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Adorno in Naples

[Adorno in Neapel]

The metamorphosis of a landscape from the focus of longing to a philosophy

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Prologue on Vesuvius

Being a tourist is a tiresome business. The tourist wants to experience something exciting and new, the uniqueness and essence of the area he is visiting. But how is he meant to catch a glimpse of real local life as a fleeting visitor? And so many visitors have gone before him. Did they at least prepare the ground? And now that he's here, it would be a pity, an omission, not to visit the sights that so many others considered worthwhile. Really, you went to Paris and didn't go up the Eiffel Tower? But when does the average Parisian go up the Eiffel Tower? Really – you went to Naples and didn't visit Vesuvius?

One of the most attractive parts of Europe, and always an extremely popular travel destination, is the Gulf of Naples. Enthroned at the centre of a semi-circle bound by the Ischia and Procida islands to the west and the Sorrentine Peninsula to the east is Vesuvius – and despite the volcano's aura of destructive violence, it contributes significantly to the region's appeal. The loose, mineral-bearing lava stone surrounding it makes the ground unusually fertile, which this is another reason why people want to live close by. The magma flung further westwards became porous when cooled, caused by escaping gases, and now forms the light-coloured, airy tuff stone that lends the area its Mediterranean appearance. As the Neapolitan writer Raffaele La Capria wrote: “[It gives] the gentle, cheerful, almost pastorally melancholic bay the colour of honey’. The enthusiastic La Capria goes on to exclaim, ‘How Virgilian is all this?’ and indeed from late antiquity onwards, to the south-west of Naples, one was able to revisit the settings in Virgil's *Aeneid*, retracing the protagonist's steps to his descent into the underworld at Lake Avernus, and to follow the sulphurous Phlegraean Fields to visit the poet's grave.

Each era imagines its own sanctuaries in writing, poetry and travel. In the 19th century, Naples was firmly established as the southernmost stop on the extensive educational trip of Europe, the Grand Tour. But soon, near a small island off the Sorrentine headland, the painter and writer August Kopisch discovered a mystical, glowing blue grotto and made Capri into a hub for northern, civilisation-weary Europeans. The blue flower of Romanticism materialised as a place where you could swim, no longer illuminating just Virgilian western Naples but also enchanting the entire gulf. Even the darker, craggier Amalfi coast that protects the gulf from the Sorrentine Peninsula 'like a fortress from without', and where places like Positano were built almost perpendicularly into the rocks, was soon touched by its radiance too.

In his 1950s' essay on tourism, which clearly shows Adorno's influence, Hans Magnus Enzensberger deduces that the touristic need stems from the Romantics' dream of freedom. Pristine landscape and untouched history 'have remained the models of tourism. [It] is thus nothing other than the attempt to realize the dream that Romanticism projected onto the distant and far away. To the degree that bourgeois society closed itself, the bourgeois tried to escape from it – as tourist.' (from Enzensberger's 'A Theory of Tourism', translated by Gerd Gemünden and Kenn Johnson, 2001). There is hardly a more ideal embodiment of this need for freedom than Kopisch's glittering grotto. Even Kopisch's own journey was more an escape from the impositions placed on him by family and education than an educational goal in itself, and Dieter Richter claims that the 'departure to the south was not seldom an escape from the north.' Capri became a gathering place for non-conformists and the stranded from all walks of life. The fact that they did not remain on their own for long was due to an accursed logic. The allure of a place that stands for non-conformism leads to conformist action: everyone wants to go there. The very moment that bourgeois society created the dream of the untouched, it already destroyed it, according to Enzensberger. Kopisch himself actively spurred on Capri's development into a tourist spot and, as a 'multi-media propagator of his discovery,' he had the idea of recreating Vesuvius and the grotto in miniature model form. One could no longer 'escape the sougning of German bards on this blessed patch of earth,' as Theodor Fontane put it with some exasperation in 1874, referring not only to the grotto but also to a poem by Kopisch's friend, August von Platen, on the subject of the Capri fishermen.

Up until the 1920s, the intrusiveness of tourist 'models' steadily increased. 'Why travel?' thinks Georg, the eponymous hero in the novel by *Frankfurter Zeitung* journalist Siegfried Kracauer, before he flees the tiresome springtime crowds into an urban cinema only to be presented once again with a screen version of the spring sun. What does he see in the first frame? 'The Blue Grotto swam into close-up and glittered with faraway-ness in a way that it could never have glittered in real life.' Kracauer's friend, the young pupil of composition, Theodor Wiesengrund-Adorno, reported on a strange form of this phenomenon long before he became infamous as Adorno the Spoilsport with regard to all kinds of leisure activities including travelling. Thomas Cook, the inventors of package tourism, paid a picturesque Capri fisherman to ensure a feeling of authenticity among 'long-in-the-tooth American ladies' and 'gentlemen from Saxony.' Incredibly, the original can still be found in many places. 'How lovely,' exclaim the Thomas Cook tourists.

Nevertheless, in September 1925 Kracauer and Adorno set off on a tour of southern Italy along the Gulf of Naples and the Amalfi coast. But what were they supposed to do there, being so familiar with the dubious nature of being a tourist? They could climb Mount Vesuvius. After all, if something as powerful as a volcano could not provide the unique feeling that the journey was meant to inspire, what could? 'Volcanoes in all their violence of destruction' as well as bold rocks, hurricanes, oceans set in a state of tumult and other dangerous occurrences were already listed in Kant's *Critique of Judgement* as a catalogue of natural phenomena capable of causing sublime feelings in us. But on one condition: 'provided only that we are in security.' For he who fears 'can form no judgement about the sublime in nature', he is simply busy with the profanity of saving his life. At last, then, a genuine advantage of the tourist over the resident. Whereas the latter lives in the danger zone of an impending eruption, the visitor, who spends the rest of the year in safety, is allowed to enjoy a sublime shudder. 'The subject of Kant's infinite ideas of reason is the tourist,' writes Boris Groys.

But in Kant's time, Vesuvius was not yet in the clutches of Cook's Railway. In 1887, John Mason Cook, the son in Thomas Cook & Son, bought up the funicular railway that had opened eight years prior. Shortly before he died, Cook launched the project of linking the electric railway to the funicular. True, in 1906, Vesuvius rebelled and destroyed the last section of the track during an eruption, making it necessary to travel the final part of the ascent on horseback. But three years later, this partial section was rebuilt and at the

same time, the vehicle fleet was increased by two cars while newly installed electricity made night trips possible. In the 1920s, the rush of visitors was so great that three more cars had to be added. The model of package tourism made it possible for everyone who booked a trip to central or southern Italy to receive a coupon for the ascent of Vesuvius – whether he wanted to or not.

The mental trivialization of the volcano's sublimity went hand in hand with its diminution through technology. Even Fontane struck an ascent of Vesuvius from his travel itinerary and had little difficulty incorporating the volcano into a metaphor for his digestive problems. And for Swiss artist Gilbert Clavel, who has faded into oblivion despite Kracauer's portrait in the essay "Felsenwahn in Positano" ("Cliff Folly in Positano"), which refers to Clavel's attempt in the 1920s to blast himself a home into the rocks in Positano, Vesuvius was unceremoniously transformed into the 'engine' in the 'vehicle' of his body: 'I not long ago stuck a longish pipe into the exhaust of my deposit-encrusted colon and let in a light-coloured, healing tea. There followed a Vesuvian eruption that resumed telescopic sight to my behind.'

What does Adorno, standing in September 1925 on the edge of the crater of the maltreated Vesuvius 'where travellers could only stop for a short time due to the wind,' make of this very ambivalent tourist experience? He does not write a romantic travelogue. He does not write anything satirical on the touristic abasement of the demonically sublime in the form of funiculars, souvenir stands or idyllic postcards. He makes what he believes he sees into the core of his philosophy.

Squinting at texts – the aim of this book

On a list ranking the things that one most desires, another contemporary book on Adorno a good ten years after his 100th birthday is not likely to make it into the top ten. Adorno's philosophical oeuvre, it seems, has done its duty. Adorno provided the sound of modernity through his disquiet at a damaged life; his theory has been etched into the conceptual figures and intellectual jargon of at least one generation in a way that very few other philosophers have managed. But even before Adorno's philosophy was fully formulated, a violent series of backlashes started along with growing suspicions that Adorno would recoil from the consequences of his own scathing critique of society – and so the furore of appropriating Adorno's theories was accompanied by an equally heated condemnation.

And now? After three biographies and countless commentaries marking his 100th birthday in 2003, the eventful history of reception of Adorno's work seems to have found a conciliatory end: he is an established icon in recent philosophical history and his theories have been historicised to a great extent – to the displeasure of those who still insist on making Adorno's theories productive in the analysis of the present day.

So why another book on Adorno? And what's more, one on Adorno in Naples, in other words one that appears to collude in the project of revealing every irrelevant facet of Adorno's private life – as if what's now called for, after abandoning his theories, is to record Adorno's behaviour on holiday, even on his less significant journeys. No one to date has bothered researching Adorno's stay in Naples, and no wonder. Other places spring to mind when Adorno is mentioned: Vienna, Adorno the artist's first domain, where he took composition lessons from Alban Berg. Amorbach, a much-visited place of inalienable childhood utopia. New York or Los Angeles, sites of emigration, distinctive popular culture and empirically composed sociological methods. Paris, the capital of the 19th century through Walter Benjamin's mediation and in his own life, the first reunion with Europe after emigration. And Frankfurt of course, Adorno's birthplace, where he rebuilt the Institute for Social Research after the war together with Max Horkheimer and where the Frankfurt School first became something resembling a school.

But Naples – that hot-tempered, chaotic, exhausting city, which is not even easy to place along the spectrum of European cultural city and American wasteland with no past? If it has to be Italy, then let it be Genoa where Adorno occasionally indulged in speculations

about the noblesse of his own family tree. The complete disregard of Naples in Adorno's mental cartography seems to have occurred with good reason. From his trip in 1925, Adorno's impressions amount to just two letters to Alban Berg and a short text on the fishermen of Capri. Although he met for a 'philosophical battle' in Naples with Walter Benjamin and Alfred Sohn-Rethel, who adapted a little more comfortably to southern Italy than Adorno and Kracauer, he claimed to have survived this battle unscathed. Why, therefore, should Naples be significant for Adorno or his theories?

When Adorno travelled with Kracauer to Naples in September 1925, in time for his 22nd birthday, he encountered a mixture of non-conformists, egocentrics, project-spinners and revolutionaries who were all cultivating their own portion of the Gulf of Naples in very different ways. For Adorno, a core group crystallised from this teeming panorama, whose slumbering revolutionary spirit was awakened in Naples. Even the most inward-looking participants in the philosophical dispute were incited by everyday Neapolitan life to raise their sights to the trivialities of the present and attune their ears to its revolutionary potential. But this was not enough. In each person, although it manifested itself in completely different forms, a puzzling impulse was triggered: was it possible that the intoxicating oriental mood of Naples, with its cult of death and excessive vitality, was translatable into a new-fangled form of philosophy?

Adorno seemed unmoved by this. It took a while for his Neapolitan experience to completely spread into his theoretical nervous system – and for this reason, it takes a while until an Adornian text becomes the focus in this book. But then he succeeds – or it befalls him – in transforming Naples into philosophy with the greatest consequence of all. As in Heinrich von Kleist's *The Duel*, where against all odds a small gash for the supposed winner turns into a fatal wound, the confusions of the Neapolitan battle, together with the five essays that the combatants write on the spectacles of the Gulf of Naples, evolve into the birth pangs of Adorno's philosophy.

Clavel, the water-detonating tower-builder, is at first turned by Adorno into the ideal composer and later, a less-than-ideal enlightener. The mythical-mysterious, even hellish Positano deviates into a site of modernity gone demonic. One only needs to step up close enough to the panes of glass in Naples' aquarium and look at the tamed 'water demons' to practice Adorno's 'remembrance of nature within the subject' with a tourist's shudder – an alternative habitus, say, to that of man dominating nature. The blood miracle of the

St. Januarius is also a useful warding-off spell in Adorno's work. And the porousness that Benjamin and the Latvian theatre activist Asja Lacin discover in the Neapolitan building material and its social environment becomes the very structural ideal of Adorno's texts. Naples, the apparent side entrance into Adorno's theory, leads to its centre.

In two of Adorno's early essays, this metamorphosis of landscape into text will be narrated in its entirety. In essence, a short visit from Naples to Positano and back again is sufficient for this purpose – an excursion in which the whole history of mankind can be reconstructed. Only then, in the second half of this book, can the complications, distortions and overwritings of this Neapolitan structure be presented in Adorno's highly influential texts. We witness the gradual modelling of a theory, at whose centre lies a catastrophe of which the landscape that this theory comes from cannot yet be aware. Adorno saves the structure that comes out of Naples over the head of fascism, and it lends his philosophy in Germany of the 1950s and 1960s its productivity and authority. A sanctuary in the form of the southern Italian landscape becomes the source code of one of the most successful and momentous theories in the postwar history of the Federal Republic of Germany.

The Naples experience infiltrates Adorno's texts in the form of material enrichment. In what follows, it will be attempted to collect these influences as fully as possible. Significantly more substantial, however, is the transformation of Naples into the structural principle of his texts' composition. Because the retracing of this structure opens up completely new perspectives on Adorno's intellectual biography. Is it not the ideal point in time, now that the battles over the relevance and correctness of Adorno's arguments have abated, to change our viewpoint slightly and to squint at these texts from a different angle, as it were, so that the compositional logic according to which these arguments were structured becomes visible? Similarly to Susan Sontag's plea in her 1960s essay "Against Interpretation", the aim is not to force works of art into yet another corset of interpretation but to unearth their factuality. Adorno demanded something very similar in his notion of the ideal way to listen to music: to comprehend the compositional structure instead of simply listening out for the beautiful passages. This 'anti-interpretation' should benefit Adorno himself in the following. The arguments – the beautiful passages in Adorno's texts – have been listened out for often enough. By

way of contrast, in this book the structuring principle of their composition should come to the fore. It will prove to be its strongest argument. From his early essay on Alban Berg's opera *Woyzeck* to the posthumous *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno the performing artist becomes evident, a role that a few have suggested he was capable of executing. Looked at from the point of view of Naples, this art form's set of rules can be discerned. And his reputedly difficult texts emerge as highly appealing dramatizations of Neapolitan lunacy.