War, Home, and Permanent Exile: Theodor Adorno’s *Minima Moralia* and William Spanos’s *In the Neighborhood of Zero*

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The long interval between the war memoirs and the conclusion of peace is not fortuitous: it testifies to the painful reconstruction of memory, which in all the books conveys a sense of impotence and even falseness, no matter what terrors the writers have lived through. —Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from a Damaged Life*

William Spanos is—underscore *is*, since at age eighty-eight he still teaches—the most extraordinary academic lecturer I have encountered in my life, which includes my own twenty-seven years as a university teacher. His passionate intensity, a phrase he will no doubt bridle at, given its association with the bourgeois apologetics championed by Matthew Arnold, comes through in his lectures as an unalloyed assault on the *mythos* of a rarified American academic community in thrall of the logocentric tradition of unreflective Western reason. Spanos’s work relentlessly criticizes the rhetoric of American exceptionalism and the aesthetic and literary self-satisfaction and quiescence that serves it. This critical stance results not from any brand of
moralistic exceptionalism but from his microscopically attentive reading of the texts at hand, and of the text of the Western canon. He uses the very terms of the prevailing critical arena to reinvigorate criticism, and to uncover and confront the blind spots and repressive mechanisms that thought continuously exiles from its territory. Like Theodor Adorno, Spanos engages in an immanent form of critique, this time in the postmodern age.

Spanos has often spoken of his transformation from someone schooled in formalist literary-critical methodologies to his position as a radical critic of the metaphysical tradition associated with thinkers like Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Theodor Adorno, Michel Foucault, Edward Said, and others. The fuel for this transformation, Spanos tells us, was the incommensurate US involvement in the Vietnam War, which he saw as reason gone mad. Insofar as his own work was a response to the technocratic irrationality of war, it reflects the efforts of Adorno, whose *Minima Moralia* is also a meditation on the strange logic of war.

While Spanos’s critical legacy is well known, his personal transformation into an oppositional scholar has roots that he has only recently made clear. In his 2010 memoir, *In the Neighborhood of Zero*, Spanos articulates a long-repressed series of experiences that have been present in his work over the past forty years. He recounts his involvement as a young infantryman in the Battle of the Bulge, his subsequent capture by the German army, and, finally, his direct experience of the firebombing of Dresden. Through his recitation of these moments, Spanos tells how he bore witness to the consequences of a technological and administrative relation to Being spawned by reason’s apocalyptic excesses. He raises the following question: Is human agency or some darker acting-out of nameless reason the real arbiter of human experience? In this regard, Spanos’s memoir also reflects the subtitle of Adorno’s own aphoristic memoir, *Minima Moralia*—both Adorno and Spanos recount an experience of “damaged life,” and both help to explain the origins of a lifelong critical response to that damage. In what follows, I hope to juxtapose their memoirs and their critical trajectories, exploring their stylistic and theoretical similarities, ending with a discussion of their critical legacies today.

2. William V. Spanos, *In the Neighborhood of Zero* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010). Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as *NZ*.
Stylistic and Thematic Semblance

The bulk of Spanos’s work is culturally engaged literary criticism, while the majority of Adorno’s work criticized a philosophical and aesthetic tradition he felt had lost its way. Memoir is not the first thing that comes to mind in the context of their work: when one mentions Spanos, one thinks of literary and cultural criticism; when one mentions Adorno, one thinks of philosophical, aesthetic, and cultural criticism. Yet the practice of memoir realizes something that both thinkers consistently cite in even their most rigidly disciplinary work: the centrality of experience—of lived, historical, errant life—in contradistinction to systems of thought and practice that tend to eradicate the significance of such experience in obedience to an oft-unnamed and overarching telos or abstract principle. For both, memoir is a testament to the resistance of the subject in the face of mechanisms that might erase subjectivity itself.

Readers of their works will also note a remarkable affinity in prose style. Adorno’s prose is famously forbidding, a bit like the compositional styles of his mentor Alban Berg. Difficult though it may be, Adorno’s work is not willfully obscure. It is actively engaged in working through its formal rhythms and patterns. The common assertion that Adorno’s style is “off-putting” misses two important points. First, his defamiliarizing style dialectically challenges prevailing modes of thinking. Second, dismissals of his style as chaotic and disorderly are usually voiced by the very authorities whose methods of inquiry he challenges. Adorno’s work is an act of resistance to the principles of correction that classical rhetoric invokes in order to tame the unruly contents of inquiry. As such it is an interventionist form of criticism, a term that recurs in Spanos’s work again and again.

Spanos’s writing style is no less challenging. Informed by the postmodern rupture inaugurated by the thinkers mentioned earlier, his prose refuses reduction or facile delimitation. One finds in his work an electric network of intellectual cross-references, along with dismembered and reconfigured words and phrases, all leading the reader into a dense, multivalent labyrinth of thought seeking itself—often against the grain and in

4. Adorno replied to accusations of jargon in his work with the following: “So-called jargon of the sort my closest friends and I are accused of—if its distinguishing feature is that it eludes easy understanding—comes about precisely because it is an attempt to express the matter very rigorously in order to avoid the sloppiness of the universal communication that, given the nature of society today, itself only serves to obscure the truth by offering an illusion of universal understanding.” Cambridge Companion to Adorno, ed. Tom Huhn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 14.
direct opposition to the restrictive strains of received linguistic norms. We could easily apply Fredric Jameson’s famous characterization of Adorno’s prose to Spanos: “In the language of Adorno—perhaps the finest dialectical intelligence, the finest stylist, of them all—density is itself a conduct of intransigence: the bristling mass of abstractions and cross-references is precisely intended to be read in situation, against the cheap facility of what surrounds it, as a warning to the reader of the price he has to pay for genuine thinking.”

Their respective styles capture a late modernist (for Adorno) and postmodern (for Spanos) reconfiguration of both critical and aesthetic patterns. On many levels, their work emulates the most challenging, yet formally enlightening, work of composer Arnold Schoenberg—a kind of artistry in the form of critical theory that pushes against the formal and theoretical limits of the work. As Gerhard Schweppenhauser puts it in his 2009 study of Adorno, “The basic assumption of Adorno’s aesthetics is that art is unconscious historiography. It is most authentically so when it withdraws from society’s monopolizing grasp. . . . The pathos of distance in abstract painting and atonal, serial music was the pathos of dissonant noncooperation in the mechanical representation of the real, to which photography was bound by images, and entertainment music by tonality, harmony, and rhythm.”

In their critical and stylistic juxtaposition, Adorno and Spanos approach a unique mode of beauty and critique—a mode separate from reductive formulas that enacts an authentic encounter with language and Being.

In addition, both Adorno and Spanos focus on exile, outsider status, or perhaps even homelessness, as pervasive features of modern life. It may seem strange to compare these two as figures in exile: while the Nazis forced Adorno to flee Europe, Spanos served his country with recognized valor, returning home after his ordeal—and acts of witness—as a prisoner of war. That is, one was a victim, as such, while the other was vanquisher. Yet the scars of these events—Spanos’s service as an infantryman in the 106th Division of the US Army, and Adorno’s flight from certain persecution—would remain with both thinkers throughout their careers. Adorno memorialized the pain of exile in Minima Moralia, while Spanos recalled his experience in In the Neighborhood of Zero. The bloody balance sheet of courage, dismay, loss, and death in World War II was to reappear during the Vietnam

War in the early years of Spanos's academic career, as if the ritual exorcism of his own experience was not enough. Both thinkers were cast in the shadow of war, whose logic they never ceased to try to understand.

**Spanos's Critical Project**

William Spanos reformulated his critical project (which, as I stated earlier, continues to this day) in light of a series of intellectual and political events that transformed a postwar generation of scholars. Formalist literary and aesthetic criticism dominated the North American academy from the 1940s through the mid-1960s; it reached its apogee in Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, where he identified the irrepressible archetypes that he deemed the fundamental material of narrative.

In the late 1960s, however, Spanos challenged the ahistorical posture of Frye and the New Critics by highlighting their blindness to the unruly world outside the academy. Spanos pointed out that that the New Critics’ valorization of the aesthetic dimension as the repository of privileged values endorsed an ideology that enframed history, thus erasing the specificity of the lived experience of flesh-and-blood individuals. In his *Repetitions: The Postmodern Moment in Literature and Culture*, Spanos states the problem this way:

I had become convinced of the complicity, however inadvertent, of literature, both traditional and modern (and the institutions that transmit its “vision”) with the hegemonic purposes of Western ideology. It was especially the interrogation of philosophical essentialism—what Heidegger called the “onto-theological tradition”—that convinced me that the mimetic or representational literature of the nineteenth century (the discourse of realism) legitimated the West's aggressive cultural and sociopolitical imperialism.7

This approach challenges the representational authority and sedimented values of the Western literary-critical tradition, an approach that harkens to Slavoj Žižek's contemporary notion of a parallax view,8 or to

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8. Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 17. Žižek offers the following interesting reversal on the “deadlock” of dialectical criticism and the role of the critically intervening subject: “The standard definition of parallax is: the apparent displacement of an object (the shift of its position against a background), caused by a
Adorno’s notion of a *negative* dialectics. Spanos accuses the tradition of seeking order over its own (idiosyncratic) terror of disorder, of valorizing identity over difference, and thus of complicity in the denigration of the subject. Spanos and other postmodern critics saw the radical effusion of literary models in surrealism, absurdism, and postmodernism, embodied in writers as diverse as Samuel Beckett, John Barth, and Italo Calvino, as constituting a radical break with tradition, or at least as a countervailing force to it.9

Spanos does not restrict his analysis to the modern, modernist, or postmodern literary arena. His mode of critical analysis is not chronological but interventionist. He abandons any notion of history as a progressive phenomenon and instead traces the formal and political exhaustion of the modernist and realist traditions to classical texts, particularly to the receptive apparatus with which those texts were canonized by figures like Matthew Arnold—and thus made safe. Following Heidegger, Spanos sees a fundamental shift from the celebration of errancy in early classical literature to its exile via formalization in Aristotle (later more fully foreclosed within the totalization inherent in the Virgilian epic):

Similarly, I felt, the disruptions of the literature of the absurd bore witness to the exhaustion of the formal instrument of the Western literary tradition—the tradition inaugurated by Aristotle’s privileging of the universality of poetry over the superfluous particulars of history, extended by Sidney’s appropriation of Aristotle in his *Apology for Poetry*, and brought to its enervated fulfillment by the New Critics’ apotheosis of formal closure.10

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9. There are, of course, many ironies in such a claim. American novelist John Barth liked to jest about the “death of the novel,” particularly when he was writing a new one. As he put it in his essay “The Literature of Exhaustion,” “The novel is dead? I think I’ll write a novel about that.” John Barth, *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfictions* (New York: Putnam, 1984), 68.

As suggested earlier, the central limitation of this approach, according to Spanos, is its flight from an encounter with Being. While traditional critical assessments of literature and art often speak of the salutary nature of the formal “shaping” that the work gives to unruly existence, Spanos recognizes here a profoundly inauthentic flight from the vagaries of lived, existential there-ness. In the metaphysical tradition that colored—and continues to color—much of Western literary criticism and analysis, Spanos sees a repressive and regressive relationship to existential reality, up to and including the invention of such discursive apparatuses as the notions of “the human” and “the human condition” themselves. In the face of such discursive inventions, so powerfully interrogated by Foucault throughout his life, Spanos calls for an incessant resistance to the forgetting of contingency in the name of order—an order, he reminds us, that always serves power.

Spanos’s literary act (and here I would like to invoke the notion of “act” put in use by Žižek in any number of places11) is thus an expression of revolt, or the invocation of a countermemory. Often invoking Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Spanos endeavored, along with his fellow *boundary 2* scholars, to “brush history against the grain.”12 More important, the notion of countermemory, which he repeatedly invoked in his work and lectures of the 1970s, was to be pressed to its existential and historical limits: Spanos aims not only to offer alternative narratives for the history of the Western literary tradition but also to change the very terms of narrative structure. In the spirit of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, he seeks to reconsider the constitution of the notions of sense and nonsense, the visible and the invisible. His work strives not only to reinvigorate the tradition, and to challenge what he deems a kind of repetition compulsion in Western literature, but to question the very concepts of meaning and being implicit in that tradition—concepts that, in his view, have ossified to the point of obscuring the fluid historicity of literary and lived experience. A sense of unruly immediacy has guided his efforts, which aim to create a mode of literary inquiry *grounded* in its occasion, an “interested” or “immersed” or “destructive” mode that interrogates the transcen-

11. For example, Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom* (Routledge: New York, 2007), 77. Žižek conceives the act as a twofold phenomenon. First, it involves repetition (evoking the title of Spanos’s book); second, it “reaches the utter limit of the primordial forced choice,” inverting the choice in such a way as to open up a sphere or moment in which we are radically free.

dent *logos* as *Origin* and its *Recollective Memory*, which repress and forget in attempting to assimilate—to bring to presence—the disconcerting differences they encounter on the temporal way. To put it positively, I want to suggest a hermeneutics that remembers or retrieves the occasion—the time—that engaged and interested it and, in so doing, reactivated the ongoing and interminable explorative process.13

Spanos establishes a number of critical tenets here. First, he calls for a joyful yet unyielding Nietzschean endorsement of criticism in an “interested” mode (that is, in a mode that foregrounds the always purposive nature of inquiry). Second, he calls for an interrogation of *logos* as a reductive and exiling specter of Western thought. Finally, he calls for a re-collection of the experience of the moment, in all its ambiguity, that motivates the “explorative process.” He realizes all these things in his memoir, an example of just the kind of “disconcerting difference” he refers to above. It is a recollection immersed in its occasion, and stands in stark contrast to the hagiographic sanitizations of war that he finds so prevalent in Western and American culture. While he honorably and passionately recognizes the “multitude of young men who fought, were wounded and maimed, taken prisoner, or died violent deaths during that terrible global war,” Spanos remains resolute in his effort to “remember the singularity of the war,” along with the “insidious ideological uses” that its narratization has all too often repressed (*NZ*, xiii).

As his invocation of Heideggerian de-struction unfolds throughout his career, however, Spanos shifts his analysis from the strictly literal to the broader narrative scale, undertaking a critique of the dominant culture’s “narratization” itself. That is, he moves beyond the traditional literary field to that of cultural discourse writ large, particularly in relation to the apologetics associated with the inherent expansionist tendencies of Western culture. More specifically, he applies the tools of his literary critical analysis to the dominant and dominating prerogatives of Western culture, which he finds incipient in any number of global geopolitical conflicts. These include World War II, in which he served as an infantryman, as well as the Vietnam War, which he interprets as an inferno whose origins can be directly traced to a *logos* incapable of satiation. That *logos*, according to Spanos’s analysis, was less interested in global or geopolitical domination than in

extending its authority. It is a mode of unconscious (because so continuously embedded via repetition) will-to-power:

My inquiry will be guided by the “presupposition” that the Occident has been essentially imperial since its origins in late Greek and especially Roman antiquity. In the name of a delineated, administered, and predictable social order emanating out of the Metropolis, Rome reduced the origative peripatetic thinking of the pre-Socratics and even the classical Greek philosophers to a derivative, calculative, and institutionalized mode of thought. . . . The Occident has been essentially imperial ever since the Romans colonized and pacified an errant, polyvalent, and differential thinking that, as such, was not amenable to their polyvalent imperial project.14

In short, the West's drive toward geopolitical—and, one might add today, ecological—dominance is a consequence of a perversion of thinking that moves from a quest for errancy and inquiry to a quest for finality and totality—or what some might call “truth.”

The full force of Spanos's critical endeavor comes to the fore in his America's Shadow (2000), which addresses the cultural rememorization of the Vietnam War, or what he brilliantly terms the “amnesiac technology” of forgetting “endemic to the American Cultural Memory.”15 He assails the paradoxical quiescence of an American academy that has enfeebled many of the oppositional discourses of the late 1960s by instrumentally institutionalizing them. In this context, Spanos once again shares much with the critical discourse of Žižek, who has been bold enough to challenge much of the institutionalization of radical discourse as little more than the taming of otherness. In Spanos's words, “one cannot escape the feeling in 1999 that the emancipatory ‘postmodern’ discursive practices precipitated during and by the occasion of the Vietnam decade to resist the evils of racism, patriarchy, and, especially, postcolonial colonialism have reached an

15. Spanos, America’s Shadow, 131. Spanos’s language here deserves fuller citation: “I am not presumptuous enough to assert that the questions I have asked above are amenable to easy answers. . . . But to inaugurate a thinking of this crucial unthought that haunts these adversarial discourses, a thinking, that is, which is adequate to the conditions of the present global occasion, will require a detour into the productive technology of forgetting endemic to the American Cultural Memory as this amnesiac technology has worked itself out in the twenty years following the fall of Saigon.”
impasse. . . . One finds it in the futile predictability—the indifference—of a differential ‘cultural critique’ of the so-called postmodern agencies of knowledge transmission.” 16 Later, in response to theorizations about why this has happened, he adds that such explanations “are symptomatic precisely of what theory in its historical origins discovered to be one of the most powerful political strategies of the discourse of hegemony. It displaces historically specific conflict, where imbalances of power—injustices—determine praxis, to the rarefied and free-floating space of liberal debate, where all positions are equal.” 17

Adorno’s Critical Project

As I have noted, Spanos’s work is deeply informed by his lifelong engagement with the work of Heidegger, a thinker for whom Adorno had little patience. Indeed, Adorno exhibited an almost visceral hostility toward Heidegger’s mode of critical inquiry, evinced in a sustained fashion in Adorno’s The Jargon of Authenticity. 18 For Adorno, Heidegger’s analysis of the West’s logocentric forgetfulness, and of the West’s various methods to overcome that forgetting, resulted in nondialectical stasis. According to Adorno, Heidegger’s attempts to outline a posture that entails a fuller, more primal relation to Being ended in failure. More specifically, he felt that Heidegger’s efforts at unconcealment, which asked the subject to surrender its anthropomorphic relation to Being as a means of overcoming the limits of the tradition, constituted a passive relationship to the ontic realm. This relationship, in Adorno’s view, denies the primacy of the subject-object dynamic central to his notion of experience—something Heidegger would seem to ask that the subject either transcend, place in abeyance, or dislocate. Adorno felt that such an understanding smacked of passivity and even regression; in today’s intellectual arena, it is the site reserved for Žižek’s assaults on “New Age obscurantism.” 19

16. Spanos, America’s Shadow, 126.
17. Spanos, America’s Shadow, 127.
18. Theodor Adorno, The Jargon of Authenticity, trans. Knut Tarnowski and Fredric Will (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 138. A sampling from that text clearly captures Adorno’s hostility to Heidegger’s critical approach in his discussion of Dasein: “Since death, as the existential horizon of Dasein, is considered absolute, it becomes the absolute in the form of an icon. There is here a regression to the cult of death; the jargon has from the beginning gotten along with military matters.”
This is not, however, the place to recount the Adorno-Heidegger debate. Instead, we should look to the nature of Adorno's critical project to indicate how it aligns with Spanos's critical work, and how the questions of memoir, re-membering, and permanent exile, or homelessness, play out in their work, both generally and in their respective memoirs. To do so, we must briefly summarize Adorno's critical method and its wartime laboratory—US mass culture in the 1940s, particularly in Southern California.²⁰

Above all else, Adorno's work is informed by the failed moment of Hegelian sublation, a failure that gives rise to his famous introductory statement in Negative Dialectics that “philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed.”²¹ For Adorno, this failure was the product of a fundamental and perhaps even structural inadequacy in Hegel's understanding of the dialectic, and of Western reason itself: the dialectic is not a march of spirit coming to know itself but of reason coming to recognize the essential inadequacy in its very notions of completion. The identity of concept and object is never total; the concept is always inadequate in some way. Rather than understand this as an abject failure, Adorno sees it as a productive (albeit negative) one, where the impulse toward rational and conceptual domination of nature—both internal and external—is chastened. Only a reason aware of its own avarice, if you will, can properly enact the negative dialectical process: “The name of dialectics says no more, to begin with, than that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder, that they come to contradict the traditional norm of adequacy. Contradiction is not what Hegel’s absolute ideal-

²⁰. In his extremely interesting study of Adorno's years in the United States, Adorno in America, David Jenemann offers the following striking comment: “Nearly twenty years before Guy Debord and Marshall McLuhan would each in his own way argue that the relationship between subjects was that of spectacular and illusory mediation, Adorno would, by virtue of his own exile experiences, arrive at the same conclusion. . . . What Minima Moralia makes abundantly clear is that the mass-media transformations of bourgeois aesthetics are as much to blame for the liquidation of the individual as are the mass murders committed in the camps.” David Jenemann, Adorno in America (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), xxii. This comment, taken alone, might seem outlandish. After all, how can one compare Nazi death camps to the deleterious effects of radio and film? But the unstated element in the passage above (which Jenemann makes clear later in his text) is that the death camps are an effect, not a cause. Of what are they an effect? Of the excesses of reason.

ism was bound to transfigure it into. . . . It indicates the *untruth* of identity, the fact that the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived. . . . Dialectics is the consistent sense of nonidentity.”22

The central problem Adorno identifies in Western thought is the forgetting of this inadequacy, coupled with the instrumental utilization of reason by the mass mechanisms of an administered society. For Adorno, this is a two-step process. First, the totalizing mastery of reason over nature, which we might call nonreflexive Enlightenment, effectively converts all experience into something mediated by equivalence and identity. All experience, including the experience and structure of human subjectivity, becomes an *equation*. This, in turn, gives rise to an impulse toward administration, the effects of which are magnified by the very success of the *ratio* in dominating nature. In short, reason inaugurates a self-replicating cycle: Its very success over nature permits it to *dominate* nature in nonreflexive ways, creating a loop from which there is no escape. Enlightenment takes the form of self-perpetuating myth. This myth dominates the concept and practice of subjectivity itself, which is both colonized and contained. The result feels inescapable, as Adorno explains in the following passage: “In the open-air prison which the world is becoming, it is no longer so important to know what depends on what, such is the extent to which everything is one. All phenomena rigidify, become insignias of the absolute rule of that which is.”23

The forgetting of conceptual inadequacy is only part of the problem, however. Enlightenment rationality is remarkably seductive; it is so effective in exerting authority over nature that it takes on the quality of magic. To use the language of Adorno and Max Horkheimer, “Enlightenment is mythic fear turned radical. . . . Nothing at all may remain outside, because the mere outsideness is the very source of fear.”24 The *experience* of Enlightenment rationality on the world gains mythic authority because of its capacity to exert power. Enlightenment forgets its own fascination with this power and thus exerts its authority blindly—often with disastrous consequences. Adorno scholar Thomas Huhn likens this mythic authority to the trance-inducing states exerted by some works of art; we are in thrall of a spell:

To be under the spell of something is to sanction some power over the self by dint of that power’s failure to be subdued by a concept. A spell is curiously like a concept or thought. Both are capable of engaging and holding thinking. And yet, still more curiously, in one regard the spell is a more enlightened engagement of thought than the concept. That is, whereas the spell is a kind of embrace and acknowledgment of a thralldom to thought, the concept suffers from the illusion that it is not a product or consequence of such thralldom. The concept, in short, is constituted by a kind of mythic denial that the power of thought is irrational.25

Where do we see the extreme example of this rationality run amok? In war, where the capacity to exert control over nature and human lives is most blatantly on display. What are the lived and personal consequences of conceptual thought that fails to recognize its own mythic components? This, I will argue, is a central subject of the memoirs of Adorno and Spanos, which recount a war that engulfed both the globe and their two lives.

The Memoir and War

Only now, in the twilight of my life, after many years of obsessionally teaching and writing around this singular and unspeakable event[,] . . . have I been able to do away with the scaffolding that has cluttered everything I have written.

—William V. Spanos, In the Neighborhood of Zero

Abstraction, the tool of enlightenment, treats its objects as did fate, the notion of which it rejects: it liquidates them.

—Theodor W. Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment

Adorno was able to flee Nazi persecution in 1934, beginning a twenty-year exile that took him first to London, then to New York in 1938, and soon after to Santa Monica, California. He remained there for roughly a decade, joining a contingent of German émigrés. Some languished in the intellectual lacuna of Hollywood life, others energetically joined the assembly line of the culture industry, and others still continued their work in critical theory—this time with American culture as their subject. Thus, while he did not experience the overt violence of the war firsthand, Adorno’s work

is driven by the arrival of disaster he alerts us to in the opening sections of both *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Minima Moralia*. Indeed, the title of the latter text—an ironic, aphoristic, and chastened reversal of Aristotle’s inquiry into “the teaching of the good life” in *Maxima Moralia* (MM, 15)—hints at the fact that philosophical system building is no longer possible. According to Adorno, philosophy’s effort to explain the world via reason has turned into its opposite. Insight must be sought not through pursuit of the universal but in the return of the particular.26 The particular in question is lived experience—the raw encounter of the individual with existential conditions. Adorno is almost apologetic for the aphoristic form of his text, telling us that “our perspective of life has passed into an ideology which conceals that fact that there is life no longer.” Adorno explains: “Social analysis can learn incomparably more from individual experience[,] . . . while conversely the large historical categories, after all that has meanwhile been perpetrated with their help, are no longer above suspicion of fraud. . . . In face of the totalitarian unison with which the eradication of difference is proclaimed as a purpose in itself, even part of the social force of liberation may have temporarily withdrawn to the individual sphere” (MM, 18).

Spanos, on the other hand, was in 1943 the eighteen-year-old son of a family of Greek immigrants living in New Hampshire. While Adorno fled a self-immolating European war, Spanos was thrown toward it in the most material sense. Drafted like so many others into the war effort, he served with distinction, enduring enormous hardships in the war’s most difficult moments.

Spanos’s story of exile begins at home, with a recitation of his uneasy “assimilation” (a term he places in quotation marks throughout his memoir) in patrician New England. His tale begins in Newport, New Hampshire, where his family settled after a short stay in Worcester, Massachusetts, and where he saw firsthand the ambiguities of the “benign” American *mythos* of the melting pot. Spanos makes clear early on that he never “felt at ease” in his parents’ chosen immigrant home, a discomfort he attributed at first to his own subjective inadequacy. In this regard, he embodies a classic sociocultural phenomenon: a subject that internalizes, and takes the blame for, cultural and existential conditions beyond his control. Lacking a theoretical foundation with which to comprehend his situation, he describes his status

26. The significance of the “return of the particular” (or the object, in Adorno) cannot be emphasized too strongly. The particular always brings errancy with it. The particular always refuses colonization.
as follows: “I attributed this persistent disorientation and my sense of dislocation to the limitations of my ethnic culture. I was, indeed, a barbarian. What I remember most vividly—to my present shame—about those early years was, therefore, my willful effort to suppress my lowly ‘Greekness’ and to assimilate myself into the higher ways of the dominant Anglo-Protestant culture. I was becoming a ventriloquized dummy” (NZ, 3).

Spanos remembers himself as a subject whose identity was privately understood as lacking in some public way. He also remembers, however, a youthful intuition that as an immigrant he was a participant in the larger opposition of civilization and barbarism. The social was already the personal, and his private sense of inadequacy manifested itself as subjective deficiency. Adorno describes a similar feeling in Minima Moralia when he suggests that privacy—or individual autonomy—has become a trap: “Whatever was once good and decent in bourgeois values, independence, perseverance, forethought, circumspection, has been corrupted utterly. . . . Privacy has given way entirely to the privation it always secretly was, and with the stubborn adherence to particular interests is now mingled fury at being no longer able to perceive that things might be different and better” (MM, 34).

Spanos’s experience at that point, one can imagine, was not terribly different from that of any of the multitude of early twentieth-century immigrants in the United States. The eruption of World War II would radically transform his life. After he was drafted, Spanos recounts the disciplinary preparations he received as an infantryman, and the ways those disciplinary practices both militated against and reinforced the segregated and hierarchical civilian culture of the time. Many of the tales he tells are archetypal components of the basic training experience: the hazing, the denigration, the reduction of individual subjectivity in the name of allegiance to the unit. Even as he tells of these moments, he recalls warmer tales of the camaraderie that developed among some of his fellow recruits, and of the tenuous sincerity of the friendships he developed. He made friends; when the command reassigned them, they vanished. In one of the most poignant moments of the memoir, he tells us of two friends he had made during training, Tom and Bob. They were assigned to a different platoon, and he never saw them again. “Nor did I ever find out, except in imagination, what happened to them during the disaster that befell our division in Belgium” (NZ, 20). He describes the herding of troops into transport vehicles during his basic training, a process of objectification and reduction of subjectivity that he would experience again as a prisoner of the German army one year
later, and which itself had been so terrible a feature of Nazi extermination of the Jews.

Although these were relatively common military experiences, they assume greater luminescence in light of the experiences that were to follow, and in the arc of Spanos’s lifetime of critical inquiry. Spanos was experiencing, on an existential level, something that would continue to occupy his life’s work: the sacrificial component in culture, and the infinite replaceability of the individual in an administered universe. Spanos’s military experience is a microcosm of the disciplinary culture of the modern world, and of a culture whose impulse toward conceptual totalization suppresses and erases narrative difference—including such narrative differences that manifest themselves as simple human eccentricity, uniqueness, or as an individual human life itself.

Spanos goes on to tell of his deployment to the European Theater of Operations (itself an ironic euphemism for the terrors of that place). He recounts his involvement in the early, victorious moments of the Battle of the Bulge, the powerful German counterattack, his capture in the Ardennes forest by German troops, and his incarceration in a prisoner of war camp near Dresden. In probably the most striking passage of his memoir, he describes hiding in a massive garbage pit with four fellow soldiers as they are captured by a squad of German soldiers. Assuming that the Germans would soon kill him, he had an epiphany, which he recalls with stunning clarity:

I cannot, nor will I try to, explain “it” rationally. I will only say that before this terrible revelatory instant with my eyes shut and self-blinded to the unspeakable reality of what loomed before me, I had lived my life simply as life—bare life. . . . Facing the stark image of its instant termination, my life suddenly took on infinite possibilities of body and mind, possibilities of which I was never or had only intuitively been aware, the potential of empowerment, of real freedom, I would say now, if this word had not been corrupted as it has by modern democracies. And that this empowerment was not only a potential in me but in every human being on the face of the earth. Everyone, high and low, has a history. I vowed . . . that if I ever returned to the world, I would dedicate myself in the name of this life to resisting those various inhuman forces, no matter their provenance, that marginalized groups of human beings—denied them histories—in order to feed their own, central, will to power. (NZ, 49)
Spanos captures an existential truth that he later would recognize during his study of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, a truth that might just as well have come out of the writing of Albert Camus. The absurd impossibility of his situation creates a boundary phenomenon—a moment of perverse clarity—that crystallizes his own sense of weary subjectivity. The moment undermines his personal autonomy while buttressing a position—almost like an actor on a stage—of heroic refusal and resistance. Like Meursault in *The Stranger*, Spanos seems to open himself to the indifference of the universe, while refusing the foreclosed and dedifferentiating narrative of the powers-that-be. He asks himself if the circumstances of his capture were indeed unforeseen or part of a larger administered gambit. Reflecting on this moment years later, he asks if their plight was “indeed the consequence of unforeseen circumstances—bad weather, a failure of intelligence, fate—as the received history of the Battle of the Bulge [has] concluded” (*NZ*, 53). He goes on to wonder: “From inside however—from the extremely limited perspective of an anonymous player, a minor, insignificant and not very knowledgeable, participant . . . the question will not be laid to rest. . . . We were untried adolescent American soldiers, thrust into these vulnerable circumstances. . . . Were we simply pawns in a preconceived scenario?” (*NZ*, 53).

Spanos is reflecting on a fundamental premise of warfare—the primacy of the mission, of the necessary subordination of the man to that mission, and finally of the repression of the subjective “I” in that context. But many questions linger. Was his sense that he was a pawn in a larger scenario a consequence of the unique and terrible calculus of World War II? Or did he sense the larger cultural pattern that reduces all subjects to objects? Is he pointing toward a pervasive feature of Western culture after the Enlightenment: the instrumental understanding of the individual? Was the *individual* here—a nineteen-year-old draftee—merely acting out a role determined by instrumental reason? Was it a role—*is* it a role—that is so pervasive as to have become invisible? Once again turning back to Adorno, 27. From *The Stranger*: “It might look as if my hands were empty. Actually, I was sure of myself, sure about everything, far surer than he; sure of my present life and of the death that was coming. That, no doubt, was all I had; but at least that certainty was something I could get my teeth into—just as it had got its teeth into me. I’d been right, I was still right, I was always right. I’d passed my life in a certain way, and I might have passed it in a different way, if I’d felt like it. I’d acted thus, and I hadn’t acted otherwise; I hadn’t done x, whereas I had done y or z. And what did that mean? That, all the time, I’d been waiting for this present moment, for that dawn, tomorrow’s or another day’s, which was to justify me.” Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, trans. Matthew Ward (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 120.
we can see such questions in his commentary on war reporting. Such reporting, along with the notion of “total war,” was a “withering of experience,” and a “vacuum between men and their fate, in which their real fate lies” (MM, 55). Adorno adds, “It is as if the reified, hardened plaster-cast of events takes the place of events themselves. Men are reduced to walk-on parts in a monster documentary film which has no spectators, since the least of them has his bit to do on the screen” (MM, 55). This is not to suggest that the events experienced by Spanos during the war were in some way artificial—far from it. Instead, Adorno warns us about the retroactive reporting of the war: its narratization as one more cultural by-product or commodity that takes precedence over real events.

Spanos illustrates this existential and sacrificial moment still further when he recounts his harrowing transport to a prisoner-of-war camp. The technological logistics of war had been part of European conflict strategies since the eighteenth century. In the early twentieth century, such plans were “perfected” by Count Alfred von Schlieffen, a central German strategist, prior to World War I.\(^{28}\) Such perfection now reached a level of cold insanity. Just as millions of Jews, along with any other scapegoats of the Nazi regime, had been loaded onto railroad boxcars, so too were Spanos and his fellow POWs jammed together en route to their incarceration, ultimately leading to a work group in the town of Rabenau, near Dresden. Spanos describes this inhuman and horrific transport: “Words, no matter how precise and supple, are inadequate to describe the horrific conditions in these boxcars, which at an earlier time carried cattle to slaughterhouses. . . . What, I wondered, was it about human beings that enticed them to become so inhuman as to want to reduce their fellows’ lives to the status of nonhuman life?” (NZ, 55–56).

In his mature academic reflection and critique, Spanos would come to understand that the treatment of human beings as “nonhuman” was a predictable result of unchecked rationality. He concludes that the destruction of human subjectivity he had witnessed was not an aberration but part and parcel of any logic or rationality based on absolute domination of nature—both internal and external. Later in his memoir, he tells of visiting France with his family in 1974 and looking on some of the iconography at the Saint-Lazare cathedral. He recalls his shock at a depiction of the Last

Judgment, remembering that he had been “consigned to the miasmic world of the boxcar” by a “higher cause” like the one in the icon—by forces larger than the individual, larger than the individual soldier, larger than the individual refugee—for “sublime” purposes whose “end” remained unrevealed.

What should we make of this revelatory moment? Once again, his insight in 1974, which could only have been inchoate thirty years earlier, focused on the questions of teleology, telos, and post hoc rationalization. In the name of what? For Spanos (as for Adorno) it would seem that a certain mode of occulted reason itself was the culprit, turning real human beings into cogs in its “sublime” unfolding. Spanos realized that the Germans who perpetrated inhuman violence against him and his fellow POWs were also members of the culture that gave us Bach's Mass in B Minor, Mozart's Don Giovanni, and more. He points out that allied POWs mimicked the dehumanization he faced at the hands of German soldiers, as when two British aviators accosted him for cigarettes on his arrival at the stalag. Put bluntly, the dehumanizing effects of the circumstances knew no national or cultural boundaries. Something larger was at work.

**Homelessness, Namelessness, and Permanent Exile**

Memoir is an act of reflection, but, as Adorno tells us, the kind of reflection permitted in the modern world is always a reflection on “damaged life.” The exact nature of this damage is incapable of absolute determination, but Adorno suggests that the gap between the potential freedoms available in advanced culture and the reactionary ideological formations that continue to foreclose on those freedoms marks a kind of battlefield for the subject. That field, and the constellation of forces it contains, is a lonely place; there, the subject feels the force of second nature at its fullest, often depriving one of any authentic sense of felt affiliation or camaraderie. It is a place of conscious and unconscious alienation—a place lacking a sense of home. “Dwelling, in the proper sense,” Adorno tells us, “is now becoming impossible” (MM, 38).

Here, Adorno echoes the concerns of his archrival Heidegger, who diagnosed humankind’s homelessness as a consequence of its estrangement from language. In this regard (and in many other places), Heidegger’s assessment of the existing state of affairs is quite close to Adorno’s, even if their respective understandings of causes and responses differ. Heidegger tells us, “However hard and bitter, however hampering and threatening the lack of houses remains, the real plight of dwelling does not lie merely in
a lack of houses. The real plight of dwelling is indeed older than the world wars with their destruction, older also than the increase of the earth’s population and the condition of industrial workers. The real plight lies in this, that mortals must ever search anew for the nature of dwelling, that they must ever learn to dwell.”

The similarities in diagnosis here are contrasted by the differences in the “rules of evidence,” so to speak, summoned by each thinker. Heidegger seems to dismiss material conditions as the source of the problem, focusing instead on a forgetting of Being that can be traced to Parmenides and Plato; Adorno emphasizes the material conditions of the individual, as here, in his description of one way to combat homelessness: “In his text, the writer sets up house. Just as he trundles papers, books, pencils, documents untidily from room to room, he creates the same disorder in his thoughts. They become pieces of furniture that he sinks into, content or irritable” (MM, 87).

The material specificity of Adorno’s description of the writer’s dwelling offers a contrast to Heidegger: Adorno’s is a world of papers, books, pencils, chairs, and more. It is a concrete material situation. A few lines later, Adorno adds a cautionary note: this world has been displaced. The writer inhabits both his writing and exile: “For a man who no longer has a homeland, writing becomes a place to live. But now he lacks a store-room. . . . In the end, the writer is not even allowed to live in his writing” (MM, 87–88).

I bring up the issue of dwelling because it resonates so well with the circumstances that have marked Spanos’s academic life. His creation of boundary 2 in the early 1970s, his marginalization in the academy, his refusal to accept entrance into the mainstream of affirmative university life, and his persistent assumption of an oppositional stance—all these things are signals of his refusal to ignore the impossibility of dwelling. To put it another way, he has refused the trappings of docile dwelling. He has rejected the facile belief that things are as they should be, or that literature is a repository of only “great” things. He does not believe that we can “inhabit” a house by surrounding ourselves with the classics, or that beauty can ever come to us unalloyed.

Dresden and the Neighborhood of Zero

Spanos’s memoir reaches its brutal climax as he recounts the firebombing of Dresden, made most famous in Kurt Vonnegut’s painfully ironic *Slaughterhouse-Five*. There Spanos describes what I will call the triumvirate of namelessness, homelessness, and exile—all of which will be conditions that he inhabits, or perhaps honors through inhabitation, throughout his work and academic life. After about two months as a prisoner of war, he was assigned to an *Arbeitskommando* (work group), where, he was told, he might experience relatively humane conditions in return for his labors. In fact, the reverse was true; food was scarce, shelter was scant, and the cold was unbearable. Near starvation after just six weeks, he tells of scenes of retribution by Allied soldiers against a fellow POW who had stolen some food—the retribution that turns out to be the consistent theme of the memoir and of Spanos’s work throughout his life. Like the children in William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*, the POWs were on the verge of a return to barbarism. Spanos describes the German guards as they witnessed the beating delivered to the thieving soldier by a gauntlet of American GIs: “All this time our German guards were looking on silently at the spectacle. Were they sadistically enjoying it, a welcome break from the mind-numbing routine of guarding prisoners? Were they astonished by the inhumanity to which they were bearing witness? Were they taking pleasure in watching the ever-so righteous Americans, who claimed they were saving the world from the barbarism of Nazism?” (*NZ*, 89). Spanos concludes dryly, “A week or so later the British and American forces, *en masse*, bombed Dresden” (*NZ*, 89). It would be another act of retribution, a primal response to a half decade of war. It also echoed—on an unimaginable scale—the local drama he had just described.

The facts of the firebombing have become part of established history: on February 13, 1945, and continuing for three days, over 1,200 US and British Air Force heavy bombers dropped approximately 4,000 tons of incendiary and high-explosive bombs on Dresden. The bombings came in four distinct waves. The first wave was devastating; the second wave, three hours later, occurred as rescue firefighting teams were at work. Two larger raids followed in the next two days. The resulting firestorm leveled the city, killing at least 25,000 people, perhaps as many as 100,000.30 Many more died in the days and weeks that followed.

30. The very debate about numbers killed reminds us just how far the calculus of reason—*ratio*—has taken root.
Spanos tells of his own act of witnessing: confined with other POWs and their German guards to the basement of a wood mill just outside of town, he describes the unending roar of sirens, plane engines, and then explosions filling the air. He awaited his death. “I sat huddled in a fetal position . . . waiting breathlessly and anticipating the explosion that would blow us into oblivion” (NZ, 98).

That blow did not come. A day later, out in the acrid, ash-filled air, another raid took place. Spanos was shuttled down to the basement of the mill once more.

And outside, through the few barred windows, we saw to our dismay that the whole city, as far as our eyes could see, was on fire, the flames, like innumerable forked tongues licking the night sky, shooting numerous streams of scattered fire high into the night, the chain of lurid light across the distant horizon, flickering tumultuously like an army of crazed satanic dancers celebrating the triumph of the god of hell. . . . What I saw out there—its fury—just didn’t belong in the domain of the human. (NZ, 101–2)

He also tells of his emotional state. As the bombs fell, and as he huddled in the basement of the mill awaiting his own death,

I . . . tried to imagine what was happening in the heart of the undefended city under this tremendous and seemingly unending ferocious barrage of bombs, the devastation, the fate of its unsuspecting inhabitants. How many of the untold number of people living in Dresden had been going routinely about the process of living an ordinary winter evening when the bombing began, caught in train stations, trams, movie houses, theaters, dance halls, bars, churches, on an evening stroll, or returning from a visit with friends? . . . I tried to rationalize their vulnerability, the pain of their flesh and the suffering of their hearts and minds. (NZ, 99)

Here the questions of homelessness, namelessness, and permanent exile return. Though he does not say so explicitly here, Spanos is invoking the lived experience—the flesh and blood reality—of the nameless tens of thousands destroyed by the rational irrationality of war, by the instrumental destruction of homes, apartments—dwellings—during those three days. As he waited for his own death, it seems as if he felt a kinship, not with the “liberators” reigning death from above but with the dead, dying, and bereft of Dresden. Is it possible that such horror suggests that the only
way to live in the world might be the *affirmative* adoption of a state of permanent exile, be it at home or abroad?

Instrumental rationality, as Adorno so often reminds us, has an inherent affinity with fascism—sometimes even when it acts in the name of freedom, a point Spanos makes clear in his memoir. Adorno’s most quoted phrase (at this point, it has fallen into the unfortunate status of *dictum*) can be recalled here: “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.”

This indictment of contemplative culture has long been a mantra for those who reject the superficial beauties offered by the aesthetic realm. Adorno adds an important caveat, however: “And this [the rejection of poetry and the arts in a visceral and nonreflexive fashion] corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today. . . . Critical intelligence cannot be equal to this challenge as long as it confines itself to self-satisfied contemplation.”

In a lifetime of teaching that has borne witness to the events he recounts in his memoir, Spanos insists that we remain alert to the constellations of language, dwelling, homelessness, and namelessness that mark affirmative culture. By refusing self-satisfied contemplation, he demands that we confront the Real, along with the flesh-and-blood figures that history and narrative would have us erase via the “apocalyptic annunciation” of reason’s discourse. The memoir’s title alerts us to the “zero zone”—a realm that Spanos demands we revisit, no matter how awful such a visit may be. That Professor Spanos, who has given so much to a generation of scholars, would submit himself to this ordeal once again through his memoir is a clear signal of his own courage, dignity, and singularity.