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Adorno's Dash: Dialectics of the Inconspicuous*

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Abstract

The study focuses in detail on Adorno's punctuation as one of the key components of his philosophic style and an integral element of his negative dialectics. By providing a complex analysis of the peculiar way Adorno handles punctuation marks, the study should help the reader to achieve a richer and more precise understanding of Adorno's texts. Punctuation marks will be presented not only as means of underscoring the acoustic aspect of the text and rendering it musical but also as objects that can react to current historical processes and help to meaningfully transform them as well.

Keywords: Adorno, style, punctuation in philosophy, theory of language, Walter Benjamin

After the turn of the millennium it has been widely recognized that Adorno's conception of language plays a central role in his philosophy.[1] Numerous treatises of the main aspects of Adorno's approach have been already published by excellent adornian interpreters[2] and the only thing the readership may be still waiting for are more systematic book-length studies of his overall language theory.[3] An important piece of the puzzle that is still missing, though, is a case study that would focus complexly on one of the components of Adorno's style and demonstrate how it presents itself in a concrete text;[4] for Adorno was a performative philosopher in the sense that he manifested his theoretical insights in the *Darstellung* of his works, i.e. in the manner in which they were written.[5] Therefore, a comprehensive interpretation of a concrete text

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that would close in on *how* it is written would be as valuable as the numerous studies that pick out *what* Adorno says about language from the fragmentary insights scattered across his various works and try to reconstruct his overall view of the matter.[6] However, a text that would serve well as object of such detailed examination is hard to find since most of Adorno's studies are stuffed with unusual linguistic figures to such a degree that they simply overpower the interpreter with their sheer number and subtlety. There's too much going on in works like the *Aesthetic Theory* to be analysed complexly in this way. For this reason the interpreter has no choice but to turn to the most innocent looking texts by Adorno and hope that at least in their case he will be able to make sense of their style. I will venture on the task of such an analysis and look closely at a neat study from the *Notes to Literature* called *Punctuation Marks*, because it provides me with an opportunity to pick out and examine Adorno's punctuation as one of the little key elements of his style. The same way Benjamin's sole disciple Adorno often does, I will focus on a tiny fragment and try to show how it expresses the whole. My intention is to meaningfully compare two aspects of the study with each other, namely that what Adorno *says* in the text and what he *does* in it, mostly in terms of punctuation. Such a comparison should yield interesting results. For although it may not seem like it, a better grasp of Adorno's approach to punctuation can enable the reader to uncover the whole scope of what his texts express.[7] The concrete, material experience of reading Adorno, so to say, may transform itself into a more enriching and enjoyable undertaking.

It is no secret that Adorno had a singular, almost idiosyncratic style of writing and that many readers of philosophy have become acquainted with "an instantly recognizable Adorno sound" (Plass 2007).[8] Nevertheless, it should still be pointed out that punctuation is one of the main secrets of his uniqueness since it defines the rhythm, tempo and voice-leading of the text; in other words, it structures the text musically.[9] It is also the aspect in which Adorno's style differs the most from Benjamin's. For even though the influence of Benjamin's theory of language on Adorno was decisive and

central benjaminian *words* such as *constellation*, *dialectical image* or *allegory* have made their way into Adorno's philosophic vocabulary,[10] the same did not apply for Benjamin's punctuation and all that goes along with it. Both thinkers placed decisive emphasis on the moment of expression of truth that is in opposition to mere communication of thoughts or information, but whereas Benjamin understood his texts in visual terms, namely as the notorious dialectical images, Adorno kept his attention directed primarily to the acoustic aspect of his works. Benjamin cared primarily about how his philosophy looked, Adorno about how it sounded. In other words, Adorno was more reserved than Benjamin with regards to the conception of the philosophical text as revelation, as instantaneous visual manifestation of truth. Adorno's style lies somewhere in between the *stasis* of Benjamin's revelatory dialectical imagery and the dynamic flow of a discursive text.[11] It is also situated between the two poles designated by language ontology and language instrumentalism. For Adorno, language is neither a being in itself through which Being itself would speak,[12] nor is it a mere arbitrary instrument for communicating human thoughts.[13] Language cannot become expressive either when the human subject puts itself in the position of a mere amplifier that lets language itself speak and does not add anything of its own to it, or when the subject takes the reins completely and the text becomes a dead representation of his or her ideas that does not enrich or alter them in any way. The subject should not stand over language, but neither should it disappear under its *murmure*. It is a subtle cooperation of subject and language that Adorno is about. And the same applies to the relation of language and history. Adorno was neither a language *purist* nor what I would like to provisionally call a language *grimist*. While the purists view language as a closed system that evolves on its own like a growing organism and remains relatively untouched by historic events, the so called grimists consider it to be completely dependent on the course of history and defined by it.[14] The purists have no place in language for external influences, the grimists see language as influenced primarily from the outside, e.g. by Latinization. According to the purists, language is an

organic unity that is purposeful in itself and its organic life is measured by a "teleological rhythm" (Adorno 1992, 288), i.e. it grows towards flourishment, towards expressive fullness; in the grimists view, language is purely passive towards history and has no opportunity to transcend it. Once again, Adorno confronts dialectically these two positions and maintains a conception of language that is utmost sensitive to the influence of history on it but keeps the possibility to transcend or transform the course of history *in language*–how ever slightly–open. Through the most complex mediations, Adorno's thoroughly historical language points to something beyond history. History transcends itself in adornian texts the same way the subject does. With this necessary basic delineation of Adorno's position being completed, I invite the reader to join me in the detailed examination of the chosen text.

I.

The essay *Punctuation Marks* stands out from the whole of *Notes to Literature* at first glance. It is the only text that visually suggests fragmentation. The paragraphs are separated by blank lines and look like free-floating pieces of a mosaic. However, it was not Adorno's intention to point to the fragmentary character of the text by this very visual shape. Such simple use of expressive means was something he rather omitted–and even his works that are made of seamlessly connected page-long paragraphs that the modern readers fear[15] are fragmentary. There are no less discontinuities in *Negative Dialectics* or *Aesthetic Theory* than in the *Punctuation Marks*. So the question is what Adorno wants to say by the blatant separation of individual paragraphs. In the case of *Punctuation Marks* he seems to be expressing something he explicitly claims in the text, namely that "the writer is in a permanent predicament when it comes to punctuation marks" (Adorno 1991, 96). The blank spaces express that there should be something that both connects and separates the paragraphs, but the writer is not able to find it. A dash, ellipsis, a little *, anything would be more satisfying than the open space that evokes a strong feeling of incompleteness, of the author leaving the text too early before its proper completion.[16] In other words,

Adorno expresses the *failure* of punctuation marks to complete the text into a visually satisfying whole.[17] He is showing the reader that given the historical state of language he has no punctuation marks at hand that would help him to express the very sense of separation and connection between the paragraphs–i.e. between the ensembles of his thoughts–that he wants to manifest. Any given mark would be misleading and give the reader a wrong impression. In a sense, the void between the lines is more glaring than even the crudest punctuation mark would be and in this way it gives the reader the primary impression the text is supposed to make: the failure and absence of punctuation marks are what the text is about in the first place.[18] The main content of the work is expressed primarily through the form in which it is written.[19]

II.

If Adorno were to opt to fill the void with a punctuation mark, the main candidate would be the dash. For the dash captures "both connection and detachment" (Adorno 1991, 95), which is something Adorno wants to make the reader feel at the beginning of each new paragraph.[20] It is in the dash that "thought becomes aware of its fragmentary character" (Adorno 1991, 93). For this reason dashes kept their place–unlike question marks or exclamation points–in Adorno's repertoire of punctuation marks and were used with vigour by the big proponent of fragmentariness of thought. Adorno's dashes often remind the reader of Hegel's ones which could split a paragraph into two dialectically opposed halves like a flash of lightning. Nevertheless, Adorno chose to not set them in between the ensembles of his thoughts in *Punctuation Marks* and the sole two places where he did use them show that it is the very dash that performs the most dialectical act in the whole text. I will quote the two sentences in original because it is extremely hard to reproduce perfectly Adorno's punctuation in a foreign language, for which reason the punctuation in Shierry Weber Nicholsen's translation differs from the original. The first sentence goes like this:

> Der Unterschied zwischen dem griechischen Semikolon, jenem erhöhten Punkt, der der Stimme verwehren will, sich zu senken, und

> dem deutschen, das mit Punkt und Unterlänge die Senkung vollzieht und gleichwohl, indem es den Beistrich in sich aufnimmt, die Stimme in der Schwebe läßt, wahrhaft ein dialektisches Bild – dieser Unterschied scheint den zwischen der Antike und dem christlichen Zeitalter, der durchs Unendliche gebrochenen Endlichkeit, nachzuahmen; auf die Gefahr hin, daß das heute gebräuchliche griechische Zeichen erst von Humanisten des sechzehnten Jahrhunderts erfunden ward. (GS 11, 107)

> The distinction between the Greek semicolon [.] , a raised point whose aim is to keep the voice from being lowered, and the German one, which accomplishes the lowering with its period and its hanging lower part and yet keeps the voice suspended by incorporating the comma–truly a dialectical image–seems to reproduce the distinction between classical antiquity and the Christian Era, finitude refracted through the infinite, although it may be the case that the Greek sign currently in use was invented by the sixteenth-century Humanists. (Adorno 1991, 92)

Now while the English dashes uplift the term *dialectical image* from the stream of the sentence, the German dash functions similarly as the serious dashes of Theodor Storm, whom Adorno praises as their "unsurpassed master in nineteenth-century German literature" (Adorno 1991, 93). Storm was more thoughtful in using his dashes than the modern writers that Adorno criticizes as sloppy; nevertheless, he still used the dash in a way that was unsatisfactory to Adorno and the quoted sentence can be viewed as an implicit critique of the nineteenth-century dash. For even though Storm could place dashes between sentences in a compelling way that evoked a connection of events that were separated by large periods of time or an enormous temporary separation of those that were seemingly contemporary to each other, these connections and separations had a tint of mythical fatefulness, which is something that Adorno tried diligently to overcome. In Storm's texts events were bound together by a mythological force and it was in the dashes that myth was hidden, according to Adorno.[21] Well, his own dash does the same thing as those of Storm: it carries the reader far back into antiquity and makes it seem as if the evolution of the semicolon from the Greek one to the German Christian one was mythically bound to happen; as though things couldn't be otherwise. But his sentence does not stop here. In fact, the effect of the dash is immediately negated

by another of Adorno's favourites, the semicolon. The latter interrupts the seeming mythological continuity of historical time, saying that the Greek mark can very well be just an anachronism and the pictured development just an illusion. In the sentence the dash introduces a mythical moment, the semicolon a critical one. It is the latter that breaks the flow of the sentence in the right way, not the former, and Adorno's critique of myth expresses itself as a critique of the dash by the semicolon. The dash is implicitly told that it should search for a new function since the nineteenth-century's one has become outdated. Another telling fact is that the dash appears right after the term *dialectical image* which seems to be originally designated to describe the semicolon; nonetheless, it is the dash itself that becomes a dialectical image in the end, fitting precisely the definition of such a phenomenon. It is that which was once modern and effective but ages and becomes outmoded in front of the reader's eyes.[22] The dash is a place at which a historical dynamic can be sensed as it is in process.

III.

All in all, the way Adorno handles the first dash is a bright little variation on Benjamin's approach to historic phenomena. First, he declares that the dash is currently undergoing a crisis, degenerating into a sloppy device and, as far as its proper function goes, vanishing from history.[23] His next step is to direct his gaze towards the past and look for a better example of a use of the dash in it–not to restore it pure and simple but to critically overcome it. Adorno shows that the fact that the present is in crisis does not imply that the past was perfect; it had its own flaws and can be used only as a clue leading to new possibilities that can be discovered in the degenerating phenomenon. The dash should separate seemingly connected things without re-inserting a mythic fateful bond in between them; it should separate them in order to investigate each of them immanently and to critique rationally the false claims they are making. It is a new way of using the dash Adorno is looking for.[24]

IV.

The second dash in the *Punctuation Marks* is dialectical in a much more direct sense. For it is a dash and a negation of a dash at the same time. It appears in the last paragraph where Adorno elaborates on the relation of the writer to the rules of punctuation:

> Weder kann er den vielfach starren und groben Regeln sich anvertrauen, noch kann er sie ignorieren, wenn er nicht einer Art Eigenkleidung verfallen und durch die Pointierung des Unscheinbaren – und Unscheinbarkeit ist das Lebenselement der Interpunktion – deren Wesen verletzen will. (GS 11, 112)

> The writer cannot trust in the rules, which are often rigid and crude; nor can he ignore them without indulging in a kind of eccentricity and doing harm to their nature by calling attention to what is inconspicuous–and inconspicuousness is what punctuation lives by. (Adorno 1991, 96)

Here the interruption effected by the dashes highlights Adorno's insight about the inconspicuous nature of punctuation marks. However, by calling attention to the inconspicuous, Adorno negates its very imperceptibility. The inconspicuous becomes glaring. Now the dashes stare at the reader like two *chlorurus sordidus*. As such, they can no longer put emphasis on the words they uplift since they are drawing it involuntarily on themselves. The dash has stopped being a dash and became an incomprehensible glaring symbol instead. As conspicuous, the dash is dead, wrested out of its *Lebenselement* like a fish on the shore.[25] The symbol "–" exists as a dash, as a punctuation mark only insofar as it is working inconspicuously in between words. Otherwise it turns into an undecipherable short line. Still, this is what Adorno makes the reader experience. The quoted sentence is a place where the dialectics of punctuation have been brought to a standstill. Now that the words have called attention to punctuation, the reader becomes painfully aware not only of the dashes but of all the marks in the text. This attentive gaze puts them to death and the text cannot flow forward anymore. The sentences disintegrate into single words which lack any structured context that would provide them with meaning. The words have turned against punctuation marks whose annulation has brought the downfall of words. This conflict does not lead to any goal, though, it results in no higher conception of language that would do away with

punctuation marks. Rather, it has to be "endured each time" (Adorno 1991, 96) as a conflict between the universal rules of punctuation, the adherence to which keeps the marks inconspicuous, and the subjective will to expression which wants to use them even against rules, thus making them stand out. Without either of these elements the text would not be truly expressive.

V.

It is no accident that Adorno created a conflict between words and punctuation marks. For these two had been already set in opposition by the manner in which they were used by the society of Adorno's day. They had been viewed as two separated, autonomous sets, not as two inseparable organs of the body of written language. According to social custom, punctuation marks were used as external instruments that structure words in order to make them comprehensible to the reader; they were like blades with which the raw meat of the text was chopped up into small chunks so that it could be easily consumed. However, Adorno viewed them differently: "instead of diligently serving the interplay between language and the reader, they serve, hieroglyphically, an interplay that takes places in the interior of language, along its own pathways" (Adorno 1991, 96). According to Adorno, punctuation marks should not be set in between words with the intention of making an effect on the reader; it should rather be the words themselves, the expression they want to achieve, that demand certain marks to be used at concrete places. Adorno's punctuation marks can–and at some places indeed do–make the text more unreadable in the sense of its simple discursive comprehensibility. They are not used to make the text more logical or informative but to render it more expressive.[26] Or, to put it more precisely, the logical and expressive functions of punctuation marks cannot be separated from each other in Adorno's texts. The melody and rhythm, the musicality of the text is not to be isolated from its logical informativity. For this reason Adorno criticizes the fact that in modern society punctuation marks have become an autonomous group of instruments with purely logical-semantic functions:

> For through their logical-semantic autonomy, punctuation marks, which articulate language and thereby bring writing closer to the voice, have become separate from both voice and writing, and they come into conflict with their own mimetic nature. An ascetic use of punctuation marks attempts to compensate for some of that. In every punctuation mark thoughtfully avoided, writing pays homage to the sound it suppresses. (Adorno 1991, 97)

The mimetic, hieroglyphic nature of punctuation marks makes the written text liken itself to the expressivity of spoken language. In a mediated fashion, hieroglyphically, i.e. as images of certain acoustic phenomena, the punctuation marks should make the text *sound* a certain way.[27] However, in Adorno's time they were rather used to squeeze out a certain message from the text or to make an effect on the reader. As such, they were to be thoughtfully avoided, as Adorno suggests. For to communicate with the reader, they had had to become somehow evident. Nonetheless, only those marks that draw attention to words whilst remaining inconspicuous themselves can render the text truly musical and expressive. The mark has to withdraw from the reader's attention and in this withdrawal it colours the given word. In times when all the marks serve too blatantly to communicate with the reader, this withdrawal has to turn into omission.

VI.

The modern dash that sets off the conflict between words and punctuation marks is tellingly described by Adorno in another context as *zu kraß* (GS 11, 109). This does not only mean "too crude", as the English translation has it, but also "too blatant" or "too glaring". The downfall of punctuation marks is brought about by the mark that is no longer able "to accomplish what it should" (Adorno 1991, 94) because it has already stopped being inconspicuous. The dash is used by Adorno as a representative of the fact that perhaps all punctuation marks have become *zu kraß*. All have been incapacitated by the social conduct. Some for other reasons than others, though. A case in point is the semicolon whose blatancy was not caused by its use as an instrument of communication with the reader. Modern texts have no place for the semicolon precisely for the reason that it is not well suited

to take part in such a communication, according to Adorno; the only way the semicolon can help to make the text more reader friendly is to disappear from it. Since hardly anybody is used to it anymore, the semicolon becomes glaring every time it still makes its way into a modern text. This is expressed by Adorno in the following passage:

> Theodor Haecker erschrak mit Recht darüber, daß das Semikolon ausstirbt: er erkannte darin, daß keiner mehr eine Periode schreiben kann. Dazu gehört die Furcht vor seitenlangen Abschnitten, die vom Markt erzeugt ward; von dem Kunden, der sich nicht anstrengen will und dem erst die Redakteure und dann die Schriftsteller, um ihr Leben zu erwerben, sich anpaßten, bis sie am Ende der eigenen Anpassung Ideologien wie die der Luzidität, der sachlichen Härte, der gedrängten Präzision erfanden. (GS 11, 110)

> Theodor Haecker was rightfully alarmed by the fact that the semicolon is dying out; this told him that no one can write a period, a sentence containing several balanced clauses, any more. Part of this incapacity is the fear of page-long paragraphs, a fear created by the marketplace—by the consumer who does not want to tax himself and to whom first editors and then writers accommodated for the sake of their incomes, until finally they invented ideologies for their own accommodation, like lucidity, objectivity, and concise precision. (Adorno 1991, 95)

Once again, an interesting difference between the German and English versions can be spotted. Where Adorno used the colon, Nicholsen went for the semicolon; where Adorno placed the semicolon, Nicholsen set the dash. The second difference is more important, for it reveals Adorno's semicolon as a place of a thoughtful omission of the dash. The fact that Nicholsen chose the dash is eloquent, namely because Adorno set the semicolon at a place where one would expect the dash. And Adorno's semicolon seems to be fulfilling the function of the already impotent dash. It creates a rupture, a sense of waiting in a mood of connection and detachment that was typical for the dash. On the contrary, it does not fulfil its proper traditional function, which was to suspend the flow of the text at a place of equilibrium where it would be too early to set a period but where a larger break was needed than a comma would provide. Adorno's semicolon does not create a period, it does not split the sentence into two balanced clauses. While Adorno claims that in its period-making function the semicolon

is dying out, he demonstrates at the same time that precisely for this reason it can be used in new ways. He uses the semicolon to slightly shock the reader; the strangeness of the mark in modern prose can serve well to create a shocking effect. The semicolon reappears as a ghost at peculiar places. It seems that by shocking the reader, Adorno wants to make her start listening to the sound of the text as well as to the conveyed message. For when the text does not let the reader move forward in his consumption of information, when the shock disrupts his attention to the message, the sound of language can reach his ears.[28] However, it seems to be less and less easy to shock the recipient after Surrealism or Dadaism, in the era of sensations, shocking news and aggressive visual media. A subtle use of punctuation could be one of the ways to achieve a mild but effective shock. Adorno's semicolons do not make their entrance when the idea is out of breath and needs to take a breather; they appear when thoughtlessness needs to have its breath taken away.

VII.

Adorno tried to use the historical condition of certain punctuation marks to his own benefit. So far we have seen his efforts to negate and transform the degenerating dash and to rescue the disappearing semicolon by changing its function. But the mark that may be the most important in the whole text is the one that does not get almost any direct attention in it. Adorno seems to me to be primarily concerned with a new way of handling the period. For the period served traditionally to achieve closure and completeness, which was something that Adorno tried to negate and expel from his works. Since he was convinced that modern reality is profoundly fragmentary and in no way holistic, he could not let the period express a sense of a totality of thought being articulated and completed. In other words, he attempted to negate the Hegelian period, the final point towards which everything is striving and in which it turns into a meaningful whole. To give the period a new sound was bound to be one of the main tasks of negative dialectics. It is only telling, then, that Adorno makes this very mark the most inconspicuous of all in the whole essay. He only briefly

mentions it once, saying that "the comma and the period correspond to the half-cadence and the authentic cadence" (Adorno 1991, 92). Contrary to all the other marks, the period gets no individual attention, though. Adorno even claims that the most inconspicuous marks are the commas (Adorno 1991, 97), thus making them conspicuous and hiding the truly inconspicuous period behind this blind screen by not mentioning it at all. Similarly as in the case of the two most abrupt ones, the dash and the semicolon, Adorno creates a tension between the two most inconspicuous marks, the comma and the period, and tries to transform them in the process.

VIII.

Since I want to limit myself to the *Punctuation Marks*, I will work with an example of Adorno's confrontation of the comma with the period from the given text, although passages that are more exemplary can be found in other Adorno's works. Still, one eloquent sentence made its way into the essay:

> Die Prosa wird auf den Protokollsatz, der Positivisten liebstes Kind, heruntergebracht, auf die bloße Registrierung der Tatsachen, und indem Syntax und Interpunktion des Rechts sich begeben, diese zu artikulieren, zu formen, Kritik an ihnen zu üben, schickt bereits die Sprache sich an, vor dem bloß Seienden zu kapitulieren, ehe nur der Gedanke Zeit hat, diese Kapitulation eifrig von sich aus ein zweites Mal zu vollziehen. (GS 11, 110)

> Prose is reduced to the "protocol sentence," the darling of the logical positivists, to a mere recording of facts, and when syntax and punctuation relinquish the right to articulate and shape the facts, to critique them, language is getting ready to capitulate to what merely exists, even before thought has time to perform this capitulation eagerly on its own for the second time. (Adorno 1991, 95)

In this case, the English translator managed to keep the sentence intact without splitting it up into two or three individual sentences, as often happens elsewhere in Adorno's works. Nonetheless, the English sentence is significantly less fragmented and the number of commas has been reduced from eleven to six. This is partly due to the different structures of German and English languages, partly to the effort on the translator's part to make the sentence at least a little smoother. While Adorno tried to stuff it with as many disruptions in the

form of commas as possible, Nicholsen avoided the unnecessary ones, most tellingly in the case of the simple "and" that she places between "articulate" and "shape" instead of the German comma. Of course, Adorno could have used "*und*" as well, thus making the sentence flow better. His intention was the opposite, though. He structured the sentence purposefully in such a way that it moves forward only difficultly. It is as if a certain force had to be overcome at each comma so that the movement of language could even continue. The commas are purposefully set like a *mimesis* of the real historical negativity that constantly blocks off the movement of history towards a significant change. Adorno drops them into his sentences like little dynamites that shock the reader and stop the flow of reading. The sentences no longer form arches which would start at the first word and end at the period. There is no more momentum that would carry the reader to the final point. Adorno's periods have no gravity. In the middle of the sentence, the reader no longer feels attracted with interest towards the end but rather exhausted and almost unable to even get there. More importantly, once one finally reaches the period, so many commas have been already gone through that the period seems just as another comma. Adorno's constant interruptions force the reader into a rhythm that prevents him to feel the long continuity between the start of the sentence and its end. The commas weaken the force of the period. There are so many little stops on the way that the final one does not seem much different. The reader feels no unity being achieved but has to rather turn back and face the ruins of the sentence, its *membra disiecta* that have been chopped off by the commas, and try to reconstruct something meaningful from them. At the period, the work does not stop; it starts.

IX.

The same way Adorno's periods are no longer marks of closure but of suspension, thus becoming similar to the commas, the commas do not produce an emphatic sense of suspension, for there is no goal towards which the sentence would flow and thus no movement to be suspended. Adorno's mentioned analogy with music does not apply to his own text.

For cadences and half-cadences, to which he likens the periods and commas, belong to the domain of tonality, and Adorno, the proponent of atonality in modern music, composed his texts in an atonal manner. Adorno's periods are not unlike the endings of e.g. Shönberg's compositions. They are not places of a final gradation of positivity; they are bringing negativity to a fleeting standstill. Thus, Adorno's texts sound unsatisfactorily and unpleasantly. At their ends, nothing is achieved and everything disrupted.

X.

Some things can be only shown, not directly said.[29] Such is the reason why Adorno did not simply state that thought has become fragmentary and closure unachievable in his historical day but took the reader through the exhausting experience of confronting the stylistic expression of such fragmentariness instead. For claiming in a closed and undisrupted manner that thought is fragmentary would contain a paradox. The fragmentariness would be articulated by a non-fragmentary thought.[30] The form of expression itself would negate the formulated content. The non-fragmentariness of the formulation would reveal that its claim about fragmentariness is false.[31] The closure of the sentence would be a disclosure of its untruth. Adorno's texts, on the contrary, are implicitly telling the reader that there is no way of overcoming fragmentation in a historical reality that blocks off closure, not even by a closed claim about the unclosed state of thought and reality. For the claim–which Adorno makes from time to time as well[32]–has to be a fragment itself, if thought is to be truly fragmentary; the whole historic situation cannot be expressed by it. To simply say that the whole is fragmentary is to say that it is non-fragmentary at the same time. To acknowledge fragmentation as essential, one has to express it in the form of the message. It is for this task that punctuation marks prove to be especially handy. Since the fragmentariness of the modern world is one of the main themes in Adorno's philosophy, focusing on his punctuation becomes highly relevant even from a philosophic standpoint.

XI.

Adorno's language makes an impression of a machine that has not been very well oiled. Such a machine that seems to be not working right draws attention towards itself, similarly as the notorious broken hammer. By making language sound funky, Adorno's punctuation helps to make the reader see that philosophic works are *texts*, not mere documentations of thought. It forces one to focus with the same intensity on how the thoughts are expressed as on what they say. In the last instance, it draws attention to the text itself, not as a result of a certain thought process and intention but as an object in its own right. The text is no longer ancillary, it is primary. When one focuses on it in this way–almost as on a painting or a musical composition–, something different comes to the foreground than usually: not meaning or reference, but history. Once the text is viewed as an autonomous object, every aspect of it breathes out history: the words and phrases imported in it by Latinization, the terms stemming from ancient Greek or even Hebrew, the more recent expressions such as "Expressionism" or "Facebook," the current shape and function of punctuation marks, the way the text is structured in paragraphs and laid out on the page etc. All of these aspects are historically conditioned, originating from different eras and undergoing a process of sedimentation:[33] the individual historical layers penetrate each other, forming a fairly homogenous unity. One does not usually differentiate between distinct historic aspects of a text that one is reading. What has become second nature suddenly feels slightly unnatural, though, namely when the text itself in its object-being is highlighted. To a reader that starts paying attention to it as to an object, the text starts looking like an amalgam of heterogenous historic elements. The reader sees that the unity formed by the process of historic sedimentation is not an essential or natural one. More importantly, with the historical form of the text goes hand in hand a certain form of receptivity on the part of the reader, a certain form of thinking and acting. It is the historical condition of *these* forms that Adorno's texts seem to be manifesting as well. By making the seemingly

natural approach towards texts not work,[34] they force one to acknowledge that the possibilities of his receptivity are limited by their historical condition[35] and to struggle to transform them. The reader has to get rid of those old receptive residues that only block one's possibility of understanding correctly the current historic situation. Otherwise the text will remain an impenetrable cipher.

XII.

Writing about historical objects unfolds in two dimensions simultaneously: in the dimension of what the text says about history and in the way history expresses itself *in* the text. The medium used to present the object is alike it: both are historical. The words, turns of phrases or punctuation marks used to document history are themselves documents of history.[36] The current state of language itself says perhaps more about history than that what can be said about history in the current language. Adorno was well aware of this paradox, as e.g. his *Theses on the Language of the Philosopher* show, and his *Punctuation Marks* that approach the marks primarily as historic objects can be read on both of the mentioned levels simultaneously. The author is walking a thin line; he is trying to use his punctuation marks in such a way that it is their historical character that comes to the fore, not their meaning or grammatical function. This means that he has to break the rules of punctuation so evidently that the reader does not primarily focus on their grammatical function, but at the same time he has to break them so slightly that it is not subjective intention that emerges from the marks the most.

> History has left its residue (*sich sedimentiert*) in punctuation marks, and it is history, far more than meaning or grammatical function, that looks out at us, rigidified and trembling slightly, from every mark of punctuation. One is almost, therefore, tempted to consider authentic only the punctuation marks in German Gothic type, or *Fraktur,* where the graphic images retain allegorical features, and to regard those of Roman type as mere secularized imitations. (Adorno 1991, 92)

In fact, it is usually meaning or grammatical function that looks out at the reader from punctuation marks and

history has to be *made* to emerge from them. Adorno describes not a factual state of things but a desired one. In his description, the figure of the modern becoming outdated as well as the word allegory remind one immediately of Benjamin. Once again, Adorno is subtly varying Benjamin's conception of the allegorical object that describes it as a mere thing that has been hollowed out of all meaning and function by historical time and lies in front of the observer like a strange cipher.[37] For Adorno claims that punctuation marks should keep at least their semantic function.[38] So even though the only authentic punctuation marks could very well be the allegorical ones, it does not imply that they are mere graphic shapes devoid of all function. Adorno does not simply consider their function to be defining for them. The allegorical moment becomes decisive without completely negating the semantic-grammatical one. – Why should one approach punctuation marks as allegories, though. The reason is that Adorno is aiming at an explosion of second nature, at an annulation of convention. This life-long effort of his is taking place once more in the case of punctuation marks. For if one manages to discover the conventionally established marks as estranged allegories, a large potential for critique is unleashed. Adorno's allegories are not allegories of transcendence, as in the case of those from Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* book, but of a better state of immanence, of a situation where language is free of convention and historic rigidity, of its sign character. Punctuation marks as mere signs express allegorically a language that is no longer a sign. For allegories typically express something that is prominently missing in the given state of immanence. Once the text forces the reader to reflect on convention from a significant distance, to see what is missing, a transformation of convention can be on the horizon. And the more innocent looking the reflected conventional object, the greater the explosive potential, perhaps. Such may be the case of punctuation marks: when their harmlessness is disclosed as a strange power that structures the reader's thought, they can no longer be used thoughtlessly.[39] There is one mark in particular that Adorno seems to expose in this way: the question mark. One can stumble upon it only very rarely in Adorno's texts, for even

when he poses a question, he does it in an indirect way and ends the sentence with a period. The period usually takes up the function of the question mark in his works. Nonetheless, in the *Punctuation Marks* the question mark makes its appearance twice and in a way that is highly uncharacteristic for Adorno:

> Gleicht nicht das Ausrufungszeichen dem drohend gehobenen Zeigfinger? Sind nicht Fragezeichen wie Blinklichter oder ein Augenaufschlag? (GS 11, 106)
>
> An exclamation point looks like an index finger raised in warning; a question mark looks like a flashing light or the blink of an eye. (Adorno 1991, 91)

Now Adorno's questions are not really questions. They are mere attempts to persuade the reader about the claim being made. However, Adorno almost never communicated with the reader through his texts, for he deemed such an interaction to be manipulative and to the detriment of the expressive forces of the text as well as of the free interpretive activity of the reader. So when he poses these two suggestive, manipulative questions, they can be only interpreted as ironical.[40] The irony is directed towards the question mark itself, though. For Adorno's thought process probably looked as follows: what is the meaning of such a mark in a world where the break with tradition did not lead to a new stronger certainty but to a crisis in which all certainty was lost, in which everything has become questionable and questioned.[41] In a historic situation where one can no longer make emphatic claims, one can no longer pose strong questions either. The only way the question mark can still function is to manipulate the reader, to persuade him that he should question for a second time something that he already questions. In the postmodern world that Adorno saw being born, the question mark has become outdated since every period has become a question mark as well. Adorno set the mark into his text as an emptied allegory, as a mere graphic shape with some wholly conventional residues of function. In the *Punctuation Marks*, the question mark no longer signals a question, it becomes a question itself. What does it even mean now. Why should one still succumb to its persuasive power. How should one continue.

XIII.

The question mark is the most conspicuous and at the same time most allegorical of all the punctuation marks used in Adorno's text. The period is the most inconspicuous and at the same time most effective of them. Based on Adorno's hints, one can understand the dialectics of punctuation to be moving between the extremes of the totally inconspicuous and the wholly conspicuous. The conspicuous marks make the reader distance herself from the text and take it into account as a peculiar object in its own right, the inconspicuous ones draw her into the text and help it flow and sound good.[42] A skilled writer, a skilled philosopher should be able to set the marks in both of these ways. For what else does the expressivity of writing live by than the tension between the living and the dead.

NOTES

[1] For a more comprehensive summary of the reception of Adorno's theory see Palmarek (2007, 42-43).
[2] For the most influential publications see Richter (2010); Plass (2007); Foster (2007); Nicolsen (1997); Hohendahl (1995) the essay on language in the monograph *Adorno and the Need in Thinking*.
[3] For the only one that has been already published see Hogh (2016).
[4] Partial insights into the style of concrete texts have been published already, notably in Nicholsen (1997); Buck-Morss (1977). However, they still lack a certain complexity.
[5] See esp. Foster (2007, 31-88).
[6] Along with the above cited works see also Gandesha (2007); Bernstein (2001, 263-329).
[7] Punctuation in philosophic works has long been neglected, as Christine Abbt und Tim Kammasch, the editors of a rare recent monograph on punctuation in philosophy claim. Adorno's name is one of the most quoted in the whole book since he was one of the most vigorous proponents of the importance of punctuation in philosophy. See Abbt and Kammasch (2009).
[8] For a presentation of some of Adorno's stylistic figures such as the chiasm see Rose (2014, 15-34).
[9] "There is no element in which language resembles music more that in the punctuation marks." Adorno 1991, 92.
[10] "…from 1928 on virtually everything that Adorno wrote bore the imprint of Benjamin's language. To someone like Adorno, reared in the tradition of Kraus and Schönberg, who viewed language as the 'representation' of truth, a

change in vocabulary had a theoretical importance of the first magnitude." (Buck-Morss, 1977, 21). By the term "representation" Buck-Morss means the German *Darstellung*. Perhaps a little less misleading translation would be "presentation" or "expression". The same problem with translation of *Darstellung* arose at a key place in *Negative Dialectics* and has been rightly pointed out by Palamarek. See Palamarek (2007, 66).

[11] "The expressive dimensions of language often have to be *enacted* in ways which only partially translate into discursive idioms." Bowie 2013, 16.

[12] "…language should also not be absolutized as the voice of Being, as opposed to the … subject, as many of the current ontological theories of language would have it." (Adorno 1991, 43) "Foreign words demonstrate the impossibility of an ontology of language: they confront even concepts that try to pass themselves as origin itself with their mediatedness, their moment of being subjectively constructed." (Adorno 1991, 189)

[13] "It is a sign of all reification through idealist consciousness that things can be named arbitrarily … For a thinking that seizes the things exclusively as functions of thought, names have become arbitrary: they are free positings of consciousness." (Adorno 2007, 35) "In any case, stylistic indifference is almost always a symptom of dogmatic rigidification of the content." (Adorno 1991, 219)

[14] For a concise expression of Adorno's take see See Adorno (1992, 286-291).

[15] Adorno's criticism of the laziness of the modern reader is expressed in Adorno (1991, 95.

[16] It is telling that the English translation did not resist the temptation to insert a peculiar symbol in the spaces between the paragraphs, wherefore the visual shape of the text differs from the original one. The expressivity of the text is altered too, however, for which reason I will always refer to the visual form of the original.

[17] The expressivity of language in the moment of its failure is one of the main themes of Roger Foster's study. See Foster (2007, 9-56).

[18] One of the very few texts that have the same visual form as *Punctuation Marks* are Adorno's *Transparencies on Film*. In this case as well, the form expresses something unique to the content, the inner fragmentary nature of films that Adorno considered to be defining for the form of art. See Adorno (1991/1992).

[19] Adorno led a life-long battle against the separation of form and content in philosophy. See Adorno (2007).

[20] The combination of connection and disconnection is defining for Adorno's philosophy overall. That is why the dash seems to be one of his favourite punctuation marks.

[21] "So discreetly does myth conceal itself in the nineteenth century; it seeks refuge in typography." Adorno (1991, 94).

[22] This is, of course, only one of the possible definitions of the notoriously equivocal dialectical image. However, in the context of *Notes to Literature* Adorno seems to understand the term also in this way. See Adorno (1991, 89-90, 92).

[23] "It is no accident that in the era of the progressive degeneration of language, this mark of punctuation is neglected precisely insofar as it fulfils its function: when it separates things that feign a connection. All the dash claims to do now is to prepare us in a foolish way for surprises that by that very token are no longer surprising." Adorno (1991, 93)

[24] "In the history of the family of punctuation marks one can find new additions and drop-outs. Transformed social contexts require new marks that are defined in a new iconographic way and make the traditional ones superfluous." Following this claim by Abbt and Kammasch, one could say that Adorno is looking for a wholly new mark to replace the dash. However, Adorno was usually concerned more with an *Umfunktionierung* of the existing phenomena rather with their replacement. See Abbt und Kammasch (2009, 12).

[25] In this respect, punctuation marks are similar to tools, as described by e.g. Graham Herman. For tools work and exist as tools only when they are concealed, according to Harman. See Harman (2002, 13-23).

[26] This does not imply that Adorno would want to make his texts illogical, though; the moment of logicality is merely not absolutized, not put above all the other ones. It is rather inseparably interwoven with the expressive moment. Moreover, Adorno speaks of a peculiar logic that his texts are following, a logic proper to the examined object itself. See Adorno (1991, 22).

[27] "Exclamation points are like silent cymbal clashes, question marks like musical upbeats, colons dominant seventh chords" Adorno (1991, 92).

[28] "…in any case shock may now be the only way to reach human beings through language." (Adorno 1991, 192)

[29] For a comparison of Adorno and Wittgenstein see Foster (2007, 31-56).

[30] Hence the problematic nature of the celebrated Adorno's claim: *Das Ganze is das Unwahre*. Perhaps even the author himself could not resist the temptation to articulate his thought in a simple and closed manner. See GS 4, 55.

[31] I.e., the same way "one can hardly speak of aesthetic matters unaesthetically," one cannot describe fragmentation holistically. See Adorno (1991, 16).

[32] See e.g. Adorno (1991, 5).

[33] The concept of historical sedimentation is a key reoccurring figure in Adorno's works. See e.g. Adorno (2004, 163; 1991, 11).

[34] Adorno manages this not in a crude, brutal manner, not as a Dadaist or a Surrealist would. His texts resist subtly, very inconspicuously. They create an impression that something fleeting and delicate is not right. For the reader to get the most of the text, Adorno has to make her feel that what she is reading is by no means meaningless. The reader has to feel that the text is saying something important, something she is not able to decipher. And the understanding should not come as a result of a hermeneutic returning to the text over and over again; it should follow from a radical change in the readers approach.

[35] It is important to differentiate between the historic limitation and the individual one. It is not a lack of individual intellectual capacities, of intelligence or talent, that prevents the reader from understanding the text. It

is his historic and social conditioning. Of course, certain intelligence is needed to get a good grasp of Adorno's thoughts, but the main resistance of his texts seems to be directed against the historic and social limitations of the reader's cognitive abilities.

[36] "Any period to which its own past has become as questionable as it has to us must eventually come up against the phenomenon of language, for in it the past is contained ineradicably … The Greek *polis* will continue to exist at the bottom of our political existence … for as long as we use the word 'politics.'" (Arendt 2007, 49)

[37] See Benjamin 2003, 159-235. "…the often laborious interpretation of allegorical figures always unhappily reminds one of the solving of puzzles." (Arendt 2007, 14)

[38] The author states this in the very first sentence of the text: "The less punctuation marks, taken in isolation, convey meaning or expression and the more they constitute the opposite pole in language to names, the more each of them acquires a definitive physiognomic status of its own, an expression of its own, which cannot be separated from its syntactic function but is by no means exhausted by it." (Adorno 1991, 91)

[39] Elsewhere Adorno states that to start thinking critically one should feel the philosophical θαυμαζειν in face of the "world of convention as it is historically produced, this world of estranged things that cannot be decoded but encounters us as ciphers." (Adorno 2006, 261)

[40] Nicholsen perhaps felt the oddity of the questions and avoided both of the question marks as uncharacteristic for Adorno.

[41] For Adorno's take on tradition and the break in it see Adorno (2004, 53-55).

[42] "For these are the two primary ways in which the punctuation marks can be meaningful: on the one hand, the performative-operative leading of the reading, on the other hand, their iconic-mimetic dimension." Abbt und Kammasch (2009, 15).

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