“On Epic Naïveté”: Adorno’s Allegory of Philology

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“On Epic Naïveté” (1943) is a short but dizzying fragment from Adorno’s “Excursus I: Odysseus, or Myth and Enlightenment” that never found its way into the final version of The Dialectic of Enlightenment. The fragment, a self-contained essay, is continuous with the larger work’s critique of Enlightenment reasoning but is more focused in its approach, in addition to showcasing a hauntingly beautiful reading of epic imagery. In its methodological gambit, the essay resembles a piece of classical philology, though in the way it draws philosophical conclusions based on close readings and on highly focused Ansatzpunkte it more closely resembles Erich Auerbach’s critical reading of Homer from the year before, “Odysseus’ Scar.” Perhaps a still closer parallel stylistically

speaking would be the “parody of the philological method” that Adorno detects in Walter Benjamin’s “allegorical” philosophical writing.  

Whether Adorno’s method has anything in common with pataphilology in the mold of Alfred Jarry’s pataphysics is another question. As a disruption of ordinary reading and critical practices that wreaks havoc on conventional linear logic, it most certainly does.  

But insofar as pataphysics is an ethics of ludic disobedience that borders on nonsense (Jarry called pataphysics “the science of imaginary solutions” — Baudrillard would later add: “to the absence of problems”), it most certainly does not. In Nietzsche’s wake, Adorno’s philology mimics the objects of its critiques in order to subvert them from within: it is a faithful copy of an unfaithful original, dedicated to exposing problems that are nevertheless very real, politically, culturally, and ideologically. There is nothing blithely indifferent about Adorno’s stance, any more than there is about Nietzsche’s, even if they both share with Jarry a certain degree of je-m’en-foutisme and a rejection of bourgeois values. Perhaps truculence more than insouciance is the common thread that runs through these three models of philology.  

That said, “On Epic Naïveté” has a specific signature that is shaped by its object, which as its title indicates has to do with the imputation of naïve simplicity (Einfalt) to Homeric poetry,

3 Theodor W. Adorno, “Introduction to Benjamin’s Schriften” (1955), in Notes to Literature, 2:240.  

4 See Bök, ‘Pataphysics: The Poetics of an Imaginary Science (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002); and Gurd’s introduction to this volume. This disruptiveness is sometimes labeled by Adorno “parataxis,” as contrasted with “synthesis” or “hypotaxis” (logical coordination and subordination); it has close affinities with the principle of negative dialectics. See “Parataxis: On Hölderlin’s Late Poetry” (1963), in Notes to Literature, 2:109–49, esp. 131 and 136. But in the case of Homer, the naïvely paratactic author par excellence, Adorno’s project of disruptive insubordination requires an extra layer of complication. See below.  

one of its hallmark features at least since the dawn of modernity (though not in antiquity). As the essay unfolds, naïveté and simplicity slowly detach themselves from each other and then lose their purchase on Homer altogether. Ultimately, the essay is about the internal antagonism of epic as epic wrestles with its own logic, form, and expression when all three of these elements are pushed “to the edge of madness.”

The context, mostly submerged, is supplied by the overarching argument of the book to which the essay belongs conceptually and genetically. There, Adorno discerns in the Odyssey “a prescient allegory of the dialectic of enlightenment” that is best illustrated in the travels Odysseus makes through space and time:

The hero’s peregrinations from Troy to Ithaca trace the path of the self through myths, a self […] still in the process of formation as self-consciousness. The primeval world is secularized in the space he measures out […]. Laboriously and revocably, in the image of the journey, historical time has detached itself from space, the irrevocable schema of all mythical time.

Figured as a passage through mythical space, Odysseus’s travels perform a rationalization—a distantiation and negation—of pre-reflective space, while in the process they produce a sense of time and history that was never available to myth. In another vocabulary, one that Adorno does not explicitly invoke, the story that Odysseus’s wanderings tells is a genealogy, by which we should understand the insertion of the present into the past,

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6 An important point, and one that Adorno was perfectly capable of knowing. From Plato to Aristotle down through Longinus and beyond, Homeric epic was anything but naïve or simple.

7 Adorno, “On Epic Naïveté,” in Notes to Literature, 1:27. henceforth, references to the translation will be given in the body of this chapter.

albeit in disguised form. That is, on Adorno’s understanding, which accords with Nietzsche’s, genealogy does not trace origins. It problematizes them by exposing the manner in which they are used to construct ideologies in the present.⁹ In this way, in producing an untimely disturbance — that is, the sense that philology is constitutively and fatally out of sync with its objects — genealogy lays bare dialectical processes and thought.¹⁰

Adorno accomplishes this result by insinuating modernity (history) into the Homeric past (myth), which makes Homer’s “time” legible in the present as an origin that can be both affirmed and denied. Myth represents the historical starting point for modernity (Adorno calls it for this reason a “bourgeois prehistory,” DE 46), but one that must be abandoned and disavowed for modernity to begin. And so, although we might wish to call Adorno’s method genealogical, it is perhaps better to describe it as dialectical in its logic, allegorical in its readings, and unabashedly anachronistic all the way around. As a result, Homeric epic in Adorno proves to be a slippery thing, less a historical phenomenon than a transhistorical one. It assumes a liquid form — at times seemingly archaic, at times anachronistically projecting itself forward into a future consciousness of itself, at times grasped as if through the backwards-looking lens of a post-Enlightenment awareness.


This same theoretical framework is operative in “On Epic Naïveté,” although now the focus shifts from Odysseus to Homer and from the plot of the epic poem to its logical form as poetry, both illustrated once again through the *Odyssey*. And as Adorno adjusts his lens to accommodate a more “micrological gaze,” his method might at first glance appear to pass for a conventional, close philological reading of Homer. It is anything but. There is a perversity to his reading of Homer, which aims to bring out the inner perversities of all classical philology, starting with the radical enjambment of discrepant times that reading ancient texts in the modern day necessarily involves (this is philology’s native untimeliness), and from there indexing the ideological sutures that classical philology produces in order to paper over these very discrepancies.

The essay opens with a quotation from the climactic recognition scene between Penelope and Odysseus in the penultimate book of the *Odyssey*:

And as when the land appears welcome to men who are swimming, after Poseidon has smashed their strong-built ship on the open water, pounding it with the weight of wind and the heavy seas, […]

[…] gladly they set foot on the shore, escaping the evil; so welcome was her husband to her as she looked upon him, and she could not let him go from the embrace of her white arms (23.233–40).12

The passage is carefully chosen. It is built around an elaborate simile that serves as a virtual epitome of the poem: the whole of the *Odyssey* is contained in these few lines.13 Adorno will use

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13 As it happens, the image anticipates a second epitome of the entire poem that occurs when Penelope and Odysseus, reunited in bed, each retells their
this passage to ground a reading of the poem, and then, extrapolating from there, to produce a reading of the epic genre as a whole. Looking closer, we see that a series of contrasts structures the passage: the violently raging sea, the salvific ending, and the competing appeals to the faculties of vision and touch. One sense that is not in evidence in the passage, at least explicitly, is that of sound. Yet it is the aural dimension of the imagery, or rather lying behind the imagery and within it, that Adorno singles out for appraisal in his analysis that immediately follows, when he goes on to discover in the simile an immanent dialectical movement that, he will claim, runs through the whole poem, and indeed through all of epic poetry.

If one were one to measure the entire *Odyssey* against these verses, Adorno speculates, what would stand revealed is “the substance [of the epic] appearing in [its] naked form.” And that substance, its *Gehalt*, consists in the attempt to hearken to *[nachzuhorchen]* the endlessly renewed beating of the sea on the rocky coast, and patiently to reproduce [lit., “to trace,” as in a drawing: *nachzuzeichnen*] the way the water floods over the rocks and then streams back from them with a roar, leaving the solid ground glowing with deeper color. This roaring [or “noise”] is the sound of epic discourse *[Solches Rauschen ist der Laut der epischen Rede]*, in which what is solid *[das Feste]* and unequivocal comes together with what is ambiguous and flowing, only to part from it immediately again. (24; trans. adapted).

“This roaring is the sound of epic discourse.” Adorno’s imagery is as complex as Homer’s own. What he means to say, on a first approach, is that, in the course of its own action, epic discourse turns, or *would* turn if it could, into a stream of noise, a *Rauschen*, rather than a string of words and meanings. This is respective personal adventures (23,300–343), as Jonas Grethlein reminds me (personal communication). The image is thus an epitome of an epitome, and thus a highly wrought moment.
its naked substance revealed as the truth of its appearance — the effort on the part of epic to become pure sound, as immediate and overwhelming as the raging sea. To say this is not to say that Adorno, in selecting the verses from book 24 that he does, is blind to the tender and dramatic moment of reconciliation they portray, that he has eyes and ears only for the endless churning of the elements that rage against the return of Odysseus, his ship, and his crew. Hardly. Neither is it to say that, in indulging in the strong visual and especially the tactile pulls of the simile, Adorno has allowed himself to be mesmerized by the senseless yet powerful materiality of epic poetry. These other dimensions of the image and the sensations they evoke will play a role in his commentary on the passage. But in order to see how they do, we first need to attend to what he means by the noise of epic.

By noise Adorno has in mind whatever blocks the transmission of rational discourse from within language. Whenever language discovers its non-rational and non-verbal resources and becomes imagistic, object-oriented, and impossible to translate back into language again, whenever it becomes, in his own words, “stupid” and “dumb,” it ceases to communicate, to be “fungible” (offering exchangeable information), and instead becomes mute and opaque, itself object-like. And, as Adorno observes, Homeric epic is peculiarly marked by its relationship to this kind of opacity, which has been the source of its much-vaunted proximity to nature, to the object-world, and to the naïve.

This, at least, is how epic has customarily appeared to the classicizing imagination of the European West, which could characterize the simplicities of epic poetry as either spell-bound by a kind of “primal stupidity” (Urdummheit) — so the ethnologist Konrad Theodor Preuss (1904), speaking of the totemic substratum of early religions and myths, and so the classicist Gilbert Murray (1912), who cites Preuss approvingly and labels this terrifying substratum of enchanted nature characteristically Greek (25) — or else as evidence of what Schiller, more delicately, called “naïve,” and what Winckelmann before him had
bequeathed to later generations under the rubric of “noble simplicity [edle Einfalt] and tranquil grandeur.”

Adorno partly agrees, but he casts the problem in a different light. Epic poetry is fascinated with the objectality of things and with the prospect of approaching and even taming them through a kind of mimeticism. And indeed, “naïveté is the price one pays for” this surrender, however partial it may be, to the fearful attractions and powers of nature contained in myth (25). But there is a catch. For all its noise and opacity, epic can never relinquish its status as language and poetry. It never truly becomes an object; it merely represents itself as approximating to the condition of objects. And therein lies the founding contradiction of epic poetry, which cannot escape its own linguistic predicament even as its identity is staked on the attempt to do so. Hence Adorno’s qualifications in the passage above: the substance of epic consists “in the attempt to hearken to the endlessly renewed beating of the sea on the rocky coast, and patiently to reproduce the way the water floods over the rocks.” But the attempt is doomed to fail: “Because, however, the narrator turns to the world of myth for his material, his enterprise, now impossible, has always been contradictory” (24). And with this, Adorno launches into his dialectical analysis of Homeric naïveté:

But as long as great epic poetry has existed, this contradiction has informed the narrator’s modus operandi; it is the element in epic poetry commonly referred to as objectivity or material concreteness [Gegenständlichkeit]. In comparison with the enlightened state of consciousness to which narrative discourse belongs, a state characterized by general concepts, this concrete or objective element always seems to be one of stupidity, lack of comprehension, ignorance, a stub-

born clinging to the particular when it has already been dissolved into the universal. (25)

_This_ is the ultimate source of the noise of epic poetry—the creaking of language as epic wrestles with its own antinomies. This noise is audible not in individual verses or in their sounds, but in their form and structure, which make meaning possible without having any intrinsic meaning of their own. Adorno means exactly this when he speaks of the “naked substance” of epic poetry. To hear the noise of language is to “receive the substance of poetry not in sensory images that language would suggest but in language itself and in the structures created by it and peculiar to it alone.” For “Rauchen is not a sound [Klang] but a noise [Geräusch], more closely akin to language than to sound.” Symptomatic of the historical and ideological location of epic, the noisy “sound of epic discourse” bespeaks the essential estrangement of epic from reality: it is the muted and plaintive echo of the “_a priori_ impossibility” of epic to be otherwise than it is (27).

Adorno locates this impossibility almost everywhere he looks in epic discourse. For starters, the epic narrator “has always been contradictory from the beginning” in virtue of his self-appointed aim, which was to present a content (a story, a tale, “something worth telling”) unlike any ever presented before, “something worth reporting on, something that is not the same as everything else, not exchangeable,” be it in an effort to touch some real particular from the historical past (“what has occurred once and only once”) or as a way of passing on a token of epic’s own incomparable value (24, 25).17 Telling against this

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15 Adorno, _Notes to Literature_, 1:68, quoting Theodor Meyer.
16 Ibid., 1:69.
17 If the latter, then Adorno may be thinking of the famous remark from the Odyssey that epic audiences always flock to the latest song (Odyssey 1.351–52) — itself a troubling notion for any view of traditional, oral epic. See Armand D’Angour, _The Greeks and the New: Novelty in Ancient Greek Imagination and Experience_ (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), ch. 8.
ambition is the problem that mythical discourse is a derivative of tradition, the greater sea from which epic emerges and into which it will return once again:

The amorphous flood of myth is the eternally same [das Immergleiche], but the telos of narrative is the differentiated [das Verschiedene]; and the unrelentingly strict identity in which the epic object [Gegenstand] is held firm [festgehalten wird] serves to achieve its non-identity, indeed its very difference, with what is simply identical [mit dem schlecht Identischen], with unarticulated oneness. (24; trans. adapted)

Simply to name mythical objects is to subject them to the instruments of reason and reflection and to rob them of “the material element […] that is the extreme opposite of all speculation and fantasy” (27). It is to identify that which ought to resist identification. It is to attempt to grasp hold of the slipping tide of myth.

Adorno is deliberately echoing the language and imagery of the simile with which his essay opens. Only, now we can see that what appears as a simile in Homer is for Adorno an allegory and, what amounts to the same thing, a dialectical image. When Adorno compresses the two halves of the simile into a solitary image, concepts are crystallized, brought to a standstill, and objectified; the substance of the text is made legible in its form; and nature and history trade places, locked in a mutual embrace: nature “becomes the figure of something historical” and “what is historically concrete” becomes an image of nature. All of this is the prime matter of dialectical reflection. The image replays in its static totality the dynamic tension in the simile that stretches between the naïve and the sentimental, between natural danger and sought-for salvation, between flux and fixity. The very form of the simile enacts the conundrum of identity that is wrested from non-identity. Penelope’s arms may hold Odysseus firmly in their embrace (fest hielt), but they are doomed to release him

18 Adorno, “Introduction to Walter Benjamin’s Schriften,” in Notes to Literature, 2:226; see also “The Essay as Form,” ibid., 1:22.
to another, greater fate once again, back to whence he has come, the world of myth. It is the very intermingling of the visual and the tactile elements of the scene with the meaningful actions they represent that for Adorno constitutes the significance of the noise of epic poetry—its passionate trafficking in “primordial reality” in the throes of language and on the precipice between myth and reason (25).

Epic discourse tries so very hard not to be itself. In trying, it creates its distinctive “noise” and confesses its own limits. Given the nature of *muthos*, the epic poet must yield to the principle of “universal fungibility”: unable to say something absolutely unique, the epic narrator has to say something that has an equivalent in what has already been said somewhere else in the tradition. Given the nature of communication, the epic poet has to yield to the same principle, understood now as the principle of communicability: he has to say something that is expressible and repeatable in language. *Muthos*, after all, means “speech.” Its objects are meant to be shared. They cannot touch ground with the real of what they present, but can only circle around it, endlessly, and futilely:

The attempt to emancipate representation from reflective reason is language’s attempt, futile from the outset, to recover from the negativity of its intentionality, the conceptual manipulation of objects, by carrying its defining intention to the extreme and allowing what is real to emerge in pure form, undistorted by the violence of classificatory ordering. (27)

Adorno is not outlining the problem, familiar since the discovery of oral theory, that formulaic diction places insuperable strictures on Homeric expressiveness.19 On the contrary, he is describing an impulse to realism that runs from Homer to Flau-

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Aligning these distant relatives brings out a feature of Adorno’s portrait of Homer that places Homer on this side of Enlightenment rather than before it. Hence, epic comes to grief not only on the logic of communication, but also on something equally significant, its own temporal logic: “an anachronistic element inheres in all epic poetry: in Homer’s archaism of invoking the Muse to help him proclaim events of vast scope” (25; trans. adapted). Adorno labels this feature of epic a “contradiction”; and it is one that “has informed the narrator’s modus operandi as long as great epic poetry has existed” (25).

At issue is the constitutive logic of epic, which turns on the question—it is really a problem—of how Homer can reconcile his project of producing a distinctive difference out of the “amorphous flood of myth” that originates in the (prehistoric) past. In modern times, the situation of epic has been registered not as a contradiction so much as a tendency towards “objectivity” (Gegenständlichkeit), as a “stupid,” “stubborn clinging to the particular” (eines von Dummheit […] verstockt ans Besondere dort sich Halten) or to the “object” (Gegenstand), as a “rigid fixation” on an object that stares back, but also as epic “naïveté” (25). Once again, Penelope’s clinging to her husband stands in for this kind of object-driven behavior. What she holds in her arms, presuming it to be the particularity that is her husband, has already dissolved into a universality. Odysseus, no longer

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20 Auerbach’s rejection of any impulse to realism in Homer contrasts sharply with Adorno’s complication of that impulse in Homer, even if both are taking aim, polemically, at the same contemporary image of Homer.

21 In Voss’s translation, Penelope beholds Odysseus’ “sight” (the way he “looks”) as well as his “gaze” (Anblick). Cf. “the intimidating power of the object of the identifying word’s stare” (25). Homer’s vocabulary for vision, when applied to persons, can encompass this precise range. But Adorno is giving the look an even more material, objective twist, reminiscent of Lacan’s anecdote about the sardine can “floating on the surface of the waves” of the sea (though it didn’t “see” him, “it was looking at me, all the same”)—it materialized a blind spot, a point of opacity, in the field of vision that constitutes the visual field as such (Jacques Lacan, Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, ed. Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan [Norton: New York, 1981], 95–96).
mythical, is already a mytheme. What does that make her? We had better not ask Homer, because he is himself another such mytheme—the product, purveyor, and enabling noble lie of false consciousness all rolled into one. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, he is introduced as “the Homeric spirit.” For Nietzsche, he was already either a legendary mythical individual or a “concept,” or both. The very precision of Homer’s language, clinging to the objectively real as it does, is the proof of its contrary. Epic discourse protests the charge of falsehood with a cry that is drowned out only by its own noise.

The question, then, is whether epic hears its own noise, that is, whether epic is or is not naïve—or to what extent it is naïve, be this wittingly or unwittingly. Reading Adorno’s intentions here is tricky. The passage from stupid objectivity to anachronism is hardly an obvious move unless one returns to his earlier question about fungibility. The point there had to do with epic’s inability to cope elegantly with the logic of particulars and universals. Epic appears to be a hapless victim of its own internal contradictions. But is it? At the end of the same passage about objectivity, Adorno slips in one more remark about myth that I have yet to quote: “The epic poem imitates the spell of myth in order to soften it” (25). Here, epic appears instead to be a knowing victim of its own contradictions, and a happy manipulator of its own conditions of possibility at that.

Given the question of how Homer can produce a distinctive difference out of the “amorphous flood of myth,” the answer seems to be that he can do so only by gathering up the substance of myth into the form of its concept. This is what is named in the appeal to the Muses, and by extension all figures of myth, who embody anachronism in their very concreteness. For the very particular and concrete object that they are “has already been dissolved into the universal,” and so too has been

22 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 35.
rendered communicable and an object of exchange. Such is the mimeticism of epic, its mimicry of what it is not. Could it be, then, that epic poses as a purveyor of myth and of anachronism in order to achieve its ends, that is, to produce the illusion that it can “achieve its non-identity […] with what is simply identical, with unarticulated oneness” and, in this way, break free of the past and exercise a measure of control over it, much as Odysseus tries to do in the face of the Sirens? At stake is the mastery of the entire realm of the mythical, which is full of terrifying potential: “In its rigid fixation on its object, which is designed to break the intimidating power of the object of the identifying word’s stare, the narrator of the epic account gains control, as it were, of the gesture of fear” (25). It is this transformation of identity (myth) into non-identity (the telos of epic narrative) that is the illusion of epic fiction, and that enables us to say today of the epic narrator’s enterprise that it “now [seems] impossible” and “has always been contradictory.” Epic, so heavily reliant on myth, harbors a deeply “anti-mythological” tendency within (25). Instead of encountering the raw matter of natural objects, epic encounters the objectification of its own internal contradictions: it is self-sensing, but also significantly blind to what it senses.

The illusory change that epic works upon itself, Adorno insists, is a rational transformation, effectuated in a passage from muthos to logos that takes place entirely within logos.

For myth — and the narrator’s rational, communicative discourse, with its subsumptive logic that equalizes everything it reports, is preoccupied with myth as the concrete, as some-

24 For a similar critique of the positivist spell exerted by uncritical philology on itself and its objects, see the exchange between Adorno and Benjamin from 1938 in Benjamin, Selected Writings, vol. 4, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Belknap Press), 99–115 and 200–214. One route to critique is through a “parody of the philological method” (see note 3 above), a tactic that is illustrated in spades in Adorno’s later “Notes on Kafka” from 1953 (Theodor W. Adorno, Prisms, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981], 243–71), and in his writings on Homer.
thing distinct from the leveling organization of the conceptual system — this kind of myth itself partakes of the eternal sameness that awoke to self-consciousness in *ratio*. (25; trans. adapted)

That is, the epic narrator participates in *ratio*, the rational processes, just by participating in non-mythic discourse-production, which is to say, by producing itself as an art form that draws upon myth while remaining distinct from it. He participates in the rational processes in the very act of drawing the distinction between myth and epic, and, at a more basic level, simply by drawing a line between his own (would-be) singular product and “the amorphous flood of myth” that is “eternally the same,” which is to say, by producing myth from within reason. Finally, in the course of epic production, it can be said, but only said, that myth achieves consciousness of itself. This is a Hegelian way of indicating that once the boundary between reason and myth was drawn, myth ceased to exist in a state of formlessness (“noise”): it instantly participated in the logic of reason (*logos*). Consequently, the very idea of a “naïve” epic seems something of a fallacy.

When does the idea of naïve epic originate, then? Evidently, only after some moment of enlightenment, after the dawning of *ratio* and once the distinction between myth and non-myth gets drawn. Adorno purposefully keeps this moment vague:

As an anti-mythological enterprise, epic naïveté emerges from the enlightenment-oriented and positivist effort to adhere [*festzuhalten*] faithfully and without distortion to what once was as it was, and thereby break the spell cast by what has been, by myth in its true sense; hence in restricting itself to what occurred once and only once [*aufs Einmaleig*] it retains an aspect that transcends limitation. For what occurred once and only once is not merely a defiant residue opposing the encompassing universality of thought; it is also thought’s innermost yearning, the logical form of something real that would no longer be enclosed by social domination and the
classificatory thought modeled upon it: the concept reconciled [versöhnt] with its object [mit seiner Sache]. (25–26)

Even if Adorno pursues this thought with another that sounds precociously modern—“a critique of bourgeois reason dwells within epic naïveté” (26)—one has to wonder just when to date the birth of epic naïveté as well as on what side to place it, ideologically speaking. Not only does naïveté prove to be as plastic as epic’s temporal logic on Adorno’s account; it also proves to be a potential weapon of critique, but one that is easily misplaced and mishandled. “Homeric simplicity” (die homerische Einfalt), identical with Homeric naïveté, appears in different forms and with different values. “It is easy to either ridicule Homeric simplicity […] or deploy it spitefully in opposition to the analytic spirit” (26). In the bourgeois view, this feature of epic appears as the attitude of Urdummheit described above: a “lack of comprehension” and a form of “ignorance” that stands in utter contrast with the abstract logic of Enlightenment universal thinking (25).

Yet, from another angle, “Homeric simplicity” turns out to have been “the opposite of simplicity” (26). It is, rather, a self-consciously manufactured gesture produced by post-enlightenment thought so as to create an anachronistic mythical past with which to overcome, or at the very least to express, if not expose, the antinomies of the present:

The customary eulogizing of the kind of narrative stupidity that emerges only with the dialectic of form has made of that stupidity a restorationist ideology hostile to consciousness, an ideology whose last dregs are currently being sold off in the philosophical anthropologies of our day with their false concreteness. (25; trans. adapted)

Here, Homeric naïveté is merely a bludgeon with which to attack abstract thought; to buy into this story is to accept another myth, that of the falsely concrete product of the modern universal itself. “But,” Adorno continues, “epic naïveté is not only a lie intended to keep general reflection at a distance from blind con-
temptation of the particular. As an anti-mythological enterprise, epic naïveté emerges from the enlightenment-oriented and positivist effort to [...] break the spell cast by [...] myth” (25).

Which brings us back to the question, When does epic naïveté emerge for the first time? Adorno is happy to date its emergence to the origins of epic itself. Epic naïveté is produced willingly by epic as a false appearance of itself out of an internal necessity:

Through epic naïveté, narrative language, whose attitude toward the past always contains an apologetic element, justifying what has occurred as being worthy of attention, acts as its own corrective. The precision of descriptive language seeks to compensate for the falseness of all discourse. (26)

The irony of this embarrassment is that the very desire to correct what is false reproduces falsity on another level, that of epic simplicity, naïveté, and a mimicry of the mythical past in the epic discursive present. Epic lives off of this false consciousness, and it dwells in it intensively. Its moments of greatest saturation are found whenever the language of words melts before the language of images and the object world replaces the narrative world with an immediacy that narrative could never furnish:

The impulse that drives Homer to describe a shield as though it were a landscape and to elaborate a metaphor until it becomes an action, until it becomes autonomous and ultimately tears apart the fabric of the narrative — that is the same impulse [Drang] that repeatedly drove Goethe, Stifter, and Keller [...] to draw and paint instead of writing, and it may have inspired Flaubert’s archaeological studies as well. (26–27; trans. adapted)

This is the “objectivity,” or rather “objectality,” the gegenständliches Element, of epic, as well as its “a priori impossibility.” Together, both tendencies force epic “to the edge of madness,” by which Adorno means unreason (26–27).
One way of making sense of Adorno’s sinuous logic in this essay is to recognize that he is not addressing epic in its original historical essence at all but only in its multiforms over time, though most often he is addressing the very idea of epic in its elastic substance rather than the thing itself. For, when we look at Homer,

“It is ideas, not individuals, that are fighting in combat with one another,” writes Nietzsche in a fragmentary note to “Homer’s Contest.” What becomes visible in the logical dis-integration of epic language is the objective transformation of pure representation, detached from meaning, into the allegory of history, parallel to the detachment of metaphor from the course of the literal action. Only by abandoning meaning does epic discourse come to resemble the image, a figure of objective meaning that emerges from the negation of subjectively rational meaning. (29; trans. adapted)

With this appeal to Nietzsche in the closing sentences of “On Epic Naïveté,” Adorno seals his reading as an explicit allegory of philology about Homer and the epic form. In this way, he leaves us with the thought that only an allegorical philology, one that parodically explodes the working assumptions of positivist philology (its blind equation of texts with meaning and of both with idealist metaphysics), is capable of deciphering so supple and elusive an object as Homeric epic. In Adorno’s hands, Homeric epic has become an allegory of history and of historical consciousness, while the method that is used to grasp epic in

25 Friedrich Nietzsche, Kritische Gesammtausgabe: Werke, 7:396, 16[9]. The note dates from 1871–72. The posthumously published essay, “Homer’s Contest,” dates from 1872. Adorno plainly took some trouble to read not only Nietzsche’s published and unpublished work, but his early, philological notebooks as well. The full note gives us a better indication as to why: “The contest! And this denial of the individual! It is not historical but rather mythical people [who are depicted]. Even the person only has renown (as in Pindar) if it is cloaked in distant myths. The contest! And [the place of] the aristocratic, birthright, [and] nobility among the Greeks! It is ideas, not individuals, that are fighting in combat with one another.”
this way is best described as a counter-philology that allegorizes its own conditions of possibility and those of the philology it opposes.

Nevertheless, the true perversity of Adorno’s reading lies in his repeated insistence that he is reading Homer’s text, and not just some idea of Homer. The logic is valid, since the allegories that he detects must be lodged deeply in the dialectical processes that produce Homer’s poetry: they are, after all, part of its “substance” and visible in its “naked form,” which is to say that they become visible whenever that form is laid bare and the substance of the epic is exposed for what it is. Needless to say, by embedding allegory into the substance of epic, Adorno is turning on its head one further tenet of classicism that is easily overlooked today: allegory, from Winckelmann to Hegel, is a product of a later age, that of contemporary modernity, and it runs directly counter to the naiveties of that simpler, earlier age we call classical Greece. Every word of Adorno’s essay is meant as an affront to convention, just as every word of his Homer is this too.

For these reasons, Adorno is keen to demonstrate that opacities blot Homer’s language everywhere, and not only in his dense imagery. He affects to discover some of these in the distinctive particles of Homeric diction that unhinge the flow of a sentence’s logic and that send “syntax and material” into an abyss of “countersense” or “nonsense” (Widersinn), for instance the “enigmatic” particle ἦ of Odyssey 24.156 (27):

These two [Odysseus and Telemachus], after compacting their plot of a foul death for the suitors, made their way to the glorious town; namely [ἦ τοῖ] Odysseus came afterwards; Telemachus led the way […].

The phrase ἦ + τοι, sometimes written as one word (ἡτοι), is an emphatic particle combination that means something like “indeed,” “surely,” “verily, I tell you.” Like so many Greek particles, ἦ τοι is difficult to capture in any language. Adorno follows Voss, who reads: “nämlich Odysseus / Folgete nach.” In a note, Adorno quotes the 1910 translation by Rudolf Alexander Schröder, which reads: “und wahrlich Odysseus…,” “and truly Odysseus….” Adorno’s English translators follow Lattimore: “In fact Odysseus / came afterwards.” I have restored Voss’ translation above simply to align the English more closely with Adorno’s German original. Of these, Schröder’s version (“and truly,” “verily”) is closest to the Greek. Nevertheless, Adorno wants to make the particle say more than it strictly means by pointing, justifiably, to what it strictly does.

He observes that, while ἦ, understood as nämlich (viz., “that is to say”), seeks to express the logic either of “explanation or of affirmation,” the clause introduced by the particle creates a non sequitur with what precedes it. This conclusion is something of an overstatement, but the gist of his argument is clear enough. Indeed, the very problem of how best to render Homer’s surd-like particle backs him up:

In the minimal meaninglessness of this coordinating particle the spirit of logical-intentional narrative language collides with the spirit of wordless representation that the former is preoccupied with, and the logical form of coordination [literally: “sequence,” Fortführung] itself threatens to banish the idea, which is not coordinated with anything [more literally: “which does not follow on,” der nicht fortführt] and is really not an idea any more, to the place where the relationship of

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27 The second clause does contain a hysteron proteron of sorts, and the particle combination ἦ τοι helps to prepare us for the sequence, while a second conjunction, left out of the translation used by Adorno (and by his English translators), helps to soften the apparent reversal: “these two […] made their way; Odysseus <for his part> followed, but [αὖταρ] Telemachus led the way.” Adorno takes the particle ἦ to look back, not forward, but the rupture with what comes before is palpable either way.
syntax and material dissolves and the material affirms its superiority by belying the syntactic form that attempts to encompass it. (27)

In Adorno’s eyes, form and content are at variance in Homeric epic. Logic and description are this as well, and so too are language and image, tendentially speaking. For the tendency of all epic, Adorno insists, is to lose itself in the image, to “forget” itself and its own meaning, by “pull[ing] language itself into the image” and then by “abandoning meaning” altogether (28, 29). Language literally stutters, loses its logical trail, and then ceases to signify at all. Nonsense — the obtuse Real — is not what the poetry recovers; it is what it produces, or rather strives to produce, out of a sheer contrast with itself. A struggle ensues — not merely a dynamic or a tension, but a literal “enmity” (Feindschaft) between images and content and between meaning and action (28).

In the place of narrative sequences, epics “are transformed into mere arenas” of their own historical tendencies, as are all works of literature for Adorno, which in the case of Homeric epic reveals an underlying antagonism “between subjectivity and mythology.” The very substance of epic is enlisted in this transformation, which no longer falls within the genre of epic because it has risen to the genre of allegory — the allegory of epic naïveté in all of the latter’s innermost fragility. Here, the “historical tendency [just described] becomes visible [sichtbar] precisely where the pragmatic and linguistic context reveals its inadequacy [brüchig sich zeigt],” which is to say, has revealed itself to be “fragile” and “prone to disintegrate” into fragments (29).

This is not to say that the inadequacies of language and image are solved when they are either named or raised to the level of allegory. They are merely reenacted on a more abstract level once more, as Adorno’s own patently inadequate metaphors for vision suggest, for how does one see an inadequacy? How can we make visible Homer’s “blindness”? Adorno’s answer is to point us to the place where the antinomies of language, logic, and meaning are concentrated into “a material element” (27). If earlier he located this material element in the noise of epic,
in the present context he locates it in a seemingly nonsensical particle, a mere letter or sound, where “what is real” can “emerge in pure form, undistorted by the violence of classificatory ordering.” Language becomes—or rather strives to become—a stupid object again, by returning to the condition from which it had never truly emancipated itself, the condition of being a bearer of meaning while being stripped bare of meaning. The question is not whether language can truly achieve this state of pure and senseless materiality—it cannot: it can at most only intimate it—but how such moments are to be understood: what are they symptomatic of? Here, Homer’s “blindness” takes on a particular urgency: it expresses the impossibility of the narrator’s self-appointed task and his blind, dogged attempt to achieve it nonetheless (27). Such is the “stupidity” of epic.

And so Adorno’s argument comes full circle, in its demonstration that as epic pursues the naïveté of the image and dissolves the bonds of logic and language, it brings about, not a condition of pure imagery or materiality, but rather their approximation: “epic discourse comes to resemble the image” by becoming “a figure of objective meaning emerging from the negation of subjectively rational meaning” (20). Here, language achieves, however briefly, a zero-degree of meaning, fantasy, and speculation. But in touching, as it were, the Real of its own language, Homeric epic at the same time gives us a glimpse of a different view of itself. It reveals its historical conditions of possibility, which epic represents performatively in its proper linguistic substance and in its noisy whirring. The paradoxical result is that epic transforms itself into a theater of its own struggles with matter, form, and content. It puts on show, not meaning, but its failure to abandon meaning altogether, and its inability to achieve the noble simplicity that it allegedly sought after. For “no narrative can partake of truth if it has not looked into the abyss into which language plunges when it tries to become name and image.” And, Adorno quickly adds, “Homeric prudence is no exception to this” (27).
We were never modern, and epic was never naïve. 28
