The Discussion of Myth in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: Myth and the Unfinished Task of Enlightenment

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Abstract

My thesis examines the discussion of myth in Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Contesting Habermas’ influential reading of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as a ‘totalising critique of reason,’ I argue that Horkheimer and Adorno entwine two concepts of myth into a highly original study of philosophical self-reflection. I call the first concept of myth ‘allegorical’; it stems from aesthetics. I call the second concept of myth ‘anthropological.’

In chapter 1 I first provide a brief outline of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and the mainstream Anglophone commentaries on the book. I then argue that the Anglophone mainstream has largely overlooked a concept of self-reflection which is to be found through a detailed examination of Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique of modern reason, a critique which is built, in large part, around the particular theme of myth.

In Chapter 2 I unpack Horkheimer and Adorno’s allegorical reading of myth, a reading which treats the figure of Odysseus sailing past the Sirens as an allegory for the ‘myth’ of instrumental reason. Odysseus is here presented as an exemplar of the isolated, alienated subject of the modern world whose ability for thought and reflection is conditioned by the dehumanising instrumental reason of modern industrialised society. In a line of thought that is modelled upon aesthetics, I argue
that this reading of myth illuminates a potential for qualitatively new forms of self-reflection and human solidarity.

In chapter 3 I present Horkheimer and Adorno’s anthropological reading of myth. Myth in this reading is ‘myth’ seen through the eyes of the modern anthropologist; it is a kind of symbolic support for customs, traditions and kinship bonds of pre- or non-modern cultures. Through an innovative reading of Homer’s *Odyssey* as documenting the cultural memory of an early stage of settled European civilisation, Horkheimer and Adorno unravel the Homeric memory of traces of this anthropological concept of myth reaching into our species’ distant past. Upon this basis, I argue that Horkheimer and Adorno’s interpretation of the *Odyssey* becomes a highly original attempt to establish an anthropological underpinning for the concept of self-reflection which is sketched out in the authors’ allegorical reading of myth.

Finally, I conclude that Horkheimer and Adorno’s discussion of myth presents a valuable perspective on philosophical self-reflection which has been largely overlooked in the mainstream secondary literature on *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. 
Declaration

This is to certify that:

(i) The thesis comprises only my original work towards the degree of Master of Arts (Advanced Seminars and Shorter Thesis).

(ii) Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used.

(iii) The thesis is fewer than 24, 201 words in length, exclusive of words in tables, maps, bibliographies, and appendices.

James I. Mitchell
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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of Lidia Scafidi.
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Introduction

In this thesis I argue that the discussion of myth in Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* points towards an innovative concept of philosophical self-reflection.¹ I maintain that this concept of self-reflection is most clearly understood if one reads Horkheimer and Adorno’s discussion of myth in terms of two analytically distinct approaches to myth. I call the first approach to myth an ‘allegorical’ reading, it stems from aesthetics. I call the second approach to myth an ‘anthropological’ reading.

Under what I have called an allegorical reading of myth I mean that line of thought to be found in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* which treats the figure of Odysseus sailing past the Sirens as an allegory for the ‘myth’ of instrumental reason. Odysseus is here presented as an exemplar of the isolated, alienated subject of the modern world whose capacity for thought and reflection is conditioned by the dehumanising instrumental reason of modern industrialised society. I call this reading of myth allegorical because the myth of instrumental reason is not so much ‘in’ the world (in the empirical sense) as it is ‘above’ the world; it is something that conditions thought and communication, and that leaves the modern subject constantly vulnerable to forces pushing in the direction of reversal and regression to barbarism and social disintegration. In a line of thought that is modelled upon aesthetics, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that shared symbolic insight into the

myth of instrumental reason illuminates a potential for qualitatively new forms of self-reflection and human solidarity: forms of self-reflection and solidarity derived from the unrelenting philosophical confrontation with the vulnerabilities that preform and often deform thought and reflection in the modern world.

What I call the anthropological reading of myth is distinct from the above. Myth in this reading is ‘myth’ seen through the eyes of the modern anthropologist; it is a kind of symbolic support for customs, traditions and kinship bonds of pre- or non-modern cultures. Through an innovative reading of Homer’s *Odyssey* as documenting the cultural memory of an early stage of settled European civilisation, Horkheimer and Adorno unravel the Homeric memory of traces of this anthropological concept of myth which reach into our species’ distant past. On this basis, Horkheimer and Adorno’s interpretation of the *Odyssey* becomes a highly original attempt to salvage a self-reflective dimension of Western reason for modern philosophy: an attempt to establish an anthropological underpinning for the concept of self-reflection which is sketched out in the authors’ allegorical reading of myth.

In what follows, I develop my arguments through three chapters. Chapter one is a brief summary of both the arguments presented in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as well as the mainstream Anglophone reception of the text. In this chapter I suggest that the now dominant characterisation of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as a ‘totalising’ critique of reason is based upon a reductive reading of the text. Against the grain of this reading, I argue that the book might be more coherently
understood as a ‘work in progress’ on enduring social, historical, and philosophical questions.

In chapter two I first outline the entwinement of insights drawn from Lukacs and Freud that are the foundations of Horkheimer and Adorno’s allegorical reading of myth. I then discuss Horkheimer and Adorno’s depiction of the myth of instrumental reason through the authors’ allegorical reading of Odysseus and the Sirens.

In chapter three I first detail the framework for Horkheimer and Adorno’s anthropological reading of myth. I then go into a detailed exegesis of the authors’ interpretation of the Homeric epic as both a reflection of an early stage of settled European civilisation and at the same time a record of a philosophical potential for self-reflection which has been almost wholly abandoned by modern philosophical thought.
Chapter 1: Reading *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

**Against the Grain of the Anglophone Mainstream**

As German exiles living in the U.S. in 1944, Horkheimer and Adorno first wrote what would become *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as a manuscript bearing the title *Philosophical Fragments*. The historical-philosophical theses of the manuscript arose not only from the collaboration of its exiled authors in Los Angeles, but also from debates revolving primarily around social scientific methodology which had taken place through the Columbia University branch of the Institute for Social Research. The book bearing the title *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was published in 1947. Its original name *Philosophical Fragments* became a subtitle denoting the work’s peculiar structure.²

The completed text became a major work in what can now be seen as the Central European intellectuals’ attempt to make sense of the political disasters of the 1930s and 1940s. In an era when not only politics, but also the secular reason of the modern sciences and humanities, were deprived of a secure foundation, those disasters themselves became a kind of ‘negative ground’ for philosophical reflection.³ Horkheimer and Adorno’s approach to this ‘negative ground’ for

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³ Anson Rabinbach develops this theme in relation to the post war writings of Horkheimer and Adorno, Heidegger, and Jaspers, which marked a “a caesura in a philosophical as well as a
philosophical reflection became an introduction to a reformulation of the tradition of ‘dialectical’ philosophy: a reformulation of the approach to philosophical practice which sees the philosophical expression of the ‘spirit of the times’ as the basis of historically new forms of self-reflection. The authors describe the basis of their reconceptualisation of dialectics as: “What we had set out to do was nothing less than to explain why humanity, instead of entering into a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism.”

Through an innovative entwinement of Lukacsian and Freudian insights into modern reason, Horkheimer and Adorno understood this ‘new kind barbarism’ in light of two basic themes. On one hand, it was understood in terms of the actual political collapse of Western civilisation up to and including the Second World War. On the other hand, it was understood as an illustration of the chasm separating conventional philosophical understandings of modern reason from threatening forces determining the way in which individuals think and communicate in reality. This became the basis of Horkheimer and Adorno’s paradoxical attempt to salvage the project of enlightenment, which saw reason as nothing less than the absolute guarantee for humanity, by explaining how the project of enlightenment had destroyed itself. The authors write:

The aporia which faced us in our work...proved to be the first matter we had to investigate: the self-destruction of enlightenment. We have no doubt—and herein lies our petitio principi—that freedom in society is inseparable from enlightenment thinking. We believe we

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4 Horkheimer and Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment, xiv.
have perceived with equal clarity, however, that the very concept of that thinking, no less than the concrete historical forms, the institutions of society with which it is intertwined, already contains the germ of the regression which is taking place everywhere today. If enlightenment does not assimilate reflection on this regressive moment, then it seals its own fate.5

Horkheimer and Adorno develop their arguments through five somewhat loosely related essays and a final section of aphorisms. In the preface Horkheimer and Adorno describe the first section as the “theoretical basis of those which follow.”6 It traces the rise and fall of ‘enlightenment,’ that, beyond the historical epoch of the Enlightenment, refers to the historical development of the Western intellectual tradition from its Homeric origins to the modern self-destruction of enlightened thinking. The following four sections are devoted to concrete elaborations of the ideas sketched out in the first. The second section presents a detailed reconstruction of the Homeric origins of the Western intellectual tradition through a study of Homer’s *Odyssey*. The third section of the book reconstructs the irrevocable destruction of any intrinsic connection between modern ‘enlightened’ thinking and moral values through the work of Kant, Nietzsche, and the Marquis de Sade. The fourth section traces the dissolution of a critical, self-reflective dimension of modern art and culture within modern mass culture. The fifth section of the work traces the reversion of enlightened civilisation to the real barbarism of Nazi anti-Semitism. The aphorisms which complete the work cover diverse themes such as progress, propaganda, mass society and the body.

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5 Ibid., xvi.
6 Ibid., xviii.
Through this oddly structured and complex work Horkheimer and Adorno’s paradoxical attempt to salvage the project of enlightenment is unravelled through a series of examples, rather than through a linear and systematic method of argumentation. According to the authors, these figures of thought point to the possibility of salvaging enlightenment via fragmented insights into the tendencies that brought about a modern reversion to barbarism.

Following the modern Anglophone reception of the text, however, Horkheimer and Adorno had in fact deceived themselves. As opposed to reconceptualising the project of enlightenment, it is argued, Horkheimer and Adorno ended up condemning the foundations of Western thought as barbarous, and thereby brought themselves to a dead end of philosophical reflection. I argue, however, that this interpretation of Dialectic of Enlightenment is based upon a reductive reading of the text. In the remainder of this chapter I first sketch out a brief history of the mainstream Anglophone reception of the text. I then present two arguments that help to clarify the basic themes of Dialectic of Enlightenment, and also why those themes are still best understood as relevant to modern philosophical thought.

### 1.1: The Mainstream Anglophone Reception of Dialectic of Enlightenment: From Romantic Alienation to a Totalising Critique of Reason

Despite being written in the United States, Dialectic of Enlightenment did not appear to an English speaking audience until, due largely to the intellectual fame of Herbert Marcuse, it was translated into English in 1972. For a brief period, the text appears to have resonated with pockets of Left Anglophone intellectuals. It was not,
however, a critical perspective on the breakdown of secular reason in the 1930s and 1940s that attracted their attention. Rather, they connected their own experiences of a world caught up in the problems of the Cold War and Nuclear armament to a politicised and romantic image of alienation that was somewhat simplistically attributed to the ‘Frankfurt School.’

Due largely to the influence of Adorno’s most famous student Juergen Habermas, the focus of the mainstream Anglophone reception of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* appears to have shifted from a politicised reading of the text in the 1970s to a philosophical reading of the text from the early 1980s onwards. In *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* Habermas made the enormously influential claim that, under the historical pressures surrounding its publication, the book presents a ‘totalising’ critique of modern reason which, “attacks the presuppositions of its own validity.” Habermas’ arguments effectively reduce

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7 For a discussion of the American reception of the Frankfurt School in the 60s and 70s see Wheatland, *The Frankfurt School in Exile*, 267-295. Examples of the romantic image of alienation ascribed to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* can be found in the work of Perry Anderson and Neil McInnes. Anderson writes, “the basic argument [of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*] effectively equated North American liberalism and German fascism.” *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: NLB, 1976), 33. McInnes writes: “this theory [which is developed in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*] could not lead to any specific organized social action, for there was no party to join which offered a reasonable totality as against the ultimately nefarious and capitalist societies. Quietist conclusions were drawn from this by Adorno and Horkheimer. The whole is senseless but there is nothing to be done about it.” *The Western Marxists* (London: Alcove Press, 1972), 187.


Dialectic of Enlightenment to the assertion that modern reason is synonymous with the instrumental domination of nature, and all domination of nature is barbarism. Modern reason is therefore conceptualised as barbaric: a ‘performative contradiction’ by authors who claim to be champions of enlightenment.\(^{10}\)

Habermas’ influence on the modern Anglophone reception of Dialectic of Enlightenment has been pervasive. This approach to the text acknowledges the debt of modern social theory to Horkheimer and Adorno’s entwinement of Marxian and Freudian themes. It suggests, however, that ‘we’ have recognised the fundamental logical flaw upon which the arguments within Dialectic of Enlightenment are based.\(^{11}\)

Against the grain of this dominant interpretation of Dialectic of Enlightenment, I argue that characterising the text as a ‘totalising critique’ misrepresents

\(^{10}\) According to Habermas, “Horkheimer and Adorno...no longer want...to overcome theoretically the performative contradiction inherent in an ideology critique that outstrips itself. Any attempt to develop a theory at this level of reflection would have to slide off into the groundless; they therefore eschew theory and practice determinate negation on an ad hoc basis, thus standing firm against the fusion of reason and power...Anyone who abides in a paradox on the very spot once occupied by philosophy with its ultimate groundings is not just taking up an uncomfortable position; one can only hold that place if one makes it at least minimally plausible that there is no way out. Even the retreat from an aporetic situation has to be barred for otherwise, there is a way—the way back.” “The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment; Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno,” 127-128.

Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique of modern reason. My point is not that the mainstream secondary literature is ‘wrong.’ The insight into modern reason as a reflection of the instrumental domination of nature is indeed a central theme of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. My point is rather that an abstract, or broadly conceived, characterisation of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as equating reason with barbarism has led to the predominance of overly polemical, and ultimately reductive interpretations of the text. In the following section I defend this argument through a brief discussion of how Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique of instrumental reason is most coherently understood as a ‘work in progress.’

### 1.2: Reading *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as a Work in Progress

What is suspect is not, of course, the depiction of reality as hell but the routine invitation to break out of it. If that invitation can be addressed to anyone today it is neither to the so-called masses nor to the individual, who is powerless, but rather to an imaginary witness, to whom we bequeath it so that it is not entirely lost with us.¹²

As is suggested in the quote above, Horkheimer and Adorno originally understood the concept of enlightenment which is sketched out in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as a ‘work in progress’ addressed to an unknown audience beyond the upheavals of the Second World War and its immediate aftermath. In contradistinction to characterisations of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as a totalising critique of reason, I argue that the text is still most coherently approached in light of this originally intended meaning.

¹² Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 213.
The character of a ‘work in progress’ permeates the internal logic of the historical-philosophical theses in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, theses which were later supplemented by Horkheimer’s lecture series *Eclipse of Reason* and Adorno’s aphoristic *Minima Moralia*.\(^{13}\) Whilst the precise nature of the argumentative strategy developed through the three works does not appear to have been comprehensively worked out at the time in which they were written, it can be understood as foreshadowed in Adorno’s earliest work, and as having been comprehensively developed in his later work, *Negative Dialectics*.\(^ {14}\)

Horkheimer and Adorno’s approach to philosophical practice constitutes a radical transformation of the kind of holistic thinking which was primarily influenced by Georg Lukacs’ concept of proletarian class consciousness in *History and Class Consciousness*, a concept which played a crucial role in the thought of the young Horkheimer. Read in terms of this earlier ‘paradigm’ of philosophy, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* marks a decisive shift away from the attempt to unify theoretical insight into the generative structures of ideology with political practice, or the attempt to unify ‘is’ with ‘ought.’ In league with the influence of psychoanalytic insights into the unconscious forces that permeate the psyche, Horkheimer and Adorno approach philosophy as the practice of illuminating the obscure social and

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historical conditions of thought and existence in the modern world. Horkheimer and Adorno’s reconceptualised approach to philosophy thereby aimed to make an opening within an apparently closed horizon of enlightenment thinking, an opening which revealed how the project of enlightenment is still very much incomplete.

A preliminary understanding of Horkheimer and Adorno’s reconceptualisation of dialectics can be sketched out by reading Horkheimer and Adorno’s synthesis of Lukacsian and Freudian insights in terms of what Horkheimer describes as ‘subjective’ reason. Subjective reason does not refer to a particular philosophical theory about truth or falsehood in the sense of, for example, Popperian falsificationism. Rather, subjective reason describes a much more simple presupposition about what we call ‘reason;’ it describes the subjective faculty of mind, or simply the activity of the individual mind, with which ‘normally' socialised adults of the modern world think. It refers to a conception of reason like that which Freud described as the ego’s capacity for ‘reality-testing’: the faculty of ‘subjectivity,’ or conscious self-awareness, through which we test the realities of the ‘objective’ or external world for the sake of the self-preservation of either the individual or of the community upon which the livelihood of the individual

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16 For an introduction to Popperian falsificationism see A.F Chalmers, What is this thing called Science? (St. Lucia: UQP, 2013), 55-96. For a discussion of the relevance of Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique of philosophy to contemporary mainstream Anglophone philosophy see Bowie, Adorno and Ends of Philosophy.
depends. In short, subjective reason refers to our modern secular conception of reason as a ‘how’ rather than a ‘what.’

According to Horkheimer, after a long history of enlightenment through which ‘objective’ theories of reason or theories of reason that attempted to establish intrinsic relationships between reason and objective values were progressively demythologised, subjective reason finally became the basic concept of reason underpinning the Western philosophical mainstream. Horkheimer and Adorno

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17 Horkheimer characterises subjective reason as: “[T]he force that ultimately makes reasonable actions possible is the faculty of classification, inference, and deduction, no matter what the specific content—the abstract functioning of the thinking mechanism. This type of reason may be called subjective reason. It is essentially concerned with means and ends, with the adequacy of procedures for purposes more or less taken for granted and supposedly self-explanatory. It attaches little importance to the question of whether the purposes as such are reasonable. If it concerns itself at all with ends, it takes for granted that they too are reasonable in the subjective sense, i.e. that they serve the subject’s interest in self-preservation—be it of the individual, or of the community on whose maintenance the that of the individual depends. The idea that an aim can be reasonable for its own sake—on the basis of virtues that insight reveals it to have in itself—without reference to some kind of subjective gain or advantage, is utterly alien to subjective reason, even where it rises above the consideration of immediate utilitarian values and devotes itself to reflections about the social order as a whole.” Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 3-4. Adorno explicitly links subjective reason to the Freudian notion of reality-testing in his lecture series on moral philosophy given in 1963: “In its origins thinking is no more than the form in which we have attempted to master our environment and come to terms with it—testing reality is the name given by analytic psychology to this function of the ego and of thought.” Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, ed. Thomas Schroeder, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 4.

18 Horkheimer writes: “However naive or superficial this definition of reason [i.e. reason defined as subjective reason] may seem, it is an important symptom of a profound change of outlook that has taken place in Western thinking over the course of the last few centuries. For a long time, a diametrically opposite view of reason was prevalent. This view asserted the existence of reason as a force not only in the individual but also in the objective world—in relations among human beings and between social classes, in social institutions, and in nature and its manifestations. Great philosophical systems, such as those of Plato and Aristotle, scholasticism, and German Idealism were founded on an objective theory of reason. It aimed at evolving a comprehensive system, or hierarchy, of all beings including man and his aims. The degree of reasonableness of one’s life could be determined according to its harmony with this totality. Its objective structure, and not just man and his purposes, was to be the measuring rod for individual thoughts and actions. This concept of reason never precluded subjective reason, but regarded the latter as only a partial, limited expression of a universal rationality from which criteria for all things and beings were derived. The emphasis was on ends rather than means. The supreme endeavour of this kind of thinking was to reconcile the objective order of the ‘reasonable,’ as philosophy conceived it, with human existence, including self-interest and self-preservation.” *Eclipse of Reason*, 4.
do not, however, present the reduction of reason to subjective reason as somehow intrinsically destructive. To the contrary, they maintain that through the intellectual history of the modern West we have demythologised illusory conceptions of objective reason and come to recognise that reason is simply a means. Following Horkheimer and Adorno’s entwinement of Lukacs and Freud, however, the philosophical victory of subjective reason means that modern mainstream philosophy has become blind to highly ambivalent social and historical forces which shape and often distort the way the way in which individuals make use of their ‘subjective’ reason, or the way in which individuals think in the ‘real’ world.¹⁹

From Lukacs the authors inherit a conception of modern thought as a reflection of reification, or of human beings’ assimilation with the dehumanising ‘instrumental’ reason of modern rationalised modes of production. From Freud they inherit a conception of modern thought as a reflection of the repression of the instinctual life of the mind for the sake of adjustment to reality and hence a reflection of the conflicts and contradictions of the unconscious. Freud thus points to the way in which the mind is itself ‘instrumentalised’ as a tool for self-preservation. Through this dual lens of Freud and Lukacs, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the way in which individuals think and communicate in reality is shaped by highly ambivalent human needs and vulnerabilities. On one hand, the authors argue that these

¹⁹ Horkheimer writes: “The formalization of reason leads to a paradoxical cultural situation. On one hand a destructive antagonism of self and nature, an antagonism epitomising the history of our civilisation, reaches its peak in this era....On the other hand, philosophical thinking, whose task is to essay a reconciliation, has come to deny or forget the very existence of the antagonism.” (Ibid., 110).
vulnerabilities can be, and have been, transformed into regressive and barbaric social forces. On the other hand, however, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that shared or inter-subjective insight into these vulnerabilities points to a philosophical potential for qualitatively new forms of self-reflection and ‘enlightenment’: forms of self-reflection which reveal the vulnerabilities of the isolated and alienated subject of the modern world as shared conditions of thought and communication, and hence as foundations upon which new kinds of human solidarity might be formed. Horkheimer and Adorno hence argue that through this concept of self-reflection reason can become more than a ‘how,’ more than a mere means.20

Read in this manner, Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique of reason and its development through the various sections of Dialectic of Enlightenment is in no way synonymous with the idea that the authors reduce modern reason to humanity’s domination of nature, and hence to barbarism. As noted above, the insight into modern rationality as a reflection of our rationalised domination over

20 Horkheimer writes: “Reason can realize its reasonableness only through reflecting on the disease of the world as produced and reproduced by man; in such self-critique, reason will at the same time remain faithful to itself, by preserving and applying for no ulterior motive the principle of truth that we owe to reason alone. The subjugation of nature will revert to subjugation of man, and vice versa, as long as man does not understand his own reason and the basic process by which he has created and is maintaining the antagonism that is about to destroy him. Reason can be more than nature only through concretely realizing its naturalness—which consists in its trend to domination—the very trend that paradoxically alienates it from nature. Thus also, by being the instrument of reconciliation, it will be more than an instrument.” (Ibid., 20). Adorno makes a similar point when he writes: “Were speculation concerning the state of reconciliation allowed, then it would be impossible to conceive that state as either the undifferentiated unity of subject and object or their hostile antithesis: rather, it would be the communication of what is differentiated. Only then would the concept of communication, as an objective concept, come into its own. The present concept is so shameful because it betrays what is best—the potential for agreement between human beings—to the idea of imparting information according to the exigencies of subjective reason. In its proper place, even epistemologically, the relationship of subject and object would lie in a peace achieved between human beings as well as between them and their Other. Peace is the state of differentiation without domination, with the differentiated participating in each other.” “On Subject and Object” in Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005): 245-258, 247.
nature is indeed a defining theme of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The authors’ point in developing that insight, however, is to uncover a latent dimension of instrumental reason itself as a transparent basis for self-reflection: a basis from which philosophy might reinvigorate the self-reflective potential ingrained in the anthropological structure of Western reason. For Horkheimer and Adorno, it would seem, this concept of enlightenment would remain a ‘work in progress’ for as long as the vulnerabilities which shape modern thought and existence threaten to push human beings into new kinds of barbarism.

In contradistinction to characterisations of the text as a totalising critique of reason, I argue that reading *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in the ways described here presents an innovative concept of philosophical self-reflection. In what follows, I hope to illustrate the way in which Horkheimer and Adorno’s discussion of myth establishes the two principle foundations of this concept of self-reflection. In my discussion of the authors’ allegorical reading of myth I aim to unravel the way in which a latent dimension of instrumental reason presents a potential for new forms of enlightened self-reflection. In my discussion of the authors’ anthropological reading of myth I aim to unpack the relation between this concept of enlightened self-reflection and Horkheimer and Adorno’s reading of the anthropological structure of Western reason.
Chapter 2: The Allegorical Reading of Myth

Any reader of the *Odyssey* will be familiar with the tale of Odysseus’ escape from the Sirens. In it, Odysseus escapes the irresistible and deadly allure of the Sirens’ song by plugging his crew’s ears with wax and having himself bound to the mast of his ship. In order to understand Horkheimer and Adorno’s reading of Odysseus’ escape from the Sirens as what I call an allegory for the myth of instrumental reason, however, the theoretical bases of the authors’ allegorical reading must first be sketched out. Accordingly, in this chapter I first unravel the entwinement of Lukacsian and Freudian insights within Horkheimer and Adorno’s notion of instrumental reason. I then connect this notion of instrumental reason to Horkheimer and Adorno’s interpretation of Odysseus sailing past the Sirens: an allegorical interpretation of the Homeric tale which presents an innovative image of philosophical self-reflection.

As mentioned in the introduction, I call this reading of myth allegorical because, as opposed to something which is ‘in’ the world, the myth of instrumental reason is ‘above’ the world; it refers to the isolation and alienation which conditions how we think and communicate as socially and historically situated agents, and which leaves the modern subject constantly vulnerable to forces pushing in the direction of reversal and regression to barbarism and social disintegration. The point of Horkheimer and Adorno’s allegorical reading of myth is not, however, a ‘totalising’ critique of reason. Rather, in a line of thought modelled upon the aesthetic

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communication of the vulnerabilities and suffering derived from the dehumanising realities of modernity, Horkheimer and Adorno’s allegorical reading of myth is an attempt to open our eyes to pre-reflectively concealed vulnerabilities that preform and often deform thought and communication in the modern world. According to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, as obscure pre-reflective forces, these vulnerabilities constantly recreate regressive and self-destructive illusions which constantly threaten to create new forms of barbarism and its victims. On the other hand, however, as forces which are made explicit in their social and historical particularity and which are thereby shared through an enlightened conception of thought and communication, these vulnerabilities point to a potential for qualitatively new forms of self-reflection and human solidarity.

As opposed to denouncing modern reason as barbaric, Horkheimer and Adorno’s allegorical reading of Odysseus’ encounter with the Sirens thereby aims to unravel our immersion in myth as itself illuminating a potential for qualitatively new forms of self-reflection. Following the authors’ allegory, philosophy alone cannot dissolve the self-destructive tendencies of our immersion in myth. Philosophy might, however, open our eyes to perspectives on new forms and meanings of demythologisation in a disenchanted world.

### 2.1: Reification and the Myth of Instrumental Reason:

**Reading ‘Second Nature’ as Myth**

The technical process, to which the subject has been reified after the expulsion of the process from consciousness, is as free from the ambiguous meanings of mythical thought as from
meaning altogether, since reason itself has become merely an aid to the all-encompassing economic apparatus....The expulsion of thought from logic ratifies in the lecture hall the reification of human beings in factory and office. In this way the taboo encroaches on the power imposing it, enlightenment on mind, which it itself is.\textsuperscript{22}

As Martin Jay has noted, Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique of instrumental reason adopts a reading of reason as a reflection of a reified ‘second nature’ from Georg Lukacs.\textsuperscript{23} Horkheimer and Adorno’s incorporation of Lukacs’ thought is not, however, uncritical. Rather, it presents an alternative to a tension between aesthetics and the notion of labour which developed through a sudden transformation in Lukacs’ concept of reification from \textit{The Theory of the Novel} to \textit{History and Class Consciousness}.\textsuperscript{24}

In \textit{The Theory of the Novel}, Lukacs unravels the meaning of reification through the historical-philosophical interpretation of literature. \textit{The Theory of the Novel} documents the transformation of a ‘meaningful’ universe of an idealised Homeric Greece into the meaningless ‘second nature’ of modernity which assimilates individual experience and social relations with a rationalised and meaningless

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem*\textsuperscript{22} Horkheimer and Adorno, \textit{Dialectic of Enlightenment}, 23.
\end{thebibliography}
social world which appears natural and eternal. According to the young Lukacs, recognising that modern reason (in the sense of the subjective reason discussed above) is a reflection of our second nature gives rise to the defining yet apparently irresolvable problem of modern philosophy. In *History and Class Consciousness*, on the other hand, a reified second nature becomes specific and exclusive to the dehumanising realities of labour within capitalism. Far from the tragic vision of *The Theory of the Novel*, the second nature of a reified proletarian class consciousness now becomes the theoretical key to overcoming a reified second nature: the theoretical key to an anticipated reconciliation between an alienated humanity and our world.

From Lukacs, Horkheimer and Adorno adopt a critique of modern reason as a reflection of the modern individual’s assimilation with a reified second nature. Unlike Lukacs, Horkheimer and Adorno do not read these insights as either an irresolvable problem, or as a theoretical key to overcoming a reified second nature. Rather, they aim to entwine them with an interpretive approach to our immersion in myth.

**The Young Lukacs: Reification Read through Aesthetics**

*The Theory of the Novel* is structured around an opposition between an idealised Homeric age as a universe charged with organic communal meaning at the dawn of the Western intellectual tradition and a Weberian-influenced reading of the loss of meaning and freedom as distinctive characteristics of the rationalised modern world: an opposition between an idealised spiritual homeland at the origins of
Western civilisation and the ‘second nature’ of modernity which is characterised by
the alienated and isolated individualism of modern existence.\(^{25}\) The philosophical
meaning of this opposition is developed through the distinction between the
ancient Greek epic and the novel.

Lukacs conceives of the Homeric world as “a paradise forever lost.”\(^{26}\) He presents it
as an organic, ideal community before or beyond the alienation between ‘subject’
and ‘object.’ This means to argue that in Homeric Greece there was no essential
contradiction between the individual subject and the ‘objective’ world of collective
life, or between subjective values and objective reality, ‘ought’ and ‘is,’ ‘knowing’
and ‘doing.’ Rather, in Lukacs’ view, subject and object were unified in a harmony
of transcendental and communal meaning which was inserted into communal life
by epic literature. Hence epic literature was an historical-philosophical art form
which was not aimed at individual sensibilities, but at the destiny and self-
recognition of the community. It was the spiritual foundation of ways of life in
which truth, justice, and beauty were part of a harmonious totality before any
schism between subject and object.\(^{27}\)

\(^{25}\) On Weber’s influence on *The Theory of the Novel* Vandenberghe writes: “The influence of
Weber is not only evident in Lukács’ use of ideal-types and the vitalist rejection of mechanistic
thought but also, and above all, in its emphasis on loss of meaning and loss of freedom as
distinctive characteristics of modernity.” *A Philosophical History of German Sociology*, 137.
This is clearly a highly simplistic rendering of the intellectual influences on, and background of,
*The Theory of the Novel*. For a more comprehensive discussion of the intellectual influences on
Lukacs’ thought see Vandenberghe (ibid., 29-156).


Lukacs argues that ever since the discovery of the creative, self-constructing principle of rationality, this harmonious totality has been gradually broken into pieces. As the ever-heightening productivity of rationalised organisation, technology, and labour have shaped our social world, we observe a growing schism between ‘subject’ and ‘object.’ This schism reaches its apex in the meaningless ‘second nature’ of modernity. For the modern individual our second nature implies an interrelated loss of meaning and freedom: the individual subject no longer recognises herself as a meaningful part of the ‘objective’ world around it, and activity becomes alienated from any meaningful relationship to an ‘objective’ social and historical totality. Lukacs hence presents the formal and meaningless character of subjective reason as a reflection of the meaningless necessities of our rationalised world.

According to The Theory of the Novel the history of aesthetic forms from the epic to the novel bears witness to a dual process through which our second nature is born. The first side of this dual process is the gradual disappearance of the ‘immanence’ of meaning in the sense of subjective awareness of the relationship between subject and object, or ‘is’ and ‘ought.’ The second side of this dual process is the ‘autonomisation’ of social structures in the sense of the breakdown of the harmony between subject and object, or of organic social relations, through the development of technology and rationalised divisions of labour. Hence the dissolution of epic form and gradual emergence of the aesthetic form of the novel.

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28 Ibid., 63.
29 For a summary of these two dimensions of ‘second nature’ see Vandenberghe, A Philosophical History of German Sociology, 136-139.
bespeaks the assimilation of subjective experience and social relations to an apparently natural and eternal ‘second nature’ that no longer points to any unity between subject and object: subjective experience and social relations thereby become ‘reified,’ or assimilated to meaningless things (reified literally means ‘thingified’). ‘Consciousness’ and ‘meaning’ are hence no longer transcendental and communal, and they no longer permeate the ‘objective’ totality of our inner and outer world. Rather, they become the province of an ‘interiority’ of the alienated and isolated modern individual: a revelation of the ‘transcendental homelessness’ of modern humanity in which we ‘normally’ socialised individuals of the modern world recognise ourselves and our spiritual struggles.  

According to Lukacs, the novel hence reveals that our apparently natural and eternal second nature (and the subjective reason which is a reflection of our second nature) is the product of the process of rationalisation through which we have gradually destroyed the communal harmony at the dawn of European civilisation. This insight gives rise to a tragic puzzle facing the young Lukacs’ thought. On one hand it shows that our second nature must have a ‘meaning,’ or must point to some form of ‘ought,’ which is bound up with the ossification of a vital, sensuous relationship to nature. On the other hand, however, modern philosophical thought does not enable us to penetrate the meaninglessness of our second nature to reunite ‘is’ and ‘ought,’ or to ‘awaken’ the spiritual element that maintained the human solidarity of a meaningful earlier world. As only art and its humanistic interpretation have illustrated the human meaning of our ‘second nature,’

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philosophical reflection is reduced to reflection upon our ‘transcendental homelessness’ and a somewhat obscure hope that the meaning glimpsed in art points to the possibility of a more humane world. 31

The Later Lukacs: Reification Read through Labour

As Frederick Vandenberghe has recently argued, in *History and Class Consciousness* Lukacs makes a sudden leap from aesthetics to the notion of labour, and his reading of reification becomes oriented by two principle themes. 32 Firstly, Lukacs now synthesises Weber’s reading of the meaningless character of the modern world with Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism. From this perspective, reification now appears as the reflection of the formal rationalisation that characterises capitalism. Secondly, he entwines Hegel’s dialectical logic with Marx’s theory of class struggle. From this perspective proletarian class consciousness becomes the theoretical key to overcoming a reified second nature. 33 Hence if in the *The Theory of the Novel* aesthetics revealed the meaningless of a reified second nature as the impenetrable conditions of thought and existence in modernity, in *History and Class Conscious* the notion of labour reveals the meaningless of a reified second nature as the theoretical key to overcoming a reified second nature.

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32 Vandenberghe, *A Philosophical History of German Sociology*, 140.
33 This is again a simplistic account of the theoretical foundations of Lukacs’ concept of reification in *History and Class Consciousness*. For a more detailed account of Lukacs’ reconceptualisation of reification in *History and Class Consciousness* see Vandenberghe, Ibid., 140-156. For a discussion of the dual nature of Lukacs’ concept of reification and its relationship to the development of *Critical Theory* see Brunkhorst and Krockenberger, "Paradigm-core and theory-dynamics in critical social theory: people and programs."
Lukacs now argues that only the bourgeoisie cannot recognise themselves or the concomitant relationship between ‘is’ and ‘ought’ in the world which they constantly recreate because, as the commanders of the productive forces, the bourgeoisie are excluded from participation in the labour which reproduces the dehumanising realities of the modern world. According to Lukacs, because the labour of the proletariat (rather than the command of the bourgeoisie) had created our ‘second nature’ and the proletariat had thus experienced the dehumanisation of modern forms of labour quite literally on their bodies, the class consciousness of the proletariat was in a position to see through and analyse the mechanisms of reification with an acuity not available to the bourgeoisie. In this manner Lukacs argues that the class consciousness of the proletariat had emerged as the ‘historical subject’ which could potentially recognise itself in the reified second nature of the social world produced through modern capitalism.34

Lukacs reasoned that by identifying with the class consciousness of the proletariat (not the ‘reified’ empirical consciousness, but the ‘imputed’ consciousness of the class), philosophical thought could overcome the abstract character of modern reason (‘abstract’ in the sense that it presupposes the subject/object distinction) through the process of enlightening the self-understanding of the proletariat and, by extension, society at large.35 This process was to mobilise the class consciousness of the proletariat into a political force which would unify humanity’s self-understanding with the world which our collective activity constantly

34 On this point see Jay, “Positive and Negative Totalities,” 74, Jay, Marxism and Totality, 81-127, and Vandenberghe, A Philosophical History of German Sociology, 139-154.
35 On the distinction between Lukacs’ notion of ‘imputed’ versus ‘empirical’ consciousness of the proletariat see Vandenberghe, A Philosophical History of German Sociology, 143.
reproduces. Lukacs hence presents the class consciousness of the proletariat as the key to both revolutionary philosophical thought and a truly humane world.\textsuperscript{36}

**Horkheimer and Adorno’s Philosophical Reading of Reification:**

**Reading a Reified ‘Second Nature’ as Myth**

Horkheimer and Adorno read the collapse of the German workers’ movement in the 1930’s and the descent of Nazi Germany into barbarism as empirical evidence that Lukacs’ almost mystical conception of the ‘immanence’ of proletarian class consciousness and the anticipated philosophical unity of ‘is’ and ‘ought’ was a utopian illusion.\textsuperscript{37} Against the notion that Horkheimer and Adorno’s critical reading of Lukacs’ utopianism fed a ‘totalising’ critique of reason, I argue that abandoning Lukacs’ utopia fed a re-interpretation of Lukacs’ aesthetic and materialist insights into an allegorical reading of our modern immersion in myth.

With Lukacs, Horkheimer and Adorno read modern thinking as a reflection of a reified ‘second nature’ which bespeaks the adaptation of consciousness and social relations to rationalised labour and technology. The authors of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* do not, however, read ‘second nature’ as either a tragic puzzle as in *Theory of the Novel*, or as the revolutionary solution to the puzzle as in *History and Class Consciousness*. Rather, on one hand, Horkheimer and Adorno conceive of reification, or our reified second nature, as the ‘myth’ which is specific to ways of life within modern industrialised societies. On the other hand, the authors

\textsuperscript{36} Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness*, 3.

\textsuperscript{37} Jay, “Positive and Negative Totalities,” 72-87.
interpret second nature as the concealed quasi-natural and antagonistic structures of consciousness and social relations, or the ‘myths,’ which have always shaped thought and self-understanding (this point is comprehensively worked out in chapter 3 below). According to Dialectic of Enlightenment a reified second nature is thereby a new form of mythology in the sense that it is a historically new, quasi-natural force which is beyond conscious awareness or control, and which preforms and often deforms the way in which human beings speak, think and act:

With the spread of the bourgeois commodity economy the dark horizon of myth is illuminated by the sun of calculating reason, beneath whose icy rays the seeds of a new barbarism are germinating. Under the compulsion of power human labor has always led away from myth, and, under power, has always fallen back under its spell.

Through this lens, Horkheimer and Adorno abandon Lukacs’ philosophical and practical quest to unify ‘is’ and ‘ought,’ or subject and object, and turn towards a conception of philosophical practice as interpretation and self-reflection. They argue that philosophy can illuminate the darkness of our reified second nature by opening our eyes to the ‘myth’ of instrumental reason as itself a critical concept of reason. This means to say that Horkheimer and Adorno aim to make the isolation and alienation that conditions thought and existence within industrialised society explicit as a philosophical foundation for new forms of self-reflection and enlightenment.

38 Russell Jacoby writes: “The concept of second nature did not replace reification but the Frankfurt School’s preference for it incorporated several decades of historical experience. Between History and Class Consciousness (1923) and Adorno and Horkheimer’s Dialectic of Enlightenment (1947) lay too many cemeteries. Second nature recorded the defeats and the doubts, it testified to an unfreedom that preceded, and perhaps survived capitalism. Nor did second nature, like reification, infer the imminence of class consciousness. In an abridged formulation, reification was the unconscious specific to capitalism, or reification was the capitalist form of second nature. Second nature was the form of consciousness of an unliberated humanity.” Dialectic of Defeat: Contours of Western Marxism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 120.

39 Horkheimer and Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment, 25.

40 Jay, “Positive and Negative Totalities,” 72-87.
At first impression, the relationship between this reading of second nature and a critical concept of reason is not at all clear. In the following section I aim to more comprehensively develop the relationship between the two with reference to Horkheimer and Adorno’s interpretation of Freud. A preliminary example of how insight into ‘myth’ (in the sense of second nature) as a condition of thought and existence becomes the basis of demythologisation, however, is presented in one of Adorno’s earliest lectures, “The Idea of Natural History.” Adorno here argues that Greek tragedy presents an early example of this meaning of demythologisation insofar as in tragedy the dramatic presentation of man’s subjugation to ‘myth’ as mythical fate and guilt was itself a qualitatively ‘new’ form of self-reflection.

In tragedy, mythical fate was shown to determine the fate of the tragic hero. In Adorno’s view a story was hence told about ‘natural’ conditions and laws of life and thought, or ‘second nature,’ in the historical epoch in which tragedy was born. This story tells the audience of the isolation and helplessness of individuals in the face of the powers of fate. At the same time, however, this isolation and helplessness is

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41 In this lecture, delivered in 1932, Adorno already conceived of ‘myth’ in the following terms: “The concept of nature to be dissolved is one that, if I translated it into standard philosophical terminology, would come closest to the concept of myth. This concept is also vague, and its exact sense cannot be given in preliminary definitions but only in the course of analysis. By it is meant what has always been, what as fatefully arranged predetermined being underlies history and appears in history; it is substance in history.” “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, 2003), 252-270, 253.

42 Adorno writes: “the mythology that underlies tragedy is in every sense dialectical because it includes the subjugation of the guilty man to nature at the same time as it develops out of it the reconciliation of this fate: man raises himself out of his fate as man. The dialectical element here is that tragic myths contain at one and the same time subjection to guilt and nature and the element of reconciliation that transcends the realm of nature.” “The Idea of Natural History,” 267.
something which is presented on a stage. An aesthetic distance from the mythical
powers of fate was thereby established. Through this aesthetic distance, isolation
and helplessness in the face of a second nature, or in the face of the mythical
powers of fate, became an explicit part of the historical world in which tragedy was
born and hence a new source of shared self-understanding and self-reflection.

Hence in tragedy, historically contingent conditions of human life were presented
on a stage as already a second nature, already an expression of vulnerability to
misfortune and mortality which preformed thought and existence and which could
not be undone. The dramatic presentation of that vulnerability, however, became
part of a historically new form of self-understanding which materialised in the
inter-subjective realm of communication, symbols and their meaning. Tragedy
thereby told its audience that this vulnerability is what we share in the present, and
it is a new foundation for understanding one another in a new light of human
solidarity. In this way, Adorno argues that tragedy became a kind of allegory which
opened the spectators’ eyes to highly ambivalent and pre-reflectively concealed
conditions of thought and communication within the social and historical world of
the polis.

In his early essay, Adorno characterises this conception of self-reflection in terms
of reading history as nature, and reading nature as history. Hence the isolation and
alienation which conditions thought and existence is read as ‘second nature,’ and
human beings’ vulnerability in the face of that ‘second nature’ becomes understood
as ‘history,’ or something which is an historically new source of shared self-
understanding and human solidarity in the present. Shared insight into second nature, in other words, becomes a new foundation for meaning and dialogue. Adorno thereby poses the question of whether or not philosophy can cultivate a modern form of this sense of self-reflection. He writes

If the question of the relation of nature and history is to be seriously posed, then it only offers any chance of solution if it is possible to comprehend historical being in its most extreme historical determinacy, where it is most historical, as natural being, or if it were possible to comprehend nature as historical being where it seems to rest most deeply in itself as nature.43

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno develop a reading of this form of self-reflection as the “remembrance of nature in the subject.”44 Freed from the fiction of an idealised unity between subject and object as the origin and goal of philosophy, this ideal of philosophical practice aims to make the contradictions which mark the reified ‘second nature’ of modern industrialised cultures explicit: contradictions between the ‘natural’ longing for certainty and security and the terrors and meaningless of historical contingency, between our ‘subjective’ needs and the ‘objective’ necessities of a rationalised and meaningless world.

In an abstract sense, the process of articulating the obscure pre-reflectively concealed forces which condition thought and communication in the modern world, or the reified second nature which is the social and historical foundation of modern ‘mind’ within particular social and historical circumstances, becomes an interpretive key to deciphering our immersion in myth as a new form of enlightened self-reflection. Through this approach to Lukacs’ thought, one which is comprehensively developed through Freudian insights, Horkheimer and Adorno

44 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 32.
salvage Lukacs’ aesthetic and materialist insights into reification as a moment of a process of enlightenment which was far from complete. Lukacs’ insights into art and modern labour as revealing our ‘transcendental homelessness’—the isolation and alienation which conditions thought and communication in the modern world—thereby presents a sociological foundation for a mode of philosophical self-reflection which aspires to articulate pre-reflectively concealed forces which preform and deform thought and reflection.

2.2: The Freudian Turn in Critical Theory and the Myth of Instrumental Reason

Humanity had to inflict terrible injuries on itself before the self— the identical, purpose-directed, masculine character of human beings—was created, and something of this process is repeated in every childhood. The effort to hold the self together attends the ego at all its stages, and the temptation to be rid of the ego has always gone hand-in-hand with the blind determination to preserve it. Narcotic intoxication, in which the euphoric suspension of the self is expiated by death-like sleep, is one of the oldest transactions mediating between self-preservation and self-annihilation, an attempt by the self to survive itself. The fear of losing the self, and suspending with it the boundary between oneself and other life, the aversion to death and destruction, is twinned with a promise of joy which has threatened civilisation at every moment. The way of civilisation has been that of obedience and work, over which fulfilment shines everlastingly as mere illusion, as beauty deprived of power.45

The overtones of the quote above lay bare the decisive (and extremely complicated) influence of Sigmund Freud’s insights upon the critical concept of reason which is developed in Dialectic of Enlightenment.46 As Yvonne Sheratt has recently argued,

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45 Horkheimer and Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment, 26.
46 For a general discussion of the importance of psychoanalysis to Dialectic of Enlightenment see Martin Jay, The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School for Social
the period of Freud’s thought which played a decisive role on *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was his ‘middle’ period, the period just prior to the First World War. This middle period revolves around a conception of the development of the adult mind through a dynamic set of conflicts which leave the individual subject constantly confronted with the struggle against self-destructive regressive forces: conflicts such as those between self-preserving instincts and sexual instincts, the primary and secondary process, pleasurable and unpleasurable sensations, and primary narcissism and ego-identity.

In the broadest terms, Freud’s insights into these conflicts are so important to the allegorical reading of myth in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* because they sketch out the way in which symbolic understanding of a repressed and dominated ‘nature’ (in the sense of the innate nature of unconscious impulses and desires) can dissolve the destructive consequences of a repressed and dominated nature. This is, I think, the basic idea of Freud’s concept of the ‘transference’ through which analytic therapy achieves its goals. More specifically, Horkheimer and Adorno entwine
Freud’s thought with their allegorical reading of myth through what they describe as the subordination of ‘mimesis,’ or ‘mimetic’ traits and behaviour, to a reified second nature. In contradistinction to Freud’s ahistorical reading of psychological development, or Freud’s ‘psychologism,’ Horkheimer and Adorno thereby present a socially and historically contingent picture of the contradictions and conflicts which underpin psychological development: a picture of the ‘life of the mind’ which unravels two basic themes.49

The first theme is that the meaning of the myth of instrumental reason is revealed in modern politics through collective processes of projection that have given rise to new forms of barbarism. The second theme is that the myth of instrumental reason is revealed in art as the communication of the vulnerabilities derived from the rationalised domination of external and internal nature. This second theme develops the example of tragedy mentioned above in terms of particular social and historical constellations within modernity rather than in terms of the historical epoch of Greek tragedy. Through this line of thought Horkheimer and Adorno argue that shared insight into the meaning of the myth of instrumental reason, or into the myth of instrumental reason as part of the human condition, points to a philosophical potential for qualitatively new forms of self-reflection and demythologisation.

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Mimesis, the Myth of Instrumental Reason, and the Unfinished Task of Enlightenment

In the philosophical tradition from Plato onwards mimesis has been associated with the idea of art as the imitation of nature. Horkheimer and Adorno’s reading of mimesis, or of the ‘mimetic’ attitudes and behaviour through which the self is formed, however, detaches itself completely from traditional philosophical conceptions of mimesis. Through a reading of the development of the self as derived from the subordination of mimesis to a reified ‘second nature,’ Horkheimer and Adorno unravel a concept of mimesis which entwines Freud’s psychological insights into the conflicts which shape the self with an allegorical reading of the myth of instrumental reason.

In a preliminary sense, Horkheimer and Adorno’s reading of the subordination of mimesis to a reified second nature is reminiscent of Freud’s theory of the development of the rational ‘secondary process’ of the adult mind from the instinctual ‘primary process’ of the infants’ mind for the sake of adjustment to reality. Following this line of thought, mimesis is akin to the ‘primary process’ in that it refers to the instinctual, pleasure seeking way in which the mind functions.

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50 For a discussion of the traditional conception of mimesis, see Glenn W. Most, “Mimesis” in Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, ed. E Craig (London: Routledge, 1998), 382. For an introductory discussion of Horkheimer and Adorno’s concept of mimesis, a concept which Adorno would go on to comprehensively unravel as a defining theme of his philosophy see: Editor Rolf Tiedemann’s extended footnote on mimesis (in German) in Theodor Adorno, Ontologie und Dialektik, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Surhkamp, 2002), 358, and Brian O’Connor’s chapter-long discussion of mimesis in O’Conner, Adorno, 149-186.

51 Freud’s most comprehensive discussion of the primary and secondary process is found in Sigmund Freud, “Formulations on the two principles of Mental Functioning,” in The Freud Reader, ed. Peter Gay (London: Vintage, 1995), 301-308.
through early developmental stages. For Horkheimer and Adorno, these stages are ‘mimetic’ insofar as through these stages the imitation of everything and anything plays a decisive role in the way in which infants and children acquire many of their most elementary emotional and intellectual tools.\textsuperscript{52} Such forms of imitation are familiar to anyone who has spent time around very young children. For example, the development of gestures and of speech are both based upon forms of imitative behaviour.\textsuperscript{53} Just as Freud argues that the ‘primary process’ is gradually repressed and converted into the rational ‘secondary process’ for the sake of adjustment to reality, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that as the self matures the earliest forms of mimetic behaviour are gradually repressed and converted into the rational adult mind and rationalised modes of behaviour, or the mind whose function is ‘reality testing’ and self-preservation. Read in conjunction with Lukacs’ conception of a reified second nature, mimesis hence points to a social-psychological mechanism through which the organic nature of the individual mind is repressed and assimilated with a reified ‘second nature’ for the sake of self-preservation. In this sense, mimesis entwines psychological insights into the formation of the mind with sociological insights into a reified second nature, a second nature which is mimicked in the formation of the adult mind and body.

\textsuperscript{52} Horkheimer writes: “Modern writers tell us that the mimetic impulse of the child, his insistence on imitating everyone and everything, including his own feelings, is one of the means of learning, particularly in those early and all but unconscious stages of development that determine an individual’s eventual character, his modes of reaction, his general behaviour patterns. The whole body is an organ of mimetic expression. It is by way of this faculty that a human being acquires his special manner of laughing and crying, of speaking judging. Only in later phases of childhood is this unconscious imitation subordinated to conscious imitation and rational methods of learning,” \textit{Eclipse of Reason}, 78.

\textsuperscript{53} Whilst Freud does not discuss the role of imitation in the transition between the primary and secondary process, Sandor Ferenczi argues that imitation is fundamental to the various stages of ego identity and the gradual development of rationality in Sandor Ferenczi, “Stages in the Development of the Adult Sense of Reality,” in \textit{Contributions to psycho-analysis}, trans. Ernest Jones (Toronto, Canada: Richard G. Badger, 1916), 181-203.
In a line of thought which draws upon Freud’s notion of ‘primary narcissism,’ Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the subordination of mimesis to a reified second nature at the same time gives rise to a need to compensate for the renunciation of the more direct proximity with our environment and other human beings which is experienced through mimetic stages of development. According to Freud, at the earliest developmental stages the infant experiences a primary narcissistic state in which she is her own ideal, and to which she forms an emotional connection which lasts throughout adult life. Through the transition from childhood to adulthood, the primary narcissistic ideal is replaced by an internalised substitute. This is the ‘ego-ideal’, the censorious voices of parental and other sources of external authority that are internalised as one’s own. As the imagined happiness of primary narcissism can consequently never be re-acquired in adult life, adult life is forever marked by a largely unconscious longing for the primary state which can at times become pathological. Through an analogous line of thought, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the suppression and renunciation of mimesis for the sake of adjustment to a reified second nature leaves individuals devoid of the security, happiness and sense of fulfilment they once knew in childhood. The authors maintain that this gives rise to a highly ambivalent drive to compensate for the sense of vulnerability to suffering and mortality which marks our adult lives. This drive, and its relation to Horkheimer and Adorno’s reading of

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55 Horkheimer writes: “If the final renunciation of the mimetic impulse does not promise to lead to the fulfilment of man’s potentialities, this impulse will always lie in wait, ready to break out as a destructive force. That is, if there is no other norm than the status quo, if all the hope of
the myth of instrumental reason, is most clearly understood in terms of its meaning within the analytically distinct spheres of politics and aesthetics.

In a political sense, the sense of mimesis that is most central to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that under certain circumstances and forms of coercion, the need to give meaning to the suppression of mimesis can be transformed into a foundation for collective processes of projection which threaten to push modern cultures in the direction of regression to barbarism and violent social breakdown. In the “Elements of anti-Semitism” chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno develop insights into a ‘mimetic’ dimension of Nazi anti-Semitism as “the reversion of enlightened civilization to barbarism in reality.”(*DE*, xix) Building upon empirical studies undertaken at the Institute for Social Research, Horkheimer and Adorno illustrate how modern propaganda techniques had transformed mimetic urges and impulses of the ‘reified’ modern subject into pathological projections which had shackled the voting citizen the bourgeoisie and proletariat alike to irrational structures of authority. Horkheimer and Adorno write:

> All the gesticulations devised by the Fuehrer and his followers are pretexts for giving way to the mimetic temptation without openly violating the reality-principle with honor, as it were. They detest the Jews and imitate them constantly. There is no anti-Semite who does not feel an instinctive urge to ape what he takes to be Jewishness...The anti-Semites gather together to celebrate the moment when authority lifts the ban; that moment alone makes them a collective, constituting the community of kindred spirits...The more dreadful the accusations and threats, the greater the fury, the more withering is the scorn.56

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56 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 151-152.
Horkheimer and Adorno here argue that as the vehicle for expressing suppressed mimetic behaviour, the image of the Jew tied the community of anti-Semites together because social and sexual taboos were allowed to express themselves without fear of reprimand. The Jew was thereby turned into the image of he who transgresses the taboo, and the self-loathing of the community of anti-Semites who secretly longed to regress to the tabooed mimesis was projected onto the Jew. The violence unleashed onto the demonically distorted image of the Jew thereby reflected a return of our suppressed ‘mimetic’ nature as a reversion to barbarism in reality.

As opposed to this political reading of mimesis, the aesthetic meaning of the need to compensate for the suppression of mimesis can be understood as a foundation for the meaning of certain works of art, a notion which was not comprehensively worked out until the posthumous publication of Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory. In this reading, the need resulting from the suppression of mimesis is expressed in the experience of art that Adorno describes as ‘aesthetic comportment.’ In such experience, the vulnerability derived from the suppression and repression of mimesis—or from the suppression and repression of the security, happiness and fulfilment of childhood for the sake of adjustment to a dehumanising second nature—is momentarily suspended in the artistic communication of such vulnerability to the audience of the artwork. The experience of the artwork

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58 Adorno writes: “With regard to the subjective side, the contemporary loss of experience may largely coincide with the bitter repression of mimesis...Aesthetic comportment, however, is
thereby imitates the suppression of mimesis and transforms the vulnerability derived from the suppression of mimesis into something which is shared by the audience. In this sense, the example of tragedy mentioned above points to a kind of historical antecedent of aesthetic comportment, one which was specific to the historical epoch in which tragedy was born. Through his oeuvre, Adorno works out comprehensive interpretations of a modern sense of aesthetic comportment through the analysis of predominantly modernist artworks. In broad terms, Adorno argues that the artistic communication of the isolation and vulnerability which shapes modern thought and existence, the isolation which Lukács conceived of as our ‘transcendental homelessness,’ turns that isolation and vulnerability into something ‘new:’ into a basis for new forms of human solidarity which dissolve, if only momentarily, our isolation in the face of obscure forces of fate. Art thereby allegorises the isolation and alienation which conditions modern modes of thought and existence by communicating that isolation and alienation; it communicates the neediness and vulnerability which underpins existence in the reified world in which we are normally immersed.
In light of this reading of the development of the self through the subordination of mimesis to rational labour, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the myth of instrumental reason bespeaks highly ambivalent human vulnerabilities which are reflected in art, and which can be, and have been, transformed into barbaric social forces. Following examples sketched out in aesthetics however, I argue that Horkheimer and Adorno’s intention in outlining our modern subjugation to myth is in no way to equate modern reason with barbarism. Rather, I maintain that the authors sketch out the modern subject’s immersion in myth in an attempt to confront modern philosophy with the highly ambivalent vulnerabilities which shape the way in which individuals think in the ‘real’ world. The authors hold that just as the artistic confrontation with these vulnerabilities is a form of aesthetic self-reflection which allegorises the conditions of thought and existence in a given social and historical context, the philosophical confrontation with these vulnerabilities points to a concept of philosophical self-reflection derived from allegorising the vulnerabilities which shape thought and existence in the modern world: vulnerabilities which are synonymous with the myth of instrumental reason does art become eloquent; this is why art no longer tolerates the innocuous. Baudelaire neither railed against nor portrayed reification; he protested against it in the experience of its archetypes, and the medium of this experience is the poetic form.” Aesthetic Theory, 28. In a discussion of Kafka, to name another example, Adorno writes: “Reified consciousness, which presupposes and confirms the inevitability and immutableness of what exists, is as the heritage of the ancient spell the new form of the myth of the ever-same. Kafka’s epic style is, in its archaism, mimesis of reification. Whereas his work must renounce any claim to transcending myth, it makes the social web of delusion knowable in myth through the how, through language. In his writing, absurdity is as self-evident as it has actually become in society.” (Ibid., 302). For an extended discussion of Adorno’s literary criticism and suppressed mimesis see O’Conner, Adorno, 149-186. On a similar point Andrew Bowie writes: “The nature that is given its voice in modern art is not, then, nature as a romantically conceived unsullied past state of innocence, but rather what is repressed, both in human beings and in the environment, by forms which no longer allow certain things to speak. Crucial to this conception is Adorno’s notion of mimesis.” Adorno and the Ends of Philosophy, 151.
as it shapes the life of the mind in its infinite particular and potential manifestations. In this way, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that philosophy can aspire to develop thought which transcends the instrumentalisation of reason by opening our eyes to the ways in which the myth of instrumental reason is sedimented and manifested within our social world.

This concept of philosophy is inseparable from the language in which it is expressed and the layers of historical experience grounded in the evolution of those that speak it. It holds that philosophy can symbolically illuminate the forces which preform and often deform the discursive spheres which shape civic and intellectual life in such a way as to point to a potential for new forms of shared self-understanding and human solidarity. Philosophy, in other words, can illuminate the myth of instrumental reason as it has marked and as it marks our social and historical horizon as a shared condition of mature and enlightened dialogue. In Horkheimer and Adorno’s view, articulating the isolation and alienation which thought and reflection compulsively escapes thereby points to a potential for qualitatively new forms of enlightened self-reflection.

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61 Horkheimer writes “Each concept must be seen as a fragment of an inclusive truth in which it finds its meaning. It is precisely the building of truth out of such fragments that is philosophy’s prime concern.” Eclipse of Reason, 113.

62 Horkheimer writes “philosophy’s approach to language is indeed...one of its most crucial aspects. The changing contents and stresses of words record the history of our civilisation. Language reflects the longings of the oppressed and the plight of nature; it releases the mimetic impulse. The transformation of this impulse into the universal medium of language rather than into destructive action means that potentially nihilistic energies work for reconciliation.” (Ibid., 121).

63 Adorno writes: “Critical thought must let itself be guided by the concrete forms of consciousness it opposes and must go over once again what they have forgotten. Thought is not purely for itself: especially practical thought, so closely tied to the historical moment that in this regressive age it would become abstract and false were it to continue to evolve from its own élan regardless of the regression. This alone is the bitter truth of the “thinker in indignant times”: 48
My point here is not to suggest that Horkheimer and Adorno present a solution to the self-destructive and barbaric tendencies of the modern world. It is rather that the authors point to one way (and not the only way) in which modern philosophy can reignite a tradition of enlightenment which goes back to the very origins of the Western intellectual tradition: a tradition which has repeatedly opened up new forms of self-reflection through shared insight into particular social and historical forces which distort self-reflection. As opposed to repeated philosophical attempts to replace the contradictions which shape thought with new theories of reason, however, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that Lukacsian and Freudian insights into the quasi-natural vulnerabilities which are presupposed by modern subjective reason can themselves be the basis for a new form of enlightenment on what we call reason. The authors write:

For not only does the concept...distance human beings from nature, but, as the self-reflection of thought...it also enables the distance which perpetuates injustice to be measured. Through this remembrance of nature in the subject, a remembrance which contains the unrecognized truth of all culture, enlightenment is opposed in principle to power.64

The deepest intention of Adorno’s Negative Dialectics pursues this line of thought as the attempt to unveil the ‘non-identical’ in all ‘identity thinking.’65 It is opened up in Dialectic of Enlightenment as a critique of the notion that holds the process

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64 Horkheimer and Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment, 32.
of enlightenment to have been completed long ago, or around the recollection of myth as a forgotten part of the human condition. This myth is captured in the tale of Odysseus sailing past the Sirens. Horkheimer and Adorno describe their reading of this tale as “a prescient allegory for the dialectic of enlightenment.” (DE, 27) With the authors, but in the terminology I have developed, I describe the authors’ reading of Odysseus and the Sirens as an allegory for the myth of instrumental reason.

### 2.3: Reading Odysseus' Encounter with the Sirens as an Allegory for the Myth of Instrumental Reason

Book twelve of the *Odyssey* tells the story of how Odysseus sailed past the Sirens. The Sirens’ song offers Odysseus the beautiful promise of sensual fulfilment. The seductresses’ promise is, however, a deception. For the fate of all of those who hear the Sirens’ song is enchantment and certain death. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the overwhelming sensual fulfilment offered by the Sirens’ song allegorically represents the undifferentiated ‘nature’ of libidinous instinctual forces and preconceptual connections between human beings and the external world which dominate the psyche at preconceptual stages of development: the blind and overwhelming powers of a pre-rationalised, unrepressed, and undominated nature. From Circe, Odysseus learns of two measures with which he can escape the Sirens’ powers, both of which allegorically represent the human mastery of the deadly and overwhelming powers of nature within modern industrial society. The first measure is prescribed for the crew. He plugs their ears with wax after telling them
to row with all their strength. The crew are thereby deafened to the irresistible allure of the song, and all they know of the song is its danger. The second measure, which Odysseus imposes upon himself, is being tied to the mast. He has himself bound and instructs his crew to tighten his bonds if he should command his own release. His overwhelming desire to abandon his homeward voyage is thereby neutralised, and his appeals to be released only lead to the tightening of his bonds. The hero allows himself the pleasure, however, of hearing the song from the vantage point of the fettered listener. Impotently bound to mast with his deafened crew bleakly rowing on, Odysseus escapes the Sirens’ powers. Horkheimer and Adorno read the measures with which Odysseus masters the deadly powers of the Sirens’ song as an allegory for the myth of instrumental reason.

The first measure—plugging the crews’ ears with wax and ordering them to row with all their might—is disciplined, rationalised labour; this is the instrumental reason which shapes the second nature of modern industrialised society. The allure of the Sirens’ song is thereby negated by the crew whose mechanical rowing mimics a lifeless machine. The wax in their ears not only deafens them to the danger of the Sirens’ song, it at the same time deafens them to conscious awareness of the human vulnerability which is inseparable from human beings’ assimilation with instrumental reason. For them, as for the modern worker, the only world is a second nature and the powers that command it, both of which appear as natural and eternal conditions of thought and existence in the modern world:

Anyone who wishes to survive must not listen to the temptation of the irrevocable, and is unable to listen only if he is unable to hear. Society has always made this the case. Workers must look ahead with alert concentration and ignore anything which lies to one side. The urge
toward distraction must be grimly sublimated in redoubled exertions. Thus the workers are made practical.\textsuperscript{66}

The second measure adopted by the hero, having himself bound to the mast and hence allowing himself the pleasure of listening to the song, bespeaks the recollection of a suppressed ‘mimetic’ nature as art. The vulnerability derived from a suppressed and dominated mimetic nature, a vulnerability which is reflected in the hero’s cries to be released, is thus recalled in artistic and cultural forms as ‘powerless’ documents of modern humanity’s spiritual struggles. Odysseus thus becomes aware of the reified world in which we are normally immersed, the rationalised and dehumanising world of industrial society. Horkheimer and Adorno write:

He listens, but does so while bound helplessly to the mast, and the stronger the allurement grows the more tightly he has himself bound... What he hears has no consequences for him; he can signal to his men to untie him only by movements of his head, but it is too late. His comrades, who themselves cannot hear, know only of the danger of the song, not of its beauty, and leave him tied to the mast to save both him and themselves. They reproduce the life of the oppressor as part of their own, while he cannot step outside of his social role. The bonds by which he has irrevocably fettered himself to praxis at the same time keep the Sirens at a distance from praxis: their lure is neutralised as a mere object of contemplation, as art. The fettered man listens to a concert, as immobilised audiences later, and his enthusiastic call for liberation goes unheard as applause.\textsuperscript{67}

The point here is not to lament the fact that modern existence is shaped by the rationalised domination of nature. According to \textit{Dialectic of Enlightenment}, the material prosperity we have achieved through rationalised labour is a precondition

\textsuperscript{66} Horkheimer and Adorno, \textit{Dialectic of Enlightenment}, 26.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 27.
of a truly humane organisation of society. The point is simply to open our eyes to
way in which thought and existence are shaped by vulnerabilities which are
documented in art, which are derived from the isolation and alienation of human
beings within modern industrialised society, and which present a constant and
undiminished threat of pushing us to regress to new forms of barbarism.68

Horkheimer and Adorno write:

In this way the enjoyment of art and manual work diverge as the primeval world is left
behind. The epic already contains the correct theory. Between the cultural heritage and
enforced work there is a precise correlation, and both are founded on the inescapable
compulsion towards the social control of nature.69

According to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* the philosophical meaning of the Sirens
allegory is thus to point to a conception of philosophy which makes the
vulnerabilities which shape thinking explicit. On one hand, as obscure pre-
reflective forces, these vulnerabilities constantly recreate regressive and self-
destructive illusions which constantly threaten to create new forms of barbarism
and its victims. On the other hand, as forces which are made explicit in their social
and historical particularity and which are thereby shared through an enlightened
conception of thought and communication, these vulnerabilities point to a
potential for qualitatively new forms of self-reflection and human solidarity. In this

68 In “Why Still Philosophy” Adorno writes: “The undiminished persistence of suffering, fear,
and menace necessitates that the thought that cannot be realized should not be discarded. After
having missed its opportunity, philosophy must come to know, without any mitigation, why the
world which could be paradise here and now can become hell itself tomorrow. Such
knowledge would indeed be truly philosophy....Praxis, whose purpose is to produce a rational
and politically mature humanity, remains under the spell of disaster unless it has a theory that
can think the totality in its untruth. It goes without saying that this theory should not be a
warmed-over idealism but rather must incorporate societal and political reality and its dynamic.”
69 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 27.
latter sense, Horkheimer and Adorno present the tale of the Sirens as an allegory for an enlightened philosophical practice in a conflict ridden world, a practice which is not based upon the belief, or the wish, that philosophy can escape the conflicts which shape thinking: the conflicts derived from the domination of internal nature, external nature, and other human beings which is inherent in thought. Rather, the allegory of Odysseus and the Sirens points to an enlightened philosophical practice as the self-reflection which would stem from the uncompromising confrontation with, and symbolic articulation of, such conflicts in their irreducible particularity. In contrast to the notion that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* presents a totalising critique of reason, I argue that this concept of philosophical self-reflection stands to add a valuable (and largely overlooked) perspective to our dominant conceptions of philosophical reflection that unravels the thorough ambivalence of the isolation and alienation which conditions thought and reflection in industrial society.

For all that, Horkheimer and Adorno’s allegorical reading of myth remains abstract. For, aside from Horkheimer and Adorno’s insistence that as philosophers we can, and therefore we should, recognise the highly ambivalent vulnerabilities and needs that condition modern reason in their infinite possible particular manifestations, upon what normative foundation does Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique of instrumental reason lie? Doesn’t the authors’ critique of reason amount to a rejection of the normative foundations of the utopian traditions of Western philosophy, foundations built upon concrete emancipatory ideals and images, in favour of culturally relative aesthetic models? In the next chapter I argue that the
authors’ ‘anthropological’ reading of myth, a reading of myth that is based on a methodologically innovative interpretation of Homer’s *Odyssey* as recalling the historical transition between the ‘small-scale’ tribal cultures of prehistory and the rationalised civilisation of Archaic Greece, presents a historical-philosophical response to these questions that is grounded in the deep-seated anthropological structure of Western reason.

Through this perspective the human species, rather than a socially and historically specific agent or culture, becomes the bearer of instrumental reason, and subjectivity (and hence the origins of Western reason) becomes a reflection of the instrumental reason upon which the beginnings of Western civilisation were based. According to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* human beings thereby escaped subjugation to the mythical forces of undifferentiated nature within the tribal cultures of prehistory only to become subjugated to the quasi-natural forces of instrumental reason, or of the rationalised domination of internal nature, external nature and other human beings within settled civilisations. At the same time however, Horkheimer and Adorno’s anthropological reading of myth unravels a self-reflective dimension of instrumental reason, one which marks the anthropological structure of Western reason from its genetic origins. This dimension of instrumental reason is the capacity to articulate our subjugation to quasi-natural powers of a rationalised social world as something which is shared,

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70 Seyla Benhabib writes: “The carriers of instrumental reason are no longer socially and historically specific agents, but the species itself. The discourse of rationalisation shifts from a socially specific to a global-anthropological level. The critique of the instrumental rationalisation of society is thereby transformed into a critique of the structure of Western reason.” “Modernity and the Aporias of Critical Theory,” *Telos* 49 (1981): 39-59, 43.
and thereby something which points to new forms of self-reflection and human solidarity. In this way, Horkheimer and Adorno’s reading of Homer presents an innovative anthropological foundation for philosophical self-reflection and enlightenment: a concept of self-reflection and enlightenment that reaches into the innermost anthropological structures of Western instrumental reason.
Chapter 3: The Anthropological Reading of Myth

Recent scholarship has unearthed the way in which Horkheimer and Adorno’s study of Homer aimed to rescue the classical tradition from its appropriation by the German intellectual tradition, an appropriation exemplified by thinkers such as the young Lukacs. This train of thought, as briefly discussed above in relation to Lukacs’ *Theory of the Novel*, saw the Homeric age as a kind of idealised spiritual homeland at the origins of the Western intellectual tradition: a kind of lost cultural ‘homeliness’ in the world which could be reignited by the German intellectual tradition, and which hence constituted the goal of modern philosophical thought. As Katie Fleming argues, whilst Horkheimer and Adorno adopt a conception of Homer as marking the beginnings of the Western intellectual tradition, the authors argue that this beginning was never any kind of ideal spiritual homeland. In this manner, Fleming maintains, Horkheimer and Adorno’s reading of Homer is essentially ‘negative:’ it aims to salvage the classical tradition by negating the illusions and projections that have been spun around the classical tradition by modern German thought.

I argue however, that reading the authors’ account of Homer in terms of an ‘anthropological’ reading of myth reveals a second line of

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71 On this point Katie Fleming writes: “At stake in Horkheimer and Adorno’s re-reading of the epic is a re-evaluation and critique of the legacy and primacy of Greece as an idealised spiritual home in the German intellectual tradition. It is...precisely the lens of the critique of the Homeric text which offers such a sharp and excoriating focus on both the deeply philhellenic German philosophical tradition from Hegel to Nietzsche, and, its drier sibling, classical philology, represented synecdochically and paradigmatically by Willamowitz.” “Odysseus and Enlightenment: Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialektik der Aufklarung.*” *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 19 (June 2012):107-128, 110.

72 Fleming writes: "As their critique of Hegel, Nietzsche, and Willamowitz (and even perhaps themselves) has implied, interpretations of antiquity are always already lodged in nostalgic returns and the imposition of the reader on the ancient text. Both cause and effect, these returns to the Greeks have a disastrous twentieth century history. *DdA* offers Critical Theory as a ‘philology of the future’ and the possibility of salvaging the classical past.” (Ibid., 125-126).
thought within the authors’ study; it reveals an attempt to unravel a self-reflective
dimension of the Homeric origins of Western reason which is based upon a reading
of Western reason as instrumental reason.

By an ‘anthropological’ reading of myth I mean that with reference to early to mid-
twentieth century anthropological research into the myths of ‘small-scale’
contemporaneous tribal societies which are understood to be structurally
analogous to the myths of tribal societies reaching back into our species’ distant
past, Horkheimer and Adorno read the *Odyssey* as both a reflection of the social
and historical realities of Archaic Greece and at the same time a record of the
Archaic Greeks’ fragmented memory of tribal prehistory.73 In other words,

73 James Schmidt outlines just how important anthropological research into European prehistory
was to Horkheimer and Adorno’s reading of the *Odyssey* in his paper on the intellectual
background of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Schmidt writes: “In a letter written to Herbert
Marcuse in the fall of 1941, Horkheimer commented that Marx and Engels (“our intellectual
ancestors”) were “not so foolish with their lasting interest in prehistory.” Noting that in
California all he had to work from were the works of “Bachofen, Reinach and Frazer, as well as
Rohde and Levy-Brühl; Malinowski and Lowie’s Cultural Anthropology,” he advised Marcuse to
be on the lookout for “useful books on ethnology and mythology” .... Add the essay by Durkheim
and Mauss on primitive classification to the list, along with Mauss’ genial Theory of Magic,
Mauss and Hubert’s study of sacrifice, and the essays on imitation and festivals by the surrealist
anthropologist Roger Caillois, and one begins to have a sense of the literature on which
Horkheimer and Adorno drew in constructing their argument. That writings from the French
anthropological tradition loom large on this list is not surprising. From Horkheimer’s
correspondence we know that Adorno’s friend Walter Benjamin had attended sessions of the
famous “College of Sociology” organized by the surrealists Bataille, Caillois, and Klossowski and
that Horkheimer, prior to the collapse of France, had frequent contact with the group...While
Horkheimer appeared to have been frustrated in his efforts to integrate work from the Institute’s
economists and historians into the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, here--in what strikes many
readers as the most abstract and speculative part of the work--he was concerned to maintain at
least some ties between his own philosophical speculations and the work of social scientists.”
“Historical Notes on Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*,” 828-829. Direct
evidence for the influence of social anthropological readings of myth on *Dialectic of
Enlightenment* is found in references to the ethnographic work of Hubert and Mauss on pages 11
and 27. In the simplest terms, Horkheimer and Adorno adopt readings of myth derived from
ethnographic studies of the functional relationship between myths and the structure (or total
social and mental organisation) of particular non-modern subsistence-based cultures, cultures
which based upon kinship bonds and face to face relationships. For a recent discussion of a
comparable approach to myth as reflections of the ‘small scale’ tribal cultures in the cultural
Horkheimer and Adorno read the epic as a product of the historical epoch in which it was composed and disseminated which recalls fragmented memories of the distant history of that historical epoch, fragmented memories which reach into our species’ distant past. Read in this manner, I maintain that Horkheimer and Adorno’s reading of Homer brings to light two central themes. The first is a study of the origins of the Western intellectual tradition that bespeaks the spiritually ‘homeless’ instrumental reason from which Western reason began: the homelessness derived from the transition between tribal cultures and extensive settled civilisations. The second is a highly original interpretation of a self-reflective dimension of the Western intellectual tradition which is based upon a reconstruction of the shared insight into the ‘homelessness’ from which it began.

The first theme in Horkheimer and Adorno’s reading of the *Odyssey* is that the text is evidence of the historical moment of the earliest forms of ‘subjectivity’ in the Western tradition, a document which presents the earliest historical traces of modes of thought based upon the ‘subject/object’ or ‘mind/world’ distinction from the collective magical and mythical representations of prehistorical tribal cultures. This means to say that the Homeric epic bears witness to the development of the earliest modes of ‘rational’ thought based upon the self-awareness of an individual subject, or the earliest forms of Western individualism, for which something distinct, the object, is known. This is depicted in Odysseus’ voyage from Troy to Ithaca insofar as the narrative account of his voyage maps out a rationalised

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overview of the Mediterranean from the magical illusions and myths of earlier tribal traditions. In this manner, the epic retraces the historical development of a world which is known as ‘objective,’ or as something other than the self-awareness of an individual, from earlier enchanted conceptions of magical powers which embody time and space:

The hero’s peregrinations from Troy to Ithaca trace the path of the self through myths, a self infinitely weak in comparison to the forces of nature and still in the process of the formation of self-consciousness. The primeval world is secularized as the space he measures out; the old demons populate only the distant margins and islands of the civilized Mediterranean, retreating into the forms of rock and cave from which they had originally sprung in the face of primal dread. The adventures bestow names on each of these places, and the names give rise to a rationalised overview of space.⁷⁴

In contradistinction to the young Lukacs’ idealised reading of Homer, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the primeval forms of subjectivity in Homer have nothing to do with an idealised harmony between ‘subject’ and ‘object,’ or between the self-conscious subject and the objective world that is known, at the dawn of Western civilisation. Rather, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the Homeric epic recalls the origins of the Western intellectual tradition as already a reflection of the alienation and isolation of human beings at the origins of Western civilisation, the alienation and isolation within cultures based upon instrumental reason.

As recent scholarship still maintains, Homeric mythology became the cultural foundations of the Ancient Greeks at a time when diverse tribes and traditions were unified through the emergence of the power and wealth of the Archaic Greek

poleis. This was a time in which the primitive economies and communal bonds of tribal groups were replaced by the far more highly differentiated economic orders of the poleis and the imperial pan-Hellenic culture of a class of wealthy landowners. In this light, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the development of modes of thought based upon the subject/object distinction which is documented in the epic is a reflection of the isolated and alienated individualism within the wealthy property owning class of Archaic Greece, and of the subjugation of other human beings upon which the wealth of the property owning class was based. According to Dialectic of Enlightenment the hero Odysseus embodies this new individualism. It enables him to ruthlessly pursue his self-interest, which is the self-interest of a class of wealthy landowners. At the same time, however, the alienation from which Odysseus’ individual identity is inseparable, the alienation of the individual member of a class which has replaced ‘natural’ communal bonds with social relations based upon property ownership and rationalised exploitation of the labour of others, fills the hero with longing for a homeland that can never be fulfilled. The authors argue that the epic is thus already a “nostalgic stylisation of that which can no longer be celebrated,” and that the hero Odysseus is already the “prototype of the bourgeois individual, whose concept originates in the unwavering

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75 Peter W. Rose characterises pre-Archaic Greece, the period down till the mid ninth century BC as comprised of largely subsistence-based: “villages headed by warrior big men and chieftans with relatively small bands of followers whose loyalty depended not on kinship or any aristocratic principle of legitimacy but the success of the chief in protecting the community, solving disputes fairly, and enriching it through raiding other communities. Solidarity was presumably reinforced at this stage both by the ‘natural’ effects of kinship as well as the leader’s use of communal meals and ritual practice including all the males.” Class in Archaic Greece (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 64.

76 Rose writes that in the rise of the poleis the social hierarchy of the older tribal world was replaced by a wealthy land-owing class which “substitutes for the role of paramount chief an array of annual rotating offices, and invests real power in a collective council of the major land-owners. Through their monopoly of the juridical process whatever it was this new ruling class achieved a new level of coercion by which to expand their landholdings.” (Ibid., 72).
self-assertion of the protagonist driven to wander the earth. In this manner Horkheimer and Adorno read the Homeric origins of the Western intellectual tradition as based upon the replacement of the ‘myths’ of collective and enchanted tribal powers with the quasi-natural and ‘spiritually homeless’ instrumental reason of settled civilisation. As opposed to a specific thought, or thinker, or idea, Horkheimer and Adorno hence argue that Western reason begins with the historical transition between tribal prehistory and the spiritually homeless rationalised order of extensive civilisations.

Horkheimer and Adorno’s argument that shared insight into this spiritual homelessness became a foundation for a self-reflective dimension of the Western intellectual tradition is developed through a methodologically innovative entwinement of social anthropological readings of myth mentioned above with psychoanalytic readings of myth. According to Dialectic of Enlightenment, this self-reflective dimension of the Western tradition was derived from the Homeric communication of the vulnerabilities which shaped thought and existence within the land owning class in Archaic Greece: vulnerabilities which stemmed from the replacement of the ‘natural’ communal bonds of the primitive pre-Homeric world with the spiritual homelessness of instrumental reason. This does not mean to say that Horkhemier and Adorno posit the existence of an ideal ‘state of nature’ prior to the rationalised order of the Homeric world. The authors argue that in tribal prehistory human beings must have been subjugated to the forces of nature as

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77 Horkheimer and Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment, 35.
blind and overwhelming.\textsuperscript{78} It does mean to argue, however, that the instrumentalisation of human beings which was presupposed by the earliest modes of subjectivity meant the dissolution of ‘natural’ forms of human solidarity and the exposure of human beings to new forms of alienation, vulnerability, and domination.

With reference to social anthropological readings of the myths of tribal societies as kinds of conceptual supports for social worlds in which group solidarity is based upon face to face relationships and kinship bonds, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that Odysseus’ mythical foes symbolically recall various memories of ‘natural’ social bonds reaching into furthest prehistory: “The mythical monsters...represent, as it were, petrified legal contracts dating from primeval times. In the developed patriarchal era the earlier popular religion manifests itself in these scattered relics.”\textsuperscript{79} With reference to psychoanalytic readings of myth as venting repressed instincts by symbolically retracing the repression of instinctual impulses, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that by symbolically recalling fragmented memories of the ‘natural’ social bonds which had been repressed in the historical development of the \textit{polis}, the \textit{Odyssey} shed light on the vulnerabilities which shaped thought and existence in the Archaic Greek world as the basis of new forms

\textsuperscript{78} Horkheimer and Adorno write: “Human beings have always had to choose between their subjugation to nature and its subjugation to the self.” \textit{Dialectic of Enlightenment}, 25.
\textsuperscript{79} Horkheimer and Adorno, \textit{Dialectic of Enlightenment}, 44. For an example of the historical development of Western reason which draws upon similar ‘anthropological’ research and authors see Georges Gusdorf, \textit{Myth et Metaphysique} (Paris: Flammarion, 1953). For a discussion of a comparative approach to myth within modern ‘small-scale’ societies tied together primarily by face to face relations and kinship bonds see Bellah, \textit{Religion in Human Evolution}, 117-175.
of self-reflection and human solidarity. In contradistinction to the psychologism of Freud’s ahistorical reading of myth, however, Horkheimer and Adorno’s reading of the *Odyssey* unravels this process as specific to the beginnings of settled civilisation. According to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* these new forms of self-reflection transcended, if only in the subtlest manner, the self-interest of the property owning class in Archaic Greece to establish qualitatively new forms of human solidarity through the inter-subjective realm of communication, symbols, and their meaning: “Finally...the venerable cosmos of the Homeric world, a world charged with meaning, reveals itself as an achievement of classifying reason which destroys myth by virtue of the same rational order which is used to reflect it.”

In this roundabout way, Horkheimer and Adorno’s ‘anthropological’ interpretation of the *Odyssey* presents a critical prehistory of Western reason as instrumental reason which at the same time aims to uncover a self-reflective dimension of Western reason. In what follows I first present Horkheimer and Adorno’s reading of the *Odyssey* as a reflection of the spiritually homeless instrumental reason from which the Western civilisation and subjectivity began. This theme is unravelled with particular reference to the tales of the Sirens and the Cyclops Polyphemous. I

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80 Direct evidence of the influence of psychoanalytic approaches to myth on Horkheimer and Adorno’s reading of Homer is found in references to Freud in the *Odyssey* essay. See *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 263 (footnote 40), and 264 (footnote 58). Broadly speaking, psychoanalysis treats myths as functioning through their meaning. For Freud, myths, like dreams, explore the unconscious life of the mind. They vent repressed desires by symbolically encoding them in stories. Freud’s most famous interpretation of myth, his reading of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*, sees the tale as symbolically encoding the incestuous desires which are repressed in every male childhood. By exploring those repressed desires in the realm of symbols, the story not only serves to vent repressed desires. It at once sheds light on largely pre-conceptual phases of the repression of instinctual desires which live on in the unconscious life of the mind. For a general discussion of Freud’s approach to myth see Alan Segal, *Myth: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 91-94.

then discuss Horkheimer and Adorno’s account of the self-reflective dimension of Homer through their readings of the tales of the Lotus eaters, Polyphemus (an additional reading of this tale), the recognition scene with Penelope, Odysseus’ voyage into and out of Hades, and finally of the execution of the maidservants who fell into harlotry in the service of the suitors.

3.1: The *Odyssey* and the Spiritually Homeless Instrumental Reason at the Origins of the Western Intellectual Tradition

In contradistinction to readings of Homeric myth as an idealised spiritual homeland at the origins of the Western intellectual tradition, the first layer of Horkheimer and Adorno’s reading of the *Odyssey* unravels the spiritually homelessness instrumental reason at the origins of the Western intellectual tradition. The epic bespeaks this homelessness insofar as Odysseus, the primeval subject in the Western tradition, only makes it back to reclaim his lands and wealth in Ithaca by relentlessly sacrificing his own longings and desires and his sense of solidarity with other human beings. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that Odysseus thereby exemplifies the historical emergence of subjectivity (and the rational modes of thought and communication which presuppose subjectivity) within a land owning class which had radically alienated itself from the ‘nature’ of tribal prehistory for the sake of the rationalised mastery of nature within Archaic Greece. Horkheimer and Adorno draw our attention to the stories of the Sirens and of Polyphemous in particular as illustrating this homelessness at the core of Homeric myth.
In the broadest terms, the alienation that is inseparable from the hero’s subjectivity is depicted in the sacrifices which the hero is repeatedly forced to make for the sake of escaping his foes, and which ultimately amount to sacrificing the possibility of true happiness. Horkhemier and Adorno write:

The nimble-witted man survives only at the cost of his own dream, which he forfeits by disintegrating his own magic along with the powers outside him. He must always be able to wait, to be patient, to renounce; he may not eat the lotus or the cattle of Hyperion, and when he steers through the narrows he must include in his calculation the loss of his companions snatched from the ship by Scylla. He wriggles through that is his survival, and all the renown he gains merely confirms that the honor of heroism is won only by humbling the urge to attain entire, universal, undivided happiness.\(^\text{82}\)

More specifically, Horkheimer and Adorno present anthropological (rather than allegorical) readings of the tales of Odysseus’ escape from the Sirens and from the Cyclops as the decisive indicia of the state of homelessness, or the isolation and alienation, which was inseparable from the civilisation that had rationally mastered nature through the historical emergence of instrumental reason.

Moving from an allegorical reading of the Sirens to an anthropological reading of the Sirens, Horkheimer and Adorno interpret the seductresses as a memory of a pre-Homeric tribal tradition, a tradition which was tied together by ‘natural’ social bonds. The two measures with which the hero neutralises the Sirens’ powers, deafening his crew and having himself bound to mast, depict both the rationalised division of labour which replaced the primitive economies of tribal prehistory and at the same time the alienation and isolation of the members of a privileged land

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\(^{82}\) Ibid., 45.
owning class. It is true that by having himself bound to the mast, Odysseus enjoys
the privileges of power. That privilege, however, is already based upon longing for a
form of sensual fulfilment that can never be attained. Furthermore, Odysseus’
privilege is bought at the cost of alienation from his crew members, who are not
only deafened to the Sirens’ song, but also to their leaders’ cries to be released:

The bound listener is drawn to the Sirens like any other. But he has taken the precaution not
to succumb to them even when he succumbs. Despite the power of his desire, which reflects
the power of the demigoddesses themselves, he cannot go to them, just as his companions at
the oars, their ears stopped with wax, are deaf not only to the demigoddesses but to the
desperate cries of their commander.\(^{83}\) (DE, 46)

The suffering Odysseus endures to escape the Sirens turns him into the hero who
resists temptation for the sake of his noble cause, and yet the hero’s noble cause
turns out to be the dehumanising world of rationalised labour in which the
suppression of kinship bonds means that those in authority are alienated from both
the impulses of their own internal nature and from organic solidarity with those
whose labour they command.

In the tale of Odysseus’ escape from the Cyclops Polyphemus, Horkheimer and
Adorno unravel an analogous form of alienation, though this time in relation to the
sphere of language. When he is imprisoned in the Cyclops’ cave, Odysseus hatches
a cunning escape plan. He connives to blind the Cyclops and tells the monster that
his (i.e. Odysseus’) name is ‘nobody.’ Odysseus then blinds the monster and escapes from his cave on the underbelly of one of his sheep, and Polyphemus
famously cries out to the other Cyclopes that ‘nobody’ has escaped. Consequently,

\(^{83}\) Ibid., 46.
the others do nothing to prevent Odysseus’ escape, and Odysseus makes it back to the ship.

Through a reading of Polyphemus and his kinsmen as a memory of tribal prehistory, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the inability of the Cyclops’ kinsmen to work out Odysseus’ trick recalls a tribal past in which human beings were not consciously aware of a clear distinction between the ‘subjectivity’ and ‘objectivity,’ or between an ‘internal’ world of thoughts and feelings and an ‘external’ world of things. Horkheimer and Adorno hence argue that for the Cyclopes the name of a thing is inseparable from its intrinsic meaning:

Within the sphere of ideas in which mythical figures executed the unalterable edicts of fate, the distinction between word and thing was unknown. The word was thought to have direct power over the thing, expression merged with intention.84

Read in this manner, Odysseus confounds the Cyclopes by calling himself ‘nobody’ because the Cyclopes cannot conceive of a person who is ‘nobody.’ The hero’s word game thereby facilitates his escape. At the same time, however, the man who calls himself ‘nobody’ bespeaks a degree of conscious awareness of the distance separating ‘subjectivity and ‘objectivity,’ or the distance separating his sense of self from the collective identity of his social world. Horkheimer and Adorno elaborate: “From the formalism of mythical names and statutes, which, indifferent like nature, seek to rule over human beings and history, emerges nominalism, the prototype of bourgeois thinking.”85 Such thinking presents the self-awareness of a subject that, at least to some degree, conceives of itself as part of world which is not

84 Ibid., 47.
85 Ibid., 47.
intrinsically meaningful. The hero who calls himself nobody hence reflects existence in a social world which is radically divorced from the collective norms and communal values of prehistory. Odysseus’ trick thereby makes a hero of the self that outwits the primitive and barbaric Cyclops. As in the tale of the Sirens, however, the hero turns out to be an individual who is already isolated and alienated from nature and from other human beings.

In light of their readings of Odysseus’ escape from his mythical foes as a reflection of the alienated individual subject of a land owning class, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the Homeric origins of the Western intellectual tradition were based much more upon a rationalised and dehumanising social world based upon instrumental reason rather than some kind of spiritual homeland. Odysseus, in this reading, exemplifies the emergence of subjectivity within a class that had denied the claims of ‘internal’ nature and communal norms and values for the sake of wealth and power based upon the rationalised mastery of nature and the labour of other human beings. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that Odysseus is thus already “homo oeconomicus, whom all reasonable people will one day resemble.”86 This means that the Homeric hero is radically alienated from the nature which he is and which he transforms into a world of obstacles standing between him and his lands and wealth in Ithaca. The Odyssey, Horkheimer and Adorno argue, hence prefigures the tale of Robinson Crusoe. The lonely hero Odysseus, like the far later hero Robinson Crusoe, produces a rationalised, calculable world out of an untamed nature. Both heroes triumph over the nature to which they are abandoned.

86 Ibid., 49.
Odysseus’ triumph is that of the escape from mythical nature for the sake of securing the order of fixed property and its hierarchy. Crusoe transforms a suppressed nature into the power of industry. Both can do so, however, only at the expense of internal and external nature for the sake of the rationalised mastery of nature:

The universal socialisation for which the globetrotter Odysseus and the solo manufacturer Robinson Crusoe provide a preliminary sketch was attended from the first by the absolute loneliness which at the end of the bourgeois era is becoming overt. Radical socialisation means radical alienation. Both Odysseus and Crusoe deal in totality: the former measures it out; the latter fabricates it. They can do so only in total isolation from all other human beings, who appear to both men only in estranged forms, as enemies or allies, but always as instruments, things.  

Horkheimer and Adorno’s reading of the epic thereby unveils the homelessness at the origins of the Western intellectual tradition as the human alienation derived from the subordination of the ‘mythical’ human solidarity of tribal prehistory to the instrumental reason of rationalised labour and settlement. This means that if in tribal prehistory obscure powers of nature shaped the lives and consciousness of individuals as, then the rationalised mastery of nature at the dawn of European civilisation implied a new quasi-natural force which preformed the earliest forms of subjectivity and rationality in the Western tradition. This does not imply, however, that the Odyssey reveals the origins of the Western intellectual tradition to be synonymous with the blind domination of nature. Rather, according to Dialectic of Enlightenment, just as the Odyssey marks the ‘homelessness’ of instrumental reason at the origins of the Western intellectual tradition, it at the same time

87 Ibid., 49.
documents the germ cell of a self-reflective, ‘demythologising’ dimension of the Western intellectual tradition derived from insight into the homelessness with which the tradition began.

Horkheimer and Adorno’s reading of this dimension of the *Odyssey* expands upon their anthropological reading of the epic as documenting the replacement of the myths of tribal prehistory with the instrumental reason of a rationalised social world. Rather than simply reflecting the new social reality, however, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the self-reflective dimension of the epic communicated elements of the alienation and vulnerability derived from the primeval subjugation to instrumental reason as something which was shared by the Homeric audience. In an analogous fashion to psychoanalytic readings of myths as symbolic means of retracing repressed instincts, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that Homer thereby wove together shared insights into the vulnerabilities which shaped thought and existence in the ancient world as a new source of self-reflection and human solidarity.

### 3.2: The Lotus-eaters and the Homeric Memory of a Lost Primal State

When Odysseus and his men disembark on the Lotus-eaters’ island, we read that whoever eats the Lotus-eaters’ food is as enchanted as those that hear the Sirens’ song. The enchantment does not, however, mean death. It means freedom from consciousness self-awareness, “The curse condemns them to nothing more than a
primal state exempt from labor and struggle." \(^{88}\) Hence whilst the enchantment is not deadly, it would nevertheless spell disaster for Odysseus' voyage by stripping whoever falls under its power of the desire to return to Ithaca. Consequently, Odysseus pitilessly rounds up those who have eaten the food, forces them back to the ship, and binds them in irons in the galleys. Despite so pitilessly imprisoning those under the spell of the enchanted food, Odysseus reports upon leaving the Lotus eaters: "So we left that country and sailed on sick at heart." \(^{89}\) Horkheimer and Adorno present this sentence as a first decisive trace of the Homeric communication of the alienation from which archaic Greek civilisation was inseparable.

Horkheimer and Adorno's reading of this sentence is based upon interpreting the tale of the Lotus-eaters as a memory of a stage of tribal prehistory which is, "older than agriculture, cattle rearing, or even hunting older, in short, than any form of production." \(^{90}\) The authors hence argue that, understood as a memory of tribal prehistory, the enchantment of the Lotus-eaters' food recalls an historical stage in which human beings' social connections to one another and to external nature are not mediated by any form of social organisation. They thus recall a stage of history that is far less differentiated than the property owning structure of Homeric Greece, a stage of history which is far less differentiated than even hunter-gather cultures. In Horkheimer and Adorno's view, the Lotus-eaters thereby recall a memory of a time which far predates the instrumentally rationalised structures of

\(^{88}\) Ibid., 49.  
\(^{89}\) Ibid., 50.  
\(^{90}\) Ibid., 50.
settled civilisation and the alienated individualism to which those structures gave rise. In this way, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that Odysseus’ heartache upon leaving the Lotus-eaters symbolically communicated the estrangement from nature within the archaic Greek world to the audience of the Odyssey. Odysseus, like the members of the Homeric audience, can do nothing other than forgo the primitive state which is offered by the Lotus-eaters’ food. The sickness in his heart, however, turned the longing for a lost primal state which was presupposed by the earliest forms of Western subjectivity into something which was shared by the Homeric audience.

3.3: The Cyclops and the Homeric Entwinement of Civilisation and Alienation

Revisiting Odysseus’ encounter with Polyphemous, Horkheimer and Adorno present the Cyclops in a similar light to the Lotus-eaters, though this time in relation to the memory of a historical stage before the advent of systematic modes of agriculture and social organisation: “a state in which no systematic agriculture, and therefore no systematic time-managing organization of work and society, has yet been achieved.” Horkheimer and Adorno unravel the Homeric memory of this historical stage as communicating the shared alienation and vulnerabilities of the Homeric audience in two basic ways. The first is through a reading of Homer’s description of the Cyclops and his kinsmen as uncivilised and lawless savages. The second is through a reading of Odysseus’ rash actions after he escapes the Cyclops’ cave.

91 Ibid., 50.
Homer describes the Cyclops and his countrymen as fiercely uncivilised and barbarously indifferent to one another because, as their natural and social needs are taken care of by a simple and provident proximity to nature, they make no effort to systematically organise their labour or their social world. Quoting Homer at length, Horkheimer and Adorno write:

He [Homer] calls the Cyclopes “fierce, uncivilized people” because and his words seem to contain a secret confession of the guilt of civilization itself they “never lift a hand to plant or plough but put their trust in Providence. All the crops they require spring up unsown and untilled, wheat and barley and the vines whose generous clusters give them wine when ripened for them by the timely rains.” Abundance needs no law, and civilization’s accusation of anarchy sounds almost like a denunciation of abundance: “The Cyclopes have no assemblies for the making of laws, nor any settled customs, but live in hollow caverns in the mountain heights, where each man is lawgiver to his children and his wives, and nobody cares a jot for his neighbours.” This is already a patriarchal society based on kinship and the suppression of the physically weaker, but it is not yet organized on the model of fixed property and its hierarchy; it is the lack of contact between cave dwellers which is the true reason for the absence of objective laws and which calls forth Homer’s accusation of their mutual disregard and their state of savagery.92

In this way, the Homeric conception of civilisation turns out to be based upon the rationalised organisation of the social world and the order of wealth and property rather than upon a concern for some kind of noble human virtue. Furthermore, contrary to the Homeric accusation of indifference to others, and in spite of the Cyclops’ barbaric cannibalism, the concern of Polyphemus and the other Cyclopes for one another is made clear when Polyphemus’ kinsmen hear the anguish in his cry after he had been blinded by Odysseus, and gather round the blinded monster in solidarity. It is only Odysseus’ trick that prevents them from doing more for the wounded monster. Similar compassion is also displayed by Polyphemus himself.

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92 Ibid., 51.
when he puts the young goats and sheep to their mothers’ udders and, most
strikingly, when he asks his leading ram if he is the last to leave the cave because he
is grieving for his master's eye. Such care “for creaturely life,” argue Horkheimer
and Adorno “has a power and a poignancy equalled only at the highest point of the
*Odyssey* when the homecoming Odysseus is recognised by the old dog Argus.”93
Interpreted as a memory of the proximity to nature which was incompatible with
the rationalised world and toil of the ‘civilised’ Homeric universe, Homer's
description of the Cyclopes as uncivilised ultimately means that the monsters are
not subjected to the alienation from nature and from one another which was
necessary for the systematic organisation of Archaic Greek civilisation.

This alienation becomes far more pronounced in the behaviour of Odysseus as he is
sailing away from the Cyclops’ realm. After the escape, Odysseus hubristically
announces his true name and origin to the blinded Cyclops. The blinded and
enraged Polyphemus then hurls the top of a mountain at in the direction of
Odysseus’ mocking announcement. The mountain top narrowly misses, but
Odysseus’ irresistible need to announce his real identity incurs the
wrath of Poseidon when Polyphemus (Poseidon’s son) reveals to his father the suffering he
endured at the hands of Odysseus. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that Odysseus’
irrational behaviour suggests that the hero suddenly becomes overwhelmingly
aware of the alienation that has been unintentionally revealed by calling himself
‘nobody.’ Despite the obvious dangers of doing so, he thus feels compelled to

93 Ibid., 52.
reaffirm his identity as ‘someone,’ or the association of his name with something which is intrinsically meaningful, as in tribal prehistory:

by inserting his own intention into the name, Odysseus has withdrawn it from the magical sphere. But his self-assertion, as in the entire epic, as in all civilisation, is self-repudiation. Thereby the self is drawn back into the same compulsive circle of natural connections from which it sought through adaptation to escape. The man who, for the sake of his own self, calls himself Nobody and manipulates resemblance to the natural state as a means of controlling nature, gives way to hubris. The artful Odysseus cannot do otherwise...as if the primeval world still had such power over Odysseus, who always escapes by the skin of his teeth, that he would fear to become Nobody again if he did not re-establish his own identity by means of the magical word which rational identity had just superseded.94

The divine wrath which Odysseus’ compulsive announcement brings about eventually causes the destruction of his ship, and the deaths of his crew. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that through the Homeric report of that wrath, the Homeric audience symbolically encountered something of their own vulnerability as individuals within a social world no longer bound by the security of tribal bonds.

3.4: Circe and the Homeric Taboo on Unbridled Sexuality

With reference to arguments from the classicist J.A.K. Thompson, Horkheimer and Adorno read the tale of Circe as recalling a primitive nature religion which is far older than Homeric myth, and which hence once again points back to a remote tribal prehistory, “the tale of Circe points back once more to the stage of actual magic.”95 The authors argue that the story of the sorceress once more retraces the Homeric communication of the alienation and vulnerability of the nascent subject, though this time in relation to a taboo on unbridled sexual impulses and desires.

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94 Ibid., 53.
95 Ibid., 54. Fleming briefly discusses the reference to Thompson in “Odysseus and Enlightenment: Horkheimer and Adorno's Dialektik der Aufklärung,” 121.
The sorceress seduces her victims into abandoning themselves to instinct, thereby transforming them into animals. Like the Lotus-eaters, Circe’s magic is not lethal. She offers sensual joy and destroys the autonomy of the recipient. She does not, however, destroy the recipient. To the contrary, the wolves and mountain lions which turn out to be men who were seduced by Circe’s magic before Odysseus’ arrival on Circe’s island are peaceable and do not suffer. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that Circe’s powers hence present a kind of sensual fulfilment which dissolves conscious self-awareness, and which hence dissolves the suppression of internal and external nature which conscious self-awareness presupposes, “The mythical command to which they have been subjected at the same time liberates the very nature which is suppressed in them. What is revoked by their relapse into myth is myth itself.”

In the Homeric report of Circe’s enchantments over Odysseus’ men, however, the alienation of the hero and his men from such a possibility of libidinous fulfilment is made apparent. Odysseus’ men are not transformed into peaceable lions and wolves like the sorceress’ earlier captives, but into pigs: squealing farm animals which recall, at least in part, the filth and degradation of tabooed instinctual life. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that those amongst Odysseus’ men that succumb to Circe’s charms hence become primeval images of taboo, “later civilisations have always liked to apply the name of pig or swine to anyone whose impulses tended

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96 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 55.
toward other pleasures than those sanctioned by society for its purposes.”

Here once more Homer paints a portrait of the entwinement of civilisation and alienation. Only the ‘civilised’ victims of Circe’s magic, or those that follow Odysseus, are made to truly suffer for falling victim to Circe’s seductions. Hence only they are truly subject to a law which deems that they cannot follow their natural impulses and desires.

The actions by which Odysseus makes himself immune to the sorceress’ magic point once more to the taboo against the unfettered fulfilment of sexual impulses. Faced with Circe’s charms, Odysseus threatens the sorceress and makes her swear an oath to not transform him with her magic and to undo the effects of her magic on his men. Odysseus then sleeps with her. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that Odysseus’ actions thereby retrace the subordination of sexual intimacy to the patriarchal power and needs of a class of wealthy land owners, and hence the suppression of sexual impulses and desires which shaped the nascent forms of subjectivity within that class. The authors argue that a trace of the vulnerabilities derived from this archaic form of suppression are made explicit in an obscure sentence which describes the weeping of Odysseus and his men after they had been liberated from Circe’s magic:

How high a price was paid for the establishing of orderly arrangements for procreation is hinted at by the obscure passage on the behaviour of Odysseus’ friends when Circe had transformed them back into men as required by her contractual lord. First we read that “they not only became men again but looked much younger and much handsomer and taller than before.” But those who were thus confirmed and strengthened in their manhood are not happy: “We were so moved that we all wept for happiness. It was a strange sound for those

97 Ibid., 56.
walls to echo.” The earliest wedding song, the accompaniment of the feast celebrating the rudimentary marriage which lasts only a year, may have sounded like this.\textsuperscript{98}

In this way, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the strange sound of weeping symbolically communicated a ban on unfettered sexual intimacy as a precondition of subjectivity within the rationalised civilisation of archaic Greece.

3.5: The Recognition Scene and the Homeric Priority of Property over Human Intimacy

Horkheimer and Adorno argue that another dimension of the suppression of sexuality is presented in the recognition scene with Penelope. This theme is here revealed as the priority of property over even the most intimate human relationships.

When Odysseus reveals his true identity to his wife, she mistrustfully scrutinises the man before her and demands proof that he is her true husband. The test Penelope sets Odysseus to prove his identity relates to the position of the marriage bed which he had, as a young man, constructed around an olive tree. In its fixed position around the tree, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the bed is a decisive symbol of “the unity of sex and property.”\textsuperscript{99} Penelope’s test thereby establishes the identity of her husband as the owner of property which includes his wife’s sexuality, rather than as her loving partner. Odysseus confirms his status as the owner of his lands and his wife by “Flaring up” and “rounding on” Penelope as he

\textsuperscript{98} Ibid., 57.
\textsuperscript{99} Ibid., 58.
proceeds to give her an account of how he constructed the bed.\textsuperscript{100} By this Penelope recognises her husband, whom she flatters, somewhat mockingly, as clever.\textsuperscript{101} In the antagonism which marks the recognition scene, an antagonism that revolves around the priority of property relations over human solidarity and which at the same time bespeaks the patriarchal suppression of women, Homer hence sketches out to his audience the way in which the order of property within Archaic Greece estranged human beings from one another in even the most intimate of human spheres.

Following the display of antagonism between the spouses in the recognition scene, however, Penelope’s mocking flattery of her husband is cut short by an abrupt break in the narrative flow. Penelope all of a sudden lauds the suffering that she and her husband have been made to endure at the hands of the gods, who could not bear to see them enjoy the joys of youth and reach the threshold of old age together. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that in this rupture the recognition scene blends the image of the subordination of human intimacy to the order of property into the communication of a new form of human solidarity: solidarity which is derived from shared insight into that very subordination. Horkheimer and Adorno write:

Marriage represents not only the account balancing order of the living but also solidarity and steadfastness in the face of death. In it reconciliation grows around subjugation.... Undoubtedly, marriage forms part of the primal rock of myth at the base of civilisation. But

\textsuperscript{100} Ibid., 58.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., 58.
its mythic solidity and permanence jut from myth, as the small island realm rises from the endless sea.\textsuperscript{102}

In this way, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that Odysseus’ return to Ithaca not only turns the alienation which is presupposed by the earliest modes of subjectivity into something which is shared by the Homeric audience; the hero’s return at once communicates a fleeting glimpse of new forms of human solidarity which grew around such insight.

3.6: The First Voyage to Hades and the Homeric Ban on Reviving Mythical Images of the Past

According to \textit{Dialectic of Enlightenment} the Homeric transformation of a lost proximity to nature and other human beings into the foundation of a new form of human solidarity is once more presented in the tale of Odysseus’ first voyage to Hades.

This episode takes shape as Odysseus’ confrontation with the souls of dead pre-Homeric mythical heroines. They include Odysseus’ mother who appears to the hero as mute and lifeless. Odysseus must offer sacrificial blood if his mother is to recognise the hero and talk to him. Despite his heartache, he refuses to allow his mother to speak until he has gained the advice of the soothsayer Tiresias, whose council was the reason for his voyage into the underworld. Odysseus thus reveals a strategy of choosing to first animate those who will benefit his life, as opposed to blindly following his attachment to the images of the past:

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 59.
Sacrificial blood is required as a pledge of living memory before the shades can speak, breaking free, however vainly and ephemerally, from mythic muteness. Only when subjectivity masters itself by recognising the nullity of images does it begin to share the hope which images vainly promise. The promised land for Odysseus is not the archaic realm of images. Finally, all the images reveal their true essence as shades in the world of the dead, as illusion. Having recognized them as dead he dismisses them with a lordly gesture of self-preservation, banishing them from the sacrifice which he reserves for those who grant him knowledge which benefits his life.  

By turning his sacrifice away from the images which vainly promise to undo the suffering of the present by reviving the past images which promise a return to the organic social bonds which Odysseus’ struggles have banished to a mythical prehistory Odysseus embraces his own isolation and alienation as inevitable. According to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, in the narration of this tale Homer thereby symbolically retraced the human vulnerability derived from the dissolution of organic social bonds as a shared conception of the inevitable realities of Archaic Greece.

Horkheimer and Adorno argue that this shared sense of vulnerability puts its finger on a self-reflective dimension of Homeric mythology that gestures towards the “innermost cell of all antimythological thought.” In it, the epic which symbolically encodes the highly ambivalent vulnerabilities presupposed by subjectivity—the communication of the entwinement of the earliest modes of subjectivity with the instrumental reason of a social world based upon rationalised labour and the suppression of organic social bonds—pointed to a foundation for a new form of self-reflection, one based upon shared insight into human beings’

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103 Ibid., 59.
104 Ibid., 60.
subjugation to the quasi-natural force of instrumental reason. In this concept of self-reflection the Homeric longing for homeland was thereby detached from the hopelessness of the imagined happiness of a mythical past in the name of a potential to realise human solidarity which transcends organic mythical bonds: solidarity derived from fragmented insights into an instrumentalised humanity. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the *Odyssey* thereby already points to the paradoxical form of demythologisation derived from shared insight into human beings’ immersion in myth: the escape from myth derived from the understanding that we cannot escape myth. The authors write:

> It is a yearning for homeland which sets in motion the adventures by which subjectivity, the prehistory of which is narrated in *The Odyssey*, escapes the primeval world. The fact that despite the fascist lies to the contrary the concept of homeland is opposed to myth constitutes the innermost paradox of epic. Precipitated in the epic is the memory of an historical age in which nomadism gave way to settlement, the precondition of any homeland. If the fixed order of property implicit in settlement is the source of human alienation, in which all homesickness and longing spring from a lost primal state, at the same time it is towards settlement and fixed property, on which alone the concept of homeland is based, that all longing and homesickness are directed. Novalis’ definition according to which philosophy is homesickness holds good only if this longing is not dissipated in the phantasm of a lost original state, but homeland, and nature itself, are pictured as something that have first to be wrested from myth. Homeland is a state of having escaped.\footnote{Ibid., 60–61.}

In contradistinction to readings of the Homeric origins of the Western intellectual tradition as documenting an idealised spiritual homeland as the origin and goal of philosophy, Horkheimer and Adorno hence argue that the philosophical ideal sketched out in Homer is that of the self-reflection of an alienated subject which itself points to the emancipation of human beings from myth. The authors present
the tale of the execution of the maid servants as a decisive document of this form of self-reflection.

3.7: The Execution of the Maid Servants and a Self-reflective Dimension of the Origins of the Western Intellectual Tradition

Book 22 of the epic describes the punishment of the maidservants who fell into harlotry in the service of the suitors. Their execution by hanging is coldly compared to the deaths of birds in a trap. At first glance, the coldness of the description and its blunt statement reflect an apparent indifference to the maids’ suffering. This is followed however by a statement reporting “[f]or a little while their feet kicked out, but not for very long.” Horkheimer and Adorno argue that this sentence is a decisive exemplar of a self-reflective dimension of the origins of the Western intellectual tradition, a dimension of Homer that illuminated a qualitatively new drive towards human solidarity in a culture that had suppressed the social bonds of tribal prehistory.

Horkheimer and Adorno’s reading of this sentence is multifaceted. Firstly, the authors refer to classicist Gilbert Murray’s reading of the “consoling intentions” of this line. According to Murray’s theory, the consoling intentions of the line following the maid’s death bear witness to a Homeric opposition to barbaric violence which developed through generations of editing to which the Odyssey was

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106 Ibid., 61.
107 Ibid., 263 (footnote 62).
subjected prior to modern versions. Murray argues that through this process, scenes of torture and human sacrifice which were once part of the account of Odysseus’ voyage were removed from the epic.\textsuperscript{108} In this light, Murray maintains that the consoling intentions of ‘but not for very long’ point to a concept of self-reflection which gradually ‘humanised’ the Homeric epic, and which was manifested in the process through which the epic was received and transformed through the course of many generations.

Expanding upon Murray’s point, Horkheimer and Adorno read the consoling line following the maids’ hanging in terms of the Homeric communication of the alienation and vulnerability which was presupposed by the earliest modes of Western subjectivity. In this sense, the authors argue that the Homeric report of the convulsions of the condemned women meant that, despite the maids’ crimes and their lowly social status, the audience shared the suffering of the maids’ last moments:

As a citizen reflecting on the execution, Homer comforts himself and his listeners, who are really readers, with the certified observation that the kicking did not last long – a moment, and all was over. But after the words “not for long” the inner flow of the narrative comes to rest. “Not for long?” the narrator asks by this device, giving the lie to his own composure. In being brought to a standstill, the report is prevented from forgetting the victims of the execution and lays bare the unspeakably endless torment of the single second in which the maids fought against death.\textsuperscript{109}

Horkheimer and Adorno argue that this Homeric glimpse of solidarity with the maids’ suffering exemplifies a concept of enlightenment that momentarily illuminates “a semblance of freedom that civilisation has been wholly unable to

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 263.
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 61-62.
extinguish ever since.”¹¹⁰ That freedom crystallises in the solidarity derived from shared symbolic insight into human vulnerability in the Homeric world, insight which developed through the self-reflection and shared memory carried through generations of bards and their audiences.

According to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, from the rationalised domination of nature from which Western civilisation and reason began—domination which meant the exposure of human beings to new forms of alienation and vulnerability—Homer thereby documents a concept of enlightenment as the self-reflection and solidarity derived from symbolic communication of human vulnerability. Horkheimer and Adorno thus point to a communicative capacity stemming from the clash between ‘nature’ and settled civilisation—a capacity which is illuminated by reading Homer with reference to insights from anthropology and psychoanalysis—as the anthropological foundation for their contention that the project of enlightenment is still a work in progress. In this concept of enlightenment we do not free ourselves from the vulnerabilities which have always threatened to push human beings to commit new acts of barbarism against the powerless Other. Rather, through the force of reason which reflects on its origins in nature, we unravel that vulnerability with as shared with the Other.

In this manner, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that Western reason is, and has always been, a reflection of the instrumentalisation of our species within cultures based upon rationalised labour. At the same time, however, Western reason has

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 61.
always carried the seeds of a potential for self-reflection in which the needs and longings of a dominated humanity are transformed into new forms of self-reflection and human solidarity.
Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to present Horkheimer and Adorno’s discussion of myth as a study of philosophical self-reflection that is based upon two principle foundations. The first is a reading of Odysseus sailing past the Sirens as an allegory for the myth of instrumental reason: an allegory that depicts the way in which thinking is inescapably shaped by highly ambivalent vulnerabilities derived from the isolated and alienated individualism of modern industrialised society. Following the authors’ allegory, one that is modelled on aesthetics, shared symbolic insight into these vulnerabilities points to a potential for qualitatively new forms of enlightened self-reflection. The second is an interpretation of Homer’s *Odyssey* as documenting both the spiritual ‘homelessness’ of instrumental reason from which Western civilisation and subjectivity began, and at the same a new form of human solidarity derived from the symbolic communication of that spiritual homelessness. Horkheimer and Adorno thereby point to a communicative potential which is ingrained within the structure of Western reason as an anthropological foundation for their concept of philosophical self-reflection: a foundation for a concept of enlightenment based upon shared symbolic insight into historically contingent forces which preform and deform thought in the modern world.

In contradistinction to characterisations of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as a totalising critique of reason, I have thereby argued that the discussion of myth in Horkheimer and Adorno’s famous collaboration points to a concept of
enlightenment which is still very much a work in progress: a concept of enlightenment that presents the innermost social and historical essence of our regressive and barbaric tendencies as a paradoxical key to new forms self-reflection and human solidarity.
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