

OF MICE AND MEN: ADORNO ON ART AND THE SUFFERING OF ANIMALS

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Theodor W. Adorno's criticism of human beings' domination of nature is a familiar topic to Adorno scholars. Its connection to the central relationship between art and nature in his aesthetics has, however, been less analysed. In the following paper, I claim that Adorno's discussion of art's truth content (*Wahrheitsgehalt*) is to be understood as art's ability to give voice to nature (both human and non-human) since it has been subjugated by the growth of civilization. I focus on repressed non-human nature and examine Adorno's interpretation of Eduard Mörike's poem 'Mausfallen-Sprüchlein' (Mousetrap rhyme). By giving voice to the repressed animal, Mörike's poem manages to point towards the possibility of a changed relationship between mice and men, between nature and humanity, which is necessary in order to achieve reconciliation amongst humans as well.

Von Mäusen und Menschen. Adorno über Kunst und Leid von Tieren

Theodor W. Adornos Kritik an der Naturbeherrschung ist ein Topos, der Adorno-Forschern geläufig ist. Weniger analysiert wurde die Beziehung dieser Kritik zum für seine Ästhetik zentralen Verhältnis zwischen Kunst und Natur. Im vorliegenden Aufsatz stelle ich die These auf, dass Adornos Diskussion des Wahrheitsgehalts von Kunst zu verstehen ist als Fähigkeit der Kunst, der (sowohl menschlichen als auch nicht-menschlichen) Natur eine Stimme zu verleihen, nachdem sie durch das Wachsen der Gesellschaft unterjocht wurde. Ich konzentriere mich auf die unterdrückte nicht-menschliche Natur und untersuche dazu Adornos Interpretation von Eduard Mörikes Gedicht „Mausfallen-Sprüchlein“. Es gibt dem unterdrückten Tier eine Stimme und kann so die Möglichkeit eines anderen Verhältnisses zwischen Mäusen und Menschen, zwischen Natur und Menschheit aufzeigen – einer Änderung, die auch notwendig ist, um eine Versöhnung unter den Menschen zu erreichen.

I. INTRODUCTION

According to Adorno, the process of civilization is intertwined with its separation from nature. Humanity has defined itself as the opposite of nature in order to control it. Through the mastery of both internal human nature (desires, needs) and external non-human nature, humanity has been able to escape nature's immediate hold. This domination of nature (*Naturbeherrschung*) has not, however, been accomplished without consequences for humanity itself. The intensified exploitation of nature has led to a kind of society that is just as coercive as nature, which is itself the object of mastery. Western capitalist society has turned into a 'second nature' (*zweite Natur*) exploiting the first.¹

¹ The concept 'second nature' is used by Hegel in *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right* as a positive description of when the individual's behaviour embodies the ethics of the society in which he or she lives. See G. W. F. Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, rev. and ed. Stephen Houlgate, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 159.

The remedy for the petrification of society into a second nature and for capitalism's false belief in endless growth at nature's expense is an acknowledgement of our own dependence on nature. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno (together with Horkheimer) writes about a 'remembrance of nature within the subject'.² According to Adorno, art remembers humanity's dependence on nature. In previous magical practice, man imitated nature in order to dominate it. The mimetic element involved in this imitation acknowledged the priority of nature, and bore witness to the kinship between humanity and nature. Even if the acknowledgement was irrational, it nevertheless contained something true – namely, the notion of affinity between (human) subject and (natural) object. With the progression of enlightenment, this affinity becomes neglected. But even though its liberation from its social and religious functions is part of the process of enlightenment, art still preserves the mimetic element and manages to bear witness to the destructive process that the domination of nature is, in spite of the progress the domination of nature has involved.³

In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno claims that a form of destructive continuity characterizes the progress of civilization: 'No universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one leading from the slingshot to the

Georg Lukács gives the concept a critical turn in *The Theory of the Novel*, where he describes society as a 'world of convention' that is 'too complex for understanding'. See Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), 62. In the early lecture 'The Idea of Natural-History' ('Die Idee der Naturgeschichte', 1932), Adorno refers to Lukács's critical use of second nature when developing his own notion of natural-history. See Theodor W. Adorno, 'The Idea of Natural-History', trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, in Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Things Beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 260–62; 'Die Idee der Naturgeschichte', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003, hereafter: *GS*), 1:355–58. In this essay Adorno develops an idea of nature as historical in itself (influenced by Walter Benjamin's discussion of allegory in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*) and history as petrified second nature (influenced by Lukács). Adorno's point is that when we wrongly regard nature as the opposite of history and conceive it as static, our history and our society become all the more like this false conception of nature: human history becomes petrified second nature. I discuss Adorno's concept of natural-history and second nature further in my dissertation, *Att uttrycka det undanträngda: Theodor W. Adorno om konst, natur och sanning* [Expressing the repressed: Theodor W. Adorno on art, nature and truth] (Gothenburg: Glänta Produktion, 2009), 65–74. See also Mattias Martinson, *Perseverance without Doctrine: Adorno, Self-Critique, and the Ends of Academic Theology* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2000), 115–27, and Max Pensky, 'Natural History: The Life and Afterlife of a Concept in Adorno', *Critical Horizons* 5 (2004): 227–58.

² Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 32; *GS*, vol. 3, *Dialektik der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente*, 58: 'Eingedenken der Natur im Subjekt'.

³ See *ibid.* 4–13; 22–34.

megaton bomb.⁴ Through its ability to reflect on itself, art reveals this violent development and constitutes a sort of pain memory of the sensuous, a memory of how the priority of the object and the material – which originates in humanity's dependence on nature – has been denied and repressed throughout history. For Adorno, pain, including mental pain, always has a physical aspect: 'The physical moment tells our knowledge that suffering ought not to be, that things should be different. "Woe speaks: Go!"⁵ And he continues: 'Hence the convergence of specific materialism with criticism, with social change in practice.'⁶ When Adorno quotes Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* – 'Woe speaks: Go!' – it is consequently not Nietzsche's acceptance of life as suffering that he refers to. Instead it is an attempt to extract the truth content in Nietzsche's observation of the importance of the somatic impulses, which Adorno connects to the need for a radically transformed society. Giving voice to suffering is a truth condition according to Adorno.⁷ When suffering is lent a voice, the possibility of ending suffering is also expressed: 'Woe speaks: Go!' It is by lending its voice to suffering that art is able to point to the possibility of a transformed relationship between humanity and nature. According to Adorno, art does not in itself constitute reconciliation between man and nature, as Schelling suggested in *System of Transcendental Idealism*,⁸ nor does he regard art as a stage in this reconciliation, as Hegel does in his lectures on aesthetics.⁹ Art can only hint at reconciliation between man and nature by expressing nature's suffering.

Paying attention to the suffering that the process of enlightenment has demanded, and still demands, is for Adorno a step on the way to a radically transformed societal practice, a practice worth its name – in other words the utopian practice that can be gathered indirectly, by way of art's testimony, from the existing nature-dominating practice. I wish to stress that one factor making his thinking so important, which hitherto has been overlooked by most Adorno scholars, is that he does not speak only of human suffering. Thus Raymond Geuss claims: 'Adorno's philosophy can be seen as a philosophy of suffering

⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1990), 320; *Negative Dialektik* in *GS*, 6:314: 'Keine Universalgeschichte führt vom Wilden zur Humanität, sehr wohl eine von der Steinschleuder zur Megabombe.'

⁵ *Ibid.*, 203; 203: 'Das leibhaftige Moment meldet der Erkenntnis an, daß Leiden nicht sein, daß es anders werden solle. "Weh spricht: vergeh."'

⁶ *Ibid.*: 'Darum konvergiert das spezifisch Materialistische mit dem Kritischen, mit gesellschaftlich verändernder Praxis.'

⁷ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 17–18; *Negative Dialektik*, 29.

⁸ F. W. J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, trans. Peter Heath (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 231–32.

⁹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. 1, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), 99–101.

spirit, a way of articulating the pain spirit experiences when confronted with a world that thwarts its aspirations, and as such a criticism of that world.¹⁰ But Adorno also takes the suffering of spirit's Other, that is to say, that of the non-human victims of (seemingly) enlightened reason, into account. Such an account is not derogatory of the enormous human suffering that has been part of the process of enlightenment. Rather it is a prerequisite for taking human suffering seriously. It is fundamental for Adorno that we retain the notion of a possible reconciliation between humanity and nature, not only for our own sake but also for the sake of what is not our own, for the sake of the non-human (including the non-human in us). A reorientation to a reconciliation between subjects alone – which has been the focus of several members of the second generation of Critical Theory¹¹ – blocks out this important trait in Adorno's thinking.

The role of animals in Adorno's philosophy is a theme that until quite recently has been completely ignored in Adorno scholarship. Recent decades have, however, witnessed a small but growing interest in it.¹² Adorno also considers

¹⁰ Raymond Geuss, 'Suffering and Knowledge in Adorno', *Constellations* 12 (2005): 7. Also Robert Hullot-Kentor claims in his introduction to Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* that it concerns itself with 'the unconscious, mimetically written history of human suffering, against which enlightenment elsewhere seals itself off' (emphasis added). Robert Hullot-Kentor, 'Translator's Introduction', in Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, eds. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London and New York: Continuum, 2002), xiii.

¹¹ For example, Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, 2 vols, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge: Polity, 1984–87), and Albrecht Wellmer, *Zur Dialektik von Moderne und Postmoderne: Vernunftkritik nach Adorno* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985).

¹² Fredric Jameson briefly considers Adorno's and Horkheimer's sketch 'Man and Beast' from *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. See Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 1990), 96. At the end of his speech upon being presented with the Adorno award in Frankfurt am Main in 2001, Derrida emphasized the importance of animals in Adorno's thinking. See Jacques Derrida, *Fichus: Discours de Francfort* (Paris: Galilée, 2002), 54–55. All the contributions in the essay volume *Das steinerne Herz der Unendlichkeit erweichen: Beiträge zu einer kritischen Theorie für die Befreiung der Tiere*, ed. Susann Witt-Stahl (Aschaffenburg: Alibri, 2007), examine the relationship between human beings and animals in critical theory, and some specifically discuss Adorno's ideas on this relationship. The role of art in the liberation of animals is, however, only briefly touched upon in a few of the articles in the volume. See, for example, Arnd Hoffmann, "'Ein Königstiger als Vegetarianer": Zur Kritik an der Utopielosigkeit von Antispeziesismus und Veganismus', in Witt-Stahl, *Das steinerne Herz*, 191, and Esther Leslie and Ben Watson, 'Tiere, Geschichte und Kunsttriebe', in *ibid.*, 217–18. Christina Gerhardt discusses Adorno's ideas on the relationship between animals and human beings in 'The Ethics of Animals in Adorno and Kafka', *New German Critique* 97 (2006): 159–78. Her analysis is, however, a bit ambiguous in its discussion of animals and nature, since it constantly refers to Adorno's ideas as 'the rhetoric of nature', 'Adorno's engagement with tropes of nature', and 'the trope of animals', *ibid.*, 159–60. In my opinion, this does not do justice to his thinking. Content and form are certainly intimately connected, but Gerhardt's overemphasis of the latter in her discussion

animals and our treatment of them in his aesthetics, for example, in his interpretation, in *Aesthetic Theory*, of the nineteenth-century German poet Eduard Mörike's poem 'Mousetrap Rhyme' ('Mausfallen-Sprüchlein'). Animals are part of subjugated nature. In the following, I will analyse why Adorno holds that the suffering of nature and animals needs to be expressed by art, and by examining his interpretation of Mörike's poem, I wish to elucidate how this expression can be achieved.

II. NATURAL BEAUTY

In line with the logic that lending voice to suffering entails an expression of the wish for things to be otherwise, art's remembrance of the subjugation and denial of nature also means that art points to the possibility of a realized nature. In art we glimpse the freedom that could become reality if we acknowledged ourselves as part of nature. Nature and freedom are not complete opposites. Without acknowledgement of nature, freedom cannot be realized. For this reason, Adorno is critical of Kant's placement of humanity above nature. In Adorno's opinion, the idea of humanity's supremacy limits Kant's philosophy and aesthetics:

Rather than that, as Kant thought, spirit in the face of nature becomes aware of its own superiority, it becomes aware of its own natural essence. This is the moment when the subject, vis-à-vis the sublime, is moved to tears. Recollection of nature breaks the arrogance of his self-positioning: 'My tears well up; earth, I am returning to you.' [From Goethe's *Faust*] With that, the self exits, spiritually, from its imprisonment in itself. Something of freedom flashes up that philosophy, culpably mistaken, reserves for its opposite, the glorification of the subject. The spell that the subject casts over nature imprisons the subject as well: Freedom awakens in the consciousness of its affinity with nature.¹³

of Adorno is problematic since it risks concealing that he is indeed concerned with the concrete, suffering animals, and nature. Gerhardt also discusses Adorno's ideas on animals in 'Thinking With: Animals in Schopenhauer, Horkheimer, and Adorno', in *Critical Theory and Animal Liberation*, ed. John Sanbonmatsu (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), 137–46. The volume contains another essay on Adorno and animals, which briefly discusses his ideas on the relationship between art and animals. See Eduardo Mendieta, 'Animal Is to Kantianism as Jew Is to Fascism: Adorno's Bestiary', in *ibid.*, 153–54.

¹³ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 276; *GS*, vol. 7, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 410: 'Weniger wird der Geist, wie Kant es möchte, vor der Natur seiner eigenen Superiorität gewahr als seiner eigenen Naturhaftigkeit. Dieser Augenblick bewegt das Subjekt vorm Erhabenen zum Weinen. Eingedenken von Natur löst den Trotz seiner Selbstsetzung: "Die Träne quillt, die Erde hat mich wieder!" Darin tritt das Ich, geistig, aus der Gefangenschaft in sich selbst heraus. Etwas von der Freiheit leuchtet auf, welche die Philosophie mit schuldhaftem Irrtum dem Gegenteil, der Selbstherrlichkeit des Subjekts, vorbehält. Der Bann, den das Subjekt um Natur legt, befängt auch es: Freiheit regt sich im Bewußtsein seiner Naturähnlichkeit.'

Adorno regards Kant's account of the sublime as a description of natural beauty, well aware of Kant's strict separation of the beautiful and the sublime. According to Adorno, the dynamic sublime and the opposition between humanity and nature that appears therein is a more adequate description of the aesthetic experience than the notion of pleasure appertaining to formal characteristics. He claims that 'this basic dissonant character of all modern art in a wide sense [is] really an imprint of this dialectic, which Kant came across in natural beauty'.¹⁴ As with Kant, the sublime experience according to Adorno originates in a conflict between man and nature. For Adorno, however, nature is sublime in itself: 'Given that the sublime is supposed to be felt in the face of nature, the theory of subjective constitution implies that nature itself is sublime: self-reflection in the face of its sublimity anticipates something of a reconciliation with nature.'¹⁵ But if Kant admitted nature to be sublime in itself, it would undermine his belief in the supremacy of reason.

The idea of the supremacy of human reason is reproduced in Hegel's depreciation of natural beauty. Artistic beauty is ranked higher than natural beauty because it is more thoroughly mediated by spirit or reason.¹⁶ Adorno's attempt to reintroduce natural beauty into aesthetics is a corrective to the idealistic belief in the superiority of human reason. He argues:

Natural beauty vanished from aesthetics as a result of the burgeoning domination of the concept of freedom and human dignity, which was inaugurated by Kant and then rigorously transplanted into aesthetics by Schiller and Hegel; in accord with this concept nothing in the world is worthy of attention except that for which the autonomous subject has itself to thank. The truth of such freedom for the subject, however, is at the same time unfreedom: unfreedom for the other. For this reason the turn against natural beauty, in spite of the immeasurable progress it made possible in the comprehending of art as spiritual, does not lack an element of destructiveness, just as the concept of dignity does not lack it in its turn against nature. [...] If the case of natural beauty were pending, dignity would be found culpable for having raised the human animal above the animal.¹⁷

¹⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, *Nachgelassene Schriften: Vorlesungen*, vol. 3, *Ästhetik (1958/59)*, ed. Eberhard Ortland (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2009), 54: 'grundsätzlich dissonierende Charakter aller in einem umfassenden Sinn modernen Kunst [ist] eigentlich Ausdruck jener Dialektik, auf die Kant im Naturschönen gestoßen ist.'

¹⁵ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 197; *Ästhetische Theorie*, 293: 'Indem [...] Erhabenes angesichts der Natur soll gefühlt werden können, wird der subjektiven Konstitutionstheorie gemäß Natur ihrerseits erhaben, Selbstbesinnung angesichts ihres Erhabenen antezipiert etwas von der Versöhnung mit ihr.'

¹⁶ See Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 1–2.

¹⁷ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 62; *Ästhetische Theorie*, 98–99: 'Das Naturschöne verschwand aus der Ästhetik durch die sich ausbreitende Herrschaft des von Kant inaugurierten, konsequent erst von Schiller und Hegel in die Ästhetik transplantierten Begriffs von Freiheit und Menschenwürde, demzufolge nichts in der Welt zu achten sei, als was

Discussing the concept of natural beauty in his lectures on aesthetics, Adorno criticizes the ‘philosophical anthropocentrism’ involved in Hegel’s neglect of natural beauty.¹⁸ For Adorno there is no philosophy of art without reflecting on the relationship between nature and art, a relationship which ‘is far more dialectical than Hegel made it out to be’, and only from a reflection on this relationship do we receive the categories which help us understand what art is.¹⁹ In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno states:

Wholly artifactual, the artwork seems to be the opposite of what is not made, nature. As pure antitheses, however, each refers to the other: nature to the experience of a mediated and objectified world, the artwork to nature as the mediated plenipotentiary of immediacy. Therefore reflection on natural beauty is irrevocably requisite to the theory of art.²⁰

Natural beauty has a truth content that artworks need to mediate in order for them to have truth content in their turn. What is essential in natural beauty is, according to Adorno, that it points to the fact that nature transcends our definition of it: ‘What is beautiful in nature is what appears to be *more* than what is literally there. Without receptivity there would be no such objective expression, but it is not reducible to the subject; natural beauty points to the primacy of the object in subjective experience.’²¹ By claiming ‘the primacy of the object in subjective experience’, Adorno is not proposing a naive realism, that is to say, a belief that objects present themselves to us as they are in themselves.²² The subject does not have access to things/objects/nature without mediation, but the point that Adorno is making is that this mediation

das autonome Subjekt sich selbst verdankt. Die Wahrheit solcher Freiheit für es ist aber zugleich Unwahrheit: Unfreiheit fürs Andere. Darum fehlt der Wendung gegen das Naturschöne, trotz des unermesslichen Fortschritts in der Auffassung von Kunst als eines Geistigen, den sie ermöglichte, das zerstörerische Moment so wenig, wie dem Begriff der Würde gegen Natur schlechthin. [...] Machte man einen Revisionsprozeß ums Naturschöne anhängig, er träfe Würde als die Selbsterhöhung des Tiers Mensch über die Tierheit.’

¹⁸ Adorno, *Ästhetik (1958/59)*, 41.

¹⁹ Ibid.: ‘weit dialektischer ist, als es bei Hegel sich darstellt’.

²⁰ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 62; *Ästhetische Theorie*, 98: ‘Ganz und gar von Menschen gemacht, steht es [das Kunstwerk] seinem Anschein nach nicht Gemachtem, der Natur, gegenüber. Als pure Antithesen aber sind beide aufeinander verwiesen: Natur auf die Erfahrung einer vermittelten, vergegenständlichten Welt, das Kunstwerk auf Natur, den vermittelten Statthalter von Unmittelbarkeit. Darum ist die Besinnung über das Naturschöne der Kunsttheorie unabdingbar.’

²¹ Ibid., 70–71 (emphasis added); 111: ‘Schön ist an der Natur, was als mehr erscheint, denn was es buchstäblich an Ort und Stelle ist. Ohne Rezeptivität wäre kein solcher objektiver Ausdruck, aber er reduziert sich nicht aufs Subjekt; das Naturschöne deutet auf den Vorrang des Objekts in der subjektiven Erfahrung.’

²² See Adorno, *Negative Dialectic*, 184; *Negative Dialektik*, 185.

does not exhaust them.²³ Mediation is not in itself defective either. According to Adorno, experience, as Deborah Cook has pointed out, 'involves the encounter of an embodied subject with an equally corporeal, physical object'.²⁴ If we take the mimetic element in experience seriously, it also implies treating nature and animals as subjects, as ends in themselves. In his lectures on aesthetics, Adorno speaks of the impulse to imitate as 'the impulse to so to speak make yourself into the thing you stand before, or make the thing you stand before into a self [*einem selber*]'.²⁵ But when the mimetic element of experience is denied, and the mediated relationship between a corporeal, historical, and sensuous subject and an equally corporeal physical object is abstracted into a relation of an immaterial, ahistorical, non-sensuous thinking to an object that it subordinates, then mediation becomes distortion.

This kind of distorted, false mediation is what according to Adorno characterizes current nature-dominating society and identity thinking, which tries to reduce the nonidentical other to the identical same. And this is why Adorno connects the 'more' of natural beauty with the suffering of nature.²⁶ What is essential in the experience of natural beauty is that it indicates that nature is more than what we determine it to be (theoretically), and that it is more than dominated, exploited, and repressed (in practice) or, rather, that *nature could be more*, that it has a potential that it is not allowed to develop as a result of being mastered by human beings, which makes nature suffer. As we have seen, Adorno connects natural beauty with dissonance. In his lectures on aesthetics, Adorno states:

Every dissonance is in a way a remembrance of suffering [*Eingedenken des Leidens*], to which the domination of nature, the dominating society, ultimately subjects nature; and only in the shape of this suffering, only in the shape of longing – and dissonance is always essentially longing and suffering – only therein does repressed nature find its voice at all, and this is why dissonance is not only attached to this element of negativity, of suffering, but is at the same time always attached to happiness, the happiness of giving voice to nature [...].²⁷

²³ See *ibid.* 172; 174.

²⁴ Deborah Cook, 'Adorno's Critical Materialism', *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 32 (2006): 722.

²⁵ Adorno, *Ästhetik (1958/59)*, 70: 'der Impuls gleichsam, sich selber zu der Sache zu machen oder die Sache zu einem selber zu machen, die einem gegenüber steht'.

²⁶ See, for example, Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 64; *Ästhetische Theorie*, 102.

²⁷ Adorno, *Ästhetik (1958/59)*, 66: 'Jede Dissonanz ist gewissermaßen ein Stück Eingedenken des Leidens, dem die Naturbeherrschung, dem überhaupt schließlich eine herrschaftliche Gesellschaft die Natur aussetzt, und nur in Gestalt dieses Leidens, nur in Gestalt der Sehnsucht – und Dissonanz ist ja immer wesentlich Sehnsucht und Leiden –, nur darin findet die unterdrückte Natur überhaupt ihre Stimme. Und deshalb haftet an der Dissonanz nicht nur dieses Moment des Ausdrucks der Negativität, dieses Leidens, sondern immer zugleich auch das Glück, der Natur ihre Stimme zu geben [...].'

The more of natural beauty is thus an expression of suffering which also points to the possible realization of nature. This realization is held back by a social practice that sees nature as a resource to be exploited, and by a form of thinking that sees itself as the opposite of nature. The indirectness of nature's more – that it only indicates that nature *could* be more – is also what makes natural beauty so problematic. When Adorno tries to think natural beauty anew, he is very much aware of the difficulties in this 'reorientation of aesthetic theory to natural beauty'.²⁸ That is why he emphasizes the mediatedness of our understanding of nature.

Adorno's notion of the more of natural beauty implies that no true nature, in other words no realized nature, exists yet. We cannot therefore know the extent of nature's suffering. We do not have immediate access to such a perspective, since it is the perspective of a realized nature, in other words the perspective of reconciliation.²⁹ What we have access to in existing society is a nature for us, which is to say that our notion of nature is mediated by a nature-dominating history and a nature-dominating society: 'You cannot bring non-mutilated nature to speak, because this non-mutilated nature, pure nature, that is a nature that has not gone through society's mediation process, does not exist', Adorno argues in his lectures on aesthetics from 1958–59.³⁰ Instead, he claims, 'it is the task of art to give voice to mutilated nature, that is, nature always in the specific historical state in which it is situated through its historical mediation'.³¹ It is this mediation and its mutilation of nature that we become aware of in the experience of the more of natural beauty. Through this, however, the more of natural beauty also shows the possibility of the more of a second nature: the possibility of a radically different society, reconciled with nature. In 'On Subject and

²⁸ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 63; *Ästhetische Theorie*, 99: 'die Hinlenkung der ästhetischen Theorie aufs Naturschöne'.

²⁹ Alison Stone claims that Adorno needs this line of argument (since otherwise his account of nature's expression would conflict with his idea that what nature expresses cannot be conceptualized), but that he does not provide it. She instead extrapolates it from Herbert Marcuse's 1936 paper 'The Concept of Essence' ('Zum Begriff des Wesens'), which has a similar argument concerning human suffering. See Alison Stone, 'Adorno and the Disenchantment of Nature', *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 32 (2006): 245–46. But there is no need to take the detour, since this is precisely what Adorno means with the notion of the more of natural beauty: through the experience of nature's more we become aware of the fact that nature has capacities that cannot be realized in today's society, but we cannot know precisely what these capacities are.

³⁰ Adorno, *Ästhetik (1958/59)*, 125: 'Die unverstümmelte Natur kann man nicht zum Sprechen bringen, denn diese unverstümmelte Natur, eine reine Natur, also eine Natur, die nicht durch die Vermittlungsprozesse der Gesellschaft hindurchgegangen wäre, gibt es nicht.'

³¹ *Ibid.*, 125–26: 'die Aufgabe der Kunst ist, die verstümmelte Natur, also die Natur jeweils in der Gestalt, in der sie auf einem bestimmten Stand der Geschichte durch ihre historischen Vermittlungen hindurch sich befindet, zum Sprechen zu bringen'.

Object', Adorno characterizes reconciliation, or peace, as 'the state of differentiation without domination, with the differentiated participating in each other'.³² In a reconciled society, we would thus acknowledge that we are part of nature, but we would also respect its nonidentity with our attempts to determine it.

The problem with natural beauty in today's society, Adorno claims, is that it threatens to legitimize the unreconciled and nature-dominating world, since such an experience risks conveying that nature does not suffer quite so much if it can give voice to this suffering itself.³³ This is to say that in our intensely nature-dominating times, the experience of natural beauty threatens to conceal that this experience is dependent on the domination of nature. That is why natural beauty must be mediated through art (hence the line on sublimity quoted from Goethe's *Faust*).

Artworks cannot, as we have seen, profess to have immediate access to nature. In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno writes: 'The more strictly artworks abstain from rank natural growth and the replication of nature, the more the successful ones approach nature.'³⁴ In other words, successful artworks do not engage in naturalistic imitation, nor do they depict beautiful (sublime) nature:

The green forest of German impressionism is of no higher dignity than those views of the Königssee painted for hotel lobbies. French impressionists, by contrast, knew very well why they so seldom chose pure nature as a subject; why, when they did not turn to artificial subjects like ballerinas and racing jockeys or the dead nature of Sisley's winter scenes, they interspersed their landscapes with emblems of civilization that contributed to the constructive skeletonization of form, as Pissarro did, for example.³⁵

Adorno claims in an oft-quoted passage: 'Art does not imitate nature, not even individual instances of natural beauty, but natural beauty as such.'³⁶ He continues:

³² Theodor W. Adorno, 'On Subject and Object', in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 247; 'Zu Subjekt und Objekt', in *GS*, 10.2:743: 'der Stand eines Unterschiedenen ohne Herrschaft, in dem das Unterschiedene teilhat aneinander'. See also Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 150: 'Utopia would be above identity and above contradiction; it would be a togetherness in diversity'; *Negative Dialektik*, 153: 'Utopie wäre über der Identität und über dem Widerspruch, ein Miteinander des Verschiedenen.'

³³ See Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 67–69; *Ästhetische Theorie*, 106–8.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 77; 120: 'Je strenger die Kunstwerke der Naturwüchsigkeit und der Abbildung von Natur sich enthalten, desto mehr nähern die gelungenen sich der Natur.'

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 67; 105–6: 'Der grüne Wald deutscher Impressionisten hat keine höhere Dignität als der Königssee der Hotelbildmaler, und die französischen spürten genau, warum sie so selten reine Natur als Sujet wählten, warum sie, wenn nicht einem so Künstlichen wie Balletteusen und Rennreitern oder der erstorbenen Natur von Sisleys Winter zugekehrt, ihre Landschaften mit zivilisatorischen Emblemen durchsetzten, die zur konstruktiven Skelettierung der Form beitrugen, etwa bei Pissarro.'

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 72; 113: 'Kunst ahmt nicht Natur nach, auch nicht einzelnes Naturschönes, doch das Naturschöne an sich.'

'This denominates not only the aporia of natural beauty but the aporia of aesthetics as a whole. Its object is determined negatively, as indeterminable.'³⁷ What Adorno means is that art does not imitate the beautiful natural object or phenomenon as such, but natural beauty in its capacity of being a sign for something else, something that cannot be determined by us. In other words, art imitates the *more* of natural beauty. Adorno describes aesthetic objectivity as 'the reflection of the being-in-itself of nature,' and claims: 'The being-in-itself to which artworks are devoted is not the imitation of something real but rather the anticipation of a being-in-itself that does not yet exist.'³⁸ An example of this is the music of Anton Webern. Adorno claims that 'in Webern's most authentic works the pure tone, to which they are reduced by the strength of subjective sensibility, reverses dialectically into a natural sound: that of an eloquent nature, certainly, its language, not the portrayal of a part of nature.'³⁹ In this way the seemingly most humanly determined artefact, the artwork, anticipates nature liberated from domination:

The artwork, through and through θέσει, something human, is the plenipotentiary of φύσει, of what is not merely for the subject, of what, in Kantian terms, would be the thing itself. The identity of the artwork with the subject is as complete as the identity of nature with itself should some day be.⁴⁰

Such a liberated nature does not yet exist, and in order not to betray it, the artwork cannot explicitly present utopia. The artwork can only point to the reconciliation of humanity and nature indirectly, by lending a voice to suffering nature.⁴¹

III. 'MOUSETRAP RHYME'

To elucidate his ideas on how an artwork may point to a reconciliation of humanity and nature by giving voice to repressed nature, I will look closer at Adorno's interpretation of Mörike's 'Mousetrap Rhyme'. Adorno discusses Mörike in

³⁷ Ibid.: 'Das nennt, über die Aporie des Naturschönen hinaus, die von Ästhetik insgesamt. Ihr Gegenstand bestimmt sich als unbestimmbar, negativ.'

³⁸ Ibid., 77; 120–21: 'Widerschein des Ansichseins der Natur'; 'Das Ansichsein, dem die Kunstwerke nachhängen, ist nicht Imitation eines Wirklichen sondern Vorwegnahme eines Ansichseins, das noch gar nicht ist.'

³⁹ Ibid., 78; 121: 'in den authentischsten Gebilden Anton Weberns der reine Ton, auf den sie sich kraft subjektiver Sensibilität reduzieren, umschlägt in den Naturlaut; den einer beredten Natur freilich, ihre Sprache, nicht ins Abbild eines Stücks von ihr'.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 63; 99: 'Das Kunstwerk, durch und durch θέσει, ein Menschliches, vertritt, was φύσει, kein bloßes fürs Subjekt, was, kantisch gesprochen, Ding an sich wäre. So sehr fällt das Kunstwerk als sein Identisches ins Subjekt, wie einmal Natur sie selbst sein müßte.'

⁴¹ See *ibid.*, 69; 108.

the essay 'On Lyric Poetry and Society' as well. Here Adorno writes that Mörike, 'who is considered one of our naive artists,' has written poems that 'are virtuoso pieces unsurpassed by the masters of *l'art pour l'art*'.⁴² Mörike's 'Mousetrap Rhyme' is, as Sianne Ngai has observed, 'the only poem cited in its entirety in *Aesthetic Theory*'.⁴³ The poem (in Robert Hullot-Kentor's translation) reads:

The child circles the mousetrap three times and chants:

Little guest, little house.
Dearest tiny or grown-up mouse
boldly pay us a visit tonight
when the moon shines bright!
But close the door back of you tight,
you hear?
And careful for your little tail!
After dinner we will sing
After dinner we will spring
And make a little dance:
Swish, Swish!
My old cat will probably be dancing with.⁴⁴

Taken at face value, confined to its discursive elements, the poem signifies, according to Adorno, 'no more than sadistic identification with what civilized custom has done to an animal disdained as a parasite'.⁴⁵ Since, however, we are dealing with a work of art, Adorno argues:

⁴² Theodor W. Adorno, 'On Lyric Poetry and Society', in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 49; 'Rede über Lyrik und Gesellschaft', in *GS*, vol. 11, *Noten zur Literatur*, 63: 'den man zu den naiven Künstlern zählt'; 'Virtuosenstücke, die kein Meister des *l'art pour l'art* überbot'.

⁴³ Sianne Ngai, 'The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde', *Critical Inquiry* 31 (2005): 846. Ngai's short analysis of Adorno's close reading of Mörike's poem at the end of her article makes no connections, however, to Adorno's ideas on the possibility of a reconciliation between human beings and nature/animals, but instead regards Adorno's interpretation as emphasizing 'art's distinctive power of theorizing powerlessness', *ibid.*, 847.

⁴⁴ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 123–24; *Ästhetische Theorie*, 187–88. German original: 'Das Kind geht dreimal um die Falle und spricht:/ Kleine Gäste, kleines Haus./ Liebe Mäusin oder Maus,/ Stell dich nur kecklich ein/ Heut nacht bei Mondenschein!/ Mach aber die Tür fein hinter dir zu,/ Hörst du?/ Dabei hüte dein Schwänzchen!/ Nach Tische singen wir,/ Nach Tische springen wir/ Und machen ein Tänzchen:/ Witt witt!/ Meine alte Katze tanzt wahrscheinlich mit.' Eduard Mörike, 'Mausfallen-Sprüchlein', in *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Herbert G. Göpfert (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1964), 216.

⁴⁵ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 123; *Ästhetische Theorie*, 187: 'die sadistische Identifikation mit dem, was zivilisiertes Brauchtum den als Parasiten geächteten Tieren antut'.

The child's taunt, 'My old cat will probably be dancing with' – if it really is a taunt and not the involuntarily friendly image of child, cat, and mouse dancing, the two animals on their hind legs – once appropriated by the poem, no longer has the last word.⁴⁶

Reducing the poem to a taunt would be the same as ignoring its social content, Adorno claims, and continues (and it is worth quoting the following passage at length before analysing it):

The poem is the nonjudgmental reflex of language on a miserable, socially conditioned ritual, and as such it transcends it by subordinating itself to it. The poem's gesture, which points to this ritual as if nothing else were possible, holds court over the gapless immanence of the ritual by turning the force of self-evidence into an indictment of that ritual. Art judges exclusively by abstaining from judgment [...]. Form, which shapes verse into the echo of a mythical epigram, negates its fatefulness. Echo reconciles.⁴⁷

Mörike's poem cannot explicitly condemn the social habit of killing mice by setting mousetraps. If it did, it would not be a poem but a judgement and as such it could easily be set aside. Art's synthesis is similar to conceptual synthesis, but it does not result in a judgement.⁴⁸ If the poem would venture into a debate on the detestability of mousetraps it would be the end of it as a poem (and probably also as a contribution to the debate). The poem would be as lost as the mouse in the trap. Nor is the poem able to paint an explicit utopia of a reconciled society where children, mice, and cats dance together and where no one is able to refer to the other as parasite. If the poem gave a false air of the existence of such a world (even if merely in the realm of art), it would only become an alibi for the world outside art to go on, for business as usual. It is only by withholding judgement that the poem can pass sentence on our treatment of an animal we regard as a parasite. The poem must abstain from judgement in order to produce the view of the victim – by showing what happens with the immediate in a universally mediated world – and give the victim some sort of redress, by making its voice heard.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 124; 188: 'Der Hohn des Kindes "Meine alte Katze tanzt wahrscheinlich mit", wenn es denn durchaus Hohn sein soll und nicht das unwillentlich freundliche Bild eines gemeinsamen Tanzes von Kind, Katze und Maus, mit den beiden Tieren auf den Hinterbeinen, ist, einmal vom Gedicht zugeeignet, nicht länger das letzte Wort, das er behält.'

⁴⁷ Ibid.: 'Urteilsloser Reflex der Sprache auf einen abscheulichen, sozial eingeübten Ritus, übersteigt es diesen, indem es ihm sich einordnet. Der Gestus, der darauf deutet, als wäre es anders gar nicht möglich, verklagt, wie es ist, durch Selbstverständlichkeit, die lückenlose Immanenz des Ritus hält Gericht über diesen. Nur durch Enthaltung vom Urteil urteilt Kunst [...]. Die Form, welche die Verse zum Nachhall eines mythischen Spruchs fügt, hebt deren Gesinnung auf. Echo versöhnt.'

⁴⁸ Ibid., 123; 187.

Mörike's poem does not explicitly condemn (this would, according to Adorno, make the poem a bad work of art), but instead incorporates the custom of killing mice in traps. This seemingly simple and natural custom is transformed by the poem, that is, by an artistic form, exposing the custom as the socially constructed ritual that it is. In this lies the poem's critique. The artistic transformation of the execution of mice into something mythical (at the level both of content/theme and of form, which cannot be strictly separated) – the three turns around the mousetrap, the moonlight, the special words recited, all of which give associations to an important mythical rite taking place – and at the same time into something a bit ridiculous – the ritual is performed by a child and it is an animal considered the lowest of the low that is being sacrificed – the whole act is given a tone of absurdity. When Adorno claims that the 'poem's gesture [...] points to this ritual as if nothing else were possible', it is a gesture saying 'Comment c'est', that is to say, how it is – namely, like this and no other way.⁴⁹ But because of its unyieldingness, this gesture changes into an absurdity, and the poem is thus transformed into a condemnation of the ritual. The ritual is thereby exposed as a second nature, that is, as a social custom. Through this exposure, the potential for change appears: it does not have to be this way at all, it could be different, it *ought* to be different. The execution of mice appears absurd, and not only in the world of poetry. 'Mousetrap Rhyme' manages to show social reality as absurd by exposing the custom of killing mice as a ritual that is as mythical and irrational as we now regard the sacrificial rites that were practised at the 'primitive' stage of human social development. In reality, the ritual of killing mice and rats by setting traps is even more irrational since it gives the illusion of being something more than a rite – namely, a rational procedure, a part of the enlightened society that has repudiated myths and rites. Mörike's poem manages to reveal that a society that defines certain animals as parasites and vermin to be exterminated is not yet enlightened enough.

In Adorno's interpretation, 'Mousetrap Rhyme' is a determined negation of such a society, our society. Through this determined negation the poem manages to hold on to the possibility of a radically different society, a society where humanity has reconciled to with its own likeness to animals (*Tierähnlichkeit*).⁵⁰ In such

⁴⁹ See *ibid.*, 19; 36, where he writes about Kafka's works as being characterized by this 'Comment c'est'. (*Comment c'est* is the title of Samuel Beckett's last full-length novel from 1961.) See also *ibid.*, 133; 200–201: 'Artworks say what is more than the existing, and they do this exclusively by making a constellation of how it is, "Comment c'est"; 'Die Kunstwerke sagen, was mehr ist als das Seiende, einzig, indem sie zur Konstellation bringen, wie es ist, "Comment c'est"'.
⁵⁰ See *ibid.*, 119; 181–82.

a society a mouse would be something other than (that is, nonidentical to) what we now identify it as when we refer to it as vermin. In such a society it would no longer be possible to deprecate mice by calling them vermin, because such a term would have exposed society's (un)true second nature, revealing that it is a human construction, not something given by nature. When the absurdity of the mouse execution ritual has been laid bare, the taunt about the participation of the cat in the dance starts passing into precisely the reconciled image of cat, mouse, and child together in a dance, which Adorno mentions in passing in the passage from *Aesthetic Theory* quoted above. This transition is, however, the work of negation. There is no explicit description of reconciliation, of utopia; it appears only implicitly.⁵¹

Mörike's poem gives voice to the repressed, suffering, and deformed mouse in the trap. The poem does not depict a utopia; it does not claim to know what a mouse would be beyond our definition of it or what a society in which mice were not defined in this way would look like. Mörike's poem only hints, by the determinate negation of humanity's (and our society's) definition of the mouse as a parasite that ought to be executed, that the mouse is *more* than this. This is accomplished by giving voice to the suffering mouse: 'Woe speaks: Go!' The gesture of 'Mousetrap Rhyme' reveals the poem as a construction (something that simultaneously reveals the social construction of the mouse as a vermin precisely as a construction), and is the unbendingness of the poem's *comment c'est*. It is this unbendingness that punctuates the mythical, illusory unity, and exposes the absurdity of the social ritual of killing mice in traps.

As we have seen, Adorno claims that art cannot depict realized, reconciled nature as if it existed, but must, instead, present it in its socio-historical guise: as repressed. This is also the case in 'Mousetrap Rhyme'. The utopia only presents itself in negative shape. Mice and men, nature and spirit, are not presented as reconciled. Only by giving voice to nature and animals in their repressed state is the possibility of a transformed condition given indirect expression. Lambert Zuidervaart claims that Adorno's idea of the primacy of the object lacks 'any indication that the object can also be a subject'.⁵² But when one focuses on the role of animals and nature in Adorno's ideas on art, one is struck by the emphatic

⁵¹ Adorno's anthropomorphic description of the animals dancing on their hind legs in the indirectly conjured-up image of reconciliation in 'Mousetrap Rhyme' may be illuminated by the following passage: 'It is only through humanization that nature is to be restored the rights that human domination took from it.' Adorno, 'On Lyric Poetry', 41; 'Rede über Lyrik', 53: 'Erst durch Vermenschlichung soll der Natur das Recht abermals zugebracht werden, das menschliche Naturbeherrschung ihr entzog.'

⁵² Lambert Zuidervaart, *Social Philosophy after Adorno* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 119.

call for an extension of subject-hood to include spirit's Other. In our unreconciled society art reminds us of the mimetic approach that respects the Other as a subject. Sometimes Adorno even seems to suggest that animals (at least non-domesticated ones) in themselves are plenipotentiaries of utopia:

The unreality of games gives notice that reality is not yet real. Unconsciously they rehearse the right life. The relation of children to animals depends entirely on the fact that Utopia goes disguised in the creatures whom Marx even begrudged the surplus value they contribute as workers. In existing without any purpose recognizable to men, animals hold out, as if for expression, their own names, utterly impossible to exchange. This makes them so beloved of children, their contemplation so blissful. I am a rhinoceros, signifies the shape of the rhinoceros.⁵³

'Utopia goes disguised' in animals and that is why we need the change of perspective of games or art to be able to see it. In art we glimpse what animals could be if they were not reduced by man's domination – we glimpse the possibility of the right life.

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⁵³ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), 242–43; *GS*, vol. 4, *Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben*, 260–61: 'Die Unwirklichkeit der Spiele gibt kund, daß das Wirkliche es noch nicht ist. Sie sind bewußtlose Übungen zum richtigen Leben. Vollends beruht das Verhältnis der Kinder zu den Tieren darauf, daß die Utopie in jene sich verummmt, denen Marx es nicht einmal gönnt, daß sie als Arbeitende Mehrwert liefern. Indem die Tiere ohne den Menschen irgend erkennbare Aufgabe existieren, stellen sie als Ausdruck gleichsam den eigenen Namen vor, das schlechterdings nicht Vertauschbare. Das macht sie den Kindern lieb und ihre Betrachtung selig. Ich bin ein Nashorn, bedeutet die Figur des Nashorns.' See also Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 112; *Ästhetische Theorie*, 171–72, where he explicitly compares the unexchangeability of the rhinoceros with that of the artwork. On the connection between children, animals, and art, see *ibid.*, 119; 182.

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