Platypus Review # 33 | March 2011

Praxis, theory and the unmakeable: An interview with Robert Hullot-Kentor

Chris Mansour

On February 19, 2011, Chris Mansour of Platypus interviewed Robert Hullot-Kentor, noted Adorno translator and author of Things Beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno*. What follows is an edited transcript of the interview.*

Chris Mansour: For several decades you have been translating and interpreting the relevance of Adorno's thought for us. In your most recent essays, however, it seems you have mostly wanted to save Adorno's ideas from appropriation by the postmodern and contemporary canon, which you claim have done "immense damage" to his insights. What kind of disservices have been done to Adorno's work from his time to ours, and what exactly do you think needs to be redeemed?

Robert Hullot-Kentor: You say, "immense damage." That rings a bell somewhere—Adorno, or no Adorno. But, as to helping to discern Adorno's "relevance" to this day and age, relevance has never been relevant to my mind; "relevance" is a measure of irrelevance. The moment is plenty relevant to itself if we can figure out how to locate its—*our*—own thinking, its—*our*—own words. And whatever "immense damage" we now inhabit, I doubt those canons you cite—postmodern or contemporary canons—would hurt a fly, or Adorno. There aren't canons to struggle with, not since more than half a century ago when they were already rags. The current situation is narrow, blinded and constrained, and awash, all at once, but it is not polarized in the fixed fashion that invoking the idea of a "canon" wants to imagine. Getting wound up about the danger to life and limb of the canon is for English departments so preoccupied teaching students to write credible business memos that the faculty can't be interested in literature anymore.

The problem for critical thought, now, is *how to make reality break in on the mind that masters it*. For what we are involved in, that's the one praxis. And the puzzle of this praxis is shaped in realizing that while reality must be made to break in on the mind, that can't occur in the model of tossing a stone through a window; the window must shatter under its own fissuring tinsel pressures, from within, as a violence against the violence. It differs from being mere violence as an act in which reality has been made humanly commensurable, without this commensurability of experience in any way pretending that reality itself is human. We are considering a capacity for experience.

CM: There is much to say here, but maybe we can work our way back to it from my first question to you, I was asking what you think needs to be redeemed in Adorno's work.

RHK: Redeemed? Nothing. I mean…us? You don't mind if we go a bit word by word here? Well, I don't think that we are in a position to *redeem* anything. I doubt we can redeem Adorno's work, and definitely not if we pose that question to ourselves in terms of his own thinking, if that's what we're in part curious about in this conversation. Come to think of it, at that conference you organized for *Platypus* at the New School a couple of months ago on Critical Theory,[1] didn't something come up about Adorno and religion?

CM: Yes, momentarily, there was a discussion critical of Adorno's relation to the sacred.

RHK: So maybe it is worth mentioning—since in a way you also broach the question, perhaps from the other direction—that Adorno's thinking, if I can half quote him here, touches at every point on a theological element (no less than does Beckett's), but only by way of the most extreme diffidence to what his work lives from. That tense diffidence (that's his word for it) is implicit to any critique of enlightenment that actually is a capacity of enlightenment. The self-critique of enlightenment, at its extreme, by way of its own sober reasoning, amounts to the insight that its disillusionment, its ability to vanquish every last ghost in the machine, is itself the production of an illusion as a credulousness of its own mastery. This thought, which, maybe you know, has a vast antiquity, doesn't confirm the supposedly plump, ultramontane comforts of belief or an urge to bend at the knees. As enlightenment, and not simply citing antiquity's maxim of humility, it is as much a critique of theology, which, Adorno thought, has never once been extricated from the powers that be.

CM: Was Adorno a believer?

RHK: Adorno was not among the faithful, the skeptical, or the agnostic in the *Que sais-je?* tradition. But I do think of him in the tradition that begins in the 15th century with Cusanus—the Cusa—who in many ways marks the decisive point in the secularization of theological reasoning in aesthetics. I am not saying Adorno was Cusanus, but he did pursue the experience of thought's dependence on its object both in his materialism and, inextricably from that materialism, in his theses on metaphysics. By this measure, the gods, the many, many gods, must be a whole lot more interesting than what Feuerbach thought he might find in them as the sum total of alienated human essence.

It would be superstitious to think that human making is limited in what it makes only to what it has made, as Vico perhaps thought. An obvious, palpable clue here, in terms of technique, is that we can only do with things what can be done with them. One can only do with glass what can be done with glass, with plastic what can be done with plastic; one can only do with each and every word and with each and every note, as well, what can be done with each of

them, and so on. It takes imagination to recognize that reality is not raw material, as something we can concoct however we see fit. But, with regard to imagination, it is even more important to say that there is only imagination in the experience of that recognition. Wallace Stevens—who, as you know, is always as much on my mind as are Adorno and Nabokov—had many ways of saying this: His "necessary angel," which bears interesting comparison with Benjamin on Klee's *Angelus Novus*—is the necessary angel of reality without which there is no imagination. Or, as Stevens otherwise put it, "Reality is the only genius."[2] To comprehend the same thing, Adorno had the idea of "exact fantasy" from Goethe. In these terms, the Prometheus of labor shrinks but he also gets a whole lot more interesting, as do those deities lounging right this moment out in that Hindu temple in Queens.

CM: You are talking about the critique of constitutive subjectivity?

RHK: Yes. The *philosophem*—the recognition of disillusionment as an uttermost illusion—is another formulation of the critique of constitutive subjectivity as a capacity of subjectivity to spring its own trap. It is not categorically different from Marx's critique of the Gotha Program that labor is by no means the source of value.

CM: In this idea of the recognition of disillusion as illusion, are you saying that religion and irreligion converge?

RHK: In Adorno's thinking, they do. It is one thing, as he put it in the "Finale" to *Minima Moralia,* to "contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the perspective of redemption"—a perspective from which, as he developed the idea, "the question of the reality or unreality of redemption hardly matters."[3] And it is very much something else to suppose that we are in a position to redeem anything whatsoever.

CM: I am curious whether the idea of the recognition of disillusionment as illusion, which you say is so important to Adorno, has a correlative in his aesthetics? Earlier on, when you were talking about technique, I noticed you mentioned notes and words along with plastic and glass.

RHK: Just as Adorno thinks that enlightenment is capable of criticizing its own limits, in his aesthetics he thinks that art, to be art, must be the making of what is more than can be made. Art, as he understood it, tests the thesis that subjectivity potentially transcends itself by way of subjectivity, and not by its abrogation. That is, the artist isn't a pythian vessel. But insofar as Adorno wrote that radical art—art that in any way means to be art—needs to be "things of which we cannot say what they are," he simultaneously asserts a making that is capable of escaping its own intention. You're in art school, right, Chris?

CM: Right.

RHK: Well, if you become an artist you have the experience of someone stopping by the studio, poking a head through the door and wanting to know, "Did you *really* make that?" If you haven't had that experience by the time you're in your twenties, you can stop paying rent on the studio. Artists are, and have always been, keyed to making the unmakeable; the muse is obsolete, but all the same *sine qua non*. A friend from many years ago, Jim Tate, a poet, said that he wrote poetry to ensure "that it could still happen." That's what it's about. Who would bother with art, unless it exceeded what was made? In his letters, van Gogh writes to his brother, Theo, that he had no idea how he made his paintings; he was sure that he didn't know how to make them. It is worth thinking, all the same, that the artist writing those letters was a nominalist technician if there ever was one, building every painting up out of three or four gestures, wet on wet. It is, literally, an inconceivable mastery, and in these terms one's sense that no one could have made those paintings is not utterly delusive; and it wasn't for van Gogh, either. Do you know Francis Bacon's phrase, wanting his work to be a "Sahara of the appearances"?

Bacon meant that he wanted to produce a likeness by way of an absolute unlikeness. That would be an act of recognition in the movement across the absolute distances of shifting sands in which vision returns to the beholder as an intention by way of what has entirely relinquished intention. That is the unmakeable thing he needed to make.

CM: Adorno says that, doesn't he, in his aesthetics, when he writes that art doesn't imitate nature, it imitates cloud dramas?

RHK: Yes. That movement at a standstill could be a movement in clouds or sands.

CM: Do you like Bacon's work?

RHK: The early works, much more than the later ones. But even when the painting isn't where my imagination can go, what he could make is astonishing. Bacon was finally so overwhelmed by his desperation to make what exceeded him that he could only bring that amorphousness back by way of an inflicted and thematically narrow intentional articulation. I wasn't surprised when one of his paintings ended up in a Batman movie.

CM: Was that a psychological matter for Bacon?

RHK: That must be an aspect of it. But it is much more a problem of where art went, and where it is now. Up until modern art, artists could get away with imitating the unmakeable: rhyme schemes, for instance, imitate the unmakeable—that's a transparently painful conceit now. Art became radically modern when it had no choice but to demand of itself the veridically unmakeable, no longer its illusion, and found itself facing an impossible task. Dance became break neck gymnastics in response. "Found art" capitulated in front of the problem of the

unmade and hoped to surrogate the untouched for the untouchable. That's the level of the problem that compelled Bacon.

CM: Photography certainly taps the unintentional.

RHK: Yes, it does. But what makes photography so difficult is that it so easily wins the unintentional while paying so heavily for it in its inability to engage the constructive powers of the eye on which the capacity for exceeding appearances depends.

CM: Wouldn't Marx say that art that claims to produce the unmakeable is the manufacture of a fetish?

RHK: I'd say that Marx's admiration for the "work hardened bodies" of the proletariat is a fetish.

CM: That is an opaque answer. What do you mean?

RHK: I mean a number of things, including that Marx's critique of labor did not go deep enough. It is there in his writings, but you can understand why Adorno concluded that Marx wanted to make the world into a labor camp: the Soviet Union wasn't only a misunderstanding of Marx. So, I mean that, but I mean at the same time that of course art is a fetish, but the worst of life is not what leaves labor behind, even if it's just pretending. No doubt, setting up the made as the unmade is a fetish. But, all the same, if disillusionment is an illusion, then humans are considerably more interesting than the self-certain sobriety that interprets artworks by tracing them back to their maker's intentions or, with greater socio-economic sophistication, to the historical interests of the moment in which they originated, as if that's so smart and informative. The doctrine of interest itself needs to be demystified, in political representation as in art. Those cloud dramas are no less the voice of nature. The entire history of art—and this is very clear now—is nothing but the development of techniques for potentiating intention as the intentionless; the piano keyboard serves for nothing else. If the history of art could be written, that history of techniques of the unmakeable would be its history. What is at stake is distinct from mystical effusion in that the accomplishment is not by way of abolishing subjectivity, but by way of subjectivity; you can think of van Gogh's nominalism, which we've discussed a little, or you can think of what Hegel called the "extinguishing of the subject in the object." This is an activity that leaves the artist behind like a heap of ash, an experience that can be hard to survive without all the braggadocio that goes on over in places like the art gulch in Chelsea. Making the unmakeable is what raises every important question about the nature of aesthetic form. Adorno's apothegm is to the point here, that it is in art, if nowhere else, that "origin is the goal."

CM: There is enough to talk about here that we might as well go back to the very beginning of our conversation. Why was it, when I asked you what you've wanted to do with Adorno's work over several decades that you answered with what you called the idea of praxis, of making reality break in on the mind that masters it? That does not, to be honest, seem like much of an answer. Did you lose track of the question?

RHK: I hope not. I try to hold the whole conversation in mind at once, which is pretty hopeless, I'm sure. I mean to keep track; I know I was keeping track then. But the truth of it is, I'm more interested in what keeps coming back to us more than I think in terms, as you suggest, of our going back to anything, now or later, whether to the beginning of our conversation or elsewhere, as if there's an origin at one end of the dusty road of time and, in the other direction, tomorrow is already busy taking shape. That image implies a spatialized, kinetic idea of time. What we have gone back to in this conversation is what has come to get us. Thinking in these terms makes sense in light of Freud's concept of regression, as the need to deal with what is still to be solved, what's nagging at us, what's right here in our bones as elements of those splintering forces that are by no means located somewhere back at a spatialized beginning that we sometimes visit, or don't, as, for instance, when we were talking about what makes a window shatter under its own tinsel forces in terms of immanent criticism. By the way, that's just as much the concept of time inside Adorno's notion of those cloud dramas: A concept of time that developed in opposition to the idea of a primordial, primitive origin at the beginning of all things. Without the development of that idea of time, we wouldn't have had Freud or Adorno, let alone Virginia Woolf or Joyce.

CM: Does this involve what I remember you writing, I think, in the introduction to Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, about thinking by means of an enjambment of thought? Enjambment as opposed to argumentation?

RHK: Yes, argumentation as *modus operandi*—the proudly hard-headed passion for "getting it" vs. "not getting it," "right judgments" vs. "your wrong judgments"—is spuriously philosophical. It is an appeal to the authority of origin, not as the goal, but at the beginning of all things. It's not that logic is a matter of indifference, on the contrary, but its putative necessity is a strong-arm fraud, inextricable from the fraud of historical necessity. The problem of critical historical thought, by contrast, is—and I don't think there is any other content to the whole of Adorno's oeuvre—how to dissolve the illusion of this necessity we have woven for ourselves. I'm not saying that truth is a flip of the coin or that making mash out of the idea of truth would do us any good. Thinking is a search for binding, if however transient, insight; indirection is essential to it, enjambment is its crisis. Adorno called that enjambment, parataxis. As a technique, this can be just as full of nonsense as the syllogism. But thinking must feel its way along, so to speak. And when the issue is the consideration of Adorno's work—and this isn't exactly a special case—this consideration not least of all involves recognizing where his work gives

indications that it is no longer binding or meaningful; where what is fleeting in insight turns out to be more than an axiom about its fleetingness.

CM: What does that actually mean, then, in considering Adorno's writings?

RHK: It means reading with an eye to perceiving where the text surrenders its importance, as if the words themselves are insisting that "it can no longer be said like this." That isn't a measure of relevance or irrelevance; it is the emergence of one aspect of its own non-identity with itself. History is taking its own measure. Recognizing these moments, I want to repeat—if its not too much trouble for us to keep track of all of our conversation while we're talking—is obviously not an act of redemption. But it is a *salvaging* labor in which critical subjectivity possibly becomes the ability of the old to long for the new. This approach is not altogether different from listening with a compositional ear to music and noticing that the music itself indicates that it can no longer be composed.

CM: That is part of Adorno's theory of composition, is it not? And you are saying that considering Adorno's work in this way aims at making it break in on the mind that masters it?

RHK: I suppose. But with the caveat that conceptual labor is not art, in which case it acquires something akin to the sound of Heidegger enthused with his inamorata—the sheep of the fields. Arty criticism, criticism that claims to be art, criticism plus sheep, criticism plus adjectives, fails art and fails criticism.

CM: Does this not conflate criticism and philosophy? But, in any case, there is certainly a lot of art in Adorno's writing.

RHK: There is. And, in German at least, his writing certainly has its own sound, and that sound, a distinct voice, is often discussed. But that sound is not the achievement of being arty. What is involved, again, is a matter of that *diffidence* that we were discussing earlier, though here that diffidence is somewhat differently focused. A way of condensing the issue of the relation of philosophy and art in Adorno's work is to think of Wallace Stevens writing that the "poem is the cry of its occasion/part of the *res* itself and not about it."[4] Modern poetry and a radically modern philosophy that wants to settle for nothing less than the thing itself, converge in an opposition in which, as Adorno put it in *Aesthetic Theory*, art only has it—that is, the "cry of its occasion"—because it can't say it; and philosophy can say it, only because it does not have it. That is, incidentally, one way of stating why aesthetics is the middle point of Adorno's work.

CM: If Adorno's thesis describes the relation of philosophy to art, then there must be another side to this, right? The obverse. Because in the phrase you quote from Stevens, he seems to be claiming to "say it" in a way that Adorno's maxim would seem to prohibit.

RHK: Good point, It is true that art can pretend to be philosophy, as much as the reverse. But, you know, in the poem where Stevens writes that line, I think it's in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," he is using concepts in opposition to the illusory surface of the poem—he might as well use sand paper on the poem's illusory surface—as an act of abstraction. It's similar to how Zola could introduce in a novel a long inventory list of the contents of a department store; that's roughing up the illusory surface of art as well. It is part of art resisting art in an effort to remain art. Conceptual art wants to do that too, of course. And of course this can backfire and usually does.

CM: Well, if we are just looking around for the moment, I am curious to ask you, since you brought up the sound of philosophy and also mentioned Heidegger: Does Heidegger have a sound, a voice?

RHK: In German, Heidegger has the voice of what you might expect in a letter you would get at sleep-away-camp from grandma. Juxtapose "being at sleep-away-camp" with "being-in-the world" and an English monoglot starts to hone in on the sound of Heidegger in German without needing to study the grammar. If English translation didn't provide Heidegger's phrases with a densely arcane professionalism, as if it were a technical language, while he is being so down-home, it would be much less difficult to understand his work for what it is. I don't see how people put up with it. Its content is death and imagination as nothingness. Habermas's notion of communicative action is no less obtuse to libido than Dasein, but at least it can read a newspaper without disgracing itself with inauthenticity. There is not a lot to go on there. Adorno's *Jargon of Authenticity* at points froths at the lips, but the general credulousness for Heidegger is much more disturbing.

CM: We've ended up in a discussion of style.

RHK: I suspect we've been talking about style in various ways all along, whether about parataxis and argumentation, or in what I was saying a bit ago about examining Adorno's work for where it falters. That involves an eye for style. Another way to put it is to say that one has to be prepared to tap on words—in this case Adorno's words—with the hammer that Nietzsche bequeathed to the philosophical temperament for tapping. And if one isn't prepared, one might as well spin out concepts in those vast, argumentative sheets one reads everywhere, whether about the critique of the constitutive subject or the disintegration of "emphatic experience," or "immanent critique," but as a parody. Then theory is just "theory" dressed up in the critique of the constitutive subject. But really it is nothing else than its assertion. I say "dressed up" because in the *1844 Manuscripts* Marx wrote that fashion is a synonym for relations of production.

CM: "Theory" becomes an assertion of the given relations of production?

RHK: I think so. As I said, there's a lot of that to read.

CM: You're critical of theory?

RHK: Theory is critical of theory, wouldn't you suppose?

CM: Could you give an instance of the kind of tapping you think is worthwhile? Are you referring to what you have written about the idea of the primitive? Is that an instance of what you mean by "tapping"?

RHK: Yes. Open any few pages of Adorno's writings and you'll notice that of all the comments that concern the "primitive," in one way or another, whether the "primitive" itself, or the "savage", the "barbaric", the "archaic", "*prima philosophia*," or of "regression" to the barbaric, none communicate what they did twenty years ago, let alone at the moment they were written, when barbarism had just blown through the front door. Open, for instance, *Minima Moralia*, which is here in front of us: I'm here on p. 226, read about "the affinity of culture to savagery," and see how that comes up on the nervous system, as Francis Bacon would say. See if it means anything at all. Then start turning pages in any direction in the book and throughout the whole of Adorno's writings, and you will notice that we don't exactly know what Adorno is talking about or what the "primitive" amounts to. We may even feel a kind of antagonism toward Adorno, as if he were making the distinction at our expense. We want to raise our hand in class and demand, "What do *you* mean by *primitive*?"

CM: Is that something about the idea of the *primitive* exclusively in Adorno?

RHK: No. Read anywhere in the literature of the 1940s, for instance (I'm busy with that because I'm putting together a selection of essays from the *Journal of Social Research*, the journal, that Adorno and Horkheimer published in the 1930s and 1940s), and you will find throughout phrases concerning barbarism and the primitive by many writers, "It is the thesis of this book that the two [society and the military] are inseparably connected both with each other and with a third thing, barbarism." That insight, or, in any case, the possibility of that insight was once protean. I am referring to a review written by Karl Korsch, which was highly critical of the book and of the writer I quote, but not of the possibility of differentiating barbarism.

CM: If we can go back (the word "back" has started to sound a bit different) to the issue of relevance, why not say that the words "barbarism," or "the primitive" aren't *relevant* anymore?

RHK: Because it may be that the fashion of barbarism—fashion in the sense we were discussing earlier, the way Marx develops it in the *1844 Manuscripts*—has absorbed the differentiation of the primitive. And to think in terms of relevance, which would mean dropping the now obscure appellation, *irrelevant*, would only amount to becoming a fellow traveler.

CM: This is indeed important—*Platypus* has often argued that society is in the midst of "regression." What is the implication of the kind of tapping you're doing here for this thesis?

RHK: There is a group of implications, including that it's approximately hopeless going around asserting that society is in the midst of "regression," let alone in the primitive or the barbaric. It does not mean anything at all. The words are not even leaden; they are a matter of indifference, especially if stating them doesn't include the insights that they most importantly contain and one is only participating in a kind of amnesia. The faltering differentiation has to be expressed in the self-consciousness of the statement of what is faltering.

CM: Is that indifference to the differentiation of the primitive a matter of the "banality of evil"?

RHK: The "banality of evil" is itself a tad banal, don't you think? We didn't get used to evil. Moral impulses didn't wear out, they were overwhelmed by superior imperatives—that's Hobsbawm's point—imperatives that the newspapers most regularly present as the primacy of the financial, but that are much more deeply evidence of the coming extinction of the liberal state. It's what we see in Obama encouraging the members of congress at the recent State of the Union speech this January to break party lines and sit together. The obliging congress members did not give evidence of good will toward men but of the national disintegration of party allegiance, of lucidly oppositional politics and of representational government under the weight of the social whole. That "sit-along" has much less to do with affirming the spirit of compromise—a good thing, which Obama has changed into the spirit of capitulation—than with the supplanting of the sovereignty of the people by something considerably closer to consumer sovereignty: the selection of the best product qua representative while disregarding party affiliation. The "banality of evil" doesn't cover much of this.

CM: There would be a lot to say about this. But I don't want to lose track of the general point of our discussion of the problem of contemporary praxis so far as what's at stake in making sense of Adorno's work. Have you been saying that what is needed is to develop the self-consciousness of a faltering differentiation?

RHK: That's it. The issue is the faltering differentiation of the primitive and of the context of concepts in which it is located. Adorno's thinking altogether revolves around the development of insight into the primitive. Or, we could put this the other way around, by focusing on the disappearance of the differentiation of the *radically new*, here in the land of the perpetual

"rethink." The radically new, which artists, especially composers, sought in their work in the early 20th century as the "air of another planet," developed reciprocally with the insight into the primitive, when the primitive became the impulse of the new. But listen to the phrase,"the air of another planet," and what there is to hear is that it speaks more appositely to the imminently unlivable air of this "planet."

CM: It is as fruitless to invoke the increasingly "primitive" situation of the United States as it would be to urge people to seek the "new"?

RHK: The demand for the "new" probably sounds even more feeble and absurd than invoking insight into the "primitive," don't you think?

CM: We are suddenly out of time, and there is so much more to consider here. But, I must ask you something that has kept coming back to me throughout our discussion today, from almost the first moment. You said (I'm taking you by your own words now) that the problem of "making reality break in on the mind that masters it" is the one *praxis*. Whether it really is the one praxis, I don't know. But, what you call *praxis*, I would call *theory*. Haven't you confused theory and praxis?

RHK: This is some sense of humor, bringing us to the close on a question that would need another day to sort out at all. But what you've brought up is something I repeatedly try to state to myself: theory is praxis insofar as thinking has entered the world of objects. Meaning that, as a capacity of subjectivity, it has escaped the claustrum of means/ends reasoning, what Hegel would have called subjective spirit, and has engaged the unmakeable. | **P**

1. See J.M. Bernstein, Lydia Goehr, Gregg Horowitz, and Chris Cutrone, "The relevance of critical theory to art today," *Platypus Review* 31 (January 2011), available online at <http://platypus1917.org/2011/01/01/the-relevance-of-critical-theory-to-art-today/>.
2. Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), 177.
3. Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* (New York: Verso, 2005), 247.
4. Stevens, "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," *Collected Poems* (New York: Vintage Books, 1982), 473.