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# From Hades to Heimat: Quo usque tandem? — The Travels and Travails of Critical Theory

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# From Hades to Heimat: Quo usque tandem? The Travels and Travails of Critical Theory[1]

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**Abstract**: In their book, *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, written during the Second World War in their exile in the U. S., Adorno and Horkheimer portray Ulysses in the *Odyssey* as the exemplary Western figure. Focusing on an event that occurs as he takes his revenge not just upon the suitors but upon the women who collaborated with them, the authors raise the question of just what a return home can mean in the Western tradition. They emphasize the violence involved in reclaiming one's "property," as Ulysses' son, Telemachus, executes the women in the most brutal fashion. This allows the author to discuss the form in which this violent event is narrated as an implicit critique on the brutality being described. This essay examines the ambiguous status of mortality in the interpretation of Adorno and Horkheimer, and in their conception of their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

**Keywords**: Heimat, Homecoming, Ulysses, Mortality

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**标　题**: 从冥界到故土: 还要多久? ——批判理论的旅行与艰辛

**摘　要**: 阿多诺与霍克海默二战期间在美国写出了《启蒙辩证法》一书,他们在该书中将《奥德赛》中的尤利西斯视为西方人的典型。两位作者的关注点是,当尤利西斯的复仇不仅针对那些求婚者,还包括与他们合作的妇女,因而他们提出这个问题: 西方传统中的归家意味着什么? 尤利西斯之子忒勒马科斯为了夺回"财产",以极为残暴的方式处死了那些妇女,他们着重于分析了这一过程中的暴力。本文由此出发讨论这种暴力事件的描述方式如何成为对所描述行为的隐含批评;同时,本文也结合阿多诺与霍克海默在《启蒙辩证法》中提出的相关概念以及阐释,考察了必死性的含混状态。

**关键词**: 故土;　归家;　尤利西斯;　必死性

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Critical Theory today means different things to different people in different parts of the world. This is not at all illegitimate. However, given the constraints described in the conference topic and the inspiration that I take to have been at the heart of the sponsors of the conference[2], I will take the term to refer first and foremost, if not exclusively, not just to what has been called "The Frankfurt School," but even more specifically and historically, to its initial incarnation in Horkheimer, Adorno and those who worked with them under the auspices of the Institute for Social Research. This Institute began to travel very early in its career, as you know, and its traveling was by no means simply spontaneous or voluntary, but rather a response to the increasingly inhospitable conditions in Weimar Germany that



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culminated in the 1933 seizure of power by the National Socialist Party. But despite the enforced departure of the Frankfurt School from the city that was to give it its name, the Institute for Social Research was animated by a notion of criticism that despite its critique of a certain universalism, nevertheless had itself a strong "universalist" bent, based on general categories such as "society," "nature," "history," "culture," "identity," "self," "myth," "Enlightenment," and of course, last but hardly least: "dialectics," — to name just a few of the words that defined its intellectual horizons. These horizons were versed in a European tradition of thought and culture that reached back to Greece, but that also included aspects of monotheism that were not limited to Europe. Although its departure from Europe for the United States was a result of Nazi persecution, its theoretical position included a critique of "origins" — whether national, racial or cultural — that made "traveling" both inevitable and desirable. I want in the time available to focus therefore on the first of the two "excursions" — themselves a form of traveling — that were meant to elaborate and exemplify the main thesis of "Dialectics of Enlightenment," the book written by Horkheimer and Adorno during the Second World War but published only in 1948, in German but in an Amsterdam publishing house with a Spanish name, Querido. The "dialectics of Enlightenment" therein described consists in the dual and contradictory tendency of reason both to emancipate and to dominate. To illustrate certain aspects of this theory, the book leaves the beaten path of pure theory to make an interpretive "excursion" (*Exkurs*) into a text that it describes as "the basic text of European civilization" (DA, 63), namely Homer's *Odyssey*. Since we are here concerned with traveling, and since we will be traveling between languages-mainly German and English, but also between Latin and Greek — it should be noted that an *Exkurs* in German has a quite different use from the English word "excursion", which I will be using throughout this talk to translate it. In English, an "excursion" is usually used to designate "a short journey or trip, especially one engaged in a leisure activity." In German, by contrast, it has for some time acquired a more academic, more scholarly, indeed philological meaning, designating a digression from the main path in order to discuss or illustrate a problem. For instance, what I am doing at this very moment could be considered an Exkurs in the German sense, but not in the English one. I am digressing from what might seem to be the main path, but in order to clarify some aspect of it. In what follows I will try to show that the "excursion" into a discussion of the Odyssey not only "clarifies"-*aufklärt* one could say in German — the main argument but also complicates it and in so doing opens it up to future interpretations. In this sense, this "excursion" can be said to confirm the etymological history of the word, which derives from the Latin excursus, which could be rendered as "coming" or "running out". In other words, this excursion, far from being just a "leisure activity" as the English use suggests, may open up ways in which the argument can embark upon further journeys, not necessarily of a recreational nature. So much for my initial excursion into the ambiguities of the German *Exkurs*.

That this first excursion is dedicated to the Odyssey comes as no surprise when one has read the initial "theoretical" chapter of the book. For the Odyssey is already present in it, in a discussion above all of the chapter on the Sirens. For the discussion of "Enlightenment" depends on its ambiguous relation both to what Adorno and Horkheimer call "myth" as well as "rationality". As they put it in an often-quoted phrase from the Preface to the book: "Myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology" (DA, 16; DE, xvi). And this is why the turn to Homer's epic. For "no other work," the authors write, "testifies more eloquently to the inextricability of Enlightenment and Myth (*Aufklärung und Mythos*)." In short, the

"dialectic" that the authors seek to delineate, although associated with more recent European intellectual history, in fact can be retraced to ancient Greece, where the struggle of a certain rationality with and against myth can be observed more directly. This argument recalls the discussion of tragedy found in Walter Benjamin's book on the origins of the German mourning play. Benjamin also associates "tragedy" with the struggle against myth in ancient Greece. But the similarity stops there. For Benjamin insists that the notion of "tragedy" must be reserved exclusively for a specific historical period — that of Attic Greek culture — and must not be confused with modern drama such as the Baroque *Trauerspiel* (which therefore should be translated not as "tragedy" but as mourning play). By contrast, in *Dialectics of Enlightenment* Adorno and Horkheimer emphasize the continuity between the Homeric confrontation with myth in the Odyssey and more recent European intellectual history (which they deal with more directly in the second "excursion" on Kant and Sade).

Thus, Odysseus — and for reasons that perhaps will begin to emerge at the end of this talk, I prefer to use his Greek name rather than the more familiar Latin Ulysses-(Odysseus) thereby emerges as perhaps the exemplary figure of this double and contradictory tendency of Western rationality.

Let me interrupt myself again briefly here, to make another brief "excursion" — this time relating to my use of the adjective "Western" in the previous sentence, qualifying "rationality". This is a qualification that Adorno and Horkheimer do not make — not explicitly at least. Their emphasis on the fact although the object of their critique is not just the rise of fascism but "the renewed growth of totalitarianism" and that this in turns should not be considered to be a "historical accident" (*historische Zwischenfälle*)" (DA, 9; DE, ix) but rather part of a "major historical tendency" (*großen historischen Zuges*) (*ibid*) — all of this indicates how the critique of a certain totalizing tendency can itself easily slip into a totalizing language. This tendency to think in long historical periods, however dialectically contradictory and however geopolitically limited they may be, can easily encourage a kind of universalizing that itself demands critical attention. The use of categories such as "myth," "nature," "domination of nature" and the like contribute to the leveling of historical, political and social differences and this will be apparent in the following discussion. I will try toward the end of this talk to introduce a few categories that seek to take into account such cultural and historical differences and thereby to work against the powerful tendency to universalize that is perhaps inherent in all discourse, including critical discourse.

To return now to the discussion of Odysseus: he can be considered an exemplary figure of Western rationality, and therefore of its dialectic of enlightenment and mythologization, insofar as he is known for his extraordinary cunning and cleverness, designated by the Greek word, *metis*. Odysseus is rational, but in a reactive sense: reacting to relations of power, overcoming obstacles, outwitting enemies. But he is also someone who "travels," for Adorno and Horkheimer even the archetypical Western traveler. First, he is convinced, almost against his will, to take part in the Greek expedition against Troy, which he does with great success. But he does this as part of a larger collective, to which he contributes but which he does not dominate. Such domination emerges only after the Trojan War, when he struggles to return to his home, Ithaca. In the process he encounters a series of obstacles, which he finally succeeds in overcoming, but at the expense of losing the entire crew of his ship. Viewed from a certain point of view, Odysseus' odyssey resembles the travels and travails of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research. Forced to leave its home city and emigrate to the United States, the Institute engaged in constant and growing struggles to survive, until it succeeded in returning to its "hometown," Frankfurt am Main, and to the University where it had begun. Without wanting to exaggerate the parallels between the Homeric Epic and the history of the Frankfurt

Institute, certain key aspects of the reading of this return in Dialectics of Enlightenment suggest a non-trivial affinity between the two. Toward the end of the "excursion" the authors discuss the meaning of the Greek "nostos" in German terms, namely as a non-mythological notion of "Heimat":

> Novalis' definition according to which all philosophy is nostalgia (*Heimweh*: yearning for the home) is correct only if such nostalgia is not absorbed in the phantasm of a long-lost primeval abode (*eines verlorenen Ältesten*) but rather construes the homeland, and nature itself as that which has been wrested from myth. Homeland is where one has escaped to (*das Entronnensein*). (DA, 97)

A "homeland" — *Heimat* — is not the place where one is born or begins; not an archaic origin, but rather the place where one finds refuge — a place of hospitality that responds to a danger. But if the homeland is defined as a refuge, not every refuge is a homeland. The Frankfurt Institute escaped political and racial persecution by fleeing to the United States — but it did not find its "home" there: not during the war, when Adorno was unable to find a permanent teaching position), nor afterwards, in the rising anticommunist hysteria of the immediate postwar period. It was only when the Institute escaped for a second time, this time back to Frankfurt, that it found a refuge it could call "home". If it was this situation that inspired the rather surprising definition of Heimat as "*Entronnensein*", the situation to which it referred more immediately — that of Odysseus in the Odyssey — is more complex. For having finally succeeded in returning to Ithaka and recovering his property by killing all the suitors who were hoping to replace him at Penelope's side, he confesses to his wife that he cannot stay at home, for he has another final journey to accomplish. This relates to the prophesy of Tiresias, whom he has sought out in the land of the dead, Hades. Tiresias, who alone among the dead has retained all of his prophetic faculties, informs Odysseus that his travels and travails will not be finished once he has returned home and reclaimed his property. There is still another voyage and task to be undertaken:

> When you have cleared your house of these Suitors, you must then set out once more upon your travels. You must take a well-cut oar and go on a journey till you reach a people who know nothing of the sea and never use salt with their food, so that our crimson-painted ships and the long oars that serve those ships as wings are quite beyond their ken. (...) When you fall in with some other traveler who speaks of the "winnowing-fan" you are carrying on your shoulder, the time will have come for you to plant your shapely oar in the earth and offer Lord Poseidon the rich sacrifice of a ram, a bull and a boar. Then return home ... As for your own end, death will come to you out of the sea (in some translations: "far from the sea"[③]), in its gentlest guise. When he takes you, you will be worn out after an easy old age ... (Future citations in text occasionally modified.)

Adorno and Horkheimer develop a most ingenious but not entirely convincing interpretation of Tiresias' prophesy. For them its "kernel" (*Der Kern der Weissagung*) is the confusion of the oar with a shovel by persons who have no knowledge of maritime life — the life of Odysseus and more generally of the Greeks. This confusion is designed — so the Dialectics of Enlightenment — to bring the God Poseidon to laughter, thus attenuating his fury against Odysseus and preparing the way for a "reconciliation" — key word for the authors — of the God with the hero, Odysseus. It seems more likely, and more in line with the critique of the Self

developed in *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, that it would be the homage paid to the God of the Sea in a country that knows nothing of maritime life, that would appease his wrath if not "reconcile" him to the killer of his son.

But the authors of *Dialectics of Enlightenment* are obliged both to minimize the importance of the sacrifices enjoined by Tiresias as well as the visit to the dead that is their setting. For their critique of myth, which is the point of departure of the Dialectics they seek to trace, has as its most fundamental premise what the authors designate as "the abolition of death":

> The realm of the dead, where the worn-out (*depotenzierte*) myths gather, is furthest removed from the homeland (Heimat). Only through the most extreme distance does it communicate with it. [...] just as the motif of the smashing of the gates of hell, the abolition of death, comprises the innermost kernel of all anti-mythological thought. This anti-mythological dimension is contained in Tiresias' prophesy of the possible reconciliation with Poseidon. (DA, 96)

If "the abolition of death" is to be considered the "innermost kernel of all anti-mythological thought", then nothing of the sort is to be found in Tiresias' discourse. The reconciliation with Poseidon whose possibility he prophesizes — and it should be noted that his "prophesies," here as elsewhere[④], do not announce an inevitable future but only certain possibilities — possibilities that in no way abolish death, although they do change its countenance. Instead of a violent death at sea, Odysseus is offered the possibility of a peaceful death — but only if he fulfills the conditions outlined by Tiresias: that is, only if he once again leaves home to travel to a distant country where all that is familiar to him, and to Poseidon, no longer obtains: a country where oars are perceived to be agricultural implements, where salt is not needed to preserve food, because the sea has been replaced by land. It is only by embracing this difference through paying homage to a God who is distant, that Odysseus can hope to live his life out to something like a natural, immanent end, "worn out after an easy old age and surrounded by a prosperous people." (Homer, 175)

Is this a message that "smashes the gates of Hades"? Perhaps. But it is certainly not one that "abolishes death." Indeed, it could be argued, against Adorno and Horkheimer, that the desire to "abolish death," far from being the "nucleus of antimythological thinking" will become its essence, for instance, once the world of the living is seen as the "creation" of a Being — a Self — whose divinity consists in his being to be eternal and immortal. From the perspective of this Self, what is called "death" can then be defined as an essentially unnecessary punishment for a transgression. The transgression in turn can be interpreted as intrinsic to the very notion of an immortal God qua Creator. To preserve or confirm his self-identity, mortal man seeks to assume the characteristics of the God that created him. He does this by eating of the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil, and thus acquiring a knowledge that only makes sense when attributed to the Divine Creator. For in the created world itself, up to that point there is no Evil, no Death, no suffering. All is described in Genesis as "good". Why should humans seek to be like their creator?

One response is this: the very notion of a transcendent Creator can be considered to constitute an attempt to escape the burden of being mortal by construing a Being that is at the Origin of a Life without End. For this would imply that life in and of itself can be conceived of as being without end — and that therefore mortality and finitude are only accidental accessories. But this only holds for a being that is divine and therefore immortal. The desire to approach that Being, through eating of the Trees (of Knowledge and of Life) in the Garden of Eden, or later, the project of building a tower of Babel, would be nothing more or less than an

attempts to escape from the burden of mortal life, which affects all living beings qua singular beings. In short, the Divine must be other than, different from and separate from its Creation on order to demonstrate the possibility of transcending mortal limitation; but at the same time, mortals must seek to acquire somehow the attributes which the notion of a Divine Creator was invented in the first place to make conceivable. Man is made in the image of God, in His likeness, but when he seeks to become too "like" — too "equal" — he must be reminded of-and indeed, punished for — what he sought to forget: his finitude. All of this gives new meaning to the notion of "*Entronnensein*" — which here no longer describes the flight from political persecution, but rather the effort to escape from a finitude that is difficult to bear. This may be the fantasy that informs the Biblical religions, and in particular, Christianity. But it is definitely not that which Odysseus shares. In following the prophetic advice of Tiresias, he seeks to avoid the persecution of Poseidon, but not to avoid mortality as such. But as we have seen, it is not this that attracts the attention of Adorno and Horkheimer. Rather, there is another scene that fascinates them, and with good reason. Let us reread that scene with them to see why.

Having slain the suitors, Odysseus asks his old nurse, Eurycleia, to tell him which of the women slaves serving in his household have fraternized or collaborated with the suitors during their occupation of the palace. Eurycleia names 12 of 50; Odysseus then commands his son, Telemachus and his men, to "use your long swords on them until none are left alive to remember their loves and the hours they stole in these young gallants' arms" (Homer, 339). The 12 women are then brutally executed by Telemachus, although interestingly not in the way Odysseus had commanded. "I swear I will not give a decent death," Telemachus says, "to women who have heaped dishonor on my head and on my mother's and slept with members of this gang". Apparently dying by the sword is too good for the women. Instead Telemachus prepares to hang them:

> With that he took a hawser (rope or cable—SW) which had seen service on a blue-bowed ship, made one end fast to a high column in the portico, threw the other over the round-house, and pulled it taut at such a level as would keep their feet from touching earth. And then, like doves or long-winged thrushes caught in a net across the thicket where they had come to roost, and meeting death where they had only looked for sleep, the women held their heads out. In a row, and a noose was cast round each one's neck to dispatch them in the most miserable way. Their feet kicked out for a short while, but not for long. (Homer, 340, translation modified)

In their commentary of their scene, Adorno and Horkheimer make a distinction between the content of what is described — the death of the women — and the manner in which it is narrated. For the latter displays the temporal contradiction between a mortal life and iots extinction. In so doing, it demonstrates what the authors call "the law of Homeric escape (*Entrinnens*)". Note here that the previous term they used to describe Heimat, namely as *Entronnensein*, has here shifted to a different substantive; if the latter could be translated into English as "escape," the former should be distinguished from it as "escap*ing*". *Entronnensein*, Heimat — Homeland — designates a state, an act that has been accomplished. It is composed of the past participle of the verb, to escape — *entrinnen*. The verb has accomplished its action, the escape has succeeded. This is not the case with *Entrinnen*, a verbal noun based on the infinitive, and which in English at least would have to be rendered as *escaping*, a present participle. As such it is not accomplished but on-going. I will return to this in a moment. For now, let me just observe that this clarifies the difference between an execution "by long swords" as Odysseus anticipated, and one by hanging. The former is described in the following

scene, in which the goatherd, Melanthius, is brutally executed:

> Next Melanthius was dragged out across the court and through the gate. There with a sharp knife they sliced his nose and ears off; they zipped away his privy parts as raw meat for the dogs, and in their fury they lopped off his hands and feet. Then, after washing their own hands and feet, they went back indoors to Odysseus and the business was finished. (Homer, 340)

In the above description, the body of Melanthius is dismembered in a fashion that might recall a more recent state-sponsored murder and dismemberment of a dissident journalist in Istanbul. *Plus ça change* ... What however is significant in the *Odyssey*, however, is that this kind of killing by the sword leaves practically no time for dying, as opposed to death. The two are not the same: dying is something that can and is experienced; what is called "death" is outside of the experience of a living being. German, for instance, has two entirely different words for death (*Tod*) and dying (*Sterben*). This is not true of the Romance Languages or of English. In the case of Melanthius, the integrity of his body is destroyed from the very beginning. In the case of the 12 women, by contrast, dying is described as a more gradual process. The fact that the victims are initially compared to birds who, seeking refuge, find only torture and death, emphasizes their affinity with living mortal beings above and beyond any particular human guilt or responsibility they may bear: the birds are guilty of nothing but seeking to rest; instead they are "caught in a net across the thicket where they come to roost", a net set by human hunters. The analogy used to describe the execution of the women can be compared to the position defended by Antigone against Creon in Sophocles' tragedy: no matter what political or moral guilt her fallen brother, Polyneices, may have been guilty of, the fact that he is dead should place him beyond the reach of the State and of Creon's edict against burying the dead. The legal and moral prerogatives of the State do not or should not prohibit the respect owed to the dead by the living, who thereby acknowledge the solidarity of singular living beings in their mortality.

What Adorno and Horkheimer focus on in their gloss of this scene is the contrast between the laconic, matter-of-fact description of the execution of the women and the words with which the narration concludes: "For a little while their feet kicked out, but not for very long" (Homer, 340). It is the utter heterogeneity between the final moments of life — "for a while their feet kicked ..." and the end of life: "but not for very long," that Adorno and Horkheimer rightly focus upon. It explains why the "law of Homeric *Entrinnens*" does not simply establish a *Heimat* of *Entronnensein*: *why escaping* is not the same as *escaped*. The remark, "but not for very long" addresses the impatience of the listener or reader that the horrific event be finally consummated, that it be over and done with — and that the reader or listener can therefore regard him- or herself as having *survived* death. But the use of the present participle in German stresses the incompleteness of the process — and its repetitiveness. In English use of the present participle contrasts with that of the present indicative — the latter makes a general statement, not limited by time and place; the former often places the present in relation to the process of its enunciation. For instance, I write English (in general), but here and now I am *writing* English. This distinction helps to understand the claim that is made by the authors for the function of language in general and for that of the Homeric narrative in particular:

> Speech (Rede) itself, language in its opposition to mythical song, the possibility of holding fast by remembering the disaster that has occurred (*das geschehene Unheil*

> *erinnernd festzuhalten*) is the law of Homeric escaping (*des homerischen Entrinnens*). Not in vain is the escaping hero again and again introduced as someone narrating (*Nicht umsonst wird der entrinnende Held als Erzählender immer wieder eingeführt.*) (DA, 98; DE, 78. translation modified)

The use of the present participle is used to designate both the process of "remembering" (*erinnernd*) — as distinct from "memory" — that of *escaping as opposed to escaped* (*der entrinnende Held*) and finally that of narrating (as opposed to narration). The latter is attributed to an individual, but not as a *narrator* (which in German would be an *Erzähler*) but as someone who is caught up in the unfinished process of *narrating*: *der entrinnende Held als Erzählender*. This persistent and pervasive use of the present participle, both as adjective (*erinnernd*, *entrinnend*) and as noun (*Erzählender*) articulates what Adorno and Horkheimer will go on to describe as the interruptive force of the narrative. On the one hand it laconically describes the most horrible actions of killing the women and the goatherd. But on the other, it describes it in a manner that opens the process to a memory that conserves it *as unfinished*. This contrasts sharply with the conclusion of the description of the execution of both women and Melanthius:

> Then, after washing their own hands and feet they went back indoors to Odysseus and the business was finished. (340)

One is reminded here of a remark that Walter Benjamin makes in his 1936 essay on "The Storyteller":

> The novel is not significant because it depicts for us a foreign fate, but rather because this foreign fate, through the flame that consumes it, gives us a warmth that we can never derive from our own. What draws the reader to the novel is the hope that he can warm his freezing life on a death about which he reads. (GS II. 2, 456 – 57. my translation.)

A death about which one can read, or listen to, or view, may provide a certain "warmth" to those in need of it. But for Adorno and Horkheimer, the "business" it involves remains "unfinished." They conclude their excursion with a sentence that seems to offer another sort of consolation:

> For the entanglement of prehistory (*Urzeit*), the barbaric and the civilized Homer (offers) a consoling hand in recalling 'once upon a time. Only as the novel does the epic change into fairytale." (DA, 99)

But can the "once upon a time" of the fairytale truly wash its hands of the unfinished business just described?

Such consolation rings hollow when one considers that what is being described is never simply over and done with. Telemachus and his men may be able to wash their hands and go on with their business, but Odysseus knows that he cannot simply stay at home. Following the prophesy of Tiresias, he must go elsewhere to prepare his own end, which may or may not be in Ithaka — the text seems to leave that an open question, about which philologists still debate. The fairytale formula, "once upon a time," and particularly its German version, "Es war einmal", leave open the possibility that what once was can and will come again, in a kind of eternal recurrence that may not be without reference to what Nietzsche made famous under that name. Adorno and Horkheimer themselves suggest that the narrative "not very long" may not be confined to the past:

> As an echo what remains of the "not

> long" is nothing more than the *Quo usque tandem* (*how long..*), which later Rhetoricians unwittingly desecrated (*entweihten*) by attributing patience to themselves. Hope however, in respect to the report of the atrocity, clings to the notion that it all happened long ago. (DA, 99; DE, 80).

The Latin phrase, *Quo usque tandem*, has become known through a speech that Cicero held against Catalina, who had been planning a conspiracy against the Roman republic: "How much longer, Catalina, will you continue to abuse our patience?" was the way he began his address. In response, Adorno and Horkheimer use a very strong and religiously connoted word in German to describe how this rhetorical tradition does not just "devalue" the phrase (as the English translation would have it) (DE, 80) but indeed "desecrates it" — *entweiht* is the German word. The phrase is desecrated because the question "how much time" separates a mortal life from its end is transformed into a question of "patience" attributed to a subject, addressed at a conspirator. But the desecration perhaps belongs to the very process and history by which the enlightenment has tended to destroy itself, a history recounted in *Dialectics of Enlightenment*. By reinscribing the temporal limitation of life into a rhetorical question aimed at a political conspirator, the question of mortality is made dependent upon conscious intentionality — and by implication, death is redefined as the result of a deliberate act: a murder, an execution. This "desecrates" it in the sense of desacralizing what must remain in principle beyond the reach of human acts and intentions. Mortality becomes a question of measurement: How long? Not very long ...

In English it is probably quite significant that the word "execution" can be used both for the imposition of death as a penalty, a punishment for a transgression, and for the performance of an act. In politics execution is the prerogative of the "Executive" branch of Government. Birds "meet death where they had only looked for sleep". Perhaps it is the effort to bring such a "meeting," such an "encounter" entirely under control that drives the self-assertive and self-destructive dynamics that *Dialectics of Enlightenment* sought to reveal, and to criticize. Which does not mean that efforts should not be made to make that "meeting" as peaceful as possible. This is what Odysseus tries to do in following the prophesy of Tiresias. But it is also here that the epic of the Odyssey breaks down, unable to follow Odysseus' last journey through to a satisfactory conclusion. The civil strife that follows upon the killing of the suitors is only one aspect of the way in which "the business" is never "finished."

But the alternative suggested by Adorno and Horkheimer — the "once upon a time" of the fairytale, into which the epic is said to metamorphose via the novel — can only provide a promising alternative when that "once upon a time" is understood in conjunction with another, equally ambiguous phrase: "once and for all." *Once and for all* suggests both the unrepeatability of a singular event, but also that this event in its singularity is what is shared by all. And the "once upon a time" is "upon" the immeasurable time of a mortal life.

This is the time it takes to make the excursion from Hades to Heimat — an excursion for which *Dialectic of Enlightenment* opens the way. This is perhaps not the least significant of the travels and travails of Critical Theory.

**Notes**

① The paper was written in Memory of Theodor W. Adorno, completed on August 6, 2019, exactly 50 years to the day after Adorno's death.

② The paper grew out of a talk given at the conference "Aesthetics, Society and the Travels of Critical Theory" convened by the Center for Literary Theory Studies, Beijing Normal University, China.

③ See Irad Malkin's The Returns of Odysseus, Colonization and Ethnicity (pp. 88 - 89). The usual translation, "out of the sea," is difficult to reconcile with the immediately

following description of death from old age, "in its gentlest guise," promised to Odysseus. A death "on" or "out of the sea" is rarely "gentle", much less that of one who has been "worn out after an easy old age."

④ For instance, the information he gives both Oedipus (Oedipus tyrannos) and Creon (Antigone) entails advice that is ignored by both, and for which they pay a high price.

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