

The Subject's Destruction?

A Note on Adorno's Sublime

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'In spite of persistent economic and political inequalities, all Japanese without exception are currently in a position to live according to totally formalized values – that is, values completely empty of all human content in the historical sense. Thus in the extreme, every Japanese is in principle capable of committing, from pure snobbery, a perfectly gratuitous suicide (the classical sword of the samurai can be replaced by an airplane or torpedo), which has nothing to do with the risk of life in a Fight waged for the sake of historical values that have social or political content.'

(A. Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*)¹

Our expectations were far from fulfilled since almost no space had been given to theology. My automatic grammar checking immediately marked this opening sentence as undesirable. It runs against one of the basic rules on which all writing manuals agree: 'Avoid the passive'. It is not only a question of economy: the passive voice makes sentences excessively wordy. It introduces vagueness and confusion, since the word order situates the cause of the action at the end of the sentence, or even allows omitting it altogether, thereby evading the question 'By whom?' The active voice is to be preferred because the reader should know from the outset who the subject of the action is.

Theologians are used to their computer's allergy against their writing—most of their concepts do not belong to the standard thesaurus. But the recurrent refusal of the passive voice may point to a more fundamental feature of our secularised context. This writing rule fits in with a modern grammar, centred on an active subject. Symptomatic here would be the fate of the *passivum divinum*. Some older readers may have vague memories about a construction in the passive voice in which the one causing the action is not specifically mentioned, and as such God

¹ Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, London, 1969, 162. I would like to thank Tom Jacobs for this reference.

is implied as the actual subject. The complete obliteration of the divine passive could count as a grammatical definition of secularisation; the devaluation of the passive in general appears as the grammatical consequence of the death of God.

How to give God a voice in Microsoft's world? How to speak about transcendence today? How to represent the transcendent in a context in which God seems to have no place anymore? In the wake of the French phenomenology which is in vogue these days, it looks as if good theology would consist in neglecting our software's warnings and stubbornly (re)using the passive voice. Indeed, the retrieval of the religious in writings of Jean-Luc Marion, Michel Henry or, earlier on, Emmanuel Levinas, involved a rediscovery of receptivity and passivity over against the activism of the modern subject. This bold restoring of the theological passive often takes the shape of an aesthetic turn—the Eastern Orthodox icons, for instance, introducing a dimension of radical receptivity.

8.1 THE SUBLIME AND THE PRODUCTION OF THE SELF

In his interpretation of the modern devaluation of God, Hemming is using the same parameters – subjectivity, causality, aesthetics . . . – but in a way which undermines our presupposed grammatical opposition. To think of the divine in the passive voice already is half-way to a devaluation of God—it values God as a cause and as such introduces a subject-object relation which opens up the road to the dethroning of the divine Subject by the modern *cogito*. A contemporary plea for the theological passive would come down to a mere inversion of the same ontotheological logic. Hemming probably would point to an alternative way of speaking, even more obsolete than the *passivum divinum*: what the Greek knew as the medial, a verbal form in between of the passive and the active (cf. Hemming, *Postmodernity's Transcending*, p. 22). How philosophy could rediscover the medial voice as a way to prevent ontotheological schemes of causality and intentionality from intruding into our understanding of God, would lead us too far.

Hemming's book presents itself as an investigation in the topic of the sublime, using this term as a key to unlock the question of the place of God, or, better, the displacement of God in our contemporary context. To my disappointment I could not see any theological use for this work, until I found out that this was exactly the point. The author's intention is to show that there is no place for Christian theology in the aesthetics of the sublime. Philosophers, and in their wake theologians, desperately looking for a *locus theologicus*, are mistaken in representing the sublime as a road to overcome the nihilist devaluation of God. The very idea that one should conquer a place for God is itself part of the impasse in which contemporary God-talk is stuck. Attempts at revaluing God are merely mirroring the devaluation of God: the very idea that one has to value God (or to put God in place) at all, is based on a logic which from the outset rules out the very possibility of God's appearing. The only thing that does appear is the will to power of a postmodern self which decides 'to ascribe a value to God – to produce and reproduce God . . . to revivify God – God as the artwork which I shall become' (p. 212). 'I believe in God' becomes a slogan, a point of view, an opinion, a position to be taken up—above all, a political stylisation' (p. 207). The ones who

advocate overcoming the 'death of God' and that declare God is flourishing again, make a parody of believing, only serving their inflated egos. Blaming nihilistic culture for its death drive, they turn out to be the most nihilistic of all. Hemming sardonically comments on those who feel themselves called to speak up for God: 'Here is a true necrophilia, that I should dance with the corpse of this dead God and have it flourish in my hands!' (p. 212).

Hemming's genealogy of the sublime intends to debunk the place where a lot of theologians hoped to find a last refuge.² The many theological attempts to represent the transcendent in a context in which God seems to have no place anymore are exposed as misled, as based on false illusions and a misunderstanding of the ground on which we stand. What is at stake in the postmodern aesthetics of the sublime, far from opening up a space for God, in fact is the securing of the self. Their critiques of Modernity notwithstanding, postmodern thinkers are basically continuing the modern project of securing the subjectivity of the subject, be it in a Nietzschean parody. Referring to Jean Baudrillard's analysis of our televisual age or Slavoj Žižek's film criticism, Hemming strongly suggests that the sublime in our context merely functions within the representational technique of the 'imaginary self-postulation' of subjectivity (p. 30). The postmodern subject is through and through aesthetic: 'Every work of art is at the same time, therefore, the production of a subject: every subject is a self-productive artwork.' (p. 203) The aesthetic turn of theologians ends up in their naïvely occupying positions which are designed by two malfeasant architects: either Hegel or Nietzsche, or both at once. They are unaware that postmodernity's transcending, as articulated in the figure of the sublime, is inevitably involved in the 'constant positing of the priority of the self' (p. 37). The only god that can be envisaged in this postmodern space is a prefab god, subjected to the rules of the all-productive self. No salvation has to be expected from this side: the Sublime is a purely anthropological category.

8.2 THE SUBLIME 'AGAINST THE SUBJECT' (ADORNO)

Hemming's book is expressing a provocative claim concerning our contemporary condition. An all too easily made objection could be that the book does not contain enough elaborated discussions on postmodern protagonists—on Lyotard's interpretation of the sublime, just for one example. Indeed, his major focus is on the philosophical roots which precede today's situation, presupposing that the Modern framework is still ours; and that Heidegger's reading of modern philosophy on the basis of ontotheology is the accurate interpretation of the whole. Rather than regretting the sometimes too aphoristic character of Hemming's claim, a responsible reader of his text should try to corroborate the interpretative direction indicated.³ So one could wonder what would happen if Hemming were to read

² Cf. John Milbank, 'Sublimity: The Modern Transcendent,' in Paul Heelas e.a. (eds.), *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1998, 258–284; Clayton Crockett, *A Theology of the Sublime*, London: Routledge, 2001.

³ In his contribution to the symposium Hemming himself undertook such a rereading of his own book by means of a detailed analysis of Jean-Luc Nancy's writings (cf. *A Singular Question* in this volume).

Theodor W. Adorno, one of the pioneers of the contemporary aesthetic turn, an influence on both Lyotard and Žižek. In particular in his *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), Adorno attempts to break through the modern subjectivist impasse, by turning towards the aesthetic, and especially towards the sublime. In this Adorno does not try to overcome the subject, nor to return to a premodern horizon, but to open up within the modern subject the possibility of a real encounter. Art, as that paradoxical given which is both subjectively produced and not to be reduced to the subject,⁴ offers a kind of purgatorial experience, which is the experience of the sublime.

Adorno reinterprets Kant's account of the sublime and indicates how the Kantian sublime involves an experience in which the subject is initially overpowered, but Kant subsequently turns this overpowerment of the subject into an affirmation of the subject. The transcendental subject discovers itself as superior over nature, because it is gifted with reason. Adorno, on the contrary, radicalises the moment of overpowerment by the sublime. The experience of the sublime confronts the subject with a negation of the subject, and this negation cannot be overcome by the subject. The experience of the Sublime is 'Erschütterung'⁵—which can be translated as 'shuddering, tremor, a shock'. For Adorno, the tremor is all but a gratification of the self. Rather it is about the 'annihilation of the self in front of art'⁶. Art refuses to serve the subject, to be a function of the subject.

Art provokes an experience 'against the subject'.⁷ The shock is a 'reminder of the liquidation of the self, which by being shaken up becomes aware of its limits and finitude'⁸. He adds:

At this moment the subject in front of the sublime is moved to tears. Becoming aware of nature breaks up the hubris of its self-positing. "Tears well up, I'm returned to the earth!" In this, the self steps out of the imprisonment in itself.⁹

The sublime confronts the subject with its 'Naturhaftigkeit'¹⁰ (its 'affinity with nature', 'belonging to nature'). The subject finds itself indissolubly bound to nature. The tears of pain, the crying of the subject, bears witness to its bodiliness: the subject is a body.

⁴ Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1970 (further abbr.: ÄT), 99: 'Das Kunstwerk, durch und durch *thései*, ein Menschliches, vertritt, was of *phüsei*, kein blosses fürs Subjekt, was, kantisch gesprochen, Ding an sich wäre.' ['The artwork, through and through *thései*, something human, is the plenipotentiary of *phüsei*, of what is not merely for the subject, of what, in Kantian terms, would be the thing itself.' (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*. Newly translated, edited, and with a translator's introduction by Robert Hullot-Kentor, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p. 63)].

⁵ ÄT, 364. 401.

⁶ ÄT, 364: 'die Vernichtung des Ichs im Angesicht der Kunst'.

⁷ Cf. ÄT, 401: 'Hat das Subjekt in der Erschütterung sein wahres Glück an den Kunstwerken, so ist es eines *gegen das Subjekt*; darum ihr Organ das Weinen, das auch die Trauer über die eigene Hinfalligkeit ausdrückt.'

⁸ ÄT, 364: 'Memento der Liquidation des Ichs, das als erschüttertes der eigenen Beschränktheit und Endlichkeit inward'.

⁹ ÄT, 410: 'Dieser Augenblick bewegt das Subjekt vorm Erhabenen zum Weinen. Eingedenken von Natur löst den Trotz seiner Selbstsetzung: "Die Träne quillt, die Erde hat mich wieder!" Darin tritt das Ich, geistig, aus der Gefangenschaft in sich selbst heraus. Etwas von der Freiheit leuchtet auf'.

¹⁰ ÄT, 295.

In the experience of the work of art, the subject is subjecting itself to the work of art.¹¹ The experience of art consists in an 'ästhetische Entäusserung an die Sache, das Kunstwerk'¹², an 'aesthetic turning outwards into the work of art', or in another translation: 'an aesthetic kenosis of the subject into the work of art'. The encounter with art involves the 'self-negation of the viewer, who virtually vanishes in the work'.¹³ As the word 'virtually' indicates, the sublime does not provoke a real annihilation of the subject: art is necessarily fiction. Adorno does not drop the subject; he is looking for the possibility of a modern subject that turns itself against itself in order to transcend its modern imprisonment in itself.¹⁴ The tremor in front of the sublime is breaking the subject open: in this experience the ego, bent on self-preservation, becomes aware of the fact that it is a pseudo-subject.¹⁵ In the shock of the sublime, the self enters into the possibility to leave its self-positing self behind. In his account of the sublime Adorno highlights its power against the subject. Art is not so much about self-productive representation, but about a process of negation, which allows the subject for a purgatorial movement of self-destruction.

As many postmodern philosophers after him, Adorno deploys in his aesthetics a negativity in order to escape from subject's self-imprisoning drive to self-preservation. Extrapolating from his remarks on Derrida's 'negative theology', Hemming's objection could sound:

The negation of something positive does not yield something of entirely different order, it simply yields a thing which is determined in advance and entirely from out of that which it negates [...] are we not simply performing a reversal within ontotheology's compass, and so leaving everything the same, just upside-down? (p. 62)

Hemming's question owes its rhetorical force to a kind of mathematical evidence. The negative of a positive number is formally seen the same number, the minus added only a minor shift: $x + (-x) = 0$, so negation does not really make a difference. Hemming suggests that the postmodern focus on negativity is just a kind of trick by means of which the modern subject survives: a decentred subject is still a subject; 'it continues to appear in the light of the place provided for it by Descartes, by Leibniz, and above all by Kant' (p. 3). At this formal level, any change in the contents of what appears does not matter.

Does this formalisation take the centrality of the negative in postmodern aesthetics serious enough? To be sure, Hemming has a recurrent interpretation of postmodern negativity. He even states that the subject is marked by 'self-denial' (cf. p. 3 and p. 44), but oddly enough, this self-denial is not referring to a self denying itself, but rather a self denying things in order to produce and secure

¹¹ ÄT, 396: 'sich unterwerfen'.

¹² ÄT, 178.

¹³ ÄT, 396: 'Selbstnegation des Betrachtenden, der im Werk virtuell erlischt'.

¹⁴ This does not imply a weak subject: '[e]inzig das Autonome vermag sich kritisch zu wenden gegen sich und seine illusionäre Befangenheit zu durchbrechen' (ÄT, 178).

¹⁵ ÄT, 364: 'Zwar verschwindet das Ich im Augenblick von Erschütterung nicht real; der Rausch, der dahin sich bewegt, ist unvereinbar mit künstlerischer Erfahrung. Für Momente indessen wird das Ich real der Möglichkeit inne, seine Selbsterhaltung unter sich zu lassen, ohne dass es doch dazu ausreichte, jene Möglichkeit zu realisieren.'

itself. Hemming is stressing throughout the book that the self, the human subject, posits itself by means of the negation of God and the world, the forgetting of the being of being. Hemming claims that the postmodern self is produced and consumed at the cost of God and world. A postmodern aesthetics of the sublime is manifesting the logic of representation, which would be a logic of the subject's production and consumption.

Let us have a look at the *Brontosaurus* once more, the visual example which is said to capture our contemporary situation. Hemming's interpretation focuses on the formal – videographic and cinekinetic – features which exemplify the visual aesthetics which conditions the production of the self. However, the body in case is not just a body, it is an ugly body. And why? Because it is an emaciated body—as Hemming euphemistically mentions 'almost emaciated' (p. 1). It is a body that visualises the dark side of the ruling postmodern aesthetics: it is the body of *anorexia nervosa*. As much as the self is produced, the postmodern self is fascinated by its own destruction. *Anorexia nervosa* is the symptomatic figure of a self-destructive subject. (Another symptom is the high rate of suicide. And especially among popular artists, artists who are the motors of postmodern imagination, and as such the main producers of the postmodern self.) What if the postmodern sublime has more to do with the elimination of the modern subject than with its reproduction? My question is: what place would you give to this self-destructive tendency? Is it just to be considered as the reverse side of the self-productive mechanisms? If so, I would object this reversibility: there is an irreversible moment in destruction, the moment of death, exemplified in the self-mutilated body.

As my remark is basically an *argumentum e silentio*, I just would like to invite Hemming to open up a perspective on this question of self-destruction, as a basic feature of postmodern aesthetics—not only pointing towards a major divergence from a modern self-productive subject, but also invoking another fashionable theological figure: kenosis, the self-emptying understood as a movement of self-destruction. He does not mention kenosis once. Kenosis seems up to a certain extent the negative of the sublime, understood as upliftment. What if the death of God does not necessarily provoke a reaction of self-upliftment, but rather self-destruction? Or is this tragic fate drowned out by the giggling, which apparently accompanied the making of the *Brontosaurus*? However, it is only in *Legoland* that construction and destruction are part of an infinite play which can start every time anew—this reversibility is what Hemming rightly blames a certain misunderstanding of temporality for.

Hemming does not mention the destructive side of today's sublime in explicit terms. It is even absent at places where one would expect it—for example when the apocalyptic is dealt with, which appears without any connotation of destruction, reduced to its etymological meaning of 'unveiling'. Or is the destructive lurking behind the book's Heideggerian motto 'Räumen ist Freigabe von Orten'. 'Räumen' is not just making space, it is a destructive activity—'räumen' is what you need bulldozers for. What if Hemming's *Devaluing God* is the aesthetic act of self-destruction par excellence? The ultimate Kojévian gesture, or rather Adorno's 'virtual self-liquidation', or both at once?

In the end, the radicalism of Hemming's philosophical position seems to

be counterpoised by a theological refuge into the liturgical sphere (p. 244). But *'what are these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchres of God?'* How the altar can stay untouched by the tolling of Nietzsche's funeral bells, remains unelucidated. To put it differently: does Hemming see any relation left between reason and prayer?

