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## Presupposing primary experience Adorno, Huysmans, Benjamin

### Abstract

*Against Hegelian idealism and certain strands of Marxism, Adorno defends subjective, somatic, and affective experience, not as immediately true, but as a historically mediated reflection of objective social forces. Such experiences are historically caused, but they are also “primary” insofar as theory must presuppose them in order to gain critical traction. The article first looks at Adorno’s criticisms of Hegel’s mistrust of individuality and Lukács’ privileging of objective economic analysis. Subsequently, through readings of Huysmans’ *Against Nature* and Benjamin’s *Berlin Childhood*, the article then shows how primary experience can fail or succeed, according to how it is taken up by critique: decadence fetishizes sensation and stalls in false alternatives, while Benjamin reveals how everyday images preserve missed historical potentials. The aim of the article is to show how primary experience functions as a fragile presupposition for critique and progress.*

### Keywords

*Adorno, Benjamin, Experience*

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### 1. *Firsthand experience*

Adorno's materialism can be characterized, in part, by his defence of subjective, somatic, and affective experience, which is often relativized, formalized, or relegated by traditional theory, including Hegelian idealism and certain currents of Marxism. As such, it might be said that his materialism depends upon what he occasionally calls "primary experience" (*primäre Erfahrung*).

The meaning of "primary experience" may seem straightforward, having already been fixed in the reference to the somatic and affective reactions of the individual subject. In this case, the term would refer to essentially firsthand nervous reactions, feelings, or physical realities more generally, and would cover a broad range of experiences: a sudden emotion, pain, a pang of hunger, a bead of sweat, a nervous tic etc. However, Adorno seems to have something more specific in mind. We should ask ourselves, he says, why some people seem to "find it infinitely more difficult to make primary observations and to have primary experiences, which are then followed by interpretations and theories, than to learn the techniques by which empirical observations can be systematized" (Adorno 2016: 261)<sup>1</sup>. This passage suggests that the meaning of "primary experience" is more complex than it may seem at first glance. Spelling out what this means will require taking several points into consideration.

As already mentioned, Adorno balks at idealist attempts to subordinate individual experience to allegedly universal figures and functions of subjectivity. For example, he calls into question Hegel's criticisms of individual consciousness, which, Hegel thinks, all too rarely grasps the substantive intellectual content of what it experiences as immediate. Of course, some individuals are more closely related to this content than others. They are the "agents" (*Organe*) of what is really – i.e. intellectually, spiritually – at stake at historical turning points (Hegel 2008: 161-2; 1968-: 23.2: 765-6). Yet even they can be limited by their individuality, i.e. unable to see beyond their historical standpoints. They are "one-sided" (e.g. Antigone). In the *Phenomenology of spirit*, Hegel therefore speaks from the perspective of a phenomenological "we", which rises above the individual "I" to represent the absolute knowing that has, in principle, liberated itself from one-sidedness. In some passages, this shift in perspective takes the form of a mistrust of individuality, e.g. in Hegel's criticisms

<sup>1</sup> English translations have been cited where possible and tacitly emended where necessary. All other translations are my own.

of the generally “pliant medium” of subjective “opinion” (*Meinung*), in which “one can imagine whatever one likes” (Hegel 1991: 22; 1968-: 14.1: 15).

Adorno’s emphasis on primary experience involves the criticism of such criticisms. “Hegel was oddly inconsistent”, he says. On the one hand, the individual is necessarily the subject of the dialectical, self-surpassing “experience of consciousness” (e.g. as described in the introduction to the *Phenomenology of spirit*). Yet, on the other hand, instead of going on to defend subjective experience on that basis, Hegel “accused individual consciousness, the site of the intellectual experience [*geistige Erfahrung*] that animates his work, of contingency and limitation”. “The only explanation”, says Adorno, is that there persists in Hegel an unchecked “desire to weaken the critical moment that is bound up with individual spirit” (Adorno 1973: 45; 1970-86: 6: 55).

Of course, Adorno does not think that what the individual experiences is defensible in its sheer immediacy. On the contrary, he acknowledges, in agreement with Hegel, that “that which, for the individual, is ‘primary’ [*das Erste*] and irrefutably absolute is derived and secondary, down to every individual piece of sensory data” (Adorno 1993: 63; 1970-86: 5: 303). This means that what the individual feels or suffers is not in and of itself reliable as a criterion of truth – at least not without taking into consideration the historical mediations that lie hidden within such feelings. If these mediations can be deciphered, then individual experience *may* be convertible into a criterion of truth.

In this regard, it should come as no surprise that Adorno is most interested in those affective and somatic reactions that are the subjectively encoded form of objective forces. He mentions, for example, the physical characteristics of bodily movement, as these are conditioned by social realities: “The movements machines demand of their users already have the violent, hard-hitting, unresting jerkiness of Fascist maltreatment” (Adorno 1978: 40; 1970-86: 4: 44).

The fact that the body is the site of such social processes of formation, and of any number of surplus feelings that do not quite conform to that formation, is what makes individual experience an essential point of departure for social critique. Because “society is essentially the substance of the individual [...], social analysis can learn incomparably more from individual experience than Hegel conceded” (Adorno 1978: 17; 1970-86: 4: 16).

Beyond Adorno’s reading of Hegel, his qualified defence of subjective experience also takes shape in his criticisms of institutional Marxism and,

philosophically speaking, very often of the writings of Georg Lukács. For Adorno, one way of putting the problem with Lukács' Marxism is that it puts too much emphasis on "objective economic analysis" at the expense of subjective experience.

As Lukács puts it, the hidden truth-content "of capitalist fetishization can only [*nur*] be brought to light through objective economic analysis, never [*niemals*] through the opposite method, which finds its point of departure in the subject" (Lukács 1949: 43). Lukács is here taking aim at formal phenomenological subjectivity, which, on his reading, illegitimately brackets its historical conditioning. Adorno partially concedes the point, but his reply implies that Lukács throws the baby of subjective experience out with the bathwater of formal subjectivity. Consequently, he stresses the importance of felt suffering for any materialism worthy of the name: "Lukács is right to ascribe our understanding of the fundamental objectivity of political economy to Marxism. However," he adds, "it is an essential moment of the [social] totality, and especially of late bourgeois society, that objective negativity is experienced as subjective suffering that surpasses class boundaries" (Adorno 1970-86: 20.1: 254).

Given the broader context of Adorno's thought, and for reasons that will be further explored below, we should infer from this that while class consciousness may theoretically grasp and explain subjective suffering and thereby provide a motivation for its overcoming, we should not forget that it is the primary experience of suffering that provided the material impetus for objective economic analysis in the first place. More generally, the material impetus remains relevant in the wake of any theorization of it. As Adorno puts it, *contra* Lukács' insistence on the validity of Marxist doctrine: "Knowledge that dispenses with such [subjective] aspects of experience does not thereby pass without further ado into higher objectivity, but rather into technical science, reification, and disinterest in human beings" (Adorno 1970-86: 20.1: 254).

These references to Hegel and Lukács allow us to provisionally discern the general shape of Adorno's attempts to redeem primary experience. Primary experience does not refer unrestrictedly to the vast gamut of firsthand affections and physical realities. It refers more specifically to those spontaneous visceral reactions that are pre-discursively expressive of some social content that calls for theoretical reflection, and perhaps especially those reactions that point beyond what existing theories and doctrines purport to explain or justify. In fact, we should probably go one step further: primary experience is, for all the reasons already mentioned, a medium of the "priority of the object" (*Vorrang des Objekts*), for Ador-

no, understood not as an objectivity independent of us, but as something objective that may well happen “behind the back of consciousness” (Hegel 2018: 41; 1968-: 9: 61), but which is nevertheless registered within somatic and affective experience.

For example, the insomniac’s altered perception of time may register their unconscious sense that life’s potential is being missed, without any further indication of what is really at issue (Adorno 1978: 165-6; 1970-86: 4: 188-9). Or the lover’s neurotic reaction to an imagined slight may unconsciously register their fear of a very real social coldness (Adorno 1970-86: 4: 294-5).

## 2. “Primary” experience

Having noted that primary experience is a narrower category, within Adorno’s materialism, than somatic or affective experience in general, we might now wonder what the adjective “primary” is meant to convey, if it is not merely a synonym of “firsthand”.

One problem is that it is not entirely clear how Adorno can speak of *primary* experience, while also saying, at the same time, that “that which, for the individual, is ‘primary’ [...] is derived and secondary”. What is “primary” about primary experience if it is inevitably derived and secondary? It would seem that firsthand experience is in fact secondhand.

Indeed, one might wonder why Adorno would choose to use the word “primary” at all. In most cases, the word is anathema to him – the sign of a mythological search for origins dressed up as philosophy (Adorno 2016: 191-2). For example, he considers the apparently similar notion of “primal experience” (*Urerfahrung*, referring to Husserl’s use of the term in *Ideas I*) to be problematic (Adorno 1973: 39; 1970-86: 6: 49). Thus, whatever the word is meant to connote, it clearly does not mean “original”.

Nor does it seem likely that Adorno is obliquely referring to Freud’s notion of primary process (*Primärprozess*), not least because Adorno rarely, if ever, refers to this latter term, and was generally quite sceptical of the possibility of constructing a psychoanalytic theory of objective social content: “The absolute predominance of the economy”, he says, “defies any attempt at explaining the situation on the basis of the [generic] psychic life of its victims” (Adorno 1978: 58; 1970-86: 4: 65). While such passages do not authorize us to disregard the many ways in which Adorno was influenced by psychoanalytic theory, they do give us reason to look elsewhere for the meaning of Adorno’s use of the word “primary”.

In order to grasp what is *primary* about primary experience, we should perhaps take a closer look at the task that implicitly accompanies some seemingly immediate subjective reactions, i.e. the fact that such reactions are not true in and of themselves (their reality notwithstanding), but only in relation to some objective social content that remains to be adequately interpreted or theorized. As Adorno puts it:

Not every experience that surges up as primary is to be denied point-blank. [...] Whatever part of the object goes beyond the determinations imposed on it by thinking turns up, in the first instance, as something immediate for the subject; and conversely, the subject is least of all a subject [i.e. critically self-aware] where it feels most certain [*gewiß*] of itself, in primary experience. (Adorno 1973: 39; 1970-86: 6: 49-50)

On the one hand, mere sensory certainty (or ‘knowing’ what I feel) is no guarantee of anything. Adorno seems to have in mind the fact that Hegel makes a similar claim in the first chapter of the *Phenomenology of spirit*. Yet, contra Hegel, if visceral ‘immediacy’ is not yet knowledge, let alone critical, it cannot be transformed into knowledge merely by situating it somewhere within the gallery of figures that make up the *Phenomenology*. On the other hand, what is at issue is how the somatic or affective translation of “the object” must nevertheless guide discursive articulation. In other words, it is a question of whether we are up to the task of giving primary experience a voice, independently of existing theories.

Hence primary experience is not only something I feel or undergo from a first-person standpoint. It is also something of which *one should be capable*: “To what extent”, Adorno asks, “are people who live under conditions of centrally controlled mass culture, and who tend to adapt to these conditions, still at all capable of having genuine, primary experiences [*überhaupt noch fähig, echte, primäre Erfahrungen zu machen*]?” (Adorno 1970-86: 20.2: 637).

It is here that we may begin to take the measure of the fact that primary experience is not merely a passive emotional or somatic state laden with objective social meaning, but also a capability or potentiality from which theoretical insight may flow. Indeed, Adorno understands this capability as a real, material condition of progress, in the specific form of what he sometimes calls “advanced consciousness” (*fortgeschrittenes Bewußtsein*), i.e. a consciousness that has “progressed” because it was able “to raise idiosyncratic or blind reactions [and experiences, *Reaktionen, Erfahrungen*] into consciousness and even to raise [or to sublimate] them

into theory [*zur Theorie zu erheben; zu sublimieren*]" (Adorno, Haselberg 1965: 494-5).

Primary experience therefore names the point of convergence between unreflective subjective impulses and those objective forces which theory has to decipher. That point of convergence within the subject is not merely a subjective fact; it is an objective social potential to the extent that primary experience thereby becomes a special prerequisite of theory.

Or as Adorno concretely suggests: "Theoretically speaking, it would not be the worst approach to reflect on the expression that horror finds in the [individual] subject, to remain in control of subjectivity in such a reflection, and thereby to contribute something to the objective precondition of resistance" (Adorno 1970-86: 20.1: 254).

### 3. *Decadence: Huysmans*

The theoretician has this in common with the artist who attempts "to drive thought beyond that which exists, instead of merely reproducing it". They are both guided by "nervous reactions" that are at once "idiosyncratic" and historically "opportune". It is "only through the utmost sharpening and tension of subjectivity that [what is at stake in experience, *die Sache selber*] may be given a voice" (Adorno, Haselberg 1965: 493, 496).

In this vein, it may be helpful, at this juncture, to refer to an unusual counter-example of what Adorno has in mind: a telling failure in the attempt to convert primary experience into expression. More specifically, this counter-example will allow us to see that primary experience involves a special form of "presupposition", whereby that which is "primary" provides the precarious precondition for an alternative to "that which exists, instead of merely reproducing it". In this regard, as we shall see, it is the presupposition that really counts, rather than its outcome, which may prove inadequate.

Adorno's critical remarks on literary *décadence* are quite interesting in this regard. "Decadence", he says, "is the nerve point [*Nervenpunkt*, a 'hotspot'] where the dialectic of progress is as it were bodily appropriated by consciousness [*leibhaft gleichsam zugeeignet wird*]" (Adorno 1998: 151; 1970-86: 10.2: 627). The past participle "appropriated" (*zugeeignet*) carries a negative connotation in this context: something is wrong with this appropriation. More explicitly, one might say that decadence is an attempt to depict cultural collapse and, correspondingly, the need for

progress beyond the historical moment – a need that is articulated at the level of somatic reactions. And yet it must fail, as Adorno goes on to point out, because it cannot ultimately get beyond these reactions.

True, Adorno's remarks do not offer many specific references to literary history, beyond a few indeterminate allusions and a quick mention of Oscar Wilde's *Salomé*. However, it is possible to discern what Adorno has in mind in relation to a work that influenced Wilde: J.-K. Huysmans' 1884 novel *À rebours*, translated into English as *Against the grain* or *Against nature*.

The novel fastidiously depicts the somatic and affective experiences of its neurotic, neurasthenic main character, but what is most compelling about it is the fact that it leads us into an impasse, albeit one that is bursting with unintentional content. This impasse is not just a failure of the need for expression that is encoded into somatic and affective experience. It is an emphatic, albeit negative, reiteration of the task set for therapy by primary experience.

The novel is essentially made up of the first-person experiences of an "anaemic" and "highly strung" *fin de siècle* aristocrat, the Duc Jean Des Esseintes, who can neither understand nor tolerate the disintegration of the old European social order (Huysmans 2003: 3; 1977: 80). He is both literally and figuratively the last of his line, the final product of exhausted cultural possibilities. His central motivation, related to this exhaustion, is ostensibly an "escape from the present", a search for transcendence or a way out of the *ennui* he feels (Huysmans 2003: 119; 1977: 241). However, he cannot find the right kind of transcendence, the right way out of the debility of civilization. Consequently, the possibilities contained within experience gradually disintegrate with each of his botched attempts at establishing a sensuous haven from the obsolescence of bourgeois values.

As Wilde famously puts it in *The picture of Dorian Gray*, Huysmans' novel is "without a plot" (Wilde 2000: 120). It rather takes the form of a dizzying series of experiments with various eccentricities, artifices, vices, and substances (bizarre visual shows, foods, liquors, perfumes, and so on), which purport to rebel against both nature and established mores. Perhaps like Marx, his class opponent, but lacking his theoretical insight, Des Esseintes understands that there is nothing 'natural' about bourgeois values.

However, because his experiments do not allow Des Esseintes to progress beyond his somatic and affective experiences, the book constitutes something like an anti-*Bildungsroman* or, better, an anti-*Phenomenology of spirit*. It is the serial presentation *not* of progress, nor of neatly

interrelated, trans-historical figures of spirit, but rather of disconnected scenes of intoxication, useless distraction, and disappointment, centred on an increasingly irritable, isolated, and sickly individual. Instead of escaping the society he despises, Des Esseintes can only wander about in the ruins of an obsolete social paradigm.

It is through the physical and psychological symptoms of the failed search for transcendence that the true primary experience of the novel's protagonist begins to make itself known. In fact, it might be closer to the truth to say that primary experience is the real protagonist of the novel, while the character of Des Esseintes himself is just the physical, symptom-laden site of an objective social content that he cannot correctly grasp – and, one might add, that Huysmans himself failed to grasp (a point to which we shall return in a moment).

The failure of Des Esseintes' various experiments is gross and foreseeable. The extreme sensations that he undergoes lead only to "dyspepsia, [...] bowel irritation, [...] nightmares, eye troubles, [a] hacking cough that [comes on] at fixed intervals as regular as clockwork, [a] throbbing of the arteries and heart, and [...] cold sweats [...] followed by aural illusions", among other somatic and neurotic reactions (Huysmans 2003: 187; 1977: 335). One might say that what he indirectly 'experiences' on the level of these involuntary bodily reactions, and without in the least being aware of it, is essentially a *flaw* in his desire for transcendence, or an *incapacity* as regards the meaning of primary experience.

Or to put it more specifically, the problem is that Des Esseintes' search for transcendence is structured around a defective alternative that is repeatedly described in the book, although its defect is never stated. It is rather undergone in the form of illness and neurosis. The alternative is explicitly formulated when Des Esseintes' doctor finally suggests that it may be time for him to stop his debauchery, to return to Paris, and thereby to the pleasures that suffice for others: "So it's either death or the penal colony, then!" (Huysmans 2003: 196; 1977: 349).

The alternative is then sharpened into an even starker contrast that reveals the animating forces of the novel, namely, two opposed attempts at *transcendence*, each vying for supremacy: *either* a complete abandonment to worldly pleasures and vices, i.e. existing "against the grain" of society, but at the risk of death, *or* a return to the social ideal of Catholic salvation, i.e. the renunciation of idiosyncratic pleasures in favour of sacrosanct transcendence.

Essentially, the alternative is that of Heaven or Hell, where Hell is represented by a form of life that, from the standpoint of bourgeois mores,

is aberrant, perverse, and vicious. In other words, as with other strands of decadence, we should understand that Hell connotes not a posthumous punishment inflicted on sinners, but rather an affirmative, apparently emancipatory pursuit of vice, coupled with deep contempt for what is touted as humanity.

Ultimately, after his brush with death, Des Esseintes realizes that embracing damnation is no better than the “impossible [Christian] belief in a future life” (Huysmans 2003: 204; 1977: 360-1). Both branches of the alternative are impossible, from his point of view – and yet he still desperately desires a future that would represent an escape from the end of civilization as he knows it. Thus, his either/or reveals itself for what it truly is: a neither/nor, which is to say, an abstract and therefore sterile negation of the existing world.

Huysmans himself would later attempt to dispel the problem. While he had presented the alternative and its failure with caricatural clarity in his novel, his subsequent turn to Catholicism constituted a wishful denial of the impasse in which the novel culminates. In his 1903 preface to a special edition of the book, Huysmans famously quotes Jules Barbey d’Aurevilly, who had grasped the novel’s impasse in his own terms: “After such a book, the only choice open to the author is between the muzzle of a pistol and the foot of the cross”. To which the then-Catholic Huysmans replied: “The choice is made” (Huysmans 2003: 217; 1977: 77).

The interest of all of this, from the standpoint of critical theory, is that the ‘immediate’ content of the novel, the choice between Heaven and Hell, is not at all the ultimatum that it seems to be – because it is not the making of *that* choice that is really at issue.

What is really at issue is rather the social construction of the alternative and its radical insufficiency. Huysmans and Des Esseintes sense the contradictions of the age, yet without fully grasping them – and certainly without transcending them. They know just enough to posit the *need* for transcendence, a haven from a civilization increasingly consumed by its contradictions. Essentially, they want to bring about a kind of progress that would be fundamentally different than bourgeois progress, which had led not to actualized humanity but rather only to Edgar Allan Poe’s crowd. Huysmans and his character are simply not capable of the primary experiences caused by decadence, not capable of being a match for their social content. However, from our perspective, they make it possible, in spite of themselves, to see that they are mistaken in taking ‘Heaven or Hell’ to be the ultimate alternative. As Adorno puts it (although he does not mention Huysmans by name):

the irrationalism of *décadence* [rightly] denounced the unreason of dominant reason. An isolated, arbitrary, privileged happiness [at the level of individual experience] is sacred to irrationalism because it alone vouches for what has escaped [...]. [However, the] oppositional stance of decadence remains abstract [...]. Decadence mistakes the particularity of happiness, which it must insist upon, for immediate utopia, for actualized humanity. (Adorno 1998: 151-2; 1970-86: 10.2: 626-7)

Now, it may seem that Des Esseintes is quintessentially unhappy, and that Adorno's remarks therefore do not apply; but his extreme behaviour would be of no interest were it not also an attempt, however clumsy and misguided, at fulfilment. Indeed, this is stated explicitly in the novel: "In [Des Esseintes'] opinion it was perfectly possible to fulfil those desires commonly supposed to be the most difficult to satisfy under normal conditions, and this by the trifling subterfuge of producing a fair imitation of the object of those desires" (Huysmans 2003: 21; 1977: 105-6).

It may be noted in passing that this claim could also serve as a description of the most developed forms of the culture industry, as articulated from the standpoint of its subjects. But what is most important at the present juncture is that no limits are set on possibility by Des Esseintes, *except* for the fact that they are all reduced to one or other of the two branches of the novel's central alternative. This reduction is the unintentional yet instructive flaw at the novel's core. The *bad* and *illusory* infinity of possibilities of fulfilment – and their reduction to the terms of a false alternative – is precisely what blocks true progress.

À rebours is, in that respect, symptomatic of the standstill of history, i.e. of a contradictory society that is neither able to continue nor to see beyond its limits, despite the apparently endless possibilities on offer. Thus, all of the novel's somatic and affective experiences remain in play and relevant, as the trace – *not* of the alternative of Heaven or Hell, which both signify failed transcendence – but rather of the alternative that is lacking to that alternative. Des Esseintes' physical and psychological breakdown is the trace, at the level of primary experience, of that missing alternative.

#### 4. *Presupposition*

How, then, should we understand primary experience? It is that experience, which, in the apparent immediacy of sensory and affective realities,

serves as a fragile “presupposition” of the overcoming of the social pressures that are the hidden content of those realities.

The use of the word “presupposition” in this context is inherited from Hegel. It may be summarized as follows: “‘To presuppose’ [*Voraussetzen*] means to come across something immediate, which reflection then moves beyond in order to return to itself. This process of reflection presupposes the immediate, which is thus no longer immediate but mediated” (Schaefer 1975: 573). For example, in the context of the *Phenomenology*, sensory consciousness serves as a presupposition for the stages that follow it, but since we discover along the way that sensory consciousness is not the immediate starting point that we took it to be, its true content can only be articulated in the process of leaving it behind. It is a presupposition that is effective only to the extent that we must grasp its truth on terms *other than its own*. Now, it may be recalled that Hegel’s thought is said to be “presuppositionless”, but this is not because the structure of presupposition is not at work in his thought. It is because nothing that is presupposed is what it seems to be or may serve as a firm postulate. “Presuppositionless” means “having no starting point in axiomatic immediacy”, which in turn means that true development only begins when we discover that the truth of some initial immediacy (say, sensory certainty) lies elsewhere than within the limited regime of claims that characterizes it. Hence the defective starting point must be (dialectically, not axiomatically) presupposed for its overcoming to find its justification.

Primary experience, on Adorno’s emphatic use of the expression, involves the dialectical structure of presupposition. In other words, somatic and affective realities are *primary* precisely to the extent that they may serve as a transitory, mediated precondition for progress beyond their social causes. Another way to phrase the structure of presupposition would be to say, as Adorno puts it in a telling passage, that we must learn to “rely upon” primary experiences (*uns auf diese primären Erfahrungen überhaupt zu verlassen*; Adorno 2016: 261).

In short, primary experience names those historically mediated somatic and affective impulses that can serve as a presupposition for a language in need of expressing something that it is not currently able to express. Consequently, primary experience is the communication of ‘something’ that consciousness undergoes somatically or affectively:

one wants to say ‘it’, one wants to express ‘it’ – this ‘it’ that is at first nothing other than what one has originally experienced – [but one must recall] that this original

experience is neither 'primary' nor 'ultimate' [*nicht ein Erstes und nicht ein Letztes*]. [The primary experience of 'it'] is [...] mediated within itself, which is to say that it can only be thought as the subjective moment intertwining with its opposing moment. (Adorno 2016: 110)

Of course, the expression of this 'it' is often discouraged or blocked by the way in which thought and behaviour are organized. Indeed, Huysmans no doubt felt the pull of such an 'it': "My life and my writing", he says, "have a strong element of passivity, of unawareness, and of undeniable forces acting upon me from outside" (Huysmans 2003: 216; 1977: 74). Unfortunately, he understood 'it' not as a presupposition for the rejection of the false alternative of Heaven or Hell, but as a possibility of salvation that he mistakenly took to be located within its limits.

### 5. *Childhood: Benjamin*

The fact that contemporary experience tends to discourage or disguise the presuppositions of expression, while nevertheless registering them at the level of idiosyncratic reactions and impulses, constitutes one of the most central lessons of Walter Benjamin's thought, as taken up in Adorno's concept of primary experience.

Examples of primary experience are numerous in Benjamin's writings, perhaps the most relevant of which in the present context is his *Berlin childhood around 1900*. In that work, Benjamin focuses his attention on the way in which childhood images "are capable, at their core, of pre-forming [*präformieren*] later historical experience" (Benjamin 2002: 344; 1972-89: 7: 385).

This preformation is complex and equivocal. It is first premised upon the inscription within experience of lost potentials. As Benjamin elsewhere puts it: "The [nineteenth] century was incapable of responding to the new technological possibilities with a new social order" (Benjamin 1999: 26; 1972-89: 5: 76). However, this thought makes its way into childhood experience not in the form of the theoretical perspective that it would later become, but rather as a swirl of thoughts and feelings that accumulate around places and objects, and that only tacitly register redemptive possibilities and their blockage. Crucially, the child is not yet certain that these possibilities have been squandered.

Thus, the scenes of *Berlin childhood* are balanced precariously between a present that bears the meaning of a different future and the

dissolution of that meaning into a problematic continuity with the past. They are dialectical images: the presupposition, within language and social objectivity, of a surplus meaning that cannot find full expression, but which is nevertheless, against all odds, a possible point of departure for a break with the past. As Adorno puts it: "Dialectical images are constellations between alienated things and injected meanings, resting in a moment of indifference between death and meaning. Whereas things are awakened in an appearance of the newest, death transforms the meanings into the oldest" (Adorno, Benjamin 1999: 115; 1994: 152). The very things and feelings that promise transformation are also forced to break that promise. And yet, these childhood images are also the presuppositions of an 'other' experience, and so of a promise kept alive within the impoverishment of experience.

The introduction of the telephone into private homes provides one example of the structure of presupposition. Benjamin speaks alternately of new potentials and of "the devastation [that the telephone] once wreaked in family circles", disturbing family habits and eroding the barrier between the home and the outside world. For example, the telephone changed people's behaviour, causing them to adapt their bodies to its machinery (as Adorno too would later note, as mentioned above): Benjamin's father "gave himself up to [cranking the handle of the telephone] for minutes at a time, nearly forgetting himself in the process. His hand, on these occasions, was a dervish overcome by frenzy". Benjamin also recalls how he himself was affected by the telephone, how he submitted to the "violence" of the voice on the other end of the line: "Powerless, I suffered, seeing that it obliterated my consciousness of time, my firm resolve, my sense of duty".

One cannot help but notice that in this image of submission, what is "obliterated" is in fact a series of bourgeois values (a sense of time, resolve, duty). At which point, the reader should recall the beginning of the passage, which stresses the new possibilities that accompanied the introduction of the telephone into the home: "The night from which [the first telephone conversations] came was the one that precedes every true birth. And the voice that slumbered in those instruments was a newborn voice". Indeed, the telephone was not merely a tool of modernity, but the ambiguous promise of interruption: the ringing of the phone "menaced [...] the historical era that underwrote and enveloped [my] parents' afternoon nap". Indeed, it was perhaps even the possibility of a reprieve: "It became a consolation for the loneliness [of the younger generation]. To

the despondent who wanted to leave this wicked world, it shone with the light of a last hope" (Benjamin 2002: 349-50; 1972-89: 7: 390-1).

Of course, the telephone was not, for Benjamin, the harbinger of a radically new future. However, for the child that Benjamin was, experiencing it for the first time, its deviations from the norm were enough to inscribe it within primary experience (aurally, affectively) and to infuse it with disruptive, transformative power. This equivocality does not dilute salutary social potentials; it saves them within primary experience, which can then serve as a basis for theoretical reflection (prompted, for example, by the question as to why massive technological progress is not also progress towards an emancipation from labour and domination). Thus, while such images indicate the social "irretrievability" of historically missed potentials, they also remind us that history contains such potentials, the development and actualization of which would be a liberation from the "catastrophe" of having missed the moment (Benjamin 2002: 344; 1999: [N10, 2]; 1972-89: 5: 593, 7: 390-1).

In the passage on the telephone, as in many others, Benjamin underscores the allegorical and equivocal qualities of modernity, as these are encoded into primary experience. All of the recollections in *Berlin childhood* point in the same direction. One might think of the flowerbed on the bank of Berlin's Landwehr canal, which hovers uncertainly between its urban banality and being a monument to a deceased childhood friend – a very real loss of social potentiality (Benjamin 2002: 360; 1972-89: 7: 401). This image is reinforced by another: "The canal – through which the water took its dark, slow course, as though intimate with all the sorrow in the world – held me engrossed from time to time. In vain was each of its many bridges betrothed to death with the ring of a life preserver" (Benjamin 2002: 378; 1972-89: 7: 422). Memory swirls around such equivocal images, like a momentary eddy in the dominant current of history. Such eddies are caused by something caught in the current and that resists it, however momentarily and ineffectually (Benjamin 2019: 24; 1972-89: 1: 226).

Perhaps the most evocative of such images is the *mise en abyme* of the socks that delight the young Benjamin. They are both another equivocal image of potentiality and, at the same time, a representation of the structure of the work as a whole. As each rolled-up pair of socks is unrolled, it is revealed to the young Benjamin that their rolled-up content was in fact the same object as their outer "pocket". This outer pocket contains nothing more than the socks themselves and yet it also contains

something else, an unfoldable surplus that it carries within itself (*das Mitgebrachte*).

This rolled-up surplus – a possibility of transcendence caught within immanence – is what Benjamin elsewhere calls an “idea”, i.e. “something given in advance” (*ein Vorgegebenes*) that is not a template for existing phenomena, but rather an outline of the missed potentials that are historically rolled up within those phenomena – and within the primary experience of them, e.g. melancholy (Benjamin 2019: 5; 1972-89: 5: 210). Such a “pre-giveness” of the different within the ever same, coupled with the analysis of missed historical potentials, is Benjamin’s articulation of the presupposition of primary experience.

In this regard, Benjamin’s ‘recollected child’ is an essential counter-figure and antidote to Huysmans’ jaded aristocrat, Des Esseintes. Whereas Des Esseintes fetishizes the eccentric and the vicious, the recondite and the extravagant, as the promises of a new beginning, the child needs no more than a telephone or a sock to feel that there are unused potentials at work within experience. And whereas Huysmans knows that “modernity is the time of Hell” (Benjamin 2002: [S1, 5], [G<sup>o</sup>, 17]; 1972-89: 5: 676, 1010), only to reaffirm the ideal of sacrosanct transcendence, Benjamin knows that reading history *à rebours*, i.e. against the grain, involves presupposing primary experience in the construction of a future that would have to be unfolded from the past, rather than remaining rolled up within it. “The decisive thing”, says Benjamin, “is to brush nature against the grain [*gegen den Strich*]” (Benjamin 2002: [G<sup>o</sup>, 20]; 1972-89: 5: 1011). Although he does not mention Huysmans by name, he deftly turns the German title of the novel against its author.

## 6. *Somatic and affective oughts*

The central lesson of primary experience, as taken up by the dialectical historian or philosopher, is that there is an ‘ought’ – an incomplete transcendence – hidden within certain somatic and affective experiences. We might even say that primary experience is the first glimpse of intellectual experience (*geistige Erfahrung* or experience in the dialectical sense), but as viewed from the uncertain and often socially immobilized standpoint of its materially, somatically, affectively given possibility.

Or to put it the other way around, primary experience is primary, but only because intellectual experience must ‘presuppose’ it – and thereby become its reflection.

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Iain Macdonald, *Presupposing primary experience*

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