

# **REASON AND HORROR**

## **CRITICAL THEORY, DEMOCRACY, AND AESTHETIC INDIVIDUALITY**

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# ONE

## INTRODUCTION: REASON AND HORROR

Keeping company with the many explanations marshaled over the decades for the rise of German Fascism and its extermination of the Jews, one constant suspicion may be held in common at this late period of modernity by all who have thought about those events. Those who participated in the crime of the Holocaust did so in the wake of some terrible sea change that had been effected in the human spirit. If such a fear does haunt us, perhaps through all our efforts to lay blame for the Holocaust elsewhere so that we can feel less vulnerable precisely where we may have become the weakest, then the thesis of this work will resonate. The destruction of the Jews was the consequence of the destruction of the aesthetic features of what the Western philosophical tradition since John Stuart Mill more narrowly understood as “individuality.” “Aesthetic individuality,” as I will call it, disappeared with the triumph of a form of rationality whose progress led inevitably to the Holocaust. Set forth in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, I will argue in [part I](#) of *Reason and Horror*, this is Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno’s discovery.<sup>1</sup> It is the sea change in the human spirit from which the horror of the Holocaust followed.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, although the eclipse of aesthetic individuality and the event of the Holocaust are related so necessarily in Horkheimer and Adorno’s text, the intellectual autonomy they required to entertain even the possibility of an exception to this thesis was foreclosed by the horror of the extermination. In *Twilight of the Idols* Friedrich Nietzsche captures the relationship between reason and horror that must have prevailed at that moment in 1944 when Horkheimer and Adorno first wrote of the “indefatigable self-destructiveness of enlightenment,” of the path not to a truly human condition but rather to “a new kind of barbarism” on which the process of enlightenment seemed to have launched humankind.

The fanaticism with which the whole of Greek thought throws itself at rationality betrays a sense of emergency: one was in peril, one had only *one* chance: either to perish or—*be absurdly rational*.<sup>3</sup>

It is not that their extreme reaction to the state of emergency defined by the horror of the Holocaust gave birth to the concept of an aesthetic form of



individuality, or more generally to an “aesthetic reason” that would secure rationality in the midst of madness. To the contrary, Horkheimer and Adorno’s “pathologically conditioned” response to horror, as Nietzsche goes on to describe the Greeks’ reaction to the peril of internal warfare from which they labored to free themselves with their uncompromising rationalism, assumed the opposite form. Horkheimer and Adorno’s pathology lay in their belief that “formal reason,” as they referred to it, which from the very birth of human thought propelled enlightenment on an irreversible and unwavering trajectory toward the Holocaust, could so utterly eliminate the aesthetic form of reason with which it had been locked throughout history in primordial struggle.

My argument in [part II](#) emerges from a recognition that the self-destructive process of enlightenment rooted in an “absurdly” powerful formal rationality was Horkheimer and Adorno’s desperately conceived explanation for an event whose horror absolutely determined that they could offer no alternative reply. While they mark the Holocaust as the culmination of the history of enlightenment, the aesthetic form of individuality they believe a horror-bound formal rationality destroyed to bring about the Holocaust nevertheless survived elsewhere, I will contend. To borrow Alexis de Tocqueville’s expression, as the “consequence” of democratic institutions and practices, aesthetic individuality becomes a democratic achievement, the singular product of a democratic society. Aesthetic individuality becomes a new and increasingly prevalent form of democratic individuality. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* enables us to speak of an “individuality before the Holocaust,” of an aesthetic individuality whose eradication issued in horror, and of an “individuality after the Holocaust,” of this same aesthetic individuality that did not vanish everywhere, as Horkheimer and Adorno claimed, but was seeded in the bedrock of modern democratic society. If it can be shown that aesthetic individuality survived the process of enlightenment to flourish within a democratic form of life, then the destruction of the Jews and of all other forms of “difference” the Jew symbolically represents may be an event to which democracy proves resistant. Through the aesthetic form of individuality to which it gives birth, democracy erects barriers to evil.

## INDIVIDUALITY BEFORE THE HOLOCAUST

To read *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as their response to the Holocaust, horror becomes the emergency that compelled Horkheimer and Adorno to produce a concept of reason beyond the bounds of reason, which is what I understand Nietzsche to mean by a pathologically conditioned absurdly rational idea of reason.<sup>4</sup> What is required first, then, is an understanding of their concept of reason, the task to which [chapter 2](#) is devoted, though some introductory remarks will be useful in getting our bearings for that discussion and for the chapters that follow.

### Formal and Aesthetic Reason

At the outset of what will become the long history of the development of reason, essentially the historical process of enlightenment, Horkheimer and Adorno argue, out of fear of the threat to its self-preservation posed by the appearance of an unknown world surrounding it, thinking's strongest impulse is to render known what is unknown. From the very birth of thinking, fear of the unknown provokes reason to make transparent a world that is dark and fathomless, bringing an end to the danger the unknown threatens. As what is unknown ultimately is unknowable, however, the world to some extent must elude thought, no matter how exhaustive its concepts. What reason believes it knows to be true of the world is, in part, therefore, an illusion, although this insight is itself unavailable to a form of reason driven single-mindedly by its fear of an enchanted world. And perhaps it is an illusion in greatest part, because as the world is finally unknowable, it is not possible for reason to estimate how much of the world it has grasped. Enlightenment, first as a world-historical process that extends from the birth of thinking onward, and then as the culmination of this process in the cultural self-understanding of the West designated as "the Enlightenment," is reason relentlessly pursuing knowledge of the world that in part is illusory, yet without a reflective understanding of the known's illusory nature.

Reason's illusion is not merely a malformation of thought. It is also, and most importantly, a malformation of the *object* of thought, a malformation of the unknowable world that is forever different from reason's every thought of it. For if the world is unknowable, and reason in its determination to abolish its fear of the unknown creates an illusory image of a world always exceeding the range of thought, then reason's illusions have re-formed a world that objectively is otherwise. Reason has imposed form on an unfathomable world essentially different from the way it is represented in thought. What is different about the world has been abolished in reason's drive to rid the world of the unknown and thinking of its fear of the unknown. Herein lies the meaning of enlightenment as Horkheimer and Adorno conceptualize it. Enlightenment is precisely this elimination of difference or, more emphatically, of all the difference in the world, because enlightenment is the process through which reason seeks to make the world known in its entirety. Whereas in its early history reason represents the world as other than it is, in-itself, later in its development reason through science and technology acquires the power to effect a wholesale transformation of the world on the basis of its illusory representations. Enlightenment in a twofold sense is consequently the expression of a violence to difference that inheres deeply in the nature of thought—in reason's impositions on the world of the forms in which it represents the world as the object of thought, and in the transformation of the world in accordance with these forms.

Unless we think of the progress of reason as the equivalent of the historical process of enlightenment, as the force of Horkheimer and Adorno's argument encourages us to do, reason is not simply and only hostile to difference. Only

“formal” reason, which becomes increasingly hegemonic as enlightenment on its way to and through the modern world wends its way successively through each developmental stage of thought, unleashes its violence on the world. Formal rationality is expressed in cognitive strategies that render the unknown world known by representing it in ways that identify only those elements each thing belonging to it shares with everything else, while omitting those qualities which differentiate them. Each thing, unknowable in-itself and essentially different from thought’s every representation of it, and thus different from everything else represented in thought, is represented in terms of its commonalities with other things, through which it appears to be the same. Differences become known as formal rational thinking represents them in a form through which they are made to resemble that from which objectively they are distinct. Yet, where formal reason through representation of the commonalities of the objects of thought effaces what is different among them, knowing the world’s diversity of differences by making them appear the same, other properties of reason recognize that the world’s differences are not entirely available to thought. “Aesthetic” reason, as I shall refer to the form of rationality Horkheimer and Adorno contrast with formal reason, is distinguished by its quality of receptivity. Aesthetic reason is receptive to the diversity of differences of which the world is composed when it acknowledges the fathomlessness of the world and affirms that its meaning and value are mysterious and that all it contains exceeds the boundaries of thought and is essentially different from reason’s representations. If life is this diversity of differences, then in its acknowledgment of the unknown and its affirmation of mystery, both of which constitute thinking’s receptivity to differences in all their infinite diversity, aesthetic reason’s receptivity affirms life.<sup>5</sup> And formal reason, which eliminates differences through their assimilation to images representing only commonalities and exterminates differences that cannot be so represented in thought, is hostile to life.

Formal reason and the aesthetic form of rationality with which Horkheimer and Adorno contrast it—reason that finds what is unknown and different from thought to be an obstacle to its emancipation from fear, and reason unafraid of the unfathomable in which it finds the source of its receptivity to the diversity of different forms of life—are the two forms of reason whose conflict defines the historical process of enlightenment. As I will show in the following chapter, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* they trace the conflict of these forms of reason through several stages. Each stage in turn marks the further ascendancy of formal reason and the steady devolution of its aesthetic counterpart until the struggle is resolved with the dominion of formal rational thought. Beginning with preanimistic thinking through magic and myth to the Enlightenment of modern times, at each of these stages the power of formal reason to purge the world of what lies outside the boundaries of thinking and is different from reason’s thought of it is enhanced. The Holocaust represents the capacity of formal reason to exterminate not just the Jew but difference as such. For as Judaism embodies difference in its most abstract form, the destruction of the Jews likewise represents

the destruction of the last line of ideological resistance to formal reason's power to impose form on the world, ridding it of what is unknown and appears threatening to its self-preservation. Adopting a straightforward exegetical approach to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in [chapter 2](#), I review the stages through which reason's violence to difference escalates until it reaches its apotheosis with the Holocaust.<sup>6</sup>

### Aesthetic Reason, Aesthetic Individuality, Aesthetic Sensibility

Long before this catastrophic event, however, as early as the birth of thinking and also in magic, Horkheimer and Adorno find evidence for the aesthetic form of rationality that opposes the violence in thought, which as their study of Homer's *Odyssey* proves, then surfaces dramatically at the stage of thought dominated by a mythical view of the world. Although Horkheimer and Adorno never explicitly refer to the form of rationality acknowledging the unknown and receptive to difference as "aesthetic" reason, there can be no doubt that this is its proper reference. As I will argue in [chapter 3](#), they discover the embodiment of aesthetic rationality in the individuality they attribute to Odysseus, who models the struggle to free thinking from formal reason's dominion so that it may incorporate an acknowledgment of the world's fathomlessness and a receptivity to difference. In Odysseus's encounter with the lure of the Sirens they explore an episode in the *Odyssey*, symbolic for the history of thought, when his aesthetic capacity to experience enchantment *directly*, the capacity in which his aesthetic individuality is anchored, turns into aesthetic contemplation, the *indirect* experience of enchantment through art. After partially relinquishing the formal rational mastery that has enabled him to avoid the dangers to his self-preservation threatened by an enchanted world, Horkheimer and Adorno argue, Odysseus at first is immediately engaged by their music. While the directness of his experience suggests that the two opposing forms of reason were moving toward some sort of harmonious relationship, Odysseus as his ship passes beyond the Sirens continues to gaze after them as though they were merely works of art. It is at this moment in the evolution of thought, I will propose, when Odysseus's original receptivity to difference assumes the form of art, that in retrospect we realize the form of rationality that throughout his journey had defined his individuality as receptivity is an *aesthetic* orientation to the world. Aesthetic individuality is revealed clearly at that moment when enlightenment spoils myth's anticipation of a resolved division within reason between its will to make the world known and its will to affirm the unknown, between its fear of what lies outside of and is different from thought and its receptivity to such difference. Beyond myth formal reason continues to be developed by the process of enlightenment, while at the stage of myth enlightenment has arrested the aesthetic individuality with which Odysseus had embraced the world's darkness, as he had in his encounter with the Sirens through his receptivity to a direct

experience of enchantment. Individuality, in the aesthetic form in which it appeared “before the Holocaust,” shedding its fear of the unknown to become receptive to difference, has been displaced to art, which confirms its aesthetic nature.

Reason’s aesthetic receptivity, the third chapter demonstrates, is at the heart of individuality as Horkheimer and Adorno conceptualize it. Likewise, the chapter’s explanation of art as the repository of individuality’s displaced aesthetic features justifies my introduction, in [chapter 2](#), of the term *aesthetic* to describe the receptivity to a world of difference that opposes formal reason’s relationship of violence. Both of these discussions are integral to a larger project that occupies [chapter 3](#), the reconstruction of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. If our interpretation of this work were to progress no further than an account of the stages of enlightenment through which reason advances to the Holocaust, the final impression would be that of a linear historical development of reason that unfolds with the inertia of an unvarying and unremitting force. Indeed, so much so does the course of enlightenment seem to follow a predetermined course that with the hegemony of formal reason and its eclipse of aesthetic individuality in modernity there are several inevitable consequences for thinking. At the conclusion of Horkheimer and Adorno’s linear historical narrative, reason’s aesthetic capacity to think the world could ever be different from its every thought of it has been ruined so thoroughly by the process of enlightenment that we no longer can imagine reason could be anything other than formal rationality. In effect, formal reason constitutes a sphere of rationality that defines the parameters within which all thinking proceeds. Our thinking is so determined by formal reason that we cannot account even for a reader who has the ability to grasp enlightenment’s catastrophic implications for “difference.” Yet, as readers we do grasp these implications, and surely Horkheimer and Adorno expect that they will not elude us, at least not entirely.

*Dialectic of Enlightenment*, I contend, is thus paradoxical. At one level it presupposes the existence of a reader who at another level, that of the text’s linear historical narrative, is shown to have vanished without a trace in the wake of enlightenment. Of course, it is not that there is either a reader or there is not, but that the reader that escapes the historical fate to which Horkheimer and Adorno’s narrative claims it has succumbed has instead been made rather precarious by the historical forces threatening it with extinction. So precarious has the reader been made by the process of enlightenment, perhaps all that remains of a historically earlier and robust aesthetic reason and aesthetic individuality is an aesthetic *sensibility* awakened at the conclusion of their work to establish the readers connection to their argument. No matter how precarious the reader, though, once our recognition of the paradoxical character of their argument has led us to the aesthetic sensibility that prevails against enlightenment to allow *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to become accessible to a reader, a strategic interpretive move becomes possible. We then are drawn back into the narrative structure of the text to discover how a form of aesthetic reason

could have survived the history of disenchantment to which it was argued to have been lost. Put differently, since the preservation of an aesthetic sensibility belies the argument of the linear historical narrative, we are encouraged to entertain the possibility that Horkheimer and Adorno's work contains a second and deeper argument that does not agree with the narrative structure at the manifest level of their text.

With this possibility in mind, I pursue a reconstruction of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as a "genealogy of reason." By the reconstruction of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* genealogically, textual evidence may be found indicating that at some point in its past reason may not have been so perfectly shaped by enlightenment as its linear historical narrative proves. Aesthetic reason may have had some chance to resist enlightenment. The relationship between formal and aesthetic reason may have been otherwise than the domination of the former over the latter. Consequently, at some stage of thought the evolving identity of the modern world and of all those in it may have been received as a *contingent* formation, or one offering *possibilities* for aesthetic individuality *other* than its displacement to art. If so, these earlier possibilities for aesthetic individuality may have been inherited by the late modern world in the diminished form of an aesthetic sensibility, or perhaps in some other form that even outstrips the aesthetic sensibility that appears to be all that has survived the onslaught of enlightenment. A line of inquiry enabling us not only to account for the survival of a sensibility qualifying us to be readers of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* but also to recover the possibility for a more developed form of aesthetic individuality in the present becomes available when *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is reconstructed as a genealogy of reason. Genealogy potentially places us on the threshold of an enlightenment for which Horkheimer and Adorno had held out hope, an enlightenment that through the aesthetic transformation of reason breaks through the historical limitations of an enlightenment of violence.

### Reading *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

Adopting a two-tiered interpretive strategy, I approach *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as though it were a text divided against itself. Though it is unequivocally a linear historical narrative of enlightenment that empties the world of contingent possibilities for aesthetic individuality, on the one hand, it becomes equally a genealogy of reason that recovers contingency in history to loosen formal reason's hold over us. Guided by this genealogical interest, I retreat to Horkheimer and Adorno's examination of myth, for it is at the mythical stage of thought, they argue, when enlightenment initially appears as the progress of formal over aesthetic reason. It is unlikely that an aesthetic orientation to the world could have persisted beyond myth if at this stage there had not been some contingent opportunity to counter the assault of formal rationality that inaugurated enlightenment as the architect of reason's future history. No matter how insignificant, if there is some contingency to be

discovered in the history of enlightenment, in other words, it will be found at the stage of myth. To be sure, as seen through Horkheimer and Adorno's discussion of Homer's *Odyssey*, Odysseus's aesthetic receptivity to the enchanted world through which he must make his way home to Ithaca at first appears to be the victim of a fateful process of enlightenment. His trials and their outcomes appear to be determined in advance by a contest in which one world-historical principle steadily cedes to the ascendancy of the other. Odysseus appears, in every instance, to be an object of formal reason.

Against the inevitability guaranteed by this linear historical narrative, however, Odysseus, considered genealogically, refuses to be ruled by a principle of reason that operates over his head and behind his back. Rather than a worldhistorical conflict of which Odysseus's struggles are symbolic, the conflict between a formal and an aesthetic orientation to the world becomes a conflict within his own thinking, essentially within his self, and as such one over which he has some power. Especially in the poignant episode in which he encounters the Sirens, which with the genealogical turn of interpretation in [chapter 3](#) will move to the forefront of my discussion, we witness Odysseus exercising some control over his fate. By having himself lashed to the mast of his ship so that he could experience their mysteries directly, though without risking his self-preservation, Odysseus forges a compromise between a formal rational orientation and an aesthetic receptivity to the world. Through this *compromised* form of aesthetic individuality, as I describe it, Odysseus permits himself an aesthetic experience of enchantment. At the same time, however, because his self-preservation and identity are never endangered and his crew is able to hold fast to its homeward course, the principle of formal reason underlying his approach to negotiating dangers that appear to be posed by an enchanted world is not reconstituted in the least. In the *Odyssey*, I argue, Horkheimer and Adorno consequently discover evidence that at the mythical stage of thought formal reason's first decisive challenge to an aesthetic receptivity to the world is not entirely victorious. Aesthetic reason is subordinated to formal rationality, but not subdued, and Odysseus's individuality has not yet been sacrificed to an identity whose relation to the world eventually would be governed exclusively by formal reason. Contingency, the possibility that beyond this historical point Odysseus's future could have been otherwise than the way we know it to have unfolded, as could the futures of those who would have inherited the partially unconquered form of his aesthetic individuality, is installed at the moment of his compromise.

On the basis of the compromised form of aesthetic individuality through which Odysseus avoids sacrificing the aesthetic dimension of his experience, it becomes possible to clarify the features of aesthetic reason and to project an *ideal* of aesthetic individuality that would entail the transformation of enlightenment. With this ideal I conceptualize a fully developed form of aesthetic individuality whose receptivity is the articulation of an undistorted human nature that, in turn, neither reproduces formal reason's distortion or destruction of outward nature's diversity of differences nor threatens the self-preservation of identity. Beyond

these conceptual insights, however, Odysseus's encounter with the Sirens finally does not suggest that mythical thought yielded the degree of contingency that might have altered the direction of the process of enlightenment away from the horrors to which it inevitably led. From the standpoint symbolized by Odysseus at the stage of thought reached by myth, the subsequent history of enlightenment might have been other than it became only if the contingencies that were then available to the Western cultural constellation he represents became a legacy for future generations.

As we shall see, though, the compromise Odysseus strikes with formal rationality to create space for an aesthetic receptivity to difference—that is being squeezed out of history by the fate to which he has been subjected by the process of enlightenment—is but a fleeting independence that momentarily problematizes the linearity of Horkheimer and Adorno's narrative. What appeared as a contingent opportunity to oppose formal reason by insinuating into the tightly woven fabric of history an aesthetic form of individuality that could shape, as well as be shaped by, the history of enlightenment is quickly suppressed. Odysseus fails to exploit the contingencies his compromise opens to him, and the aesthetic receptivity to an enchanted world of difference expressed in his encounter with the Sirens is displaced to art. Continuing on his journey home to Ithaca, Horkheimer and Adorno argue, Odysseus passes through the stages of enlightenment as they are traced out by the *Odyssey*, and he becomes symbolic of the fate the process of enlightenment visits upon modernity. Odysseus's affirmation of aesthetic individuality gives way to the hegemony of formal reason and to the creation of the modern subject with the Enlightenment of modern times. Individuality's aesthetic existence is effectively ended, which unbridles the violence inherent in thought and exposes all the difference in the world to reason as a murderous principle. What contingency we inherit from myth is the pale reflection of that briefly created by Odysseus. Odysseus's compromised form of aesthetic individuality is bequeathed to us in the form of art, rather than as the contingent opportunity he possessed before his direct aesthetic experience of an enchanted world turned to aesthetic contemplation. At most, all we possess is the aesthetic sensibility embodied in artworks to which aesthetic individuality has been displaced by formal rational thought. Enlightenment continues unabated, while the aesthetic sensibility that found refuge in art allows us entry to a text that, as narrative, teaches us only of our fate, though, as genealogy, accounts for a sensibility that has escaped that fate to enable a reader who at least can conceptualize aesthetic individuality and reconstruct its history.

Although it may be suspected that I have adopted a genealogical approach to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* out of deference to current methodological trends, my real motive lies elsewhere. In part it is informed by my belief that Nietzsche must be credited with having the greatest influence on Horkheimer and Adorno's thought. While the matter of his real bearing on their work must be left for another time, *Dialectic of Enlightenment's* structural resemblance to Nietzsche's



later genealogies appeared to me so striking that circuitously, at least, my reconfiguration of this work as a genealogy of reason establishes his presence emphatically. What becomes most important in the course of my argument, however, are the new interpretive possibilities that open up when *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is approached as a genealogy. At the same time, I do not concentrate on its genealogical dimensions to the exclusion of other methodologies prominently at work in Horkheimer and Adorno's argument. In particular, in the concluding sections of [chapter 3](#) I will propose that the genealogical design of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* does not explain the progress of enlightenment beyond the Enlightenment of modern times. Whereas genealogical categories enable Horkheimer and Adorno to plot the ascendancy of formal reason from the birth of thinking to the Enlightenment, to complete their analysis of the evolution of enlightenment they turn to Marxism. With the aid of Marxist categories they are able to show how property relations and formal reason develop in and through each other until the latter becomes universal, and how as a consequence of securing the universalization of formal reason capital becomes responsible for the murderous history of enlightenment since the Enlightenment. Even where they rely on economic categories to explain the development of formal reason from the Enlightenment through the several stages of liberalism, though, there is also a degree of continuity in their use of genealogical concepts. To take Horkheimer and Adorno's argument as a whole, then, the Enlightenment marks the dividing line in a history of enlightenment between a past development of formal reason that cannot be understood without being reconstructed genealogically and a future development of formal reason that to be understood must be seen to correspond increasingly to a linear narrative as capitalist relations unfold.

As I already have indicated in a preliminary way, though, as I draw out the structural similarities of Nietzsche's genealogical method to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in [chapter 3](#), and the genealogical framework of Horkheimer and Adorno's work is thrown into relief, it will become evident that they offer us more than a metanarrative of reason's destruction of difference. Approaching *Dialectic of Enlightenment* genealogically, we have begun to see, allows us to account for a reader who they believe has been interdicted by the history of enlightenment to the point of becoming an "imaginary witness," the term they use in the "Notes and Drafts" to their text. Short of this genealogical account, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* cannot be critically redeemed, for if we were unable to discover a historical basis for a reader, far more than the new interpretive possibilities that a genealogical approach opens to us would be lost. Lost, as well, would be the possibility of discovering in our own historical period some evidence for the aesthetic form of individuality a genealogy of reason recovers. As I will show, approaching their work as a genealogy reveals that Horkheimer and Adorno carry out what Nietzsche in his own work had called a "translation" of "man back into nature," a translation—or what we more recently understand to be a "deconstruction"—of modern subjectivity back into individuality. With

this genealogical translation they are able to recall individuality's original aesthetic properties before it evolved into a different form as a consequence of a struggle within thought between two qualitatively different types of thinking. Recovering their genealogical reconstruction of the concept of aesthetic individuality allows us to imagine our own relationship to difference as becoming free of violence and to inquire into the conditions under which this relationship might be developed, as I will do in [part II](#) of my argument, even if within the framework of Horkheimer and Adorno's own work such a possibility is no more than Utopian.

Finally, by developing the resemblance between Horkheimer and Adorno's and Nietzsche's genealogical practices, my intention is to generate a certain openness to the argument I follow with in [chapter 4](#): that the concept of aesthetic individuality we find in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* has an even more fundamental Nietzschean connection. Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, I will argue, furnishes a historical model of the origin and decline of aesthetic reason that resembles Horkheimer and Adorno's nearly to the last detail. Nietzsche's work not only entails a concept of an aesthetic receptivity to the world mirrored in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* but likewise explains its destruction by a principle of rationality identical to the principle of formal reason that animates the process of enlightenment as Horkheimer and Adorno present it. By developing the parallels between *The Birth of Tragedy* and *Dialectic of Enlightenment* through a series of analogies drawn between the two texts, I clarify the concept of aesthetic individuality that first became available to us by approaching Horkheimer and Adorno's work as a genealogy. And as the parallels prove to be nothing less than stunning, they shore up my claim that by virtue of its counterpart aesthetic characteristics in Nietzsche's work, the concept of individuality Horkheimer and Adorno offer is undoubtedly aesthetic.

### Aesthetic Individuality and the Aesthetics of Tragedy

As Nietzsche reconstructs it genealogically in *The Birth of Tragedy*, the history of Hellenic culture develops as a struggle between two principles, the Dionysian and the Apollinian. Because there is not one but several outcomes to this conflict, the art and thought of ancient Greece will vary during its epic stages depending on which of these principles dominates at a given time. With the structure of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* already well established as the background to my discussion of his work, it will be evident that the conflict that Nietzsche describes finds its virtual facsimile in Horkheimer and Adorno's study, and not just with regard to the process of enlightenment considered synoptically.

Among the key moments in Nietzsche's arguments, I will contend, we find predecessors to the interpretive scenarios through which Horkheimer and Adorno offer different forms of aesthetic individuality. Nietzsche's recollection of the Greek Dionysian festival, for example, relates the Apollinian and Dionysian

principles in a way that is duplicated in Horkheimer and Adorno's construing of the way in which, in his encounter with the Sirens, Odysseus forges and then resolves a compromise in his individuality between its formal and aesthetic qualities. Similarly, Attic tragedy, whose birth Nietzsche describes as arising from the balanced coupling of the Apollinian and Dionysian, is imitated by the ideal of aesthetic individuality implicit in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Replicating the structure of the relationship between the Apollinian and Dionysian principles in Attic tragedy, Horkheimer and Adorno's ideal of aesthetic individuality equally incorporates the principles of formal and aesthetic reason. Normatively speaking, it then drives their critique of enlightenment and its destruction of aesthetic individuality. And it does so in much the same way that Nietzsche's model of Attic tragedy drives his critique of the death of Attic tragedy brought about through the changes in Greek drama and culture that commenced with the art and science of Euripides and Socrates. As I will try to show, there can be no doubt that the dramatic parallels between *The Birth of Tragedy* and *Dialectic of Enlightenment* are underpinned by Horkheimer and Adorno's belief that formal reason shares the *modus operandi* characterizing the principle of Socratic reason as Nietzsche described it. In relation to the individual's aesthetic receptivity to all the difference in the world, formal no less than Socratic reason is a "murderous principle," as Nietzsche so unforgivingly judged the principle of enlightenment responsible for the death of Attic tragedy and with it the destruction of the Hellenic aesthetic receptivity to being.

When the analogies between the two texts all have been drawn, it will be clear that in every important respect *The Birth of Tragedy* conceptually prefigures the entire course of enlightenment as it is deciphered in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. So clear, in fact, that as we listen to each work echoing the other's analysis of the destruction of the aesthetic receptivity to the world that distinguishes the highest stage of Greek culture, it will be tempting to dwell on the future raw consequences of enlightenment as they are commonly laid out in both texts. There is a shared conviction more telling, however, than Horkheimer and Adorno and Nietzsche's agreement that we are denied our deepest, aesthetic experience of a world by an enlightenment that necessarily subjects it to the mastery of formal reason. It is Nietzsche's aesthetic ideal modeled by Attic tragedy and reproduced in Horkheimer and Adorno's aspiration for an aesthetic enlightenment that will come to power to transcend the historical limits of an enlightenment of violence. By valuing our aesthetic experience of the world above all, such an enlightenment would protect the ways in which the world is different from our every thought of it, the world as it appears in its diversity of differences, thus ending the domination of formal reason.

Nietzsche's ideal, though, does celebrate an aesthetic experience that at its extreme appears to know the world in the precise way that the Socratic logic to which he objects purports to know the world, that is, in its essence. Acknowledging this ambiguity in his aesthetics, I defend Nietzsche against the charge that his theory of Attic tragedy reflects a philosophical allegiance to the

possibility of reconciliation. Here, again, I find him aligned with Horkheimer and Adorno, who attack both the process of enlightenment and the cultural period of the Enlightenment for nurturing forms of thought that entail a belief in reconciliation. Reconciliation is e/Enlightenment's illusion that the world can be known as it is, in-itself, the expression of reason's deepest cognitive need to free itself of its fear of the unknown by making the world transparent, the need that underlies every thought of the world shaped by formal rationality. Nietzsche's aesthetics affirms reason's unbridgeable separation from the world for which Horkheimer and Adorno, I argue, through an alliance between Kant and Hegel, find grounds in the "concept," the work performed by thought when it recognizes that it can know the unknowable world always and only in part, and that the greatest part may remain unknown. By affirming the ontological divide at the root of conceptual thinking, in other words, Nietzsche's aesthetics affirms the form of thought at the heart of individuality as Horkheimer and Adorno allow us to develop it aesthetically. Formal reason's drive to cross the unbridgeable divide between thought of the world and the world as it is, in-itself, which is the physical and mental space within which difference is located, is consequently hostile to the aesthetic nature of individuality and to aesthetic individuality's conception of the world as unknown and essentially different from its every thought of it.

With the argument of [chapter 4](#) the comparative analysis of *The Birth of Tragedy* and *Dialectic of Enlightenment* has served to clarify the concept of aesthetic individuality embedded in Horkheimer and Adorno's text and to support my claim that they do, in fact, contribute a concept of aesthetic individuality. Yet the comparison of these two great works does not rewrite the history of enlightenment that buried individuality's aesthetic experience of the world in art. At the chapter's conclusion I briefly revisit the event to which the process of enlightenment is hurled. As Judaism is the incarnation of difference, the destruction of the Jews is the most extreme escalation of enlightenment's determination to purge thinking of the uncertainty ineradicably inscribed in conceptual thought. As does the concept, the Jew represents the unknown, though in its most elusive form. Exterminating the Jew is thus enlightenment's most "advanced" achievement, as it proves that no form of life other than art can withstand the progress of formal reason to preserve thinking that constitutes aesthetic individuality's receptivity to the world in its infinite diversity of differences. Confined to art, to which in the history of enlightenment it was displaced, aesthetic individuality becomes a matter for aesthetic theory, the focus of [chapter 5](#).

#### From a Genealogy of Reason to Aesthetic Theory

As [chapter 5](#) opens, formal reason has crushed individuality's capacity to be receptive to the world aesthetically except through the medium of art, so that the aesthetic properties of individuality now must be recovered conceptually from

the work of art in which they took refuge. Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, I argue, is precisely this recovery. Both the compromised and the ideal forms of aesthetic individuality differentiated out of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* by approaching it as a genealogy of reason, which were lost to the artwork as a consequence of enlightenment, now can be reconstructed by aesthetic theory only more generally as aesthetic reason. By fully recovering the concept of aesthetic reason from art, aesthetic theory defines what it means to be receptive to the world aesthetically, and thus restores the philosophical basis for the theory of aesthetic individuality that I will develop in [part II](#) of my argument. As the study of aesthetic reason through the study of art, aesthetic theory proves that to be receptive to the world aesthetically—to be receptive to the world as aesthetic reason orients art receptively—is to take the world to be unknown and unknowable and the darkness of the world to be an absolute barrier to the discovery of truth, so that the world always is recognized as different from thoughts every representation of it. Art consequently sets limits to enlightenment, chastens reason by purging it of the violence in thought, and by providing the unknown as the first principle of its creativity teaches how an aesthetic form of individuality receptive to difference can be creative against a background of mystery where the world is held to be unknowable. Unfettered by the aesthetic idealism that the work of art lays bare the essence of every existence it takes as its aesthetic object, emancipated from the chimerical notion that art is able to reveal truths to which all artistic work should be directed, aesthetic creativity explodes, becoming nearly indeterminate, as does the creativity of an aesthetic individuality that takes aesthetic reason from art as its first principle.

## SURFACES

With [part I](#), “Individuality before the Holocaust,” concluded, a project in conceptual retrieval has been completed. What was lost is again found: a concept of an aesthetic individuality that stands in opposition to the nightmare of the historical process of enlightenment is recovered from Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Although, its importance is not to be underestimated, an aesthetic sensibility that allows us to unlock the secrets of its history is the only sign that aesthetic individuality has survived in any other than a conceptual form. As the historical artifact of aesthetic individuality, by itself an aesthetic sensibility offers no real hope for changing the future trajectory of enlightenment unless it inspires a renewed search in the late modern world for the aesthetic individuality for which it provides evidence. Guided by the concept of aesthetic individuality retrieved from enlightenment's historical ruins, should we not next consider whether aesthetic individuality might not have been made entirely extinct by enlightenment? To put it boldly, should we not now undertake the task of completing Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of enlightenment by searching for evidence of aesthetic individuality in addition to the sensibility that appears to be its only legacy? Failing to take this next step, would we not then succumb

to the same horror that pathologically conditioned their metanarrative of reason gone uncontrollably and irreversibly mad?

In the four chapters that make up “Surfaces,” [part II](#) of *Reason and Horror*, I first develop the concept of aesthetic individuality from the point it was left after being recovered from art through Adorno’s aesthetic theory. This project revolves briefly around Adorno and Nietzsche in [chapter 6](#), and then is fleshed out through the poetry and prose of Walt Whitman in the remainder of that chapter and in the two that follow. While Whitman’s contribution to this effort is decisive, each of these thinkers contributes uniquely and indispensably to the conceptual properties of aesthetic individuality. Once its conceptual dimensions are developed fully, in [chapter 9](#) I look for evidence of aesthetic individuality in a democratic society by way of an examination of Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*, an approach for which I offer justification early in that discussion. Relying on his understanding of democratic America, I *re-describe*, in the aesthetic terminology I developed through Adorno, Nietzsche, and Whitman, Tocqueville’s analysis of the forms of thought and action that the “equality of condition,” as he refers to democratic equality, encourages each individual in a democratic society to adopt. Evidence for aesthetic individuality as a democratic achievement rests on the possibility of re-describing, in aesthetic terms, Tocqueville’s argument about the forms of thought and action fostered by equality. What behavior Tocqueville carefully observed though conceived in other terms, I will show to be aesthetic through and through.

### Individuality as an Aesthetic Problem

As a consequence of his earlier collaboration with Horkheimer, and then subsequently through his *Aesthetic Theory*, we have seen, Adorno has enabled us to conceptualize individuality as an aesthetic problem. Adorno’s own contribution to this problem, as I summarize it at the outset of [chapter 6](#), constitutes its foundation. An aesthetic form of individuality eroded through the historical process of enlightenment is sublimated in art and reappears conceptually as aesthetic reason. Through the philosophical reflections of aesthetic theory, aesthetic reason, the rationality internal to the artwork, illuminates a contradiction belonging to aesthetic representation that speaks to the nature of thinking as well as to the nature of art. Aesthetic theory shows that, like the object of art, the object of thought evades representation, that there is a persistent “difference” between the identity of an object and our every thought of it. According to aesthetic theory, the rationality of the artwork demonstrates that the identity of the world we believe we can know by dint of reason escapes it. Through art we learn that by striving to abolish the difference between the world and our every thought of it, as enlightenment requires, so that we eliminate the fear bred by the uncertainty in the persistence of difference, thinking mistakenly equates its representations with the world it represents. By virtue of this equation, art teaches, thought compels the world to bear the illusory form of identity

imposed upon it and to suffer the violence of appearing to be something other than it is. Aesthetic rationality thus installs the unknown as the limit to enlightenment and is sensitive to the violence accompanying every act of thought that attempts to cross the unbridgeable divide between the known and the unknown.

If we now take aesthetic reason to be the defining quality of individuality, aesthetic individuality's receptivity to the world will proceed from its recognition of an essential difference between the identity of the world, and of anyone and anything in it, and the world as individuality represents it. Each object, each living and nonliving thing, will be represented as composed of depths that are unknowable and a surface, a realm of appearance, on which reason cannot but remain. Unknowable, every object now appears as a world in-itself, so that we can speak of a "world of worlds." Out of respect for the fathomlessness of the identity of difference, aesthetic individuality will confine itself to the surfaces of the world and of everyone and everything in it, which will be to adopt a receptivity to appearances that leaves their identities, their differences in their fathomless depths, alone and unknown. Aesthetic individuality's experience of the world will be divided, confined to the surfaces of the world that in their impenetrable depths are mysterious, its creativity inspired by the mystery and wonder of the unknown while unencumbered by the desideratum to subject creativity to a truth reason seeks to discover in the depths. Aesthetic individuality's every representation will be free of the violence that accompanies representations that reason fails to acknowledge are, at least in part, impositions of form on an unknowable world.

Adorno: A Sensibility to Violence, Creativity without Form—  
Nietzsche: Creativity with Form, without a Sensibility to  
Violence

Adorno's contribution to conceptualizing individuality as an aesthetic problem is not unproblematic, however. Insofar as aesthetic individuality confines its experience of the world to its surfaces and abstains from trying to penetrate its depths, its receptivity effectively denies any knowledge of the identity of the world that would inform and guide its relationship to it, which had been the prerogative of reason in its pursuit of truth. Aesthetic individuality cannot know what form its *creativity* ought to assume when confined receptively to the surface of a world. To put it simply, aesthetic individuality's creativity is in want of *aesthetic form*. Nevertheless, the image of the world as a surface with fathomless depths that we draw from Adorno's aesthetics is indispensable to an individuality whose ethic cultivates, out of respect and care for difference, an aesthetic sensibility to the violence inflicted on difference by thought guided by enlightenment ideals.

Whereas Adorno forces us to bracket aesthetic individuality at the moment its creativity becomes problematic, I will argue in [chapter 6](#), Nietzsche orients

individuality creatively to the surfaces of the world by “envisaging the aesthetic problem from the point of view of the artist (the creator),” as he writes in *On the Genealogy of Morals*.<sup>7</sup> From the artist’s point of view, Nietzsche is proposing, creativity is expressed and developed through aesthetic form, which he wants us to think of as the medium through which individuality can create, or represent, itself and the world, as does the artist.<sup>8</sup> Surfaces, or the ways in which each of us and the world and all it contains appear, are the artist’s objects of aesthetic representation, but acquire depth—and this is decisive—*only* through the meaning and value belonging to the image of the surface when it is first created by the artist through the medium of aesthetic form.

As I will show, to emphasize the co-originality of value, meaning, and creativity through aesthetic form, Nietzsche cleverly conceives of surfaces metaphorically as “mirrors” in which their depths appear only as the “reflections” of the image of how a surface can be creatively formed or represented.<sup>9</sup> As the mere reflection of an image created on the surface of the world, depth, figuratively speaking, has no weight, and thus is no source of gravity weighing creativity down. To put it differently, thought of as mere reflections, depths release individuality from captivity to values and meanings that, when privileged as truths, are imposed upon its creativity as authoritative norms and standards it must subservise, as though they were depths belonging to a surface all along, an objective foundation that should govern creativity on the surface above. And with the idea of depth as the reflection of a creation on a surface, Nietzsche is stressing that the depth of any particular meaning or value created is open to interpretation. Indefinite in meaning and value, depth confers a corresponding indeterminacy upon the identity of its creator. Through the interpretive openness of the meaning and value of individuality’s creation, individuality’s own identity becomes something different than it appears to be, a surface with a fathomless depth, deeper in meaning and value than the image in which it has represented itself. Hence Nietzsche’s approach to the aesthetic problem, the problem of creativity, from the point of view of the artist, enables us to imagine individuality originating meaning and value without proscription, and creating an identity that differs from its appearance, that is as different from its appearance as may be the depths of an image’s reflection as it appears in the surface of a mirror.

Such creativity earns the individual “nobility,” the quality with which Nietzsche distinguishes individuality. Those incapable of originality are fated to resent those who are noble. Out of their resentment, they collectively “say no” to the values and meanings originated by nobility by constructing and universalizing moral systems that demonize nobility as “otherness” while valorizing the collective identity of the herd. To Nietzsche, moral truths are depths—values and meanings—that the power of the collective universalizes, and in their universalization cease to be reflections of their origins and take on an illusory objectivity. As depths normatively grounding thought and action, universal moral truths become weights subduing creativity by holding it hostage



to values and meanings not of its own making, which undermines individuality's creativity on the surface. Surfaces and depths are consequently inverted. No longer a reflection of creativity on the surface, as truth depth is transformed into "reality" and the surface and its creations into mere manifestations of the underlying reality. Since in the moral universe reality connotes the value accorded truth, losing the totality of surface possibilities to the reality of the depth further diminishes the value of creativity on a surface already devalued through its enslavement to moral imperatives.

It is through the concepts of surface and depth, then, that Nietzsche establishes the conditions for aesthetic individuality's relationship to the world. Receptive to the surface of the world, individuality's creativity on a surface is "light" in two metaphorical senses. Its creativity is light when unencumbered by the pull of gravity exerted by the deadening depth of truth below, to become the light reflecting the meaning and value of images created on a surface as its depths.<sup>10</sup> Yet, I shall also ask what would be the relationship of Nietzsche's aesthetic individuality to Adorno's depths, the fathomless depths of a world whose identity is forever unknown? After all, Adorno's depths do not weigh individuality down as do the heavy, inert depths of moral truth. Unknown, unfathomable depths free individuality from the belief that the ideas and images of the world it forms illuminate its depths, free thought from the hubris that it can know the world in its depths and from the limitations on creativity that such truth prescribes. Freeing individuality from the illusion of reconciliation, Adorno rescues from the violence of representation all that the world contains, whose identities necessarily elude and thus remain different from thought, by confining individuality's aesthetic receptivity to the surface.

In the course of my discussion it will become clear that both Nietzsche and Adorno orient individuality receptively to the surfaces of the world, though with a decisive difference. Once Adorno's idea of a world possessing an identity with fathomless depths confines creativity, or representation, to the world's surfaces, individuality is left to imagine the form of its aesthetic relationship to the world. Creativity is in want of form beyond individuality's reflective understanding that unless its experience of the world remains divided, the world falls victim to a process of enlightenment that extinguishes difference by seeking to know the world in its depths. Nietzsche, to the contrary, confines individuality creatively to the surfaces of the world, though without being mindful of Adorno's depths below. Nietzsche's formulation of an aesthetic relation *excludes* the possibility that a fathomless depth, unavailable to thought, might lie divided from us beneath the surfaces on which individuality creates its images of the world in all their values and meanings. In that event, Adorno's depths become a mere extension of Nietzsche's surfaces, mere layers of the surface and as depths indistinct, collapsed to the surface and integral to the foreground on which individuality's creativity explodes when emancipated from the limitations imposed by the foundations, the "fathomable" depths, underlying moral truth. Adorno's depths would be re-formed by the creative transformations of the

surface, their identity subjected to the violence of the forms of representation to which the surface is subjected, their plight veiled by depths construed to be the mere reflections of individuality's images of the surface.

It is evident, I will argue, that there is an irreconcilable contradiction between the ways in which Nietzsche and Adorno relate individuality aesthetically to the surfaces and depths of the world. On a general level, surfaces and depths are the poles around which Nietzsche's ideas of individuality and creativity revolve, and they circulate powerfully though tacitly throughout Adorno's thinking. By means of these concepts as they work when Nietzsche and Adorno are taken together, the two central dimensions of aesthetic individuality—creativity and a sensibility to violence in the ways individuality creatively forms itself and the world—are fleshed out. While both Nietzsche and Adorno constitute an aesthetic relation to the world as receptivity to its surfaces, however, the identity of difference in its depths that Adorno's aesthetics protects from the impositions of representation are violated by Nietzsche's idea of creativity, becoming assimilated to the surface on which individuality's images of the world are formed. If we are to preserve for aesthetic individuality the aesthetic sensibility to difference that Adorno's aesthetic theory recovers, we must discover a way to enfold this sensibility within Nietzsche's model of creativity. Aesthetic individuality must be conceptualized in a way that weds Nietzsche's idea of aesthetic creativity on the surfaces of the world to Adorno's idea of an aesthetic sensibility to its depths. With this conceptual challenge, which I show will be met by Whitman's work, we have the fully developed formulation of individuality as an aesthetic problem, to which the remainder of [chapter 6](#) and the two chapters that follow are devoted.

#### Whitman: The Aesthetic Problem from the Point of View of the Artist (the Creator)

Whitman's prose, though especially his poetry, I will demonstrate, not only affirms but draws inspiration from an experience of the world divided between the world as it can be known and the world as it remains unknown. If it were not for a certain innocence in his enthusiastic embrace of technological progress, the philosophic motifs that in all their poetic variations spring from Whitman's recognition of the unknown would qualify him as no less an opponent of the Enlightenment than Nietzsche and Adorno. Whitman's conviction that the world is unfathomable is evident from arguments he frames poetically. As its animating principle, the unknown enables the poet to form images distinguishing between the depths, the fathomless qualities, of the world's diversity of differences, and the surfaces of differences through which poetic creativity is to unfold. Every thing and every one existing is different from everything and everyone else, on its surface different from the surface of every other, and different in its depths from the way it appears on the surface.

The poet is drawn irresistibly to the world when engaged by the world's sheer diversity of differences, an engagement that becomes possible for the poet once the identity of everyone and everything of which the world is composed, and hence the identity of the world itself, is acknowledged to be unknowable in its depths, a surface with a fathomless depth. Acknowledged to be unknown, different in their depths from how they appear, surfaces cease to be reducible to deeper, shared properties that would blind the poet to the differences among them by urging him to attend to their commonalities. As for Adorno, for Whitman differences appear among surfaces when surfaces are acknowledged to be unknown in their depths. Poetic creativity is inspired by surfaces that by virtue of their differences each become highly visible and absorbing, and to which the poet becomes receptive when out of a recognition of the unknown he cultivates an indifference to fathomless differences in their depths, an indifference to the identity of difference. For Whitman, individuality realizes its creativity when it relates to the world just as the poet relates to the world through poetry, aesthetically—receptive to the world's surfaces through an acknowledgment of the unknown and an indifference to the world's depths. Only on the surface of the world will individuality discover the sheer diversity of different forms of life, and in this diversity the images through which to form itself and the world as the poet forms his poetry and through his poetry forms the world.

Following Nietzsche's suggestion, then, I envisage the aesthetic problem, the problem of individuality, from the point of view of Whitman, the artist (the creator). I consider Whitman's point of view, in other words, as that of an artist addressing the problem of individuality's creativity in aesthetic terms, which is what I believe to be his interest to begin with. Accordingly, the aesthetic forms of Whitman's poetry, which constitute the point of view through which he takes the world as an object of his creativity, become a model for individuality's own aesthetic creativity and receptivity to the world. Taking Whitman's poetic forms as the model for aesthetic individuality, I initially focus on his poetic forms as modes of aesthetic representation, the ways in which they allow him to represent the world in poetic images. In light of a reconstruction of what I describe as the representational logic of his poetic forms, Whitman's images appear to be created through a mode of aesthetic representation that agrees with Adorno's criteria for what determines aesthetic receptivity to the world. Obedient to this logic of representation, the poetic forms through which Whitman's images are created acknowledge the world to be unknown in its depths, distinguish the world's surfaces from its unfathomable depths on the basis of the unknown, and conceive of every surface as different and an image through which poetry is formed and forms the world. Because the assumption underlying Whitman's poetry is that the world is different from its poetic representations, the identity of all the difference in the world remains concealed beyond the representational reach of poetic images created through an aesthetic receptivity only to the surfaces of the world's diversity of differences.

Now, if individuality were to form the world as Whitman's poetry forms the world, as I argue he intends, or in Nietzsche's terms, if it were modeled on the aesthetic point of view provided by Whitman's poetic forms, individuality would relate to the world as Whitman's poetry is related to the world. Individuality's own logic of representation, the form of its creativity, in other words, would be purged of the violence that Adorno attributes to the representations of the world rooted in the illusory belief that the identity of a fathomless world, its meaning and its value, can be known. Receptive to the world aesthetically, individuality's creativity would leave the world's differences alone in their depths. The aesthetic receptivity to the world in which Whitman's poetic forms place individuality would subdue the violence of mastery as it subdues the violence of representation accompanying the illusion of reconciliation, the illusion of knowing the identity of a world that in its depths is essentially unknowable. By bringing his poetry to bear on individuality as an aesthetic problem, I will show that from Whitman's point of view, the point of view of the artist (the creator), poetry proves that individuality can be guided by an ethical sensibility to the violence in the ways its representational practices creatively form the world.

It is not only in its representational dimensions that Whitman's poetry meets the aesthetic desiderata according to which Nietzsche and Adorno encourage us to conceptualize aesthetic individuality. While Whitman's poetry offers individuality a model of aesthetic representation that incorporates Nietzsche's vantage point on aesthetic creativity and Adorno's sensibility to violence in the way creativity forms the world, it also provides a model of aesthetic "presentation" whose ethic is no differently principled. Whereas [chapter 6](#) maps the aesthetics of individuality modeled on Whitman's poetic forms of representation, [chapter 7](#) considers his poetry as a model for how individuality creates, or *presents*, the *self* through the images in which others and the world can be aesthetically represented. From Whitman's aesthetic point of view, I argue, presenting or creating the self first requires representing the world. Aesthetic presentation presupposes aesthetic representation.

The key to the relationship between aesthetic representation and presentation appears in Whitman's great poem "Song of the Open Road." There he speaks of the world of "objects" that we all share—things and people and their cultures and all they contain—a world of worlds, Whitman wants us to understand, whose meanings "call from diffusion [our] meanings and give them shape!"<sup>11</sup> By this I take Whitman to mean that individuality forms itself by imitating the forms in which others appear, so that individuals form themselves through the surface forms or shapes belonging to others and other things to which their self-creativity orients them aesthetically. Aesthetically speaking, there is a constitutional moment when the identity individuality can create at first belongs to someone or something else, which individuality appropriates as a vehicle through which its own identity can creatively unfold on its own surface and in its own depths. Individuality is what enables us to become diverse beings by creating ourselves aesthetically through the world's different surfaces, and through our diversity to

become different from ourselves, from who we were or who we are, and different from others as we individuate ourselves by newly developing the depths of the surfaces we adopt. The world's diverse surfaces become available to individuality's creativity, however, only when in the manner of the representational logic of Whitman's poetic forms individuality affirms the unknown as the ethical principle that orients it receptively to the surface of the world. Only through individuality's affirmation of the unknown can it become receptive to surfaces, whose multiplicity then would serve as the vehicles through which individuality creates itself differently on its surface and in its depths.

Individuality's affirmation of the unknown, however, is but the philosophical precondition for the aesthetics of its self-creativity. Although affirming the unknown orients individuality receptively to the surface where it finds the plurality of forms through which it can create and re-create itself, individuals can become only as diverse as the diversity of the objects they can be receptive to and represent aesthetically. Individuality's aesthetic receptivity and representation are intimately bound up with the form of life in which individuality is situated. Unless that form of life is inclusive of the world's diversity of differences, unless it is *democratic*, as I argue in [chapter 8](#), individuality is denied the opportunity to be receptive to and to represent the multiplicity of surfaces through which it can present itself differently. Without democracy, in other words, individuality is unable to become aesthetic. Such a tight connection between aesthetic individuality and democracy already is anticipated by Whitman's poetic forms. As we shall see, the representational logic of Whitman's poetry is radically inclusive of the diversity of differences through which its creativity unfolds, so much so that it seems entirely appropriate to describe his poetic forms as democratic through and through. By orienting individuality receptively to all the difference in the world through a logic of poetic representation that is democratic, Whitman's poetry proves that it is its democratic form of representation that makes aesthetic creativity possible. And while the representational logic of aesthetic receptivity to the diversity of different surfaces establishes its connection to democracy, the connection appears to run in the opposite direction as well. Democracy is aesthetic when it, too, I will try to demonstrate, strains to include all differences. For Whitman, the aesthetics of individuality and the aesthetics of democracy consequently run hand in hand. Moreover, when aesthetic individuality is realized through an aesthetic, democratic form of life, the possibilities for self-creativity increase exponentially to the point where the individual's relationship to time and space is dramatically altered. As an aesthetic form of life, I will show, democracy provides an aesthetically receptive individuality with the representational means to overcome the finiteness of its existence. In a word, democracy offers an aesthetic individuality a form of immortality.

As the connection between aesthetic individuality and a democratic form of life is developed, I make it clear that Whitman also intends a connection between

aesthetic individuality and democracy in America, and between America and modernity. Whitman's idea is that America can create modernity out of itself by fostering a democratic form of life inclusive of all the world's cultural differences, past and present, in one New World. Once we grasp the relationship between democracy, America, and modernity as Whitman understands it, it becomes evident that the modern, American, democratic world, and the aesthetic form of individuality for which it provides the foundation, are aesthetic achievements because they all create their identities through the same representational logic characteristic of Whitman's poetic forms. Whitman's poetry is a model not only for an aesthetic form of individuality but for the aesthetic form of life embodied by America, whose essentially democratic constitution defines the aesthetic nature of its collective identity and the identity of modernity.

With [chapter 8](#) concluded, the concept of aesthetic individuality has been fleshed out completely and democracy has been foregrounded as the political form of life within which aesthetic individuality in its representational and presentational dimensions can flourish. [Part II](#) of my argument therefore comes unavoidably upon the question on which its final chapter will focus. If aesthetic individuality requires a democratic form of life, can we not then find evidence for aesthetic individuality in modern democratic society? To answer to this question, though only provisionally, of course, I examine Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* and proceed on the understanding that this great work offers the uncontested point of departure for contemporary analyses, not only of America but of democratic society generally.

### Aesthetic Individuality in Democratic America

My approach to Tocqueville is to *re-describe* his work in the aesthetic terms I have developed in the previous three chapters of [part II](#), to determine if there is a correspondence between the aesthetic form of individuality conceptualized through Whitman's poetry and the form of individuality produced by democracy as Tocqueville describes it. Turning to Tocqueville for evidence of aesthetic individuality in democracy, I discover that each of the elements belonging to Whitman's poetic forms appears in the relationships individuals form as a consequence of the "equality of condition," as democratic equality was called in *Democracy in America*. To put it concisely, individuals in a democracy form relationships to one another in precisely the ways that Whitman relates individuality receptively and creatively to the world and to everyone and everything in it through the representational and presentational dimensions of the aesthetic forms of his poetry. My approach has several steps.

Although he did not speak of aesthetic individuality, or even of individuality to any significant extent, Tocqueville is deeply interested in difference, a term he uses synonymously with inequality, and with the ways individuals relate to difference, which is what my concept of aesthetic individuality problematizes.

By thematizing his interest in the relations to difference in which individuals become implicated due to the encouragements provided by democracy's equality of condition, I am prepared to look for evidence of individuals' forming an aesthetic relationship to one another in all relations to difference in democratic America as they are described by Tocqueville. Before doing so, however, I must next engage Tocqueville's claim that differences in democracy disappear, for if he is correct about the disappearance of difference, there would be no differences to which individuals could form an aesthetic relationship. In response to Tocqueville's claim, I show that he narrowly conceptualizes difference as the "large class" differences of aristocratic society. While these differences disappear in Tocqueville's reading of democratic equality, his allegiance to an aristocratic concept of large class differences *blinds* his conceptual framework to other sorts of differences that continue to prevail within democracy. Once Tocqueville's argument about the disappearance of difference is clarified in relationship to large, aristocratic class differences, we then are left with differences other than large differences that have not disappeared but of which a conceptual framework equating difference with large differences could not have taken account. *Small differences*, as I term them, are those differences beyond the conceptual boundaries of Tocqueville's large, aristocratic class differences, and include the entire range of nonclass social differences, such as multicultural differences. Nonclass small differences are not small in any quantitative sense but are so called only to distinguish them from the large, aristocratic class differences that conceal them from view.

Having introduced a concept of difference into Tocqueville's theoretical framework that is far more inclusive of differences than large class differences, I direct my attention to the *relation* to difference that the democratic equality of condition encourages individuals to form. Here, as does Tocqueville, I focus on the "passion for equality," as he calls it, that the equality of condition ignites. Pursued passionately by all who benefit from the equality of condition, equality for Tocqueville initially translates into individuals' *acute sensitivity* to the differences they perceive between themselves and others, and then, most importantly, into an unflagging determination on the part of each individual to *overcome* these differences. With my revision of Tocqueville's conceptual framework, however, now the passion for equality also means overcoming all small differences. This third step shows how the equality of condition produces in individuals a relationship to the widest sort of differences that continually proliferate within democracy and allows us to raise the issue that places us on the threshold of redescribing Tocqueville's argument in the aesthetic terms I culled from my examination of Whitman. How does the passion for equality fueled by the equality of condition express itself? Or more pointedly, what occurs in a democratic society when individuals overcome the small differences they discover between themselves and others?

In one of his most brilliant interpretations of American democratic life, Tocqueville proposes that driven by a passion for equality that constrains them to

be acutely sensitive to the least perceived difference, individuals “borrow” and “copy,” “emulate” and “imitate” one another. Democracy, I will contend as I redescribe Tocqueville’s argument in aesthetic terms, possesses what I call a mimetic dimension, through which individuals imitate each other and in doing so come to resemble those differences they mark for imitation. In the perpetual throes of a passion for equality, individuals overcome differences between themselves and others by becoming different, specifically by adopting the form of difference taken by another, *exactly as Whitman in his poetry imagines individuality doing*. It thus is inaccurate, I will insist, to read Tocqueville simply to be arguing that democratic society molds all of its members in the same identical image so that eventually there will be no differences among them, as this is an incomplete and misleading picture of the way he depicts individuals forming themselves in a democracy. Individuals create themselves aesthetically through a mimetic relation to others, indeed, through a mimetic relation to all others. Tocqueville conveys the image of each individual in a democracy becoming different in all the ways all others in democratic society are different. It is an image of an individual who, becoming different through imitation, is at the same time itself and someone else. Becoming different in the way others are different and different in those ways from itself, an individual develops identities that are many “identities”—many and often contradictory ideas, notions, and desires—in one. Individual identity becomes multiplicitous.

After finding the individual’s mimetic relation to others to be the form in which individuality creates itself in a democracy, to be its Nietzschean, presentational dimension, so to speak, I examine the representational logic of this relationship to determine if it incorporates Adorno’s ethical sensibility to violence. Here the question is whether the individual who has been shown to create itself aesthetically does so through a relationship whose structure reproduces all the elements of Whitman’s poetic forms. As does the form of individuality’s relationship to the world that we explicated in Whitman’s poetry, I will show, the aesthetic form adopted by each individual within a democratic context orients individuality receptively to the surfaces of differences, and confines it to the surface as well. Confined receptively to the surface and indifferent to the identity of difference in its depths, the democratically encouraged form of aesthetic individuality allows what lies below the surface to remain unknown. Through its aesthetic receptivity individuality remains innocent of the violence to difference that throughout the history of enlightenment accompanied every effort to say what the identity of difference is. Consistent with the ethical requirements of Adorno’s aesthetics, self-creativity occurs through its receptivity to the surfaces of others and other things, through which every individual may create itself differently on its own surface and in its depths.

As we learn in [chapter 9](#), then, democracy not only produces an aesthetic form of individuality but an aesthetic individuality that, like Whitman’s poetry, meets the conceptual criteria that emerge from enfolding Adorno’s ethical sensibility to



violence into Nietzsche's approach to creativity from the point of view of the artist. Among the implications for democracy of discovering that aesthetic individuality is a democratic achievement, I am interested predominately in one. For individuals whose relationship to the world is aesthetic, I propose, identities are constituted in relationship to those who are different according to a logic that *undermines* the development of the resentment from which a slave morality grows. By virtue of their receptivity to differences, in particular, to the surfaces of differences through which their own self-creativity unfolds, individuals would not convert difference into forms of "otherness" as they do where resentment and its moral imperatives prevail. Difference would no longer be victimized. Democracy, to the extent it produces aesthetic individuality, would not visit the horrors of holocaust and genocidal extermination upon those who are different.<sup>12</sup>

### INDIVIDUALITY AFTER THE HOLOCAUST

To the extent to which democratic society produces aesthetic individuality, we can speak figuratively of "individuality after the Holocaust." What we are speaking of literally, though, is a form of individuality that in the wake of the Holocaust seems to embody the features of the aesthetic receptivity whose destruction, Horkheimer and Adorno argued, led to the destruction of the Jews, but whose democratic cultivation safeguards difference and allows it to be regarded as the source of aesthetic individuality's self-creativity. On the basis of my examination of Tocqueville's analysis of the dynamics of democracy in America, we should infer that since the aesthetic dimensions of individuality appear to be rooted in equality, which is democracy's most fundamental institutional principle, aesthetic individuality would be a strong if not the dominant tendency in democratic life. Before we suppose this to be the case, however, the question of the presence of aesthetic individuality in democratic society should be joined in a second way, which is the topic of my concluding chapter.

By considering George Kateb's *The Inner Ocean: Individualism and Democratic Culture*, I intend to explore in a preliminary way the matter of whether there may be sources of morality in late modern democratic society that would not thwart the development of aesthetic individuality but complement and perhaps nurture it.<sup>13</sup> In one of the most original and provocative studies of democratic individuality in contemporary political theory, Kateb offers evidence showing that a form of individuality produced by democracy is, for its greatest part, "morally distinctive" in nature, and he provides an explanation for how it is produced that is essentially Tocquevillian, though he concentrates on democratic institutions and practices other than those I have highlighted. My approach to Kateb will be first to explicate his concept of a morally distinctive individuality and its genesis and then to consider briefly whether it contributes to the development of individuality's aesthetic qualities. Hence Kateb's work will enable us to determine whether democratic society creates moral beliefs and

dispositions that contest Nietzsche's critique of the moral life of democracy. And it will provide a more certain grasp of whether we can speak of individuality after the Holocaust, of an aesthetic form of individuality through which democracy will avert the reason and horror of the past.