

Almost

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“Toward the End,”¹ *Minima Moralia*’s final aphorism (§ 153), plays a vital role in the controversies about the theological dimension of Adorno’s thought. It famously invokes the “standpoint of redemption” and its “messianic light,” which alone can reveal both the total negativity of things as they *are* and, in a dialectic “mirror writing,” disclose how they *should be*.

“Toward the End” is studded with expressions that suggest totality: “the *only* kind,” “*all* things,” “*no other* than the one,” “*everything* else.” Of course, there are minor mitigations: the vagueness of “*similarly*” and “*at some point*” briefly challenge the “*wholly*” and the “*this alone*.” But the “*irrefutable*,” the “*completed*” and the “*fully captured*,” the “*entirely impossible*,” and the “*every possible*” prevail. There is only one stark exception: to perceive the utter blackness of the world, Adorno writes, would “require a standpoint removed, even if only *by the most minuscule degree*, from the sphere of the spell of being.” But Adorno presents this necessity as the epitome of the impossible.

Both the totalizing gestures and Adorno’s characteristic dialectical somersaults culminate in the aphorism’s final sentence, where the imperative addressed to philosophy to stare into the depths of the abyss is deprived of its initial theological perspective. Here the “standpoint of redemption” is nothing but a chimera designed to ensure the totality of the demand. Yet a single word in this final sentence slightly but fundamentally unsettles this revocation: “the question concerning the reality or unreality of redemption itself” is, Adorno writes, “*almost irrelevant*.”

The rich and variegated afterlife of *Minima Moralia*’s final aphorism—and with it the very question as to where not only redemption, but God himself resides in Adorno’s thought—can be measured by the fate of this “almost,” especially where it is most tellingly absent. Those who seek to recuperate the aphorism for a Christian “Theology of the Cross” (*Kreuzestheologie*, Thaidigsmann 1984) ignore the “almost.” So do those who take the diametrically opposite view that ingeniously undoes any trace of transcendence in arguing that “the messianic light in which the world will one day appear need not shine from an outside source at all” (Truskolaski 2017, 210). Giorgio Agamben likewise ignores the “almost” in accusing Adorno of politico-theological quietism and his aphorism of a “melancholic reverie” (Truskolaski 2017, 208), a conjuring-up of a merely aesthetic “seat of divine grace” (Agamben 2005, 35–38). Jacob Taubes explicitly ignores the “almost” in his sharp critique of Adorno’s text and of his thought altogether. For Taubes, Adorno’s aphorism presents redemption as an aestheticizing “empty fiction” and offers the entire idea of the messiah as “a *comme-si*,” a mere “as if.” Blind to the wording of the text, Taubes writes that, for Adorno, it is “*ganz gleichgültig, ob es wirklich ist*” (Taubes 2003, 104) – “it is totally irrelevant whether it really exists.”

Adorno may have left the exact function of his “almost”—a word that inherently undoes totality—deliberately in the dark, as though to deny the book any finality or closure. It can be conceived in light of a Kantian idea of God as a metaphysically

groundless yet necessary postulate to warrant the moral life. But it can also point to a less enlightened illumination: to say that the *Wirklichkeit* (reality) of a “*Standpunkt der Erlösung*” is only *almost* irrelevant is to open a crack through which the messianic light can shine through. At the end of *Minima Moralia* Adorno might thus be opening up a minimal space in which he concedes the possibility that a divine standpoint matters. And, almost, that it exists.

Notes

1 I use Gerhard Richter’s English translation in (2006). All the references to “Zum Ende” are taken from this text, which offers a valuable corrective to the English version of “Zum Ende” in Adorno 2005.

Biography

Vivian Liska is Professor of German literature and Director of the Institute of Jewish Studies at the University of Antwerp, Belgium as well as Distinguished Visiting Professor in the Faculty of the Humanities at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. She is the editor of the book series “Perspectives on Jewish Texts and Contexts” (De Gruyter, Berlin) and co-editor of *Arcadia. International Journal of Literary Studies*. Her books include *When Kafka Says We. Uncommon Communities in German-Jewish Literature* (Indiana UP, 2009) and *German-Jewish Thought and its Afterlife. A Tenuous Legacy* (Indiana UP, 2017).

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