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Edited by Connell Vaughan and Iris Vidmar Jovanović

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Painting in Waiting
Prelude to a Critical Philosophy of History and Art

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Columbia University

ABSTRACT. This essay investigates the idea of a painting in waiting by importing the idea of waiting into a critical philosophy of history and art. There is of course no one thing meant by *waiting*. It can mean to pause, hesitate, linger, falter, or to anticipate with trepidation or hope. But it can also mean to serve as once ladies-in-waiting served in courts, or as waiters once stood in readiness in restaurants, perhaps to the point of Sartrean nausea, fully prepared to accommodate the needs of others. The very idea of waiting prompts many thoughts, as it is meant to: of the relation of theory to action, of servitudes and freedoms, but of main concern here, of what waiting has to do with paintings that are imageless or blank or with books whose pages are not yet written.

L'avenir, par définition, n'a point d'image. L'histoire lui donne les moyens d'être pensé. (Paul Valéry, *Regards sur le monde actuel* (1931))

It is wise to follow a perfect epigram with a telling example. So here is one, drawn from Cervantes' last work of 1617, *The Trials of Persiles and Sigismunda*. A pilgrim poet tells of a wealthy *monsignor* in Rome who has the most curious museum in the world. It is a museum of the future

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comprising empty tablets awaiting persons illustrious enough to be painted. Two inscriptions indicate the persons to come: poets who through their works will declare the coming of a great political leader, in this case, Constantine. One poet is Torquato Tasso; the other Zárate. But when we learn that Tasso is named for his madness and the other for his lack of talent, suddenly something about this museum seems awry. Will not painters die of starvation waiting for the poets? Will any political leader live up to the poet's promise? And if a painting in waiting were ever to be completed, would not it necessarily enter a museum of the present, there anxiously to compete with the unsurpassable masterpieces of the past?

This essay investigates the idea of a painting in waiting by importing the idea of waiting into a critical philosophy of history and art. There is of course no one thing meant by *waiting*. It can mean to pause, hesitate, linger, falter, or to anticipate with trepidation or hope. But it can also mean to serve as ladies-in-waiting once did in courts, or as waiters once stood in readiness in restaurants, perhaps to the point of Sartrean nausea, fully prepared to accommodate the needs of others. The very idea of waiting prompts many thoughts (as it is meant to): of the relation of theory to action, of servitudes and freedoms, but of most concern here, of what waiting has to do with paintings that are imageless or blank or to books whose pages are not yet written.

My interest in waiting stems from my current book project, which begins with the very idea of beginning and seems then to keep beginning to throw doubt on any ending that suggests the final completion of the task. I

stand by those who say that writing a book is like producing a painting, where finishing, in another astute observation by Valéry, is only ever a stopping on the way. Painting, like writing, has long been construed as an endless task of patience and preparation, of repeated beginnings in the face of false starts, a constant trial and error between *what has been*, *what is*, and *what could be*, allowing Valéry one more quip of quite some modernist wit, that “the future is not what it used to be.” It is the patience and preparation that I import into the idea of waiting for a future that, without any suggestion of regret, might be different from how things used to be or are still today.

To set the scene, I begin, as my new book does, with the thought experiment that Arthur Danto devised to open his *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* of 1981. The experiment itself began with an anecdote that he took from Kierkegaard. It told about an artist who, when asked to depict the biblical passage across the Red Sea, did no more than cover a surface over with red paint and, evidently needing to explain, remarked that the Israelites had already crossed over and that the Egyptians were already drowned. Beginning with this anecdote, Danto devised his famous lineup of *red squares*, asking us to engage a passage of thought by which we come to know what art essentially *is* when nothing but blank red squares are all we are given to *see*. One evening some years ago, when I naively asked Danto why there were so few representations of the Red Sea Passage in the history of painting, he answered back quick as a snap that perhaps the subject had been too easy for artists to tackle, had it been the case that all they needed

was a canvas and red paint. Beyond the wit, the question as to what more is needed for art to be art beyond a blank canvas and red paint preoccupied him as a philosophical project for fifty years. It led him to an emancipation narrative for the artworld, to declare art's end with a call to freedom aimed at exposing a politics of exclusion in the world as a whole. It was his emancipation narrative, drawn from his use of the Red Sea anecdote, that inspired me to write my own book.

My book, titled *RED SEA-RED SQUARE* is a *Passagenwerk* about passages of life, thought, and art. It offers a genealogy of freedom and an anatomy of wit to suggest with a wry smile that there is no picturing of freedom without also the liberating of wit. But what sort of wit is at work if it yields a picture with nothing to see? Seeking the many who have used the Red Sea anecdote to make much more than an anecdotal point, I draw from the work of Danto and Kierkegaard, but also Giacomo Puccini, the French poet and playwright Henri Murger, and William Hogarth. Strange bedfellows to be sure, until we discover their different contributions to what around 1800 came to be a concept standing for a life known as *la vie de bohème*. What, I ask, had the concept of bohème to do with an exodus that left the Israelites having crossed and the Egyptians drowned? We know what Moses had to do with monotheism, but what had Moses also to do with the history of the red monochrome wherein artists and thinkers sought to picture freedom and liberate wit? This question rewards me with my *rote Faden*, in part by explaining why, of all colours—*Farben*—the *Faden* had to be red.

For this essay, it suffices to report only on one version of the Red Sea anecdote of consequence in post-revolutionary France, when the punchline was revised to say not that the Egyptians had already drowned, but that they were still *yet* to come—*Ils vont venir*. When, then, it was asked what would come to France when the Egyptians arrived, everything turned on what was meant by *the Egyptians—Egyptiens*. Was France eagerly awaiting the import of a wisdom of the once great empire of the Pharaohs or in horror for the so-named *lesser-Egyptians* who, through extraordinary confusions of history, theology, and myth, were falsely believed to have travelled as vagabonds in divine punishment all the way from the biblical Red Sea? Viewed on the long path as undesirable emigrants, these *lesser-Egyptians* picked up many names: *Gypsies*, *Zigeuner*, and in France, *les bohémiens*, meaning that they were seen as having come from the German lands of Bohemia without any *right* of passage. When, then, they arrived in Paris, many (and most famously Karl Marx) demanded that they be swept away as though a plague upon the streets, and strikingly under the rubric of *La Bohème*. But what had this *la bohème* to do with the artists living *la vie de bohème*? And why did Puccini's *La Bohème* open with a painter trying but failing to paint a Red Sea—*Questo Mar Rosso*? As intriguing as these questions are, it is enough here to note only the confusion of the passage of the *lesser-Egyptians* with the other migration from the Red Sea, of the sometimes named *Red Jews*, partly so-named or misnamed for their alleged shame in never having shed themselves of the idle worship of idols inherited from their enslaved ancestors. If some believed that the red of the Red Sea

signified the blood of the drowned Egyptians, others eagerly spread the red to the Jews who, for centuries thereafter, were declared incapable of understanding what freedom in the Promised Land really meant.

The Jews of exile and diaspora would be declared many times *False Prophets*, architects, as Kant would put it, of their own fate, for having wrongly waited for freedom's promise. Without paradox, to wait wrongly meant both a waiting too long and a not waiting at all. For assuming they knew too much or, worse, trusting too well what the future would bring, they were said to have foreclosed the possibility of their prophecy changing with the times, rendering it redundant for the future or as an outdated prophecy of the past. Leaving space for history to play its proper part encouraged the critics of false prophecy to propose a waiting game on corrected terms, where, at the centre of the game, facing the future meant making only a limited claim upon it.

This essay focuses on the limit [*Grenze*] in this claim. What has it meant, as a negative injunction of critique, to leave the canvas of the future blank, unpainted or withdrawn from sight? In the background, I will retain the thought of a waiting room with blank walls, which, from a past perspective, remembers a bloody history of oppression and tyranny, while, from a new perspective, gestures towards the blood of life and freedom.

When I first began thinking about waiting, I mistakenly believed that, as a philosophical motif, it had been insufficiently addressed. Soon, however, I found waiting everywhere, in proverbs such as "time and tide waits for no man" or in the *hesitant openness* brilliantly theorised by

Siegfried Kracauer in *Die Wartenden*. And then in the endless endgames of waiting for only God knows what in the dissonant theatre of the absurd, which in turn influenced Joseph Kosuth's depiction of everything that *nothing* could mean once written onto a black surface, and whose musical score would surely have been performed as John Cage's *Waiting* of 1952. And then the countless images and stories about people in transit, or standing in queues, or living in some sort of witness protection program, as suggested by Walt Whitman in his poem about the *fog* of the *mockings and arguments* of the *linguists and contenders*: "Both in and out of the game, and watching and wondering at it," he wrote, "I witness and wait." Or T. S. Eliot's waiting between "Birth, copulation, and death, That's all the facts." Or the lonely waiting game of Dr. Seuss in "The Places You'll Go:"

Everyone is just waiting.
.... I'm afraid that some times
you'll play lonely games too.
Games you can't win
'cause you'll play against you.

Offered as an antidote to expose and halt the conceits of false prophecy and false positivity, many have engaged what I think about as a *philosophical furniture art*, so that, with chairs in rooms with bare walls, one may ask after the true posture of waiting whether it is an active standing, an in-between sitting, or a resigned lying down. Many have declared waiting as hard a task as living an emancipated life; perhaps it is

the same task. One difficulty, *apropos* Nietzsche's untimely thoughts, turns on the phenomenology and hermeneutics of subjective time, consuming the mind with fearful feelings that one's past is but one's future, or that the future will never come, turning one's life into a lying down in an empty cask or hollow coffin. Another difficulty, *apropos* Kafka, turns on how sitting or standing *before the law* has meant waiting for the equality promised by the idea of justice, while cognisant of the lack of perfect justice in the reality that is always already ours. A third difficulty, *apropos* Beckett, is whether every waiting is a waiting *for*. Is it possible to wait in an intentionless mental space for nothing as though one's mind was or has become a blank canvas? But when we say that we are waiting for nothing, are we not meaning a nothing in particular, where we know not for what we wait specifically, or that we are conscious of waiting for something but cannot put our finger on what it is? Can one wait as an existential mood, and would we say there was a benefit to being in this mood if the mood yielded no more than a *mere* or *bloßes* nothing?

Waiting has submitted to necessarily impossible instructions, to stop short but not too short, to believe but not with false conviction, to doubt but not in order to lead to the impotence of inaction, to risk and improvise but not for their own endless sake. It's been invested with healthy and unhealthy scepticisms, between procrastination and leaping, stasis and movement, forgetting and remembering, idle satisfactions and the idyll of contemplation. It's been made into a lost and found office, sometimes coloured with all the blandness and alienation of the reduced *Grau* of

Goethe's *alle Theorie*, but thereafter rescued as a twilight zone or a site for a threshold experience with all the hues of life returned. Spatially, the waiting room has also been pictured as nomadic and monadic, fourth walled yet not windowed, if this would tempt anyone to forget the inside of their mind by focusing only on the offerings coming from the outside. Temporally, it's been invested with sustained thoughts of eternity or of the *here and now*, or with transformational glimpses of messianic truths, revealed and concealed, seen darkly or in the light, given and withheld in discourses of speech and silence. And then there are all those tragic-comedies made from the frustrated waitings in games of power or submission, or from the daily waitings for the traffic to move, for a dentist to call you to the chair, for the executioner's blade to come down, or for Wagner's operas to end, or for potentially didactic lectures like my own never properly to begin. But then again, we are told that beginning is always also a starting in the middle, if not also at the end. So, in a waiting room, it is often unclear where we are or where we are going.

Subtling my own essay by reference to a *prelude*, I have in mind what Nietzsche achieved by prefixing his *Philosophie der Zukunft* with a *Vorspiel*. By the prefix, he aimed to undercut the conceits of those who had pictured the future not as a sketch of limited norms or principles, but with too dangerous a positivity of speculative content and conviction. Nietzsche aimed to *prelude* readers into *precluding* a blind enthusiasm for a *new man* who would arrive naked and emancipated with a pure ego, to reoriginate in a rebirth the lost spirit of humanity against those who, populating the streets,

were described as living with a false egoism defined by petty bourgeois (often Jewish and womanly) self-interests. If a new person for the future was to arrive, the message would better come from the *stuttering* mouth of a Zarathustra, Moses, or ironic Socrates, allowing Nietzsche to declare with a mouth half open of his having “learned to wait—thoroughly” but only, he then added, for *myself—aber nur das Warten auf mich*.

To “wait for myself” meant, for Nietzsche, the conquering of one’s impatience to prove one’s honor in a duel or one’s inclination to live in the ease of forgetting the present as though, suddenly timelessly, one could assume a Christ-like posture of being *not of this world*. Surveying the long nineteenth century, Nietzsche looked to *die Kinder der Zukunft* who, listening to *die Zukunfts-Sirenen des Marktes*, were taken in by the foolish hopes piped out by the *rat-catchers*: that one’s miserable enslavement would soon pass if only one was prepared *from this day to the next* endlessly to wait *for something to come from outside*. He described how this waiting could lead to a feverish thirst until, jumping up as a *triumphant beast*, one proclaimed oneself already free. He warned against falling prey to the antiquated reflections of those who, gray-haired, offered only a poison to encourage “the doubting drive, the denying drive, the waiting drive, the collecting drive, the disintegrating drive—*der anzweifelnde Trieb, der verneinende Trieb, der abwartende Trieb, der sammelnde Trieb, der auflösende Trieb*.”

He further considered a mass exodus in Europe of workers whose situation was not of possibility but of impossibility, reasoning that their

social sickness, far from being cured, was only falsely being consoled by leaders whose self-interests favoured, contrary to their words, the perpetuation of injustice. If once a futurity of vision had liberated a people from one sort of slavery, the new Europeans had entered another, a new *Sklaverei* to a promise of principles or ascetic ideals that had nothing to do with living life now, or to a submission to a world-history that construed the present only as an ever-fleeting stage towards a not-yet existing future.

Nietzsche's critique was shared by many, including Richard Wagner, and this despite the strong case Nietzsche made against him. Looking for a model not of conceit but of courage, Wagner had concluded his treatise on the *artwork of the future* with a striking image for the emancipated mind of both artist and the German *Volk*. Rather than following the proud and haughty Egyptians into the Red Sea, one should borrow, he had insisted, the courage of the Old Israelites who had shed their skins as enslaved beasts of burden by crossing over. In crossing over, one would become a person of true pride, capable of singing in the new land the authentic *Volklieder* of praise of the *Minne-* and *Meistersinger*. In the era around 1848, looking back to the Old Israelites was a very familiar way to praise the Old Testament that had led to the New, so as to condemn a society that had become overrun by a modern Jewry which, not keeping up, had turned true into false pride, and which once had led Yahweh to drown the hardhearted Pharaoh of the Egyptians. But when the case was made against Wagner, one complaint hoisted him high on his own petard: that in so capitulating to false

pride, his own words and works increasingly demonstrated an insufficient courage to think in a truly emancipated way.

Yet long before any case was made against Wagner, the perpetuation of unfreedom and injustice concealed behind loud claims to the contrary was diagnosed as a pride of superiority, even a hard-headed *trumpery* cast over a society by those who exhibited every sort of failure to wait. To exhibit *every* sort of failure is, one would think, quite a feat for a single individual, hard to fathom until, we might think, today—but then perhaps the always-today. Many are presently discussing *trumpery* via the authoritarian personality or the one-dimensional man, and the analysis fits scarily well. But I'm interested in the particular hubris of impatience to which waiting has always been offered as the antidote. To speak of an antidote is to seek a cure for a sickness, but where the cure must prevent itself becoming part of the problem. And this prevention is done through the labour of the negative, as when one *stops short* of letting injustice have the last word. In the nineteenth century, the historian Macaulay said that Francis Bacon would have been a second Moses had he been better able to wait. But far worse were the tyrants who, in oppressive regimes, made citizens wait in lines strung out day after day by false promises.

This brings me to an old joke from the Soviet Union, about a queue where everyone waits the first day for the promised bread. As the promise decreases, persons are sent home according to their value to society: the lowest first, the Jews, then women, then non-party members third, leaving the party-faithful to stand alone, only to discover on the fourth day that no

bread will arrive. And the punchline coming from the most bitter mouth: “you see, the Jews have all the luck!” If, now, we add to this joke Kant’s anecdote about the doctor of speedy cures, our message is almost perfectly delivered. For consoling every patient *von Tag zu Tag* with promises of imminent recovery, the doctor is outwitted when a new patient turns up complaining of the most fatal illness of all, *Ich sterbe vor lauter Besserung!* The word *lauter*—*louder*—is repeated endlessly in the critique of false prophets, but the usual English translation—“I’m dying from *sheer* recovery” picks up also on one connotation of the word *sheer*, that all that glitters in a house painted white is not gold.

In the waiting game, even when our thoughts in an *essai* or *Versuch zur* lead to something *beyond [Jenseits]* or *infinite [Ewig]*, they cannot forgo the mediated labour of history’s time and tense. Nor can they forgo the preparation that tends more to unseat than unsettle expectations as to what freedom and justice really mean. But where in this labour does one begin?

In his museum of the future, Cervantes used the word *tablet—tablos*—to allow his readers to consider not only blank paintings, but also books with empty pages. He had in mind not the art-history of artists and writers filling in their tablets with visions of the Garden of Eden or the afterlife of heaven and hell, but the *Tabula Rasa* tradition that, raising questions of *innatism*, had asked whether at birth a child’s mind was empty, or, with Plato, full of forgotten remembrance, or what it meant, as for Locke, to await first experiences from which then one abstracted the first *ideas*.

Before Locke, Aristotle in *De Anima* likened the naked mind to an *unscribed tablet*, inspiring many thereafter, including the German Idealists, to refuse a mind conceived of as a passive container awaiting external stuff to fill it up. In a popular essay on the human vocation, Fichte added the word *mere—bloß* —to the *empty pages* [*leere blätter*] to capture the mind that falsely suspends its capability to engage reason as a practical activity of mediation between the outer and inner. Hegel differently called upon the empty pages to mark the “periods of happiness”—*die Perioden des Glücks*—which, lacking the requisite antagonism, meant that nothing in world-history was happening. In this use, the empty pages represent the *unhistorical present* without consequence for spirit’s advance of reason into the *future*.

To say that the history of empty pages is today full to the brim would be no exaggeration. Long before one could see empty paintings in the modern museums of the twentieth century, one could read about them as witty and serious *ekphrases* of the pen. Consider just the examples from seventeenth century experiments, inspiring those of the *Tabula Rasa* tradition to negotiate the terms of modern science through emblemata and *parerga*: the blank tablet in Otto van Veen’s *Theologicae Conclusiones*, Robert Fludd’s cosmological black page *ad infinitum*, and Saavedra Fajardo’s blank canvas on an easel, where with “the pencil and colors of art,” he saw persons “born without any manner of knowledge ... being left to draw the lineaments of Arts and Sciences on [their minds] as on a blank Canvass.” Or Cornelius Gijsbrechts’ issuance of the back of a framed

painting as part of the *trompe l'oeil* tradition, where the deception implied by the term *trompe* encouraged the wit of inversion that later inspired Jacques Derrida to reveal the philosophical import of the *parerga* shown as a gap or emptiness in the frame.

Waiting has often been called upon to sustain the dialectical arrest of time deemed essential to artworks that await a history to unfold for their interpretation or social truth content to come to timely and untimely articulations. Adorno wrote of the *afterlife* of artworks in a reception room caught between a refusal and a wanting to be understood. Mostly, however, the waiting served for him as an antidote to a contrary conceit. “The greater the artist,” he explained, “the stronger the temptation of the chimerical. For, like knowledge, art cannot wait, but as soon as it succumbs to impatience it is trapped.” He unpacked the thought by exposing the vanities in Aldous Huxley’s not so brave world or anywhere else where he saw a reconciliation effected through extortion, or an *angedrehte*—translated as a *trumped-up*—realism of utopian phantasy. He described the counterfeit of positivity that concealed the suffering of people, but refused to let the suffering, as the trace of humane content, serve as a guarantee that in the future the counterfeit would be exposed. The idea of suffering was not to be pocketed as a safe possession alongside life’s accumulated wares. Sustained as remembrance, suffering opened up an *insight* through negation into the falsity of an art that had renounced all difference in the name of a social reconciliation with what exists for *sight* in the *here and now*. Writing about a jazz performed by the white men of Paul Whiteman’s orchestra, he found

that no longer was anything allowed to exist that was not *like the world as it is*. He saw this jazz capitulating to one-dimension, to a *false liquidation*, the more it forced gestures towards a different world to *disappear* from the *picture*. The greater the success of this liquidated art, the more the refused gestures were placed into safe-keeping in an art of an uncompromising *image-less image* awaiting a world that coming tomorrow might not be the same as today. Whenever endorsing the erasure of appearance, Adorno stressed the capability of artworks to refuse a mimetic verisimilitude to the *what is*, retaining thereby a utopian, even messianic, *mimesis in waiting* for the *what of the not yet*. This stress tallied with a modernist aesthetic theory favouring blind spots, gaps, limits, and profiles, variously theorised under the rubric of *die Bildlichkeit der Leerstelle* or the *absurd* or *dissonant disabling of representation*. But it also played into the waiting game, as exemplified, say, as an aesthetic of psychological *intensification*, where, in Arnold Schönberg's *Erwartung*, the woman's *moment* of torment is drawn out to the extreme. Or as an endless frustration in his *Von Heute auf Morgen*, when *der Mann* strikes out at *die Frau*'s siren-song by asking: "*Glaubst du wirklich—Do you really think you can scare me through pictures of the future—erschrecken durch Zukunftsbilder—which [only] alienate me coming from your mouth?*"

Let me turn now to how the disabling of representation has come to correspond to a limited political provision of ideals, principles or norms, limited because the provision stops short of the design or colour that would count as the filler or substance of the desired realisation—*Verwirklichung*.

A single passage is most helpful, drawn from an interview between Habermas and Michael Haller published in 1991 as *Vergangenheit als Zukunft, Das alte Deutschland im neuen Europa*. Discussing what philosophical theories can and cannot accomplish, Habermas criticises the tendency of arguments to become both highly improbable or heavily presuppositioned. (Modifying Max Pensky's translation), the passage reads:

The 'emancipated society' is in fact an Ideal that suggests misunderstandings. I prefer to speak of the idea of the undamaged intersubjectivity. This idea can generally be derived [or won] from the analysis of necessary conditions for communication [for reaching an understanding/consensus]. It signifies something like the appearance of symmetrical relations of a free reciprocal recognition amongst communicatively acting subjects. Of course this idea must not be pictured into the totality of a reconciled form of life and cast into the future as utopia. [*Die Idee darf allerdings nicht zur Totalität einer versöhnten Lebensformen ausgemalt und als Utopie in die Zukunft geworfen werden.*] It contains nothing more, but also nothing less, than the formal characterization of necessary conditions for the not-anticipatable forms of a non-damaged life. 'Socialism,' likewise ought never—and this well might be the greatest *philosophical* mistake of this tradition—to have been conceived of as the concrete whole of a determinate future form of life. I have always said against this: 'Socialism' is useful only for referring to the quintessence of necessary conditions for emancipated forms of life, about which the participants *themselves* would have to reach an agreement.

Putting aside the conversation demanded of a good socialism, let me note Habermas' negating terms, of what is not damaged and not anticipatable,

echoing Adorno's image of a damaged life lived at so catastrophic a moment that Adorno would declare life no longer liveable at all. Habermas was less extreme, though he resisted any turn of the negative into an empty positive, and this in recalling Hegel's description of the greatest philosophical error, when an ideal of truth or freedom is posited as a timeless, merely or unmediated formal or *a priori* ideal. Or when, according to Hegel's critique of the one-sided monochromatic formalism from his *Vorrede* to the *Phenomenologie*, one speaks wrongly of the absolute as a night when *all cows are black*. Hegel criticised those who "start straight off with absolute knowledge, as if shot from a pistol," or those who dogmatically affirm what they think they already know, thereby precluding the dialectical labour, the thinking through of our concepts, that would lead to genuine knowing. Habermas likewise insisted that working through the past in the present for the sake of a better future, one must never assume the conceit, by use of the term *ausgemalt*, to picture the future as a reality before its time.

Everything turns on what is meant by picturing. Hegel used the term *ausgemalt* in his *Vorrede/Preface* to his *Die Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* to pick up on meanings ranging from *imagining*, *envisioning*, *intensifying* but also *picturing* and *painting* by means of *sketch*, *design*, and *colour*. There is too much to say here about how Hegel connected his critique of *monochromatic formalism* to his declaration from the *Philosophy of Right*, that philosophy, coming too late, pictures the form or *Gestalt* of life that has receded into the past *mit Grau in Grau*, allowing in the

gathering clouds of twilight the Owl of Minerva then to begin its flight. (I treat this connection in detail in my book.) Here, let it be enough to pose an intriguing question as to why Hegel made philosophy do its *picturing* not with a *mere-bloßes* Grau but instead by reference to a monochromatic technique that for centuries had gone by the description *mit Grau-in-Grau*. I will return briefly to this question below.

When Habermas described the future as coming to appearance, he used the term *Vorschein* to suggest an intuitive *glimpse* or *sketch* of a future awaiting its actual appearance—*Schein*. To wait for the future was for him to acknowledge the cognitive limits in the coming to “appearance of symmetrical relations of a free reciprocal recognition amongst communicatively acting subjects.” The waiting was offered without guarantee that the *Schein* comes as hoped for or expected. Refusing the guarantee countered the conceit of anyone who thinks the *totality* of a *reconciled form of life* can be cast in advance. Avoiding the conceit, he *pluralised* the forms of a future that is not anticipatable, and issued *necessary* formal conditions that together are not *sufficient*. Only if philosophy retains its commitment to necessary conditions that stop short of reaching sufficiency does the picture remain *critical*. I think this is key to the argument. For set between necessity and sufficiency is the space for history (the mediation of reality or the concrete), a space wherein one might be given signposts towards freedom, even a form or some principles, but where still a future normatively *forecast*, even *predicted*, must not trip over

into false prophecy. In this picturing, the formalism is necessary, but it is not enough.

Danto also maintained a comparable critical gap when offering his definition of art. If the definition was to accommodate a radical pluralism of art's appearance, one could not close the concept down according to what art had been or now was in the present. Specifying the necessary conditions that art must have *meaning* and *embodiment*, he refused to substantiate the conditions in any way that would restrict how art might come to appearance, even to the point where art may come, as in conceptual or abstract art, somehow to no appearance at all. Wanting to keep the future open, he brought his philosophy of art into accord with his philosophy of history, the latter having been written to liberate claims of history from substantive, totalitarian conceits. Once the liberation was philosophically in place, all the hard work and choices for persons or artists began (as for the Israelites having crossed the Red Sea).

Habermas used the term *allerdings* in a sentence that insisted on not *picturing* the reconciled form of life. One wonders whether his *of course* signalled a repetition of what philosophers have long done when maintaining that they ought never to step over the line as an antidote to what politicians do, and arguably must do, if it is true that nobody with a quiet or stuttering voice wins votes. This brings me to a pressing question, whether the waiting game should or can really preclude philosophers getting their hands dirty. Before Marx's theses on Feuerbach or Sartre's plays of dirty hands, Heine quipped that a philosophy of a history of life made, as by

Kant, from formal principles alone would suffer from having neither history nor life. A practical philosophy without the mediation of practice renders a philosophy of principles empty, or, as Goethe put it, *bloßes* grey. For freedom, it is not enough to be guided by the pure form of lawfulness or respect. But as soon as we think about practice, are we not involved with social conditions that are, can, and should be painted not merely with colour but also design? Do we not use the paint brush to blot out false visions? Many have said, going back to Socrates, that philosophy has not the metaphysical or epistemological tools to paint, and that painting damages the more images play into the hands of those with the *louder* sophistic voices. So a strategic silence becomes the name of the game, a game of essential *reserve*, a *reserve* that becomes a non-picturing picture of freedom.

When Kracauer described the modernist alienation of the urban waiting room, he pictured people in grey suits standing unaware of each other, though with a common fate. He saw an *emptying out* of all relations of attachment. Their autonomy awarded by modern rationality situated them, he said, between the extremes of an empty timelessness and the extreme arbitrariness of daily existence. After this, he worked through every modern *either-or* attitude of rootlessness, homelessness, skepticism, and nihilism, as well as through every sort of inclination to take *short-circuits* or *shortcuts*. But he never gave up on the idea of waiting. He rather rescued it from its dangers with the utopian and gestural *perhaps* of critical theory: *Übrig bleibt vielleicht nur noch die Haltung des Wartens*, he wrote. He saw waiting as a *zögerndes Geöffnetsein*, which, he added, had *allerdings* a

sense that was difficult to clarify. The *of course* brought waiting into contact with the irony of a critical theory wherein it has long been acknowledged that matters like freedom and wit cannot be made fully explicit without erasing precisely what is to be explained. Not wanting to explain waiting away, all the questions then remain as questions-in-waiting. We might ask whether “hesitancy” or “reserve” would not be the better terms; why award priority to “waiting”? And does waiting really stop one from saying much about the future that has not yet happened? A quick glance at the *Oxford English Dictionary* lists several connotations for “waiting,” one of which is keeping guard, not as a soldier, but as a biblical shepherd or as a thinker in Plato’s republic. Without any guarantee, guardianship perhaps offers a sense of safety in a wilderness or wasteland of history that feels so unsafe.

In the same waiting room, one has the chance also to hear the voice of Charles Sanders Peirce, not because of what he said about the firstness of redness, but because, in his essay on “how to make our ideas clear,” he separated by reference to a state of hesitation the doubting that serves one from a self-defeating doubt. He described the *hesitancy* when, in a waiting room in a railway station, one passes the time reading advertisements on the wall, engaging fantasy or entertaining oneself as to where one might alternatively travel. He made the hesitancy then serve his scientific enquiry, when images and thoughts come and go slowly and quickly until one reaches a belief on the basis of which one can commit oneself—and act.

Many critical film theorists have with great insight drawn from Kracauer’s essay, but not, I believe, to read about David Lean’s classic

British wartime film *Brief Encounter*. The film is about a waiting room at a railway station where two lovers meet and part, experiencing an interruption of the truth that hell is other people when mostly women gossip with words that flow as pointlessly as the watery tea. Being at once a safe and unsafe space, the waiting room mirrors in a dialectical play two more spaces: the home of a marriage temporarily interrupted and a borrowed, prefabricated space interrupted when the lovers try to consummate their desire. Were one to view this film only along Tolstoy's lines about the happiness and unhappiness of families, accompanied by Rachmaninoff's music, one might overlook what Adorno captured so well in his *Minima Moralia*, when he described a public rooflessness of a city rained on by bombs coming ruthlessly to penetrate the private home, so that the homeliness became a war-ridden homelessness.

With Kracauer, Adorno wrote that however comfortable the appearance of the interior space, it has become emptied of meaningful relations of communication or design, cut now from prefabricated models to produce a *tabula rasa* for modern disenchanting occupants. For Adorno, adultery was less the issue than a marriage contract that had done away with the possibility of what he termed an *Intermezzo der Freiheit*. Drawing from the French *nostalgie du dimanche*, he envisaged a couple or an entire family feeling homesick in the false sea of satisfaction of weekend days. Like Marx before him, he saw a contradictory anxiety: on the one hand, a guilt implicit to the emerging modern work ethic –that, when not at work, one feels as though one were merely idling one's time away – and, on the other, a sheer

exhaustion at spending one's free time not living the moment, but wishing that the workday tomorrow would be a day as free as today. Adorno turned many an *intermezzo* of freedom into bored chords of a modernist unfreedom, to be rescued for married couples only by the hope of a little infidelity to the contradiction that was turning their lives to a *bloßes* grey.

This brings me to a last example, the waiting room of a modernist home that contains a painting, back to front, that shows all *and* nothing. Much has been written about Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, in and out of relation to his *Waiting for Godot*. Readers have focused on the waiting game, which, without a winner, asks whether the beginning and ending only keeps everyone where they always are, suspended like the "hung verdicts," sometimes catastrophic, of human history. Stanley Cavell finds in *Endgame* Nietzsche's last man who "would rather take the void for his purpose than to be void of purpose," but also Camus' rescue of a humanity in its relinquishing of its aim to play God. Christoph Menke has more recently read the game as a negotiation of an emancipation narrative, writing about the promised freedom as *un-plotted*, so that the lordship-bondage dialectic or the telling of a joke can find no resolution, but only an expiration in sheer exhaustion. He reads *Endgame* "as a play about the end of play," but the play specifically of aesthetic strategies that leaves the faltering struggle for liberation always only in a *deuce*. The *faltering* is evidenced in every crippled gesture or invocation of a blindness or deafness that is reinforced, in my own reading, by the many pauses and hesitations written into a script

that stops and starts with all manner of disconcerting and liberating puns of rhythm and rhyme.

Everything in Beckett's *Endgame* counts in a waiting game that tells you that you are damned if you do and damned if you don't, including the opening stage directions of a *tableau* of a philosophical furniture art that Beckett insisted should not be overlooked. "Bare interior," his list begins, followed by "Grey Light." Now observe his inversions that name the objects last: "Left and right back, high up, two small windows, curtains drawn. Front right, a door. Hanging near door, its face to wall, a picture." The instructions continue: "*Front left, touching each other, covered with an old sheet, two ashbins. Center, in an armchair on castors, covered with an old sheet, Hamm.*" Until finally we read, "Motionless by the door, his eyes fixed on Hamm, Clov. Very red face."

What has a grey room with a red face have to do with a picture/painting which, face to wall, is not turned around even when Clov takes it down in order to replace it with a clock threatening to set off an alarm clock, and an alarm following his declaring that the pill box is now empty of pills to kill the pain? Much has been asked about the picture. Does the not-showing matter more than the not-seeing? Does any member of the family know, or did they ever know, what it showed, if ever it showed anything (after *Corinthians*) face to face? Did it once show the time when God was not dead or before God's back was turned on humanity? Or did it only ever have a backside, making the back the front? Or if once a family portrait, did it face the wall like a punished child? Or because whoever

designed it found no way to finish it? Or was its point only ever to raise such philosophical *questions* as *questions in waiting*, so that when the answers came, the questions were immediately replaced, like Cervantes's tablets, by new ones that were forever the same ones?

A predecessor episode from Walter Scott's *Woodstock* shows, amidst old furniture, the narrator Wildrake stumbling over "several paintings in massive frames, having their faces turned towards the wall." When one is turned around, we are introduced to *the* idea of how one looks into a painting to anticipate *the future* as a way to unburden oneself of a terrifying or terrorising past. Is there or can there be this unburdening in Beckett's play? Or is the fact that the picture not turned around indicative of the fear, as Menke suggests, that, were we to turn it around, we would only find an artist or thinker so committed to failing to paint, that all we would see would be a waste comparable to the waste that comes from the ash-can, where even the oldest joke in the world cannot be delivered. "Nothing is funnier than unhappiness," Nell remarks from the ash-can to bring out the comedy of the tragic truth that if this family has obliterated its happiness, then indeed *nothing* is the funniest unhappiness of all.

To make more of the wit that is meant to liberate nothing from nothing, recall the moment when Clov picks up the telescope to take a view through the window. I hear here an echo of Achilles' *red-faced* gaze over the *wine-dark sea* to the glory that never dies. With no more glory on the horizon, Hamm and Clov negotiate each day as a repetition of *any other day*. *Looks like it*, says Clov. In his reading of the play, Adorno noted the

repeated inversions that turned the *anything* into a *nothing on the horizon*. Lowering his telescope, an exasperated Clov declares: *What in God's name would there be on the horizon?* Hamm answers: *The waves, how are the waves?... And the sun?... But it should be sinking*. Looking again, Clov sees nothing, provoking a *damn the sun*, allowing Hamm to presume the night to have arrived. Clov denies this, remarking not once, but twice, and with increasing intensity that it is still gray. *Grey ... GRREY!*

One direction of interpretation would be to unpack the relation of the wine-dark sea to the Red Sea from which so many have produced intoxicated visions of the past and future of rising and setting *suns* that are also rising and setting *sons*: from Moses to Christ. Here, however, it is more relevant to observe how, in the grey room tinged with red, Adorno stressed the *colourlessness* of a modern wit that was as damaged—*beschädigt*—as the modern selves trying but failing to deliver it. Looking through the telescope, Clov frightens Hamm with the word *grey*, though quickly corrects himself, *a light black*. Adorno saw the correction as smearing the punchline first delivered in Molière's *L'Avare*. Adorno had in mind the spat staged between the miserly master Harpagon and his servant Jacques. Jacques asks what colour a casket is, whether it's *a certain colour* and whether such a colour can even be named. He suggests *red*, to which Harpagon replies *No, grey*, leading Jacques to oblige him with *gris-rouge!*

Here, in my view, is the *grey-red* of an older *monochromatic* palette of painting *mit Grau in Grau*, which, applied to wit, allowed early writers like Molière and Cervantes to use the marrow in the bone to deliver a

wonderfully digestible and indigestible humour. Adorno then remarked that Beckett's genius was precisely to have sucked the marrow from the bone, leaving, we now say, nothing but a mere grey grit that kept the family, in Beckett's words, always in "the middle of the steppe."

In the middle, we are compelled back to my own beginning for this essay and to the very first lines of Beckett's play when Clove *tonelessly* says: "Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished" and then after a pause, "Grain upon grain, one by one, and one day, suddenly, there's a heap, a little heap, the impossible heap," so that, toward the end, we learn that "all life long you wait for that to mount up to a life." A mountain waiting to be made from a molehill, made from mere grains, can make much ado about a grey grit, which, when interrupted by a single reference to red, allows Hamm with *modesty* to say that nothing gets one very far, but still that this *nothing* is *better than nothing*. Asking after the possibility of something being better than nothing, Clov turns what perhaps is the red shame in his face into the red (sea) of a horizon that gestures toward the only *possibility* left: that the future will not be as things stand today.

I have merely scratched the surface of a picturing of freedom that is liberated by wit. But I give the last laugh literally to the French philosopher Hélène Cixous who, when face to face with the horrifying head of Medusa, sees a woman, as though for the first time, declaring her freedom with words that draw us back to the first song of the sea. "Ah, there's her sea," she writes: "But look, our seas are what we make of them, opaque or transparent, red or black." If the seas are what we make of them, then

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making is also our freedom to rewrite the history handed down to us, only a tiny part of which I have told here, so that we may begin again in a room, which even if painted grey has a single red line: a horizon of possibility that *nobody* who still has a will to be *somebody* can do without.²

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² An earlier version of this essay was printed in German in a Festschrift for Christoph Menke; Thomas Khurana, et. al. eds. 2018. *Negativität Kunst, Recht, Politik*. Suhrkamp: Frankfurt-am-Main. I thank Julia Peters for detailed comments, as well as the many audiences at lectures with whom I had the opportunity to discuss the themes.

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