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The last few decades have been characterized by an increasing interest in the aesthetics of German Idealism. In particular the recent scholarly debate on Hegel's philosophy has given new impetus to the reflection on art as a structural element of the self understanding of the modern subject. At the same time, this *Hegel Renaissance* has opened the door for a more nuanced comprehension of Idealistic aesthetics. This issue of *Rivista di estetica* aims to explore the Idealistic philosophy of art as a constellation of themes, problems and partly conflicting positions, rather than as a unified and closed theoretical model.

Mario Farina

THE SOCIAL CHARACTER OF LITERATURE: ADORNO THE
LEGACY OF THE AESTHETICS OF GERMAN IDEALISM

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to investigate the function of the aesthetic paradigm of German idealism within Adorno's thought. In order to do so, I have chosen to focus on the issue of the social significance of the work of art and the role played by the concept of literary material. Adorno's aesthetics, in fact, can be read as a reinterpretation of the idealist aesthetic model based precisely on a non-idealist notion such as that of aesthetic material.

If one is to allow a seemingly brutal simplification, there are two ways to think about the social meaning of literature. One identifies somehow the subject of the text, assesses whether or not this challenges the society from which the literary work stems, and on this ground establishes its social character. According to this perspective, Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* and Sciascia's *The Day of the Owl* can be seen as socially engaged literature, while Proust's *Recherche* cannot, or can only to a lesser extent. The other approach argues instead that any literary work, and in any of its instances, says something about the society in which it takes shape. In this contribution I would like to focus on this latter approach. In particular, I am interested in understanding how literature is connected to society, that is, through which identifiable elements literary works express certain aspects of society. The Hegelian idealistic idea according to which Greek tragedy expresses the constitutive features of Athenian society, and which is found again and again in the authors who in various ways have taken up Hegel's legacy, is generally accepted as such and valued for the explanatory opportunities it offers. It is my opinion, however, that one notion in particular can be retrieved within the whole inherited baggage of that aesthetic tradition, which may be able to further clarify the relationship between literature and society. This concept is that of material and the author who has most thoroughly investigated it is Adorno.

In this paper I will try to outline the main features of a counterintuitive notion such as that of “literary material” and thereby explain why it plays such an important role in Adorno’s rework of the aesthetic paradigm of German idealism. The concept of material, in fact, is key to the definition of another aesthetic category around which, according to Adorno, most of the problems connected to works of art gravitate, that is to say, the notion of form. From Adorno’s aesthetics, in fact, one of his most insightful readers, Peter Szondi, draws the main principle for his study of the historical form of modern drama, namely the idea that form is essentially a precipitation, a sedimentation of contents¹. The work of art, then, at least according to this definition, is essentially identified by its form. Or, better said, the artwork must be interpreted as the way in which a certain (historical) content sediments in a certain external form. That the form of the work of art is precipitated content means, in simple terms, that no effective disjunction can be assumed between form and content. This is how Adorno reinterprets the concept of “identity of form and content” stressed by classical aesthetics. The content is such only insofar as it is precipitated into a certain form. This amounts to saying that no objective distinction can be established between one and the other. Now, if one were to ask how the form is made, Adorno’s answer is quite straightforward: the form is made by means of organization and, precisely, by means of the organization of the material. As one reads in *Aesthetic Theory*, in fact, “the substantial element of genres and forms has its locus in the historical needs of their materials,” and the particular form of an artwork is defined as the “organization” of its “materials” (Adorno 1970, transl. 1997: 201).

The concept of material, therefore, is key to the definition of the very notion of work of art in its constituent components, namely the relationship between form and content. In this paper I will first of all clarify the notion of artistic material in general and subsequently I will turn to strictly literary material. Finally, and this is the main goal of this essay, I will show to what extent this definition of the material possibly contributes to a better understanding of a widely and variedly debated literary phenomenon of our time, namely the form of the so-called postmodern novel.

1. Artistic material

So what exactly is meant by artistic material? First, I will focus on the terms in which Adorno describes its nature in general, referring in particular to the arguments included in *Aesthetic Theory*. There, the titles of four paragraphs bear a reference specifically to the notion of “material”.

¹In *Theory of Modern Drama*, Szondi clearly states the relevance of Adorno’s account for his investigation of the historical forms of drama (Szondi 1956, Engl. transl. 1985: p. 4).

Interestingly – in the paragraph of *Aesthetic Theory* titled *On the concept of material* – Adorno introduces this notion in order to sharply distinguish it from that of “content.” The discussion, in fact, starts off from one of the macro-problems of aesthetics, namely the relationship between form and content. “Against the philistine division of art into form and content” Adorno writes, “it is necessary to insist on their unity; against the sentimental view of their indifference in the artwork it is necessary to insist that their difference endures even in their mediation” (Adorno 1970, transl. 1997: 147). As previously seen, form and content – in the work of art – are, technically speaking, indistinguishable, since the form corresponds directly to the “sedimented content,” as stated in *Aesthetic Theory* (Adorno 1970, transl. 1997: 47), and therefore the content is unthinkable except in that specific form in which it occurs. On the other hand, when speaking of art, philosophy must express itself in its own language and not through that of art itself; its critical activity is therefore forced to separate the two moments, hence to speak of form and content. Within this framework, the material plays a key role, since according to Adorno, what “best does justice to the mediated distinction” of form and content in “the concept of material,” which “it is not the same as content,” despite the fact that “Hegel fatefully confounded the two” (Adorno 1970, transl. 1997: 47)². As Adorno writes, in fact, the material is “what is formed” (Adorno 1970, transl. 1997: 47), that is, it is not the meaning of the work, but it is what the artist has decision-making power on and which is strictly speaking put into shape.

To put it in the clearest possible terms, the material of the work of art is everything in it that is given shape, so that it can rightfully be said a work of art. In the case of visual artworks it is quite easy to understand what we are referring to. Marble, for example, is the material a statue is made of; it is what the artist has worked on and it is what is put into shape, just as colors are what is turned into shape in paintings. Neither the frame is part of the work of art, nor is the pedestal; despite being material elements connected to the work of art, they are not part of what is put into shape. It is less clear what artistic material is – and whether we can still speak of aesthetic material – when dealing with music and, above all, with literature, for which immateriality goes as far as to delete the sense-based and object-based components of the artwork all together. Also in the same text quoted above, Adorno says more on the issue and states that the material corresponds to “what artists work with: It is the sum of all that is available to them, including words, colors, sounds, associations of

² Adorno refers, here and elsewhere, to the passages in which Hegel treats Romanesque art as a departure from the material, or a loss of materiality: “But, since this is so, the topic and this subjective side fall apart from one another, and the material is treated capriciously throughout, so that the idiosyncrasy, yes the idiosyncrasy, of the artist may be conspicuous as the chief thing” (Hegel 1843, Engl. transl. 1975: 295).

every sort [...]. To this extent, forms too can become material” (Adorno 1970, transl. 1997: 148).

In a nutshell what Adorno is saying here is namely that a work of art is a form of production and, just like any other form of production, it has to do with materials. On those materials the artists decide – and the materials are precisely what the artists make decisions on – but their decision-making power gets only up to a certain point, inasmuch as the material exerts a decisive form of coercion on the artists themselves. As stated in the *Philosophy of Modern Music*, a criticism of harmonic chords is carried out not only because “these sounds [are] obsolete and unfashionable”, but inasmuch as “they are false” (Adorno, 1949, transl. 2006: 32) and the reason for this, as one reads in *Aesthetic Theory*, is that “Thus material is not natural material even if it appears so to artists; rather, it is thoroughly historical” (Adorno 1970, transl. 1997: 148). Adorno’s attention to the historical sedimentation of materials in the work of art is in all likelihood the result of the discussions with Benjamin on the issue of reproducibility. In his essay on *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility*, Benjamin focuses, for example, on lithography³. The historicity of the materials derives, in this respect, from the fact that any given production process entails choosing among possible options, some of which, perhaps, were not available before, and, to a certain extent, directs the artist’s work toward some choices rather than others.

Just to mention an example past the period in which Adorno wrote, also the material of *land art*, Adorno would say if he saw, for instance, Giuseppe Penone’s work, is historical. And not only because the process through which the work is produced – the technique with which the artist constructs it – is historical, but because the material itself is historical, even before being processed. The artist can choose which tree trunk to use for his composition, but he cannot choose the fact that today, within the current conditions of production, the image of a hollow tree trunk carries with it a series of very precise meanings; these, in fact, are historically internal to the material itself. In reference to the quotation presented above, one can now see in what sense “forms too can become material.” Even in the visual arts, in fact, the historicity of the material does not exclusively concern the direct relationship with the technique, for which, for instance, green is rarely to be found in medieval paintings due to issues related to the toxicity of its production techniques. Forms themselves are part of the materials in the sense that a naked woman having breakfast on a lawn

³ “Lithography marked a fundamentally new stage in the technology of reproduction. This much more direct process-distinguished by the fact that the drawing is traced on a stone, rather than incised on a block of wood or etched on a copper plate-first made it possible for graphic art to market its products not only in large numbers, as previously, but in daily changing variations. Lithography enabled graphic art to provide an illustrated accompaniment to everyday life” (Benjamin 1934, Engl. transl. 2008: p. 20).

amidst fully dressed men is one of the options that history has offered Manet for him to choose from. As Adorno writes, in fact, “Stripping the material of any qualitative dimension, which superficially connotes its dehistoricization, is itself the material’s historical propensity, the propensity of subjective reason” (Adorno 1970, transl. 1997: 149).

If one were to draw a comprehensive definition of the concept of material from Adorno’s aesthetics, the following one could be then attempted: the material is everything that is found inside a work of art and that existed even before the work of art was produced, but which, within the configuration in which the artist places it, takes on a different meaning. Let’s think about a painting. For example, *The Milkmaid* painted by Vermeer. Its materials are indeed the canvas and the color composition allowing a certain rendering of light; indeed also the two-dimensionality of the surface belongs to their number; but also the pack basket hanging on the wall, the terracotta jug, as well as the abundance of bread in the basket. Taken together, all these elements allow to express the liberal and satisfied character of existence which, according to Hegel, is the specific content of a painting like this⁴. This is how, as we have seen, the material, properly speaking, is “what is formed.”

2. *Literary material*

The material, then, is what is shaped – that is to say, everything that is available to the artist – while the shaping activity is made of two elements, one defined as “technique,” the other as “spiritualization.” Examples of technique, Adorno says, are “perspective in ainting”, and “the transition from impressionism to pointillism”. These are progressive elements applied to “historical materials and their domination” (Adorno 1970, transl. 1997: 210). What Adorno defines with the now old-fashion word “spiritualization” is, instead, what allows the artwork – a collection of materials – to convey a meaning; “spiritualization” does not stand however for a separation of the materials from their real meaning, since “the mastery over the material implies spiritualization, though this spiritualization, as the autonomy of spirit vis-a-vis its other, immediately endangers itself again” (Adorno 1970, transl. 1997: 212). Rather than resembling anything thing-like and object-like, Adorno’s concept of material falls closer, then, to a specific reworking in the realm of aesthetics of what Marx understands as “material” in the context of historical materialism⁵. As much as the notion of “spirit” can be understood as a translation into the lexicon of classical philosophy of what

⁴ See Hegel’s influential interpretation of Flemish painting as a contemplation of the existing, resulting from satisfaction with political and economic freedom (Hegel 1843, Engl. transl. 1975: 668-671).

⁵ In this regard, see Simon Jarvis 2004: 91-94 and Deborah Cook 2006: 719-721.

Marx means by “social labour,” so the concept of material can be understood as standing for the power relations in the production realm⁶.

The material, therefore, stands for how the constituents of the work of art are determined within the framework of social labour; it stands for the meaning of the individual “shapable” elements of the work within the framework of the production process. If this were not the case, little sense could be granted to statements, such as that found in *the Philosophy of Modern Music*, according to which in Berg’s *Wozzeck* “in *Wozzeck* as well in *Lulu*, the C-major triad occurs – in context that are otherwise remote from tonality – whenever the issue is money. The effect is that of both patent banality and obsolescence. The small-change C-major coin is denounced as counterfeit” (Adorno 1949, transl. 2006: 179). In this sense, the work of art shares its semantic structure with another social formation, from which, however, it distances itself with regard to its objectives, that is to say, the commodity. With the expression “sedimented spirit” used to describe the material (Adorno 1949, transl. 2006: 32), Adorno hints to that “sensibly supersensible thing” in Marx’s description of the commodity; that thing that “it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will”. And since Adorno cannot be turned into a spiritualist who believes in the existence of something like the soul of objects, one has to admit that what is responsible for moving the material against its producer, turning it into a constraint, must finally be the so called: “mystical character of the commodity” which consists in the fact “that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men’s own labour” (Marx 1863, transl. 1990: 163-164).

This general account on the material also applies to literary material. While speaking of the decay of artistic materials, Adorno claims in fact that “along with the categories, the materials too have lost their a priori self-evidence, and this is apparent in the case of poetic language” (Adorno 1970, transl. 1997: 16). Also literature has materials, and also literary materials undergo historical processes, such as the loss of obviousness. Adorno mentions Oscar Wilde’s novel as an example illustrating the failure of any anti-historical attempt to make decayed materials regain autonomous sense, the result of which is “no longer superior to the crude accumulation of all possible precious materials in Wilde’s *Dorian Gray*, where the interiors of a chic aestheticism resemble smart antique shops and auction halls and thus the commercial world Wilde ostensibly disdained” (Adorno 1970, transl. 1997: 16). Not only words then are the materials of literature, but also the images they evoke and their phantasmagoric plasticity.

In conclusion, the material of literature is not made of objects, shapes, colors, sounds or stones, but rather of the set of representations that the author relies on

⁶ See for example what is argued in this regard by Zuidervaart 1991: 93-121, who insists on reading spirit in Adorno as social labour.

and recalls by means of words. Beyond Adorno's strict definition, one could say that the material of Proust's *Recherche*, for example, is the problematic contact and the tension-laden difference between the external world and its sedimentation in memory. This is why Adorno defines the *Recherche* as the union of realism and psychologism in the form of the novel⁷, since "the beginning of Proust's *Recherche* is to be interpreted as the effort to outwit art's illusoriness: to steal imperceptively into the monad of the artwork without forcibly' positing its immanence of form and without feigning an omnipresent and omniscient narrator" (Adorno 1970, transl. 1997: 102). What is at stake is, also in this case, a historical material, a material that would not have been available a century earlier, when public spaces – cities – were not yet so intimately connected to the interiority of their inhabitants. Similarly, Kafka's material is the waste of the world, what the production process leaves behind and throws into a corner; he "sins against an ancient rule of the game by constructing art out of nothing but the refuse of reality", his world is populated by "doubles, revenants, buffoons, Hasidic dancers, boys who ape their teachers and then suddenly appear ancient", "the odour is that of unaired beds, the colour, the red of mattresses whose sheets have been lost" (Adorno 1955, transl. 1962: 251, 253, 256). Finally, Thomas Mann's material is the reflection itself, the ironic detachment of the author who is pondering what doing means while writing and producing; it is the process in which "Instead, thought transforms itself into a kind of second-order material, the way the philosophical ideas expounded in Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain* and *Doctor Faustus* have their fate as material does, a fate that takes the place of the sensuous immediacy that dwindles in the self-reflective work of art" (Adorno 1958, transl. 1991: 243).

The reason why Adorno insists precisely on the term "material" has less to do with the thing-like composition of works of art, especially literary ones, and more with the specific form of resistance opposed by representations to the author who handles them. The authors choose, it is true, with which materials to shape their text, but the representations available, strictly speaking, impose themselves on them. Literary material is, so to speak, a figure of natural history. It is a social and historical meaning which develops its own natural rigidity, although said naturalness is also historical and, therefore, at least in principle, transitory. And the work of art, unlike other cultural formations such as commodities, has one specific feature – a double character, as Adorno calls it – in that art enjoyment is able to offer a possible pacification of that configuration of natural history. This amounts to saying that the work of art provides a formal and therefore conciliatory response to the tension between history and nature.

⁷ "No one surpasses Marcel Proust in aversion to the report form. His work belongs to the tradition of the realistic and psychological novel in the branch that leads to the novel's dissolution" (Adorno 1958, Engl. transl. 1991: 32).

Thanks precisely to the configuration of the material in an aesthetic form, the work of art shows that a given historical sedimentation of power relations could be developed otherwise, and that, at least in principle, the mythical and natural rigidity of history can be dissolved: “The historical trajectory of art as spiritualization is that of the critique of myth as well as that toward its redemption: The imagination confirms the possibilities of what it recollects. This double movement of spirit in art describes its protohistory, which is inscribed in its concept, rather than its empirical history” (Adorno 1970, transl. 1997: 118). For all these reasons, an expert of aesthetics like Dino Formaggio – who often makes reference to Adorno in his texts – speaks of the work of art as of a “fluidification of meaning” (Formaggio 1983: 136).

The literary work, then, meets what Adorno calls “the requirements of the material” – requirements that stems directly from the production process – in that it formally settles them, crystallizes them, pacifies them; in this respect, the rationale for the work of art is – as one reads in the essay *Is Art Light-hearted?* – “freedom in the midst of unfreedom” (Adorno 1974, transl. 1991: 248). And precisely this is the literary form, that is, the pacified organization of the material.

3. *The material and the form*

From this understanding of the notion of literary material ensues, in my view, what I have presented as one of the topical features of Adorno’s aesthetics. This does not amount to saying that it is the only one. Various researches have shown that Adorno’s aesthetics can effectively address a wide range of current events⁸. The topical element which I am addressing here can be summed up as follows: the previously outlined understanding of the literary material, and above all of its relationship with the concept of form, in my view, can be rewardingly integrated in one of the most lively literary debates of the last thirty years, as it namely provides suitable interpretative tools for what is currently understood under the label of postmodern novel. To this aim, however, a viable description of the form of the novel in general needs to be preliminarily identified. The literary scholarship of the twentieth century worked strenuously on providing a theoretical definition of the form of the novel. As is well known, Bakhtin argued that identifying the form of the novel means to acknowledge its incompleteness, that is to say, to see it as a genre *in fieri* and devoid of canons, since “only individual examples of the novel are historically active, not a generic canon as such” (Bakhtin 1970, transl. 1981: 4). And as is equally well known, Adorno

⁸ For example, Stefano Marino 2014 has shown how fruitful can be to apply Adorno’s lens to Frank Zappa’s music, while Giovanni Matteucci 2012 has employed Adorno’s arguments to give an interpretation of the fashion phenomenon.

was greatly influenced by Lukács' *The Theory of the Novel* and its failed project to define the form of the novel based on the philosophy of history⁹. Defining the concept of "form of the novel" appears, all things considered, as an arduous undertaking. My proposal is to proceed step by step, starting from the aesthetic form in general to later head on to the novel as genre.

The previously mentioned definition of the notion of form – as "sedimented content" – can also be differently formulated. The artistic form, in fact, stands for a precise response to a set of requirements laid out by the materials selected by the artists. Starting from this assumption further understanding can be gained of what "form" means in Adorno's aesthetics. On this topic, in *Aesthetic Theory* one reads that "it is astonishing, however, how little aesthetics reflected on the category of form, how much it, the distinguishing aspect of art, has been assumed to be unproblematically given" (Adorno 1970, transl. 1997: 140). Form is clearly, according to Adorno, what distinguishes art from any other kind of product, especially from scientific and conceptual ones. Form is, in fact, "the objective organization within each artwork of what appears as bindingly eloquent." (Adorno 1970, transl. 1997: 143). In other words, form is the quality capable of defining the work of art as full expression of meaning, other than its conceptual communication. Form is what allows the work of art to act in the realm of mimesis and not only in that of concepts.

The form of a specific work of art, therefore, is what allows it to qualify as sedimentation of a certain content and that identifies it as what it is. It is what makes it that particular work of art and none other; it is, in other words, what specifically makes it so that, for example, Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* is not Joyce's *Ulysses*. As such, the form cannot be directly defined conceptually, since conceptually defining a non-conceptual feature would distort its substance. In this respect the form of art is what appears within a work of art.

Based on what we have seen so far, and in the light of its relationship with the material, the form is the law-like dimension that causes the materials to be connected to one another within the work of art. In Adorno's lexicon, it is their "objective organization," their "immanent law" (Adorno 1970, transl. 1997: 143, 7). Its distinctive field of tension makes sure that the materials are ordered in a specific space according to a certain specific coherence. The metaphor of the field of tension can be, in this regard, particularly useful. In fact, just as iron filings, once placed on a sheet of paper crossed by a magnetic field, adopt a certain coherent configuration, so the materials of the work of art are gathered within the form according to binding coherence. This means that just as not every metallic material is attracted to the magnetic field, not every historical material is attracted to a certain specific form. But those materials that are at-

⁹ In the 1932 lecture on *The Idea of Natural History*, Adorno openly mentions the influence of *The Theory of the Novel* on his own thought (Adorno 1932, Engl. transl. 1984: 117-118).

tracted to it are inevitably linked to one another based on the formal tension permeating them, and thus become literary materials.

While keeping this definition in mind, it is possible to approach a more precise understanding of the notion of literary form, provided, however, that the aim is not to isolate a single work, but rather to grasp a broader notion of form, such as that of literary genre.

In the essay *Art and the Arts* – as critics have aptly emphasized – Adorno, on the one hand, criticizes the idea of sticking to a normative conception of the artistic genre, on the other hand, he opposes its total and definitive dismissal¹⁰. Neither classicism nor nominalism, so Adorno, account satisfactorily for the relationship between a work of art and its genre, since each work, while it may overflow its own genre, it also contributes, even if only by opposition, to its definition. “The simple disjunction of nominalism and universalism” one reads, in fact, in *Aesthetic Theory*, “does not hold” (Adorno 1970, transl. 1997: 201). The reason for this lies in the fact that each single work, if it pursued its individuality to the extreme and set itself completely apart from the genre, would be precluded from establishing any link to other literary works and would lose in intelligibility. As Adorno writes, in fact, “the authenticity of individual works is stored away in the genre” (Adorno 1970, transl. 1997: 201). The genre, therefore, must not be understood as the normative canon based on which every work is produced, but on the contrary as a general law that explains why different works can be set close to one another. This is to be understood in reference to the notion of material, inasmuch “the substantial element of genres and forms has its locus in the historical needs of their materials” (Adorno 1970, transl. 1997: 200). According to this perspective, the genre stands in fact for – Adorno’s idea was once more treasured by Peter Szondi – the specific set of literary works that present an answer to a common problem or that, again, are organized according to some coherent tension. This is what genre has in common with the concept of form.

This formal and law-like validity of the genre can be exemplified in relation to the three classical literary genres, namely drama, lyric and novel (or epos). It is very difficult to argue today, as well as in Adorno’s time, that any of these is available in pure form. Szondi has notably shown that modern drama is parasitic of the epic form of the novel¹¹. However, it is also true that neither their disjunction can be excluded. In dramas, one could say, a prevalent formal law can be found that differs from that of the lyric, just as the latter differentiates itself from the epic principle of the novel. A clear tendency to assess genres according

¹⁰This point is well explained by Eva Geulen 2006: 53-66 in an essay on the notion of gender in Adorno, where it is argued that Juliana Rebentisch 2003 and Christine Eichel 1993 are indeed too hasty to conclude that a liquidation of the genre has been performed by Adorno.

¹¹ See the argument put forward at the beginning of the *Theory of Modern Drama* which aims precisely to show that the drama necessarily borrows forms from the epic (Szondi 1956, Engl. transl. 1985: 3-4).

to formal laws can be detected in Adorno's essays on poetry and theatre – for example on Hölderlin and on Beckett's *Endgame*. In fact, language itself defines the lyric, its structural arrangement, as proven by Adorno's study of Hölderlin's parataxis. In this context, one reads, for instance, that "the transformation of language into a serial order whose elements are linked differently than in the judgment is musiclike", although it is not the same as the musicality of sounds (Adorno 1974, tr. en 1991: 131). Conversely, while examining Beckett's text, attention tends to fall on the concatenation of actions, or better on the absence of concatenation, inasmuch as drama is made of the actions that occur before the eyes of the beholder. As Adorno states in his essay ensuing from his *Attempt to understand "Endgame,"* in fact, "through its own organized meaninglessness, dramatic action must model itself on what has transpired with the truth content of drama in general" (Adorno 1958, transl. 1991: 242). This does not mean, of course, that the lyric is devoid of actions or that in drama no attention is paid to language. It rather means that two distinct formal laws prevail in one and the other: in the lyric the syntactic juxtaposition of the elements of language, while in drama the development through actions.

Something similar happens with regard to the form of the novel – "nominalistic and thus paradoxical form par excellence" (Adorno 1970, transl. 1997: 201) – and Adorno is very clear in defining how this genre is to be understood. In the essays on *Epic Naïveté* and on *The Position of the Narrator in the Contemporary Novel* one reads that the formal law that defines the novel is that of the I, that is to say, what for Szondi brings modern drama close to the narrative form: the epic I. "The task of compressing some remarks on the current status of the novel as form into the space of a few minutes forces me to select, albeit by doing violence, one aspect of the problem" Adorno says, and this aspect is "is the position of the narrator" (Adorno 1958, transl. 1991: 38); the narrator, one reads in the essay on *Epic Naïveté* "has always been the one who resisted interchangeability" (Adorno 1958, transl. 1991: 25). The narrating "I" is the assumed subject on which the foundations of the world of the novel rest; the supporting structure; the guarantor for the text; what defines and gathers its materials around its law-like core. The novel corresponds to the gesture of telling a story. It is all that remains of the mythical image of an original narrative. In fact, everything can be missing in the novel except a precise narrative pact with the readers, who upon opening the book accept the "so it was" that the narrator puts before them.

The law-like and binding force of the narrating I principle is then made fully clear, as soon as its crisis is detected – so Adorno – in the modern novel. Between the classic bourgeois novel – in which "the narrator raises a curtain: the reader is to take part in what occurs as though he were physically present." (Adorno 1958, transl. 1991: 33) – and the modernist novel as emerging from the experience of the avant-gardes – in which "the immanent claim that the author cannot avoid making- that he knows precisely what went on -requires

proof” (Adorno 1958, transl. 1991: 33) – the essential variation is to be seen precisely in the formal law of the epic I, that is, in the way in which the literary materials are organized around the law-like core of the novel. In this respect, Adorno’s accounts allow us to speak of something like the form of the novel in general, based on which the novel is identified by the set of literary materials gathered around a narrating I who is the guarantor of their consistency, that is to say what establishes the field of tension that bestows a meaningful configuration upon them.

4. The postmodern novel and the crisis of form

On the outset I wrote that the aim of this essay was to show how Adorno absorbed certain structural tendencies of the aesthetics of German idealism, particularly Hegelian aesthetics, opening them up to discussion of aesthetically contemporary issues. Indeed, the concepts of form, content, and aesthetic material are presented as a reworking of the basic forms of Hegelian aesthetics, with a view to specifying their relevance in the social context. As I have stated, the other aim of this paper was to point out the relevance of Adorno’s aesthetics, namely in reference to his definition of the concept of literary material, and that I would do so by playing Adorno’s arguments within the current discussion on the so-called postmodern novel. A full survey of the literary problems connected to the postmodern novel exceeds the scope of this contribution, as it would be foolish to try and fit it within the limited space of an essay¹². What I will do instead is to clarify in what sense it is possible to apply the concepts that I have extrapolated from Adorno’s aesthetics to read some basic trends in contemporary novels. In particular, I will show how the notion of aesthetic material and its relation to the form as sedimented content allow for a fruitful interpretation of the postmodern novel. In this way, in fact, the postmodern novel is able to free itself from a reading that understands it as the bizarre expression of a cultural disorientation, or as an ingenious construction that proceeds from outside the world in which it arises. The postmodern novel, on the other hand, presents a precise continuity with the traditional novel, insofar as its form, as an organization of aesthetic material, is the aesthetic sedimentation of a precise historical and social content. This continuity, finally, expresses again the dialogue between idealist aesthetics (interpreter of traditional literary forms) and Adorno’s aesthetics, understood as a reading of contemporary phenomena.

When we talk about contemporary postmodern novels we are referring to an undefined set of works, which share nevertheless some salient features, such as the fragmentation of the plot, a considerable length, references to mass

¹² More on this topic can be found in the fifth chapter of my monograph: Farina 2020.

culture, and that tone of obsessive paranoia face to the world and technology that Wood has defined as “hysterical realism” (Wood 2000). Arguably the best known names and works that fall into the genre are *Gravity’s Rainbow*, written in 1973 by Thomas Pynchon, DeLillo’s 1997 masterpiece, *Underworld*, and *Infinite Jest*, published by Wallace a year earlier, to which one could also add *2666* by Roberto Bolaño (2004, posthumously) and *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith (2000). Literary criticism has engaged in several attempts to offer a definition of these texts. The heterogeneous outcomes of this debate have resulted in conflicting categorization proposals: Frederick Karl, for example, has proposed the category of “Mega-novel” (Karl 2001), LeClair instead that of “systems novel” (LeClair 1989), while more recently Stefano Ercolino has developed the concept of “maximalist novel” (Ercolino 2014), which relies on the connected notion of “world text” (Moretti 1996). The contribution that Adorno’s arguments can provide in this context is, however, of a purely philosophical and aesthetic nature. This means that Adorno’s account cannot be used to advance individual claims connected to literary criticism or history of literature, as it is rather aimed at applying the tools of aesthetics to a whole literary phenomenon. What ensues can, then, prove effective in the context of larger debates.

Unlike categories such as that of mega novels and systems novels, that of postmodern novel, although vague, has two advantages: its communicability and the reference to a historical context and to an entire cultural *milieu*. Its effectiveness in communication is proven by the fact that anyone even vaguely close to these debates, upon hearing a short reference to the postmodern novel, knows at once what one is talking about; its ties to a historical context have furthermore the advantage of signaling a certain common cultural sensitivity. The category of postmodern novel, according to the perspective that I put forward, can be handled based on the same gnoseological scheme previously applied to the notion of genre – although it cannot be assimilated to it. To the form of the postmodern novel belong then those novels which, if scrutinized, seem to react to the same problems and to give formal answers to the problems that are common also to other novels that fall into that form. One should here bear in mind that for historically shaped categories the question about the first item falling under said category is idle, as is the question about the first comedy or the first novel. What is at stake is therefore to understand what problems the postmodern novel reacts to and through which answers it reacts to them. Since we have identified the structure of the epic I – or rather, the way in which the narrating I articulates its own law of coherence – as the formal principle of the novel, the attention will have to fall precisely on this literary figure.

One will look, then, for the narrating I, as the law-like center around which the literary materials are arranged. The reader of the postmodern novel is however in this respect immediately faced with a problem: on the one hand, the presence of the narrators is undeniably cumbersome; great display is made of their virtuosity, at times even through direct winking at the readership; on the other

hand, an equally undeniable impression of chaos prevails. The narrator of the postmodern novel, in fact, is like the Wallace of *Infinite Jest*, who constructs a novel of over a thousand pages with two hundred pages of footnotes, obsessed as he is with the urge to comment ironically on what he is observing; and it is also the Pynchon of *Gravity's Rainbow*, who cannot resist winking at the reader and introducing much doubt on whether he is really being serious. Precisely this feature, that is to say, the ability to build immense narrative castles based on ironic cynicism, has often been presented as the display of a narrative omnipotence. Typical of the epic I of the postmodern narrator is however also the tendency to dissolution. Everything in the novel tends to dissolve: Slothrop, the protagonist of Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, dissolves; the distinction between reality and fiction in Wallace's *Infinite Jest* dissolves; the plot in general dissolves and the very unity of the narrative dissolves. Finally, and this is the case with *Underworld*, also the narrator dissolves. Without mannerism, DeLillo writes a novel in which the narrator constantly switches from the first to the third person, betraying a marked need to go beyond his own individuation. The narrator is, then, ousted from the world, like the collector of sports memorabilia who lives in a basement surrounded by his objects and who, disconsolate, comments on his condition saying that it is simply the "revenge of popular culture on those who take it too seriously" (DeLillo 1997: 323).

But granted that the epic I is the law-like unity of the novel, how can this rift be mended? What holds the novel together? While reading *Underworld* one might want to say that the principle of unity has moved to the opposite side of the narrative spectrum. It is no longer the subject that rules over the world of the novel, but the object: in this case, a baseball, a useless, perhaps unreal, piece of junk from the entertainment industry, which collects the secrets of half a century of American history in its own non-sensical parable. And all is left to do for the narrator of the postmodern novel is, then, to stand by and watch, to give up on the leading role, hide this abdication behind cynicism and make display of excessive power, and finally resolve to disappear as unitary subject face to the overpowering historical world. The narrator of classical novels – as Adorno puts it – could still raise the curtain on a world known for being orderly, whereas the modernist narrator was like a director who didn't trust the actors and who feared they may have forgotten the part. Following this metaphor, the narrators of the postmodern novel opens the curtain on a world that is not known to them and of which they pretend, in retrospect, to make sense, while constantly apologizing with the audience. More than a director, this narrator seems then the embodiment of an image very dear to Walter Benjamin, which is described in the text *Theses on the Philosophy of History*:

There is a picture by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward

the past. Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is this storm (Benjamin 1940, Engl. transl. 2003: 392).

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