity, one can say the same about a notion such as non-attachment, with its active effort of keeping affection away from routine and repetition.

In other words, while fidelity focuses on the particular immersion in one object that we sense in the experience of falling in love, non-attachment focuses on its innovating, non-repetitive character, the feeling of finding something new. That’s why, from the perspective of non-attachment, fidelity appears as the villain representing societal manipulation with its insistence on mechanical repetition, while conversely non-attachment appears as the villain from fidelity’s perspective for its insistence in relentless variation. Both believe to be actively resisting society by respectively opposing socially dictated repetition and variation. Nevertheless, as principles, they both fail themselves in achieving what they want: non-attachment, instead of novelty, is the sheer repetition of the socially produced dynamic of the continual change of objects of desire; fidelity, instead of immersion, deprives its object of any immersive particularity by turning it into the sheer object of mechanic concentration.

Indeed, aphorism 49, “Moral und Zeitordnung”, presents the reader with the inverse scenario, with fidelity as the persistence upon one and the same object of affection appearing as contrary to freedom, being put in parallel with economic possession. From the apparent warmth of fidelity’s demand of exclusiveness, says Adorno,

“(...) an irresistible path leads, by way of the little boy’s aversion for his younger brother and the fraternity-student’s contempt for his ‘fag’ to the immigration laws that exclude all non-Caucasians from Social-Democratic Australia, and right up to the fascist eradication of the racial minority, in which, indeed, all warmth and shelter explode into nothingness. (2005:79)

Hence, choosing fidelity over non-attachment would seem rather random and unjustifiable⁸.

Now, the merit of Bernstein’s interpretation lies, we believe, in its hinting at the latent and potential critical power of fidelity, and, therewith, at the notion that concepts and social practices are non-identical with themselves, that is to say, that they possess a moment of internal tension pointing beyond themselves. Indeed, Bernstein’s interpretation focuses on the second sentence of “Constanze”, on the idea that the “the bourgeois idea of love transcends bourgeois society”. That’s why, for him, in the last passage of the fragment, Adorno is insisting on fidelity against non-attachment: it might be socially practiced in a way that impedes freedom, but it also somewhat promises freedom.

The main difficulty here is understanding this “somewhat”, understanding how one thing can be non-identical with itself, specially because, as we indicated above, this feature is not exclusive to fidelity, being possible to attribute it to non-attachment as well. *Minima Moralia*, indeed, in a way, is basically constituted of reflections on how concepts and practices systematically internally fail into achieving what they aspire. The problem is, then, to understand how to unlock such critical potential, which presupposes also understanding why and how it is socially repressed.

⁸ Although we do not share his interpretation of “Constanze”, as a further indication of how random favoring fidelity seems, it is worthwhile considering Clemens Porschlegel’s brief commentary of the aphorism in *Minima Moralia: Neu gelesen*. He shares Bernstein’s impression that Adorno is favouring bourgeois fidelity against non-attachment, but this seems unjustifiable to him. Accordingly, the only explanation he finds is attributing Adorno a form of anachronistic romanticism, that’s to say, a random personal preference, which hinders actual social critique.

Crucially, this issue leads us to the central question of the meaning of Adorno's notion of "social totality". More precisely, of how systematic such totality really is. With the interpretation presented in this section – let's call it the "less wrong" interpretation – we can better understand the limits of the irrationalist interpretation indicated above: for the latter, the social totality is absolute in the sense that the whole world is dissolved into a continuum of undifferentiated badness and, therewith, no action is possible within such world, propelling the individual into seeking something allegedly outside it and, therewith, failing in acting *within* it. If a concept such as fidelity has an internal moment of non-identity, then, there is an internal way to criticize and act within society.

Conversely, the irrationalist interpretation also helps us to highlight the limits of the "less wrong" one. Its notion of a continuum of badness hints at how the contemporary world is structured in a way to systematically repress any form of spontaneity. Because of this, socially shared principles and patterns of behaviour all somewhat have, in a way or another, an impulse and an aspiration at freedom, at breaking free from such repression. Therefore, having or not having such aspiration, as much as being active or not, as indicated above, do not really function as guiding principles to evaluate concepts and practices within such bad totality.

The main issue is to understand how, beyond sheer abstract analysis, such potential can be practically realized within critique, that is, how it can become praxis beyond instrumental abstract reason. This does not mean to say that one cannot identify less wrong options within society here and now; on the contrary, such praxis should rather be able to provide a more concrete guidance for such evaluation, as we shall attempt to show in the following.

6 PARADOX AND CRITIQUE

In order to do so, we would like to focus on the figure of speech of the paradox, so often associated with the aphorism as a genre, and its relation to Adorno's critical aspirations. Firstly, we would argue that both the irrationalist approach and the "less wrong" one actually neutralize the paradoxical character of "Constanze" instead of unveiling and actualizing its critical potential. This is so because both

alternatives block the mediating character of the paradox between two worlds, its feature of producing a tension between how the world is and how it should be⁹.

In the irrationalist case, the paradox is dissolved into sheer performative negation of all that is, there being no concrete connection between the latter and what it should be. That's why we said that it provides no orientation of how to act within the world apart from the paralyzing and self-deluding stance of denying everything – self-deluding, because, of course, one is invariably always acting all the time. In Bernstein's interpretation, on the contrary, one could hardly say that we reach a paradox at all, but rather a dilemma, where one ends up opting, after some careful considerations, for the less wrong option. It rather therewith accepts how things are against what they should be by simply favouring fidelity over non-attachment as if its critical power were immediately available here and now, ignoring how in reality it is not easily accessible at all and therewith neglecting the difficult discussion of how to realize it.

In this regard, we believe that in the last passage of “Constanze”, its paradoxical character is connected with the attempt to concretely produce such mediation between how the world is and how it should be, that is, between the way fidelity tends to be socially practiced and a possible other form of behaviour it potentially aims at producing. And such mediation is aware that such potential cannot be realized neither “outside” society through an irrationalist performance nor fully inside it through the balancing of pros and cons of immediately given options. It must consider and sustain, as mediation, the unbalance between the enormous systematicity of the badness of everyday life and the fragility of the goodness, which sometimes erupt within it and which concepts such fidelity attempt and fail to uphold.

To better understand this, let's first briefly review what we have this far. If the reader understands that fidelity as it is generally and prevalently socially practiced does not immediately offer a basis for concretely producing social deviation, and that it is not in any way better than non-attachment per se, then, the last part of the aphorism will strike as surprising and contradictory. This aims, we argued, at shifting the reader's attention from the sheer content of what is said to the problem of the meaning of how this is said, or, as Eco puts it, to the issue of the conditions of veridiction of what is said. That's what we have called the immersive

⁹ For this conception of the paradox as a mediating phenomenon as well as for its relation with the aphorism as a genre, it is also worthwhile consulting Eco's article “Note sull'aforisma”.

character of the aphorism, since this dislocation absolutely depends on the flesh of the text, on the particular way it is composed, which demands the reader to read it *within* such particularities.

Furthermore, those conditions of veridiction, following Finlayson's interpretation of this feature within Adorno's work, are related specifically to the predominance within contemporary capitalist society of instrumental reasoning. In other words, in our society, when we seek to express ourselves and think in everyday life, we tend to do so instrumentally. Because of this, if this last textual effect were to produce a critical effect, it would need to convey a form of experience that is non-instrumental, the value of which can be appreciated for itself within the experience itself.

The only, but crucial step, then, which our interpretation does not share with the irrationalist reading presented above, is that this critical form of experience, at least in the case of "Constanze", would be an experience of the "ineffable". On the contrary, we believe it to be an experience of finally being able to say what one usually isn't able to due to the shifting in the form of saying, which here and now concretely overcomes the limitations of the one that we are used to, namely, the instrumental one.

In this regard, although we might read the aphorism as an argument for or against certain modes of behaviour, inviting us to consider the pros and cons of and choose between fidelity, nonattachment or even performative irrationalism, this would be a pale representation of it. If we pay close attention to the way the text is built, by no means it truly resembles an argument in the strict sense, with structured transparent definitions and step-by-step progression of the chain of thoughts from premises to conclusions. These are, of course, somewhat referred to; but before we are allowed to fully adjust to their logic and attempt to analyze them in detail, the aphorism rapidly moves forward as if no further argument were necessary. The arguments and therewith argumentation as a mode of engagement are hinted at, but not allowed to further develop.

As we recognize them, though, in order to understand the text, we must fill in all the gaps that the aphorism's speed leaves behind by simply moving forward. That's why, in the presentation above, we strived to suggest some of the narratives and tales connected to the concepts presented and their internal tensions, such as those of the loving couple against society or of the love that stands out of the grey mass of people. These are by no means exterior to the aphorism, but rather

necessary for us to understand what it is talking about, since it does not lay down transparent explanatory reasons for moving from one alternative to the other: it simply counts on our intuitive comprehension of the insufficiency of the options given.

We, the readers, have already been faced with them in real life, have already seen their dialectics, have already lived through them as we sought to act in accordance with them. Not only the options themselves, but also the very mode of attempting to find a solution for their insufficiency are things that we are very familiar with. When further motifs, inversions and contradictions are introduced in the text, the meaning of such connections depend on our intuitive understanding that love cannot be effortless, not due to an abstract analysis of its concept, but because we already sought to live and act as if it were effortless and no matter which type of contortions we made with concepts such as fidelity or nonattachment, the result remained the same: we were frustrated, and the suffering of our constraining into principled mechanic behaviour repeated itself.

Therefore, despite refusing fully entering an argumentative mode, the aphorism is by no means sheer chaos. It proceeds by introducing themes, setting up references and allusions, and therewith forming a constellation of images, and what articulates such images as we move through the constellation is our intuitive perception of the repetition of a same form of violence persisting throughout all the options given, that is to say, the perception of the predominance of instrumentality and of the way it hurts us.

In the mirroring effect of the last sentence, then, its second half is not pointing to somewhere outside the aphorism (and language and society), but rather to this constellatory way of proceeding itself, the one which constitutes itself in an opposition to argumentation and which we are invited to perceive through the last textual effect. It is as if the aphorism transformed itself by allowing its latent being to come forth and to take over the way it appears to the reader. It makes us realize it never was an argument to begin with; we were the ones that first attempted to read it as one because we are so accustomed to do it. It is *because* it fails as an argument through a last-minute contradiction that we recognize argumentation as *the* mode of engagement with the world that we prevalently tend to use. And, thereby, “Constanze” also allows the reader to be faithful to the feeling of suffering such prevalence produces in our daily lives exactly because, here and now, we break free

from it by being allowed to not enter argumentation and to remain faithful to the particularities of *this* aphorism that we are reading here and now.

The paradox in the last sentence, then, mediates between the way we first approach the aphorism, argumentatively, and a form of engagement with the text that concretely opposes argument seeking to overcome the violence that the latter produces by repressing subjective experience in favour of alleged objectivity. Such paradox marks the moment in which the aphorism refuses to be approached as an argument, in which it refuses to let go of its textual particularities in favour of general structures that allow fast and mechanic manipulation of concepts, and such refusal strives to reverberate the reader's latent impulse to go beyond argument and instrumentality as well.

Pivotaly, by conveying an immersive experience of attentiveness and carefulness to the text's particularities structured through a particular form of textual elaboration, the aphorism, then, also demystifies love. It helps us to see how the experience of falling in love is valued as good exactly for also having such mediating paradoxical character, with the disruption of the continuum of grey sameness of everyday life by the immersive perception of another person, which also changes the way we perceive ourselves and perception itself. By re-actualizing such mediating character here and now – and thereby realizing fidelity's aspirations of rescuing such goodness –, “Constanze” shows how love, in this regard, is not magical, or rather that its magic is not connected to any sort of irrationality, but arises under certain circumstances through a particular structure in a way that overcomes instrumentality into an immersive experience; that is, love is shown to be a mode of engagement.

By rescuing such critical power through a particular textual elaboration, “Constanze” succeeds where fidelity and non-attachment as principles fail: to go from spontaneous “pure feeling” to reflective resistance without dissolving into “stubborn counter-pressure”. It is not a matter of the ineffable, but rather of learning to express oneself in another way, which uses concepts “indirectly”, allowing allusion, connotation, intuition, suffering and pleasure to take part in thought. Instead of offering schematic and mechanic directions of behaviour, such as principles do, there is here a form, which realizes itself through personal experiences and through which personal experiences are allowed to be faithfully accessed and transformed, allowing one to concretely and individually judge on each occasion

what in a given concept and in a given practice is hurtful and what is potentially liberating, and also to attempt to realize on each occasion such potential¹⁰.

What we believe “Constanze” is striving to accomplish, then, is not simply to teach theoretically what fidelity is or isn’t, but rather, by leading the reader within the reading to practice fidelity to the aphorism’s particularities and to one’s own personal feelings, to convey a mode of critical engagement that may provide concrete guidance in everyday life. Such critical engagement, instead of theoretically balancing pros and cons of immediately given options, relies rather on the immersive felt-in-our-flesh evaluation of how much concepts and practices live up to their own aspirations of freedom and how much they rather internally resist such realization. In this regard, such engagement depends on our non-transparent intuition of both the identical and the non-identical moments of such concepts and practices, that’s to say, the non-argumentative intuitive perception of how and where they hurt and how and where they promise liberation. And in as far as such paradoxical mediation between how the world is and how it should be provides a good non-instrumental experience here and now, critique overcomes the separation between the theoretical analysis of what things are and the transformative practice into what they should be. Critique becomes a praxis that conveys goodness here and now so that the transformation of life into a better one may have a concrete path to follow¹¹.

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¹⁰ This is, perhaps we should highlight, something that makes sense within the realm of the critique of culture, and not in all realms of thought and knowledge. Adorno’s view is not that conceptuality as instrumentality is bad per se, but rather that its predominance as the only form of thinking is bad. For both scientific thought and for the more “pragmatic” level of daily life it remains constitutive and crucial.

¹¹ And, in this regard, we believe to have indicated a way to solve a problem raised by Rahel Jaeggi concerning the use of contradiction and determinate negation for immanent critique: “It is a hard question, how the (logical) relation of contradiction is to be carried over to (practical) contradictions in social reality” (2005:137). In our interpretation, there is no gap between theoretical analysis and practical transformation, since they come together in a reading experience, which conveys both at once. The gap that does remain, however, of course, is that between this individual experience and instrumentally structured social life as a whole.

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