Critical Messages in a Bottle and Restoration

Performatively, perhaps, both the source and contents of this image remain enigmatic, fragmented, and difficult to read. Its history provides, as Walter Benjamin once phrased it, a ‘configuration pregnant with tensions.’\(^1\) In this part, and its two excurses, I focus on a number of these antinomies, showing how this image has been used to support and attack the political dimensions of Adorno’s aesthetic and critical theory before subjecting this instrumentalisation to critique.

Recalling an anecdote of Hanns Eisler’s, which offers a clue to the origin of Adorno’s image, W. Martin Lüdke suggested, in conversation with Leo Löwenthal, that,

At the beginning of the war (...) some members of the Institute of Social Research were standing on the shore of the Pacific when suddenly Adorno, seized by melancholy, said: ‘We should throw out a message in a bottle.’ Eisler remarked dryly that he already knew how the message should read: ‘I feel so lousy.’\(^2\)

The picture painted here expresses something of that subversive intrigue\(^3\) seen in Caspar David Friedrich’s earnest, romantic and melancholy Rückenfigur, Monk by the Sea (c. 1809), which was itself reinterpreted in photographic form with a good deal of playful parody, lighthearted caricature, and dry or sardonic humour by Bas Jan Ader in his, Farewell to Faraway Friends (1971). Both images show rearview figures in communion with the sea, lost to the sea. The romantic spirit or motif of being sensitive to and overcome by emotion, of dynamical sublime feeling (as outlined by Kant), of ecstatic encounters wherein ‘the subject becomes conscious of its own nullity and attains beyond it to what is other’ (AT 266), of the proto-religiosity and eternality of ‘oceanic feeling’ (as elaborated by
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Freud) – the contemplative outsider on the edge of society, alienated and alone, depicted variously by Friedrich and Ader, certainly speaks to the Institute members’ brutal experience of exile and the dark humour that did not escape them.

Stefan Müller-Doohm, in his biography of Adorno, also tracks the first uses of this image back to the early 1940s and implies that it appealed as much to Horkheimer as it did to Adorno as a descriptor for ‘the position of the critical intellectual.’ This lousy-feeling, free-thinking, and solitary figure asks if and how it is possible to think at all amid such barbarism, whether or not the projects of critical and aesthetic theory as containers for truth can sustain the promise – equally interrupted and suspended (lost to the sea, shipwrecked) – of a future, revolutionary and utopian, society replete with emancipated and self-determining, mature and autonomous subjects.

Müller-Doohm cites Horkheimer’s statement of intent, ‘In view of what is now threatening to engulf Europe... our present work is essentially destined to pass things down through the night that is approaching: a kind of message in a bottle’ (AB 262). This statement supports the familiar narrative whereby the creation, communication, and circulation of critical theory was reconfigured in response to the terror of praxis propagated by the authoritarian personalities and totalitarian regimes of fascism and Stalinism. Critical theory became, in Richard Leppert’s words, ‘an address to an uncertain future – what Adorno called “Flaschenposten,” or “messages in bottles,” tossed out to sea in hope of their later being found.’

Geographically displaced in catastrophically dark times, the exiled scholars of the Frankfurt School may be forgiven a melancholy disposition and romantic sentimentality, imagining themselves shipwrecked or lost to the sea. Cut off from a form of rescue via readership they could only address their texts to an uncertain future, which must have offered little consolation. Müller-Doohm argues that the image ‘provided the underlying motif in the texts [Horkheimer and Adorno] worked on intensively from the beginning of 1942’ (AB 277), which engendered a ‘new conception of philosophy that was conceived as a collection of messages from the shipwrecked – messages that were as shocking in their content as they were fragmented in form’ (AB 278).6 Referring here to the coauthored standard-bearer of critical theory, Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments, first published during wartime, Müller-Doohm warns that although it was originally conceived as messages in a bottle, it ‘was supposed to be found and decoded,’ urgently (AB 334). Adorno and Horkheimer put it thus,