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*AGON,
LOGOS,
POLIS*

The Greek Achievement
and its Aftermath



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On the Notion of the Tragedy of Culture

Vassilis Lambropoulos

Explorations of classical origins tend to focus on themes that promise diachronic, if interrupted, continuity, and therefore make possible the mapping of survivals. To take the eminent example of tragedy, studies usually concentrate on figures, such as Oedipus, or issues, such as love, whose transformations can be traced through several works, languages, and periods. Explorations that are not premised on survival but analyze creative adaptations of classical material are more rare. Such explorations are less interested in locating ancient origins than in discovering the operations of classicism itself, of classicizing efforts within cultures which felt in a variety of ways that they had to deal with an antiquity of their own – with archaizing trends in their midst. A case in point is the idea of the Tragic, which emerged at the end of the eighteenth-century with German Idealism as part of its attempt to establish an indigenous Hellenism. The Tragic idea was not a continuation of ancient theatrical practices but an adaptation of dramatic theory to metaphysical purposes. Although certain aspects of it, like catharsis, could be traced to ancient sources, its overall constitution owes much more to post-Enlightenment ethico-political concerns. In this paper, I analyze a particular articulation of the Tragic that highlights its close links with modern cultural and political theory, and thus I offer a philosophical scrutiny of modernist classicism and its aftermath.

When it comes to the highly contested area of contemporary culture, most commentators seem to agree on two major points: first, culture is something positive and worth-celebrating; and second, recently it has been in serious decline. There is no lack of diagnoses dealing with this dramatic and deeply disappointing development. However, the idea of culture as a tragic struggle with catastrophic results is not as recent as apocalyptic post-structuralist (Jean Baudrillard) or traditionalist (Allan Bloom) thought would have us believe.¹ It is at least as old as the twentieth century and has been an integral part of the self-definition of High Modernity. In order to understand better the notion of the tragedy of culture, which has achieved such a great currency in our time, it is worth returning to the essay that first drew its parameters, Georg Simmel's seminal "On the Concept and Tragedy of Culture".

Simmel opens his essay by positing Hegel's distinction between subjective and objective spirit as the fundamental dualism of soul and structure within the realm of the spirit. If the soul is the essence of the individual, structures like custom, morality, religion, law, science, technology, and art are the individual's

¹ Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*. Edited by Mark Poster (Stanford, CA 1988); Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York 1987).

material expression. Once these structures are created, they acquire autonomy and stability – a “fixed but timelessly valid”² existence. Although such an autonomous existence was part of the individual’s aspirations in creating them, this achievement triggers a strange tension within the life of the soul, within subjective life, whose running stream, “restless but finite in time”,³ keeps flowing and changing all the time. Once human works are made, they are endowed with an independence that separates them from the soul of their maker. They now create their own universe, that of culture. In turn, the soul confronts culture in different ways, experiencing attraction or repulsion, fusion with or estrangement from its contents. Thus a division is created between soul and its works which generates “innumerable tragedies”.⁴ The question, then, arises as to how this separation can be overcome. For Simmel, that is the question of culture, which is “lodged in the middle of this dualism”.⁵

The source of the problem is the dialectical necessity of form itself. Soul is more-than-soul – it is also its pulsating capacities in their constant “drive towards form”,⁶ towards a higher articulation of individuality. The inner drive of its organic evolution toward greater perfection demands the integration of its history and the manifestation of its destiny, which can only be achieved through form. Thus Simmel’s argument implies that soul is also less-than-soul since the soul by itself, without the help of forms, cannot find fulfillment.

Culture ameliorates the soul’s deficiency and serves self-perfection by giving a meaningful direction to the drive toward form and by leading the life process to ever advanced stages of unified development. “Culture is the way that leads from the closed unity through the unfolded multiplicity to the unfolded unity.”⁷ Through its operations, singularities spread out, potentialities mature into actualities, drives converge into a path. Thus culture is the synthesis of subjective and objective spirit. In Simmel’s view, culture is both path and destination: its objective forms are both “stations” through which the soul needs to pass and the material of that special quality acquired by subjective life during such a successful passage – the unique quality of cultivation which establishes harmony between the free human activity and its products, between the subjective and the objective spirit of cultural values.

The essay could well end here, having reached a comfortable reconciliation of its original dualism. Yet, Simmel is not satisfied with this happy synthesis. His attention is drawn to “the paradox of culture”⁸ – the fact that subjective life can reach inner perfection only through extrinsic means, that individual cultivation requires objective culture. To the extent that it obeys the dialectical logic of the

² Georg Simmel, “On the Concept and the Tragedy of Culture” [1911]. In *The Conflict in Modern Culture and Other Essays*. Trans. K. Peter Etkorn (New York 1968) 27.

³ Simmel (*supra* n. 2) 27.

⁴ Simmel (*supra* n. 2) 27.

⁵ Simmel (*supra* n. 2) 27.

⁶ Simmel (*supra* n. 2) 28.

⁷ Simmel (*supra* n. 2) 29.

⁸ Simmel (*supra* n. 2) 30.

spirit, effecting a synthesis of the subjective and the objective, culture is not a paradox. On the contrary, it is the agent of that distinct human growth known as cultivation. The real paradox is the heteronomous development of the autonomous subject, the fact that the autonomy of the soul is violated by the heteronomous drive toward autonomous structures. What puzzles Simmel is the scandal of form. How can the soul’s perfection be an inner one if it requires the assimilation of alien forms? Why should an attempt to posit subjective autonomy result in an admission of the objective autonomy of spiritual culture?

After only a few pages, Simmel’s essay, having questioned its assumptions, reaches an impasse. Despite the beautiful promise of culture for a harmonious synthesis of subject and object, the iconolatric ignominy of forms, the paradoxical independence of representation, of human-made images, emerges to discredit the hope of admixture and union. Why should there be a need for such a synthesis in the first place, the author seems to wonder. To salvage his inquiry, he begins all over again by positing once more a basic dualism, this time in starker dialectical terms. By its very nature, the spirit is condemned to an eternally unfulfilled motion that first drives it toward objects and then, without allowing it to penetrate them, drives it back to its own orbit. There is no way out of this self-contained, cyclical motion. The mutual attraction and revulsion between subject and object continues unresolved. This situation takes on a special importance when the two sides are both spiritual, that is, when the objects of attraction are objectifications of spirit, namely, structures of culture, and consequently means of cultivation – “ethical and intellectual, social and aesthetic, religious and technical forms”.⁹ In these cases, for a fruitful encounter to occur, the objects need to become subjective (as a medium of individual cultivation) and the subject objective (as an experience of spirituality crystallized in forms). This does not entail fusion but the possibility of a certain reciprocity in the realm of the spirit.

This new start enables Simmel to focus his inquiry better in that it moves it closer to his philosophical concerns. The notion of overcoming and the earlier ideal of fusion are abandoned. The division between subjective and objective spirituality is described in terms of resentment and hostility only. The topic of the essay is defined as “the deep estrangement or animosity which exists between the organic and creative process of the soul and its contents and products: the vibrating, restless life of the creative soul, which develops toward the infinite, contrasts with its fixed and ideally unchanging product and its uncanny feedback effect, which arrests and indeed rigidifies this liveliness. Frequently it appears as if the creative movement of the soul was dying from its own product.”¹⁰ Here the domain of culture begins to turn into a nightmare.

Simmel finds two forces at work in the unfolding of cultivation: a constructive one, where individual growth assimilates objective spirit, and a destructive one, where individual growth obeys the logic of forms. Thus culture presents humans with its conflicting demands. These demands are not extrinsic but lie at

⁹ Simmel (*supra* n. 2) 30.

¹⁰ Simmel (*supra* n. 2) 31.

the heart of life itself since life has a dual function: as a process, it marches forward, unfolding and maturing according to its inner nature; as a creation, it produces objects with a distinct cultural logic that follow their own course of growth. The independence and stability of their existence puts the flow of life at risk when life pursues its highest development, cultivation, and seeks to use them as means. If the flow passes through their domain, they threaten to arrest it. Thus human development needs to both create and escape the power of its creations to avoid being extinguished by them. The achievement of permanence undermines the possibility of movement. Instead of cultivating it, spiritual forms can lead inner life into paralysis. By taking on a life of their own, external values can stifle the human capacity to confer value by objectifying its spirit. "Herein lies one fundamental form of our suffering from our past, our own dogma, and our own fantasies."¹¹ Within "the basic tension between the process and content of consciousness", the discharge of creative process and the fixed shape of works and norms are fundamentally opposed. The structures of life as creation can freeze the rhythm of life as process. Rhythm and structure are simply antithetical. The dualism of life and form is insurmountable. Form, created as a vessel for the spirit, turns into its coffin.

Once again, it is not the opposition between subjective and objective spirit that disturbs Simmel so much as the heteronomy of the former, in other words, the scandal of form. Why should the human mind, will, knowledge, or creativity be invested in material and non-material structures? Why should the soul, the source of all values, need contours and configurations, figures and formations to express itself? Why should the "completely closed reality which we call our subject"¹² need those outside products of the objective intellect "which have grown into an ideal existence"?¹³ Why should personal perfection be mediated by the supra-personal perfection of objectively spiritual realities? Why should cultivation be meaningful only when endowed with objectification? Why should the soul be embodied in form? Why should the spirit be embodied?

Simmel is tempted and frightened by the graven images of forms. Even though in his descriptions their world seems to include all lasting products of human productivity, it is neither their materiality nor their endurance that disturbs him. Things or habits that simply exist are of no interest to him. It is only when they take on the life of forms, when they take on the spirit of structures and they enter the realm of mimesis and signification, that they begin to puzzle and alarm him, like the specter of a lost innocence. More than their embodiment in communal customs or religious practices, legal rules or political institutions, it is the artistic incarnation of forms that appears to Simmel to have deprived humans of an Edenic stage where the world of shapes and the word of God were one.

Having filled the stage with Hegelian dualisms, and having prepared the ultimate duel between rhythm and structure, Simmel appears ready to stage the fifth act in the drama of form. Everything in his argument so far, indeed every-

¹¹ Simmel (*supra* n. 2) 31.

¹² Simmel (*supra* n. 2) 38.

¹³ Simmel (*supra* n. 2) 36.

thing in his life's work, has prepared him for the task. His readers are ready to hear the darkest secret of the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*. But it is not meant to be. Simmel refuses to take the next step. In this thinker's hands, Idealism can go no further. Simmel's refusal will mark the course of dialectics for the rest of the century as a thoroughly negative one. Instead of addressing the question of form itself, of figuration and incarnation, Simmel again takes up the question of culture and its mediating role in another effort to explore the possibility of synthesis, namely, of cultural assimilation. With this regress, philosophy abandons its responsibility to an Idealist project, as first expressed in its "Oldest System-Program" of 1796, and commits itself to an anthropology of modernity, specifically, an aesthetics of social life. However, as we shall see later, despite the abandonment of the system itself, it continues to observe the Program's commitment to a tragic viewpoint.

Its original anthropological turn, which was initiated by Left Hegelians like Feuerbach, had taken philosophy in the direction of society. By relinquishing the socio-economic function of capitalism to economists in *The Philosophy of Money*, and instead adopting Modernism as an emblem of modern life, Simmel gave philosophy a new anthropological turn, this time toward culture itself and its role in modernity. "When Simmel's profuse writings are compared with those of Weber, Sombart and the mass of lesser figures in the budding German *Sozialwissenschaften*, one is struck by the paucity of attention Simmel pays to the state, the church, and other foreground powers... As a matter of fact, even the category of *society* plays but a subsidiary role in Simmel's sociology: society is just a fickle, fragile and perpetually changing form sedimented by the endless process of *sociality*."¹⁴ His contemporaries and students often remarked on this approach, calling him "the genuine philosopher of Impressionism"¹⁵ and "a collector of standpoints which he assembles all around truth without ever wanting or being able to possess it".¹⁶ Durkheim described his work as "philosophical variations on certain aspects of social life", while Benjamin noted that his philosophy "already signifies a transition from strict academic philosophy towards a poetic or essayistic orientation".¹⁷ They all seemed to agree that "Simmel limits himself to wandering along the exterior of the phenomena; the concept that serves him as a guiding thread in each case cannot sustain any profound interpretation".¹⁸ This far-reaching reorientation can be explained in many ways that would place it in its historical context. One account could relate it to the emergence of the professional social sciences, which made the social their exclusive field of specialization. Others could relate it to the fragmentation of the public sphere or to aestheticist trends in all the fin-de-siècle arts. The emergence of *Philosophische*

¹⁴ Zygmunt Bauman. *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Cambridge 1991) 168.

¹⁵ Georg Lukács, "Georg Simmel" [1918]. Trans. Margaret Cerullo. *Theory, Culture & Society* 8: 3 (1991) 146.

¹⁶ Bloch quoted in David Frisby, *Georg Simmel* (Sussex 1984) 146.

¹⁷ Quoted in Frisby (*supra* n. 16) 147.

¹⁸ Siegfried Kracauer, "Georg Simmel" [1920]. In *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*. Trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA 1995) 244-245.

Kultur (which Simmel gave as a title to one of his essay collections in 1911),¹⁹ of culture as a philosophical concern, can be traced to Simmel's decisive turn to aesthetic problems after 1908 and to his constant negotiations with Weber, Marx, and Nietzsche.

A more philosophical account of the cultural turn of philosophical anthropology would begin by identifying culture at the convergence of two trends within turn-of-the-century philosophy, *Lebensphilosophie* and hermeneutics, in the work of Wilhelm Dilthey. It is at this juncture that the vitalist drives of the first trend and the interpretive demands of the second produced the category of experience/*Erlebnis*, the idea of life in all its variety and complexity. Hermann Cohen was also working on Kant's notion of "experience" during the last thirty years of the nineteenth century but his "transcendental method", despite its initial popularity, failed to explain adequately the conditions on which the experience of things-in-themselves was based. Dilthey proposed the grand enterprise of the *Geisteswissenschaften*, the sciences of the Spirit, as the comprehensive approach to all the manifestations of human experience. The designation of this approach raised the question of the paradigmatic domain in which experience could be studied, of the site where the celebration of life and the practice of interpretation could interact and reinforce each other so that the interpretation of life and the life of interpretation could fulfill their mutual tasks.

Dilthey found this domain in history, arguing that historicist interpretation was the one most faithful to the plurality of experience. Simmel, however, assigned this place to culture, expanding on Dilthey's designation of a separate sphere of "objectifications of life" for the (legal, scientific, and artistic) cultural systems confronting the individual. Whereas Dilthey posited a principle of integration, Simmel began with a diagnosis of "differentiation". Among Dilthey's "categories of life", he focused on the relation of inner (mental content) and outer (material manifestation). Simmel always made individual experience the focus of his inquiry. "In fact, in countless cases the objects that engage the philosopher's reflections stem from the realm of experiences and encounters of the highly differentiated individual."²⁰ But because he understood objectification as alienation, he concluded that only culture can heal the division of experience between life and cultural systems. Only in cultural values can the spirit find its best expression as well as (self)understanding. As Simmel declared, culture is the synthesis between subjective and objective spirit. Only in its domain is a non-alienated, authentic experience possible. As a result of this view, not only is culture internally valorized but life itself, as a creative becoming, acquires the production of culture as its paramount goal.

Simmel did not heed Weber's repeated warnings against attitudes that would allow artistic criteria to become cultural values and influence social or political life. Until the end of his life, he was seeking solace from the pathologies of modernity in the metaphysics of culture. In this regard, his legacy was immense:

¹⁹ Georg Simmel, *Philosophische Kultur: Gesammelte Essays* (Leipzig 1911).

²⁰ Kracauer (*supra* n. 19) 226.

the compensatory-turned-redemptive potential of culture has remained a constant point of reference and promise for philosophy and its sciences of the spirit. For Husserl and Gramsci, for Adorno and Raymond Williams, for post-structuralism and post-colonialism, the twin issues of life and interpretation still converge in the principle of "experience", the impressionism of the refined senses, which seeks in culture its authentic articulation. Whether possessed more by hermeneutic responsibilities (as in critical formalisms) or by vitalist exactions (as in identity expressivisms), the hope for a harmonious experience still rests on culture as the last refuge of dialectics from alienation, the transcendent realm of reconciliation.

According to Simmel's essay, culture unifies subject and object by incorporating objective phenomena in the development of subjects as a means toward personal growth, that is, without compromising the objectivity of such phenomena. In this way, the spirit reaches perfection in subject and object, enabling both of them to transcend their materiality and become respectively more-than-life and more-than-construct. Thus culture is by definition a synthesis since it interpenetrates subjective and objective spirit, bringing together personal development and objective value. "A synthesis, however, is not the only and most immediate form of unity, since it always presupposes the divisibility of elements as an antecedent or as a correlative. Viewing synthesis as the most sublime of formal relationships between spirit and world could occur only during an age which is as analytical as the modern."²¹ Having contemplated cultural reconciliation once more, Simmel proceeds to denounce it by recalling the division it presupposes. This time, he historicizes this ideal, arguing that only ages like the modern one consider synthesis the highest form of unity. In reality, interpenetration of the two realms can cancel the ordinary duality of cultural creation. The ultimate illusion is not the basic tension between subject and object but their presumed synthesis, that is, the entire dialectic which culture was supposed to fulfill. It is only the moderns who wistfully attribute to culture the power to transcend the division of the spirit. This ideal is nothing but a chimera that enables them to impose artificial unity where there is only separation and friction. Instead of a path or a destination, it is a beautiful, seductive lie. Instead of a solution, culture is the problem. What we are witnessing here, at the very moment when culture is created as a distinct object of study and speculation, is the decisive role that the tragic idea played in this creation – a role that it continues to play in cultural studies and reflections in general.

As an example of the ineluctability of "the tragedy of duality",²² Simmel cites its survival in cases of over-specialization, where people excel in a certain skill or branch of knowledge without becoming truly cultivated.²³ Such a cleavage in the structure of culture is not just historical but foundational, turning the paradox of culture into a tragedy. There is a constitutive friction between the

²¹ Simmel (*supra* n. 2) 35.

²² Raymond Aron, "Culture and Life" [1938]. In Lewis A. Coser (ed.), *Georg Simmel* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ 1965) 140.

²³ Simmel (*supra* n. 2) 39.

inner drive of human personality and the inner logic of its creations. The source of this tragic friction is now located not in the heteronomous drive toward objectification but in another drive, one toward subjectification. Since the time humans developed an internal frissure by positing a self for themselves, an unbridgeable gap opened up between interiority and exteriority. "From the moment that man began to say 'I' to himself, and became an object beyond and in comparison with himself, from the same moment in which the contents of the soul were formed together into a center point – from that time and based on that central form the ideal had to grow according to which everything connected with the center point formed a unit, self-contained and self-sufficient. But the contents with which the 'I' must organize itself into its own unified world do not belong to it alone. They are given to it from a spatially, temporarily idealized realm outside; they are simultaneously the contents of different social and metaphysical, conceptual and ethical worlds."²⁴ Simmel identifies an original sin in the drive toward subjectification, which destroyed the unity of a single, undifferentiated universe. By positing an autonomous subjectivity, by seeking to know themselves as such, humans expose themselves to the temptations of several outside worlds. Exterior worlds of religious, social, philosophical and other structures and values always seek to draw humans into them, dissolve their individuality, and make them obey their dictates. Some individuals manage to find a balance among all those dictates by ordering them around themselves. "The process of culture, however, compresses the parties of this collision into extremely close contact by making the development of the subject conditional on the assimilation of objective material. Thus the metaphysical dualism of subject and object, which seemed to have been overcome by the formation of culture, reappears in the conflict between subjective and objective developments."²⁵ Hence culture, instead of overcoming the division, makes its presence more acutely felt. Cultivation constitutes a sin and at the same time the tragic awareness of the separation inherent in metaphysics.

Simmel is groping toward a primordial time of pure innocence – a time before culture, before knowledge, before division, before the self. If the first friction took place within interiority, there must have been a pre-dialectical stage where interiority itself had no meaning, where a natural state of things without names or identities prevailed. But that stage is beyond the reach of the dialectical tools available to modern thought. Thus the exploration of the tragic takes another abrupt anthropological turn, shifting from metaphysics to the experience of the domination of commodities in cultural life.

With this change of perspective, the "ominous independence"²⁶ of cultural contents becomes a question of quantity, of magnitude; the world of the spirit changes to one of producers and consumers. On the one hand, Simmel suggests that the Marxian commodity fetishism is only a special case of "this general fate

²⁴ Simmel (*supra* n. 2) 40.

²⁵ Simmel (*supra* n. 2) 40.

²⁶ Simmel (*supra* n. 2) 42.

of contents of culture".²⁷ On the other, having reached a philosophical impasse, his argument relies more and more on the quantitative increase in cultural production. Now it is the change of subjects into consumers, and of creativity into industrial (re)production that worries him. In an era of extreme specialization and mass production, instead of contributing to it, cultural works turn people away from cultivation. It is this cultural predicament which, in its intensity, brings to the fore the tragedy of culture, the fact that the immanent force of the inner development of spiritual objects estranges them both from their origin (the soul) and from their purpose (cultivation). Humans have lost control over their creations.

Simmel's exploration of alienation proceeds with unbridled culturalism. Just as he transformed the Hegelian dialectic of the spirit earlier, he now transforms the Marxian dialectic of history into one of culture, and presents it as tragic, thus at the same time remaining faithful to the speculative roots of the dialectic, namely, the dialectical engagement with tragedy, more than a century earlier, in the work of the German Romantic artists, critics, and philosophers. There is, however, a major difference. This time, the problem is not the commercialization of the art market or the vulgarization of literary opinion that inspires this engagement. From Schiller to Marx, artistic creation was the model of non-alienated work, presenting the organic autonomy of the disinterested artistic sphere as an alternative to the modes of capitalist economy. Simmel is unwilling to grant culture such immunity. His view is deeply pessimistic. The fact that the modes of production have left behind the cultural super-structure is not just a "contradiction" but a manifestation of the basic "tragic paradox". Alienation does not inhere in labor alone but also in the area that was supposed to enlighten or redeem labor – in culture itself and the widening gap between subjective and objective culture. The contradictions of modern culture represent an intense dramatization of the constitutive conflict between life process and generated forms. Thus, what was earlier perceived as a historically specific phenomenon is elevated into the realm of an eternal tragedy of culture.

The choice of tragedy as the prototype of experiential alienation carries strong connotations. In a tragic situation, the destructive forces are immanent: the necessity of annihilation is the logical development of the very structure that has produced it. Just as the forces destroying the tragic heroes and heroines do not come from the outside but from within, their nature fulfilling their unique destiny (the fall of the auto-posed subjectivity), the destructive power of forms shares the same origin with the constructive one of creativity. What makes the human relationship to cultural objects tragic is that their human-made objectivity acquires an independent norm of development which tears them away from the subject, and the subject from itself (in a manner that repeats the scene of its original sin).

Modernity exacerbates the problem as it overwhelms all aspirations for cultivation with an infinite number of "producers", a boundless "supply" of

²⁷ Simmel (*supra* n. 2) 42.

objectified contents, and a “voracious capacity for accumulation”.²⁸ This situation of generalized cultural economy baffles the moderns as they are thrown into total (tragic) relationships with elements they can neither ignore nor absorb, neither reject nor master. Such elements promise continuous cultivation but in the end contribute to a feeling of powerlessness and exhaustion. At the same time, the expanding technical skills of specialization aggravate the division of labor which separates work from life, and the product from its creators, emptying the subjects (as producers) of their cultural content while exposing them to an assault by indistinguishable, uncontrollable, mass-produced cultural objects, each one asserting its importance and clamoring for attention.

Simmel’s critique of the commercialization of culture builds on a tradition of more than a century of aesthetic philosophy that scrutinized modern ills on the basis of the decline of taste and the emergence of a mass audience. What differentiates this critique from its predecessors is its culturalist diagnosis of alienation and its despair over the possibility of cultural emancipation. Simmel is the first critic to observe that the modern problem is not deficient or mediocre but excessive cultivation. Where the pursuit of *Bildung* until his time set individuals on a course of exploration, seeking ideas, values, and works that they could assimilate into their growth, the overpowering presence of culture everywhere in the modern world forces them in the opposite direction, one of avoiding culture in the name of cultivation. In order to protect its integrity, instead of anticipating an ultimate synthesis, cultivation must actively engage in irreconcilable opposition. Simmel is committed to *Bildung* as the cultivation of subjective potentialities through the utilization of objective contents. “Cultivation is, so to speak, the ethical aspect of *Lebensphilosophie*, for it means treating one’s own life as an object that must be continuously shaped.”²⁹ However, given the crisis of modern culture, cultivation of individual autonomy should abandon the ideal of assimilation, develop an aesthetic distance from the world, and adopt a counter-cultural stance. Simmel develops Hegel’s dialectical conception of *Bildung* because he finds in it a connection between philosophy and social theory: the subject both constitutes socio-cultural milieu (through objectification) and is constituted by it (through assimilation of collective objectifications). Through the mediation of objective spirit, pure subjectivity is transformed into subjective spirit. Hegelian *Bildung* mediates between individuals and society. Following a socio-cultural reading of Hegel, though, Simmel sees all objectification as alienation, seeking its transcendence in the identity of soul and structure. Dreading the creation of permanent objects as well as objectification as self-creation, he never considers the possibility of an appropriation of objective reality by an embodied subject. That is why praxis is completely absent from his work.

The noble pursuit of culture, unavoidable as it is for human maturity, is ultimately self-defeating because no level of maturity can fully control it and prevent it from deteriorating into a self-reproducing indiscriminate pluralism.

²⁸ Simmel (*supra* n. 2) 44.

²⁹ Rudolph H. Weingartner, “Theory and Tragedy of Culture” [1960]. In Lewis A. Coser (ed.), *Georg Simmel* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ 1965) 127.

This insight confirms the innately tragic character of culture, whereby spirit is alienating itself through its own spiritual work. “One of the basic capacities of the spirit is to separate itself from itself – to create forms, ideas and values that oppose it, and only in this form to gain consciousness of itself. This capacity has reached its widest extent in the process of culture.”³⁰ Modern cultural alienation drives the *askesis* of cultivation into paroxysm. Not just the character but the function of culture is now tragic. The only option left to cultivation is the negation of culture, a negative aesthetic, a suspended dialectic. Thus *Bildung* must become oppositional.

In a coda that prefigures the Frankfurt School critique of mass culture, Simmel laments the “adornment and overloading of our lives with a thousand superfluous items, from which, however, we cannot liberate ourselves; the continuous ‘stimulation’ of civilized man who in spite of all this is not stimulated to expressions of individual creativity”.³¹ He views these cultural ills as consequences of “the emancipation of the objectified spirit”,³² of its independence which leads it farther and farther away from its goal of cultivation. Form is emancipated but the soul cannot liberate itself. This is the tragic situation of culture that, instead of achieving a synthesis, carries its self-destructive fate within it from the beginning. Culture as a means undermines culture as a goal. Overcoming develops its own duality and turns against itself. It is this dialectical elaboration and abnegation that Horkheimer and Adorno popularized later with their “tragic”³³ interdependence of myth and reason in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. It is also the same elaboration that inspired Lukács to posit, as the last Left Hegelian quest for reconciliation, the concept of “totality”. In both cases, Simmel’s epitaph for culture has been interpreted as the birth certificate of oppositional *Bildung*, of cultivation as counter-politics. This legacy is still central to all post-structuralist theory, from deconstruction to gender and post-colonial studies.

At the very end of his essay, Simmel returns to the fundamental question of the autonomy of the spirit: “The great enterprise of the spirit succeeds innumerable times in overcoming the object as such by making an object of itself, returning to itself enriched by its creation. But the spirit has to pay for this self-perfection with the tragic potential that a logic and dynamic is inevitably created by the unique laws of its own world which increasingly separates the contents of culture from its essential meaning and value.”³⁴ The tragedy of the autonomous spirit is its success, its making a perfect object of itself – a new world with its unique laws. By doing so, it seems to violate a commandment against such independent creativity. The path of the soul toward perfection passes through beautiful cities of idols, the world of forms. Once it begins traversing this worldly domain, it is led astray and cannot find its way back to itself, it cannot regain its self-enclosed,

³⁰ Simmel (*supra* n. 2) 45.

³¹ Simmel (*supra* n. 2) 46.

³² Simmel (*supra* n. 2) 46.

³³ Christopher Rocco, *Tragedy and Enlightenment: Athenian Political Thought and the Dilemmas of Modernity* (Berkeley 1996).

³⁴ Simmel (*supra* n. 2) 46.

pre-self identity. The theater of appearances (that is, the contents of culture) lures it away from its tautological essence into a quest for self-determination. The song of the Sirens puts on it the spell of other melodies and meanings. The soul is condemned to an unfulfilled motion of exile from its homeland, the spirit. Its heteronomy results in the negativity of culture. The tragedy of the spirit (whose cultural expedition is but one, though obviously the most representative, manifestation of the cyclical motion that drives it first toward objects and then back to its orbit) is its internal division, its subsequent twin fall into self and signification, into soul and form. The price the spirit pays for its self-perfection is the loss of its authentic identity.

The image of the cyclical motion of the spirit which is driven, first into adventures with forms, and then back to its alienated self, is based on an allegorical use of Odysseus' travels and return to Ithaca. Throughout the twentieth century, the Homeric story has retained its status as a paradigmatic quest of identity – one thinks, for example, of explorations by Lukács and Auerbach in literary theory, Joyce and Kafka in fiction, Kazantzakis and Walcott in poetry, Godard and Angelopoulos in film, Skalkotas and Berio in music. Following Simmel's lament for the successful but dishonored return, Levinas draws explicitly on the same allegory to attack the nostalgia for home as the circular adventure of Western metaphysics from Parmenides to Heidegger – the search for truth, Being, and self, or Novalis's definition of philosophy as homesickness. "Philosophy has long aspired to the totality of homeliness, the ideal of at-homeness (*Heimatlichkeit*) in one's entire existence, and has found its model in the Greek (self)representation. ... Being-at-home-with-oneself means to be the ground and origin of oneself, to arise from out of oneself and be in possession of one's life. Independent existence has its own self-justifying value: this is the lesson modern man should learn from antiquity."³⁵ Home is where worldly dwelling takes place, and it can cover a wide range of experiences, from self to art. In Odysseus' adventures, Levinas (1968) sees an itinerary of return, "a complacency of the Same".³⁶ Self-realization and self-knowledge are not legitimate goals because they amount to man turning himself into god. That is why Levinas calls philosophy, the Western itinerary to these destinations, "the temptation of temptations".

Simmel's fear of the domination of objective culture, of the "culture of things" over humans, reappears intensified in Levinas's discussion of "things". Things are important insofar as they constitute the human world, providing enjoyment and an appreciation of this life's pleasures. While they are naked, without any identity, the necessary involvement with them can lead to the Face, which is the ultimate nudity. Levinas's view of the Face is a Talmudic gloss on Paul's famous passage: "For now we know in part and we prophecy in part; but when the perfect comes, that which is partial shall pass away. ... For we now look through a mirror in an enigma but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I

shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood" (*I Corinthians* 13.9–12). Humans live in a world of reflections and shadows, and they know only in part. Only when the perfect, the eschaton, comes, will they be able to look not at the mirror of their own creations but at the Face itself, and be seen by it as well. However, humans often forget that things are only "playthings", mere shadows, and therefore cannot lead to transcendence. The true transcendental experience is beyond form. The face of the Other is nudity from form. Since he is free from any formal constraints, the Other cannot be represented, only encountered in a face-to-face experience. The danger arises when such things acquire an identity, a false one, by being endowed with beauty. When things acquire beauty, their being is doubled in form and their essential nakedness is obscured by identity. By giving them autonomy and individuality, beauty draws objects into a different sphere, the domain of aesthetic finality. Under these conditions, their shadows promise an alternative totality, making humans idealize the self-sufficient image as infinity and mistake enjoyment for transcendence. But because it doubles the being of things in self-sufficient form, beauty, through its aesthetic orientation, can lead astray those who seek the absolute in the path from form to nudity, from thing to Face. Levinas uses the figure of Odysseus to portray this loss of direction and entrapment in a world of beautiful forms.

Levinas frets about objective representation because he does not believe in self-justifying values and shudders at independent existence that is in possession of one's life. To him, autonomy means atheism, and immanence equals idolatry. Accordingly, he entertains a fierce antipathy toward art. In *Totality and Infinity*, he presents art as a derivative domain of a secondary nature that imprisons its followers in a world of shadowy appearances, and he treats it as a wicked, blasphemous, and dangerous practice. Because of its Circean power to mislead people away from the course to transcendence, art is an invitation to a monstrous, inhuman world. In the finality of art, the totality of beauty, and in general in all formed representation, Levinas sees the enemies of the naked and infinite Face, the face of obligation – the commanding face of faith.

To follow the path that led from Simmel's fear of form to Levinas's censure of representation to Derrida's critique of presence to contemporary rejections of pictoriality is to trace the engagement of modern thought on many fronts with the dilemma that Gombrich called "assimilation or imitation". One front is obviously the anxiety over the eminence and priority of the Ancients. Another concerns the iconomachic legacy of the Reformation against any embodiment of the spirit. A third one is the challenge stemming from Nietzsche's ethical attack on decadence and resentment. Closer to our concerns here would be the "luciferian" (Lukács) view of art shared by early Modernism. Simmel, his students, and his descendants from Thomas Mann to Celan struck a reverse Faustian pact with aesthetic cultivation: they renounced mimesis and gave up the world through (rather than for) art in order to reach salvation of the soul, dedicating themselves to the Antichrist, at it were, in order to provoke God's intervention.

But can there be a non-cultural cultivation? A number of non-Protestant writers (Rosenzweig, Ortega, Berdyaev, Maritain, Simone Weil, Levinas) could

³⁵ Vassilis Lambropoulos, *The Rise of Eurocentrism: Anatomy of Interpretation* (Princeton 1993) 215–216.

³⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, "On the Trail of the Other". Trans. Daniel J. Hoy. *Philosophy Today* 10 (1968) 34–45.

not allow cultivation to become the shaping of life itself. If, as Simmel argued, the tragedy of the spirit is its internal division, then the spirit should not pursue in vain self-perfection and its adventures in the Cyclopean caves of forms or the seas of the Sirens. Levinas suggested that its destination should be separation, not identity; nomadic wandering, not return. There is no Ithaca to which Odysseus could return. If totalization is impossible, if subject and object cannot be reconciled, if perfection destroys authenticity, then true relation is only possible as separation. The deception of a perfection achieved in the aesthetic realm should be renounced. Instead, division ought to be embraced as the true course to individuation. Individuation uproots the self from being and separates it from manifestation, setting it free to develop a relation with the Other by responding to his command and serving the infinity of his transcendence. Perfection is aesthetic, severance is ethical. Thus, Levinas would conclude, tragedy does not pertain to the spirit since, far from being a contradiction, division is the fundamental operation of the spirit's nature which opens the possibility of transcendence. Tragedy pertains to culture only because it is the outcome of the spirit's seduction by form, its loss of infinite direction, and its fall into self-perfection. "A sense of names 'archaically' conjoined to things belongs to tragedy, while the Judeo-Christian God imposes a difference between names and things as his law. He orders man never to make a tragedy of himself, for he has reserved heaven and hell for him alone."³⁷

A generation older than Levinas, Simmel did not live to see his ideas turn into monophysitic dogma. His essay, though, is the most concise statement of *Kulturphilosophie*, a landmark in the theoretical turn that made culture, rather than history, society, or economy, the privileged domain of the spirit. The aesthetic turn in philosophy, criticism, education, history and so on was of course nothing new at that time. Since the early nineteenth century, it represented a programmatic, vital alternative to, or refuge from all modern evil and corruption – secularism, materialism, commercialism, consumerism, anomie, normalization, modernization, and the like. Idealism had charged individuals with constructing a purely human personal life through the devoted and systematic pursuit of an aesthetic education. What was new in Simmel's time was the deployment of culture as a negative (rather than simply an alternative) force – as not just a comportment but an energy of such vitality and creativity that it alone could resist the pervasiveness of alienation. Thus *Kultur* was combined indissolubly with *Kritik*.

Following the devastating critique of liberalism from several philosophical and scholarly sides at the end of the century, the positive, collective, and pedagogical Romantic ideal of *Bildung* as organic, autonomous cultivation of *Innerlichkeit* had lost its credibility. Pessimism over the commodification of bourgeois culture increased as liberal individuals of the professional and commercial bourgeoisie, with their strong interests in profit, leisure, and popular fiction, did not

grow into what Shaftesbury or Humboldt had originally envisioned. Neither their morals nor their taste could be trusted to resist the preferences of an open market and the procedures of a tolerant parliament. Their conservative judgment and conformist conduct (Nietzsche's *Bildungs-Philistertum*) seemed to ridicule earlier hopes that cultivation of individuality would free the natural person from social and moral conventions.

Despite all these disappointing developments, the project of cultivation as the aesthetic assimilation of modernity was not altogether abandoned. Its ascetic task of a continuous shaping of individual life, and of consistent maturity toward self-perfection on the basis of an intrinsic norm, was recuperated by the vitalism of cultural "experience" (and, more recently, cultural identity) and its interpretive regimen. While static principles of harmony, unity, and reason were discarded, they were replaced by dynamic principles of life,³⁸ force, and flux. In this context, the late eighteenth century attack on the Enlightenment ideal of civilization as universal history, secular development, and linear progress acquired critical power and oppositional potency.³⁹

Herder, the initiator of that attack, had pluralized "culture", writing about specific and diverse cultures of different nations, periods, and socio-economic communities. Thus from the very beginning *Kultur* was based on difference and developed tremendous potential for collective othering as well as resistance. This new culture represented everything local, organic, and unique in contradistinction to the universal, material and mechanistic character of Enlightened modernity. Furthermore, instead of competing with the so-called Manchester capitalism on its own terms, it forged its own system of values and spheres of production, sharply differentiating spiritual, artistic, and intellectual creations from secular, industrial, and material products – a distinction that remained important from Kant to Marcuse. *Kultur* was an expressive concept based on identity and particularity that included unique works of collective human communication and self-definition like ideas, books, elements of faith, practices of creativity, and rites of interpretation – all of them specialties of the middle-class intellectuals (scholars, scientists, artists, essayists, teachers, journalists) who presented their objects of study and theory as supreme manifestations of the human spirit. These connoisseurs of debate elaborated on the three realms of intellectual self-formation – depth, spirit, and individuality. They also established the "public sphere", an alternative domain of literature, philosophy, theology, research, review, and performance, taking great pride in their accomplishments and proclaiming the birth of a cultural (as opposed to civic) democracy.

During Simmel's time, engagement with *Kultur* became *Kulturkritik* – an intellectual response to the crisis of the times not through political or ethical philosophy but through cultural opposition. Such strong emphasis on culture reflected a combination of social discontent, a sense of intellectual poverty, the decay of artistic individualism, and the triumph of bourgeois mediocrity. When

³⁷Massimo Cacciari, *Architecture and Nihilism: On the Philosophy of Modern Architecture*. Trans. Stephen Sartarelli (New Haven 1993 [1973–1981]) 33–34.

³⁸Peter Viereck, *Metapolitics: From the Romantics to Hitler* (New York 1941) 16–47.

³⁹Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners and State Formation and Civilization*. Trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford 1994 [1939]) 1–28.

the intellectuals felt that the middle class had betrayed the social contract of *Bildung* by abandoning its spiritual responsibilities for the pleasures of popular taste and morality, they barricaded themselves within *Lebensformen* like the *Bund* and the *Gruppe*, turning the public sphere from an alternative democracy to a militant aristocracy⁴⁰ and declaring “war against the West”⁴¹ – a civil war they fought and continue to fight using the sheer negative force of culture. Since they saw progress as spiritual decline, and politics as moral failure, they were determined to resist cultural disintegration, political anarchy, and social anomie by investing in art not for art’s sake but as the only meaningful way of life – as pleromatic “experience”.

Driven by spiritual views of history, they replaced the demonic of the Romantics with chiliastic visions (Heidegger’s adventism, Benjamin’s messianism, Lukács’s totality, Bloch’s “not yet”) which prefigured spiritual, religious, aesthetic, and national redemption. In the simultaneous critiques of several grand systems (from parliamentarianism to Wagnerism, from Neo-Kantianism to capitalism), synthesis was rejected as totalitarian, being was presented as absolutist, while the unmitigated élan of becoming emerged as an open-ended goal. The new philosophy of heroic vitalism, revolutionary despair, and conservative nostalgia would not offer the vision of a reconciled civilization in repose but would call to arms the defenders of an embattled *Kultur*. In other words, it was time for cultures to either decay or clash. This well-documented path from aesthetic discontent to political pessimism to nihilist activism led to the first creation of cultural politics – an allegorical politics not of governance, morality, truth, or beauty but of expressive, injured, and embattled native authenticity.

Given its emphasis on authenticity, the political deployment of aesthetic culture as a contrarial force of critical vitality defending lived experience and resisting alienation faced from its inception the cardinal question of the relation between life and form. If the cultural production of the modern industry coopted and assimilated the humanistic project of collective culture, rendering works, practices, and norms impossible to absorb and organize, what would be the dissentient forms that could legitimately and creatively mediate the growth of the soul? What would be the properly dynamic and fluid forms of an authentic individual life in constant flux? As the very beginning of the Simmel essay makes clear, *Kulturphilosophie* cannot attend to its tasks before answering these questions. The demand for synthesis, which bourgeois culture failed to address, was now transferred to the realm of aesthetic individualism under conditions of market materialism and Philistinism. In this refined realm, nothing is valued more than the intensity of individual experience that reveals life in all its richness. Yet this illuminating experience is either one of those espoused by Sorel, Jünger, and Celine (one that can be lived, not known) or an epiphany of incarnation, of life’s embodiment in form. The latter can turn the quest for full life into a plea for complete forms, for structures that can be known but not lived. In the

⁴⁰Walter Struve, *Elites against Democracy: Leadership Ideals in Bourgeois Political Thought in Germany, 1890–1933* (Princeton 1973).

⁴¹Aurel Kolnai, *The War against the West* (London 1938).

end, Simmel concludes that the contradiction between life and form is so deeply embedded in the soul that it cannot be overcome. A transmutation of formed life into a lived form is existentially impossible. Culture cannot deliver the soul’s unfolded multiplicity to the promised land of an unfolded unity. Thus, in the name of lived experience, cultivation declares a holy war on form.

Simmel describes this revolt of experience against form in a later essay, “The Conflict in Modern Culture” (1918), one of his last writings. There he argues that, while most eras witness a struggle between forms (new and dynamic vs. old and depleted), the modern world is experiencing an assault of life against form as such.⁴² This rare assault is possible when cultural forms of all kinds are perceived as exhausted and life agitates against being confined to their fixed structures.⁴³ However, having set the stage for yet another *Trauerspiel* on culture, Simmel follows his favorite critical approach and decides to elaborate on a related topic. Instead of explaining the atrophy of modern forms and the reasons that have led to this crisis, instead of describing the death of form, he deviates to the emergence of the concept of “life” in the late 19th century. Because modern culture is devoid of ideals and is driven by a negative impulse, he writes, the question of the meaning and value of life as such has taken absolute priority.⁴⁴ The idea that the perfection of a closed system is a valid criterion of truth⁴⁵ is rejected. The formal principle which presented structures as beings with their own meaning and power is discarded. The new principle is life itself which no longer listens or reports to outside authorities. Instead of allowing itself to be absorbed into other systems, this new life will assimilate everything into its own. Now everything must be transformed into life.⁴⁶

But there is more to life’s declaration of independence than we first hear. Simmel reveals that the revolt is directed not just against the exhaustion of culture (since, after all, such a revolt would be led by new forms, rather than life) but against all forms, old and new. The principle of form has a specific name, materiality, and configuration: form is the classical molding of being into plastic formations which fuse life with art completely.⁴⁷ Classicism is “the ideology of form”,⁴⁸ the confidence and trust in its meaning and power. Thus, though prompted by a pervasive sense of exhaustion, the revolt of life is not directed against form as such but against the classical understanding of form and its belief in the possibility of a life-art fusion. Now that life feels self-assured,⁴⁹ it strives from within to liberate itself from form – by contradicting and destroying it – and to preserve a self-conscious expression of itself.

⁴²Simmel, “The Conflict in Modern Culture” in *The Conflict in Modern Culture and Other Essays*. Trans. K. Peter Etkorn (New York 1968) 12.

⁴³Simmel (*supra* n. 42) 13.

⁴⁴Simmel (*supra* n. 42) 15.

⁴⁵Simmel (*supra* n. 42) 21.

⁴⁶Simmel (*supra* n. 42) 20.

⁴⁷Simmel (*supra* n. 42) 17.

⁴⁸Simmel (*supra* n. 42) 21.

⁴⁹Simmel (*supra* n. 42) 21–22.

We thus discover that modern life is fighting against neither depleted nor old forms but only against a certain “ideology of form”, the one which promised a reconciliation between life and art, experience and representation. All the earlier negative remarks about closed systems and their suffocating perfection apply only to the classical ideal. In proclaiming its self-assurance, life is affirming the bankruptcy of that ideal. Life can rebel against the formal principle but cannot exist without form. At the end of his career, and with the serene combination of bitterness and dignity that characterizes his later writings, Simmel acknowledges that the predicament of cultural life, its inherent basic conflict, cannot be overcome. The drive toward forms, the ineluctable necessity of forms whose very being contradicts the essence of life, persists. “Life is inseparably charged with contradiction. It can enter reality only in the form of its antithesis, that is, only in the form of form.”⁵⁰ There is no other form but form. At the same time, life, feeling that structures inhibit its energy, “desires to transcend all forms and to appear in its naked immediacy.”⁵¹ This was Levinas’ starting position that led him to the transcendent encounter with the naked Face. But Simmel recognizes that an escape into the infinite is not available either: “Yet the processes of thinking, wishing, and forming can only substitute one form for another. They can never replace the form as such by life which as such transcends the form. All these attacks against the forms of our culture, which align against them the forces of life ‘in itself’, embody the deepest internal contradictions of the spirit.”⁵² This was Derrida’s riposte to Levinas which produced deconstruction. Even though life may be agitating against the ideology of the fixed form, rejecting the ideal of its fusion with, and therefore absorption into, art, there is no surpassing the classical drive. Simmel concludes by suggesting reconciliation with the tragic fate of culture: “The bridge between the past and the future of cultural forms seems to be demolished; we gaze into an abyss of unformed life beneath our feet. But perhaps this formlessness is itself the appropriate form for contemporary life. Thus the blueprint of life is obliquely fulfilled.”⁵³ So long as life continues to be a struggle, it should be content because its destiny is fulfilled. The peace of a reconciliation between life and form “remains an eternal (*göttlich*) secret to us.”⁵⁴ Only in God can the opposites be reconciled, as Simmel had argued a few years before: “The essence of the notion of God is that all diversities and contradictions in the world achieve a unity in him, that he is – according to a beautiful formulation of Nicolas de Cusa – the *coincidentia oppositorum*. Out of this idea, that in him all estrangements and all irreconcilables find their unity and equalization, there arises the peace, the security, the all-embracing wealth of feeling that reverberate with the notion of God which we hold.”⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Simmel (*supra* n. 42) 25.

⁵¹ Simmel (*supra* n. 42) 25.

⁵² Simmel (*supra* n. 42) 25.

⁵³ Simmel (*supra* n. 42) 25.

⁵⁴ Simmel (*supra* n. 42) 25.

⁵⁵ Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*. Trans. David Frisby and Tom Bottomore (London 1990 [1900]) 236.

Simmel’s remarks enable us to explore the emergence of form as a problematical idea in modern thought. At first glance, it seems paradoxical for a study of “life” to focus so intensely and so passionately on form. When life is posited as an independent entity and a self-sustained value, we would expect to learn more about its richness, its variety, its strength, and its superiority over any other system. But this kind of life appears to have little at its disposal besides its wealth of experiences. By itself, it is self-centered and self-consuming, dumb and silent before a world of overwhelming abundance and complexity. In fact, the more it becomes more-than-life, the less worldly it appears. Unless it chooses to withdraw into mysticism, it needs a kind of profane engagement that will give it purpose and movement. Thus the definition of life as soul and as experience requires the parallel creation of “form” as a concept of worldliness, of appearance, and of enunciation. This form is a protocol of worship. It is a means by which the spirit adorns and praises its elusive essence, making it visible and accessible to all. Correspondingly, cultivation is the rite of passage that initiates individuals into the mysteries of the spirit, its inner separation and harmonization. The cultivated person is involved in spiritual exercises that constitute the domain of culture and confer to life its worldly worth. But the commerce between culture and the soul raises the question of incarnation: What is the appropriate form that the spirit must take in order to appear in the world? How can life be objectified without falling prey to beautiful idols and beginning to worship itself?

What Simmel called the “classical” answer to this puzzle, with its pneumatic faith in reconciliation, envisioned a fusion of life with art. Modern views, which have rejected that Idealist faith and have rebelled against the plastic principle of representation, need a different response that will keep the objectification available without abolishing the dialectical tension. Following the repudiation of classical ideology, the dilemma between imitation and assimilation does not hold. The solution cannot come from inquiries that are still defined by theories of presentation, figuration, or pictoriality. Neither rhetoric nor poetics can conceptualize this issue, which goes to the spiritual heart of form itself. The question of form is not open to mere artistic or philosophical deliberation any more. It has acquired a moral urgency that can be addressed only by the metaphysics of culture. The demand is not for a beautiful or even pure form but for a righteous one. Culture stands accused of artness and must find a new rectitude. The moment of this stark realization marks the impasse of dialectics, the inability of the conceptual means at one’s disposal to provide an insight and a passage beyond the intransigent laws of experience and do justice to its boundless authenticity. It is at this most difficult moment that Simmel introduces the idea of the tragic to capture the self-confuting essence of the spirit, its constitutive negativity. The failed revolt against the classical understanding of form is thus expressed through a classical idea.

This is also the moment in which modern thought discovers in the spirit’s negativity the answer to its spiritual quest in the Mediterranean seas of culture. The only moral form, the only form that can honestly deal with the contradiction between life and form, is the form that remains form and refuses to become

anything else. The unrepresentable is the sacred. The transmutation of formed life into a lived form would be idolatry and has been forbidden. "The heroic and tragic undertaking of the great Impressionists consists precisely of this: unable to escape form – the only possible medium of their essential existence – they always demand of it and impose on it something which contradicts its meaning, which annuls form. For, if form ceases to be self-contained, sovereign and complete in itself, it ceases to be form. There can be no form which serves and is open to life."⁵⁶ In order to compensate for the heteronomy of life, for the fact that life without objectification is less-than-life, form must become more-than-form, a grammatological form, a force of grammatical (for example, analytic, futuristic, cubist, twelve-tone) invention that cannot be assimilated or appropriated. Rejecting with contempt the commercial success of low art among the educated classes, it must abandon content, as Clement Greenberg proclaimed,⁵⁷ and turn to avant-garde formalism. It must resist the commodification of culture by remaining stubbornly alienating. It will thematize its dialectical necessity and insist on the necessary failure of that dialectic. And it will keep *Bildung* oppositional by infinitely extending the cyclical motion of the soul, never allowing it to return to its homeland and instead pushing it to renewed adventures in the diaspora of objectification. The restless life of the creative soul will know no rest, organic process will achieve no permanence, the spirit will reach no communion. Exiled from the primordial domain of cratyism, language will honor the memory of tautology by endlessly dividing and multiplying itself. The aporetic view of language crystallizes the apophatic understanding of the spirit. Like the God of the Christian Neo-Platonists, the spirit of the culturalists can only be known by what it is not – by following the *via negativa* of denying cataphatic attributes to it. Condemned to autonomy, the spirit will resist the mimetic temptations of cultural independence by observing the ban on representation and welcoming the Babelization of tongues.

This is the minima moralia of counter-cultural politics. In this stern moral system, ethics undergoes an extensive vitalization in that life is understood in terms of process and force. It also undergoes an individualization in that life is understood in terms of experience and resistance. The new morality of aesthetic self-cultivation curtails responsibility to the preservation of inner freedom; it reduces ethics to Simmel's "individual law"; and it limits cultivation to the negation of culture. But what this scheme sacrifices in moralia, it more than gains in aesthetica, as anti-cultural cultivation recuperates several theological issues gradually abandoned by philosophy during the nineteenth century, such as tradition, grace, presence, incarnation, faith, and the absence of God. In the dispossessed, self-exiled, catastrophic dwelling of minima moralia, maxima aesthetica succeeds theology as the inquiry into transcendence, an ascetic inquiry of great devotion and diffidence which takes over the rituals of consecration and prosely-

⁵⁶Georg Lukács, "Georg Simmel". Trans. Margaret Cerullo. *Theory, Culture & Society* 8:3 (1991 [1918]) 146.

⁵⁷Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitch" [1939]. In *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston 1961).

tization. To those unable to participate in communion or commit themselves to mysticism, the ethical exercises of the aesthetic cultivation intimate, in the midst of the tragedy of culture, a modernist (and later post-modernist) sublime: the chiliastic restitution of ruined lives, damaged works, incomplete essays, undermined arguments, and wrecked systems – the apokatastasis of disfigured representations in the redemption of form.

The uses of tragedy by the transcendental aesthetics of oppositional cultivation appear at first rather superfluous. With its pagan origins, profane concerns, dramatic presence, and theomachic heroes, the genre of tragedy would appear ill-suited for metaphysical critiques of alienation. It is true, as we saw earlier, that it serves as a prototype of the immanent destructive forces of objectification, the self-blinding insights of creativity into the riddles of existence. Tragedy is not exile from Paradise but the irrepressible human drive toward forbidden knowledge. This is how Simmel defined it in his posthumous diary: "The apple from the tree of knowledge was unripe." The crime was not even worth it! The ripe knowledge, the knowledge that would turn man into god, has been forfeited by man's own impetuous questioning. "Here everything depends on how the accent is applied: It is not the Fall from Paradise, the forfeiting of freedom from death, or the quarrel with the benevolent master of the garden that distresses the late thinker, but rather the vexation caused by the fact, which is paradigmatic for all ages of mankind to come, that the fruit had been taken from the tree of knowledge a little bit too soon, too hastily, and thus the only compensation for the loss of Paradise has been forfeited."⁵⁸

But together with the allegorical depiction of the necessary annihilation of the divided spirit, tragedy is also called to express the heroic defiance of the "paradox of culture" by oppositional cultivation – the melancholic predicament of an aesthetic faith condemned to wander among deserted temples that became beautiful ruins, communal rites that turned into civic theater, sacred books that are taught as literature, divine apparitions that are venerated as icons. Simmel and his epigones believed that, with its independent structures and "autopoietic systems" (Luhmann), modern culture stood opposed to human potentialities and development. Thus they saw the spirit trapped between Apollonian forces of power and form, on the one hand, and Dionysian force of freedom and experience, on the other. Given the conflict of these irreconcilable forces, tragedy came to signify the suspension of culture between (modern) life and (classical) creation. If this tension could not be resolved, the only ethical decision that made itself available was the refusal to make a choice between the two forces and the determination to keep their conflict alive and urgent. While Weber had proposed a distinction between an "ethics of conviction" and an "ethics of responsibility", beginning with Simmel, cultural philosophy opted for its own ethics of ferocious non-conviction, specifically, of formalist critique and aesthetic resistance.

The uses of tragedy here have strong moral connotations in that they are meant to depict the trials of faith among radiant, autonomous, permanent struc-

⁵⁸Hans Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*. Trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA 1985 [1979]).

tures while the promise of transcendence is constantly deferred. In the “epoch of absolute sinfulness” (Fichte), the tragic hero is “a volitional and spiritual being”⁵⁹ – he is the individual of cultivation (Stephen Dedalus, Adrian Leverkühn, Jean-Christophe Krafft) who endures with dignity the paradox of aesthetic faith (its antinomical dependence on the being of forms) and survives the crisis of modern culture with his adventist hope intact. Comparing ancient and modern tragedy in terms of their depiction of time, Spengler notes: “The sentiment of the ahistorical soul gives us a Classical tragedy of the moment, and that of the ultrahistorical soul puts before us Western tragedy that deals with the *development of a whole life*. Our tragedy arises from the feeling of an *inexorable* Logic of becoming”,⁶⁰ and it is this unavoidable course of becoming that the tragic idea presupposes. By transforming the *Geisteswissenschaften* into a cultural philosophy of objectification, and by dramatizing *Lebensphilosophie* in tragic terms, Simmel made possible the creation of *Kulturkritik* as the minima moralia of aesthetic resistance – a militant hermeneutics deployed by alienated virtuosos of cultivation against a hostile and unjust world.

Recent considerations of culture have uniformly drawn on the Self-Other dialectic, discussing the “invention” of this social, political, national, or ethnic domain in connection with its inescapable reliance on the invention of other such domains against which culture needs to be posited and positioned. Although constructionist approaches of this kind may be useful in an ethnographic context that is (national or international) policy oriented, they obscure the relevant philosophical issues in that they still follow the dialectical logic of “culture”, and therefore remain culturalist themselves. Since the late eighteenth century, the languages of culturalism have always included an extensive vocabulary of difference and otherness, which has served eloquently their separatist aspirations. In fact, the “othering” qualities of culture have been so popular and effective that they have been avidly reproduced everywhere. But the concept of culture is not based on difference or sameness. This is what it claims but this is not how it operates. Culture demands, rather than denies, the existence of other cultures.

A proper understanding of modern “culture” requires an investigation of its emergence during the iconoclastic battles of the turn of the twentieth century, when, in works like Simmel’s, *Kultur* divided into life and structure, a self-differentiation from which it has not recovered yet. “With the problem put in the terms of life-form, there can only be one task or commitment to be fulfilled: that of reestablishing the forms of life – a task proper to *Philosophie als Kultur*.”⁶¹ Since that time, since humanist *Bildung* collapsed and aesthetics began losing faith in its Hegelian incarnationist legacy, the basis of this concept is the paradox of culture, the fact that, as Simmel described it, its question is mournfully lodged in the middle of the soul-form dualism. Because this metaphysical dualism is perceived as the source of “innumerable tragedies”, the mediation of culture is

sought in order to provide reconciliation. But instead of achieving synthesis, culture turns into a paradox by producing a new estrangement – the alienation of spiritual objects from the soul and its desired cultivation. If beauty doubles the form of things into identities, culture doubles these identities into spiritual objects. Instead of effecting fusion, culture produces a play of opposite mirrors. The apple of knowledge is unripe because, by doubling beauty into autonomous perfection, culture never ripens into cultivation.

This self-inhibiting growth makes the paradox of culture a tragic one. The fate of culture is similar to that of Oedipus whose riddle-solving intelligence was so estranged from his own life. Because it is based on an internal separation that endlessly reproduces itself in the form of a tormented division, culture is innately tragic and exists in a permanent state of fear, doubt, and indecision. As a result, it is constantly engaged in rituals of self-mutilation, self-denial, and self-hatred – accused, for example, of delusion by Freud or of barbarism by Benjamin. Nowhere has this pathos been expressed more fervently than in Adorno’s denunciation: “All post-Auschwitz culture, including its urgent critique, is garbage. ... Whoever pleads for the maintenance of this radically culpable and shabby culture becomes its accomplice, while the man who says no to culture is directly furthering the barbarism which our culture showed itself to be. Not even silence gets us out of the circle.”⁶² After Simmel, the cyclical movement of the spirit toward and away from the objects of culture, set in motion by the exterminating spell of forms, cannot be avoided. After Simmel, culture, including its urgent critique, is declared guilty. The philosophy of culture, including warnings against it like Adorno’s, is a tragic enterprise.

At the same time, this philosophy has elevated its belief in an inescapable complicity to an ethics of unwordliness, as its practices of oppositional cultivation faithfully keep devising internal separations and multiplying cultural identities so that culture can be kept in a state of ever-intensifying crisis. Because of its engagement with tragedy, modern culture has sometimes considered the question of hubris, of its own legitimacy and limits. In the same section of *Negative Dialectics*, “Metaphysics and Culture”, Adorno expressed some apprehension about a “tragic posture”⁶³: “The theology of the crisis registered the fact it was abstractly and therefore idly rebelling against: that metaphysics has merged with culture”.⁶⁴ Yet, before the end of his paragraph, he reverted to translating this warning into his obsessive concern with words and the wrath of God. Metaphysics thwarts any attempt to confront the political hubris of *Kulturkritik*. So long as human creativity feels intimidated by divine prohibitions, it will remain a sole, alienated, melancholic protagonist on the tragic stage of culture, conjuring up an aesthetic politics of identity to redeem his sinful drive toward forbidden knowledge, namely, toward his classical disposition.

⁵⁹Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of the Germanic Ideology* (Berkeley 1961) 278.

⁶⁰Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West* (New York 1926 [1918]) 130.

⁶¹Cacciari (*supra* n. 37) 68.

⁶²Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*. Trans. E. B. Ashton (New York 1973 [1966]) 367.

⁶³Louis A. Ruprecht, Jr., *Tragic Posture and Tragic Vision. Against the Modern Failure of Nerve* (New York 1994).

⁶⁴Adorno (*supra* n. 62) 367.