

Philosophy and/as literature: the case of Theodor W. Adorno

The question concerning the relation between philosophy, poetry and literature somehow characterizes the whole history of Western philosophy, from the Pre-Socratics up to today. In this paper, my aim is to give an account of Theodor W. Adorno's particular view of this relation. I think indeed that the case of Adorno is highly interesting, since it gives us the possibility to not consider the relation between philosophy and literature simply in terms of differences or even 'oppositions' between them, at the same time without getting rid of their differences and peculiarities, that is, without reducing philosophy to just 'a kind of writing'. Moreover, I think that such an account of Adorno's work can provide the basis for a possible dialogue between his own point of view and those expressed by other main thinkers of the 20th century, belonging to both the analytic and the 'Continental' traditions, such as, for example, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jacques Derrida, Nelson Goodman, Arthur C. Danto, and most of all Richard Rorty.

1. In the first paragraph of my paper, I try to show that Adorno, throughout his whole life and work, always expressed a deep concern for art, and thus for poetry and literature too. This is clearly witnessed, among other things, by his philosophical interpretations of narrative and poetical works. Beside the influence of modern music – especially Schönberg's, Berg's and Webern's atonal and dodecaphonic works, whose influence on Adorno's thought is so evident, that some interpreters explicitly spoke of 'atonal philosophy' –, the influence of modern literature too was actually of great importance for the development of his own philosophical thought. Taking a look at the 'Table of contents' of his many collections of papers, such as *Prismen* and the four volumes of *Noten zur Literatur*, one is astonished by the richness and complexity of Adorno's engagement with authors like Goethe, Hölderlin, Heine, Balzac, Dickens, Mann, George, Hofmannstahl, Proust, Valéry, Kafka, Huxley, and Beckett. In particular, one might recall the role played by Samuel Beckett, to whom Adorno's unfinished *Ästhetische Theorie* was to be dedicated, and whose dramas Adorno explicitly defines, in the 1965 lecture course on *Metaphysik: Begriff und Probleme*, as "the only true relevant metaphysical productions since the war".

Anyway, the aim of my paper is not to detail Adorno's interpretations of writers and poets, but rather that of analyzing Adorno's basic conception of the relation between philosophy and literature, and thus Adorno's own prose too, i.e. the reason why he gave so much importance to the literary, expressive, 'stylistic' moment of philosophy. In fact, not only did Adorno express a constant interest in poetry and literature, but he also let literature 'seep in' his philosophical work. This is clearly testified, from a theoretical point of view, by his considerations on the importance of

the presentation-form, and from a practical point of view, by his endless experimentation with different forms and styles.

2. In the second paragraph of my paper, I try then to point out the theoretical motivations underlying Adorno's need for new ways of thinking and writing. I briefly sketch Adorno's basic conception of a 'transformation' (*Veränderung*) of reason and philosophy itself, taking into consideration two of Adorno's major works, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (1947) and *Negative Dialektik* (1966), which deal precisely with this task. Not by chance, an element of great importance in both these books is represented by the question concerning the role of language, expression, exposition, rhetoric, with a special attention to the problem of the 'stylistic' accuracy in which, according to Adorno, philosophy too must not be lacking. I try then to briefly sketch the attention paid by Adorno, during the whole course of his philosophical career (from the early writing of the 1930s, such as *Die Aktualität der Philosophie*, *Die Idee einer Naturgeschichte*, and the *Thesen über die Sprache des Philosophen*, up to his major works of the following decades), to the question about 'style in philosophy'. That is, the question about those stylistic strategies of exposition, which, far from being just a 'shell' or a formal cover for conceptual contents that could be also expressed otherwise, rather constitute for Adorno a decisive element of thought itself. In fact, in the Introduction to *Negative Dialektik*, Adorno carefully underlies the relevance of the 'expressive', the 'exhibitory', and the 'rhetorical' moments of philosophy. He states indeed that expression was constantly banned by the whole official philosophical tradition, and that it consequently took shelter in language and rhetoric, that is, in "the presentation of philosophy", which "is not an external matter of indifference to it but immanent to its idea. Its integral, non-conceptual mimetic moment of expression is objectified only by presentation in language".

As a result, the capacity of 'critical' thinking somehow involves the capacity of 'critical' speaking and writing too, and thus it is impossible (or at least mistaken), in Adorno's view, to 'split' form from contents. So, he proposes to abandon the somehow traditional view, that considers form and content as different and unrelated aspects of a philosophical text, and he tries to conceive of them more dialectically, namely as relational 'poles', constantly exercising a reciprocal influence on one another, and actually determining themselves through this continuous mutual interaction. Given these assumptions, in the essay entitled *Der Essay als Form* Adorno sharply criticizes those philosophies, like "the general positivist tendency", which don't go "beyond the mere separation of form and content [...]. In positivist practice, the content, once fixed in the model of the protocol sentence, is supposed to be neutral with respect to its presentation, which is supposed to be conventional and not determined by the subject. To the instinct of scientific purism, every expressive impulse in the presentation jeopardizes an objectivity that supposedly leaps forth when

the subject has been removed. [...] In its allergy to forms as mere accidental attributes, the spirit of science and scholarship comes to resemble that of rigid dogmatism. Positivism's irresponsibly sloppy language fancies that it documents responsibility in its object, and reflection on intellectual matters becomes the privilege of the mindless".

3. After this general overview on Adorno's basic convictions about the role of language, form, expression and exposition in philosophy, in the third paragraph of my paper I try to 'concretely' analyze the kinds of presentation-form that Adorno himself chose to adopt in his works. In this attempt, I mostly rely on Gillian Rose's study entitled *The search for style*, which still appears to me as one of the best contributes on this particular topic. In addition to the particular features carefully examined by Gillian Rose – such as Adorno's "alternative way of using concepts", his use of "impersonal and passive constructions", his use of "stylistic strategies [...] directed at the experience of the reader", and his use of "the mode, half way between argument and trope, [of] chiasmus", in the place of "the norms of the standard philosophical argument" –, I also try to point out the attention paid by Adorno to some apparently 'marginal' aspects of the text-composition. For example, his attention to the choice of titles, to the use of punctuation and of foreign words, to the usefulness of dictation and the importance of corrections and erasures, or even to questions concerning the pagination and binding of books.

But most of all, I try to show how Adorno's fundamental mistrust against the traditional philosophical claim to a systematic comprehension of the whole also led him to a consequential mistrust against the traditional presentation-forms of our philosophical tradition, like that of the systematic treatise. For these basic theoretical reasons, in his many writings Adorno chose to adopt presentation-forms and styles which might be considered as 'alternative' to that of the systematic treatise, like those of the collection of aphorisms, the essay, and the 'paratactical composition'. The second half of this paragraph of my paper is thus devoted to a brief analysis of these three peculiar forms of presentation, which are emblematically represented by such Adorno's major works like *Minima moralia*, his many collections of essays (*Prismen*, *Noten zur Literatur*, *Eingriffe*, *Ohne Leitbild*, *Dissonanzen*, *Klangfiguren*, *Quasi una fantasia*, *Moments musicaux*, *Impromptus*), and his unfinished, posthumously published *Ästhetische Theorie*.

4. In the fourth and final paragraph of my paper, I first try to show how a sort of radical change in the relation between philosophy and literature actually took place during the 19th and especially the 20th centuries. It seems indeed that while most philosophers, from the Greeks up to the modern age, considered their discipline as something radically different from poetry and literature, that is, as something concerning truth instead of mere appearance or 'fiction', after Romanticism many authors put a strong emphasis on the affinities, rather than on the differences,

between philosophy, poetry, and literature. Perhaps, the original source of such an undermining of the difference between philosophy and literature is to be found in the early Nietzsche's 'aestheticism', clearly expressed by his famous definition of truth as "a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms". Throughout the whole 20th century, this tendency was somehow developed and brought further, in the so-called Continental tradition, by thinkers like Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Jacques Derrida. Meanwhile, in the analytic tradition authors like Nelson Goodman and Arthur C. Danto paid close attention to such questions like the actual meaning of the notion of style, and the relation between philosophical theory and literary practice. All this, together with the provocative work of the so-called 'Yale Critics', led to a great diffusion of deconstructivism and textualism, and thus to a widespread tendency to 'leveling' the genre distinction between philosophy and literature. Perhaps, the last result of this process can be seen in Richard Rorty's proposal to consider the whole history of Western philosophy as nothing more than the history of a peculiar kind of writing unconscious of its 'mere' literary value, and in his provocative thesis, according to which: "Philosophy is best seen as a kind of writing. It is delimited, as is any literary genre, not by form or matter, but by a tradition". Rorty aims indeed at promoting "a general turn against theory and toward narrative", that is, at "breaking down the distinction between philosophy and literature", at "promoting the idea of a seamless, undifferentiated 'general text'", and consequently at assimilating metaphysics to "that genre of literature which attempted to create unique, total, closed vocabularies".

After this general (but, as I hope, useful) view on the way the philosophy-and-literature relation was conceived of throughout the centuries, in the second half of this paragraph of my paper I finally try to let Adorno's conception 'interact' with the abovementioned, widespread 'textualist' tendencies which characterized the last two decades of the 20th century. My thesis is that Adorno, while emphasizing the importance of 'style' in philosophical works too, always denied that philosophy could be reduced to just 'a kind of writing', as theorists like Rorty claim. As it's been noticed, with Rorty and Derrida "philosophy is turned into a form of 'literature', [...] that is, *fiction*. Philosophy's world is but a dream world. When everything becomes textuality and intertextuality and nothing but, the real world of human concerns and human praxis vanishes into the black hole of free-floating signifiers. This is indeed nihilism, a joyful nihilism perhaps, but nihilism nonetheless". The 'provisional' conclusion of my paper, thus, is that Adorno would never have accepted Rorty's point of view – which, as I already said, is perhaps representative of wider philosophical and intellectual trends of the last century –, and that Adorno's 'non-reductionist' conception of the relation between philosophy 'and' literature, that is, his attempt not to simply consider philosophy 'as' literature, is probably more interesting and actual today than 30, 20 or even 10 years ago. In

fact, after the great diffusion of 'postmodernism' and other culturally analogous phenomena, both analytical and Continental philosophers seem to feel now a new 'urge' for specifying the real 'nature' of philosophy, without simply reducing it to science, on the one hand, or to art and literature, on the other hand. That which probably corresponds to Adorno's own idea of philosophy, as clearly testified, for example, by his famous 1962-63 lessons on *Philosophische Terminologie* or by the *Negative Dialektik* itself, where he constantly points out both the 'specificity' and 'non-specificity' of philosophical thought. That is, its constant overlapping with science and art, its peculiar combination of method and expression, of the conceptual and the non-conceptual, of the objective and the subjective. A combination, or 'mixture', which belongs to the complexity of the human nature itself, and which allows us to think such different features of human thought and experience as terms of a mutual, irreducible relation.