

10 Stravinsky as devil: Adorno's three critiques

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Introduction

Adorno's *Philosophie der neuen Musik* was published in 1949,¹ at a decisive turning-point for music in the mid-twentieth century. In this highly influential book, Adorno put forward a dialectical reading of the New Music in the form of a critique of its two most extreme representatives, Schoenberg and Stravinsky. The effects were dramatic, providing a rallying cry for the generation of new composers emerging in the immediate post-war years, and who were to become associated both with the rejection of neoclassicism and with the espousal of the multiple serialism of the Darmstadt School. The reception of Adorno's critique by the two protagonists themselves was in some respects contrary to expectations. Schoenberg, who disliked Adorno, saw it primarily as an attack on himself, thus going directly against the general view, which regarded Adorno as the great advocate of the Second Viennese School. But at the same time Schoenberg also sprang to Stravinsky's defence, annoyed by Adorno's treatment of his old adversary.² Stravinsky, on the other hand, remained silent – in public, at least – thus making it difficult to gauge the extent to which Adorno's critique of his music may have played any determining role in the composer's own spectacular change of direction in the early 1950s, when he himself abandoned neoclassicism and turned to serialism. This has, naturally enough, prompted speculation. Célestin Deliège, for instance, has argued:

Publicly, Stravinsky would make no mention of T.W. Adorno's criticism, but it is highly improbable that it could have left him indifferent, even if he was conscious of the weak points in the argument and disagreed with a philosophical approach whose materialistic tendencies could only disturb him ... It has often been remarked that Stravinsky was very open to influence – at least, until he stepped into his study – and could not remain indifferent to a well-formulated argument. The acuity of his judgement warned him when the alarm bell really sounded.³

Apart from Robert Craft's dismissive and not very comprehending article 'A bell for Adorno',⁴ there was little response from Stravinsky's immediate circle. Adorno himself, however, was perfectly clear as to his own influence on the larger course of events, when he later wrote that 'my discussion of

Stravinsky [in *Philosophy of New Music*] is commonly deemed to have played its part in causing the demise of neo-classicism'.⁵

It is understandable that most critical attention concerning Adorno's interpretation of Stravinsky's music has been directed at *Philosophy of New Music*, precisely because it was a book which, without trying, coincided so exactly with the historical moment it had anticipated. Some commentators, such as Carl Dahlhaus⁶ and Peter Bürger,⁷ have criticised its claims through seeing them in relation to Adorno's later reading of Stravinsky from the early 1960s, the essay 'Stravinsky: a dialectical portrait' (1962). To these two readings I add another: Adorno's early view of Stravinsky dating from the late 1920s and early 1930s. I shall consider some recurring themes from each of these three Stravinsky critiques in turn, using a cluster of key concepts taken from Adorno's philosophy of music history, and with particular emphasis on the concept of irony. It seems to me that, out of the contradictions, changing judgements, but also continuities of these three critiques, a convergence emerges which helps make sense of the immensely difficult and much misunderstood hermeneutic task Adorno had set himself.

A commonly held view has been that Adorno simply sanctified Schoenberg and demonised Stravinsky. This is certainly a crude simplification. What he did do was to put forward a philosophical evaluation of the truth or untruth of their music in terms of the interaction of subjectivity and objectivity and of their alienation within the musical work: a problematical and contentious project criticised by, among others, Jean-François Lyotard in his essay 'Adorno as the devil', on the grounds that the concept of the 'subject' itself remains unquestioned, and is easily equated with the 'expression' theory of art.⁸ Schoenberg himself was not fooled by Adorno's apparently positive reading of his work, clearly recognising a criticism of his serial music when he saw it. As for Stravinsky, nothing is quite what it seems when it comes to the devil. An underlying theme of this essay is therefore Adorno's presentation of Stravinsky as devil, particularly in his repeated references to *The Soldier's Tale*. It needs to be remembered that Adorno's writing comes from a long German literary tradition of using the extremes and the rhetoric of exaggeration, irony and the grotesque, as strategies for revealing underlying truths. It goes back to E. T. A. Hoffmann, finds its greatest exponent in Nietzsche, and its most accomplished twentieth-century master in Thomas Mann (Adorno's own cameo appearance as the devil in intellectual guise in Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, delivering whole passages lifted straight out of an early draft of *Philosophy of New Music*, neatly reinforces the point).⁹ Stravinsky's diabolical aspect needs therefore to be seen as a necessary part of Adorno's scheme, and the 'inauthenticity' of his music as an aspect of its truth.

The first critique: Stravinsky, stabilisation and the social situation of music

The first of Adorno's Stravinsky critiques is to be seen in two main sources, dating from 1928 and 1932, neither of which is exclusively on Stravinsky. First, in an article called 'Die stabilisierte Musik' from 1928 (although only published posthumously),¹⁰ Adorno argued that by the late 1920s music had become 'stabilised', in the sense that there had already been a retreat from the advanced position reached by the musical avant garde before 1914 (i.e. as represented by the Second Viennese School). He identifies two dominant tendencies – neoclassicism and folklorism – which are characterised by stabilisation. However, although he identifies Stravinsky with both neoclassicism and folklorism, and argues that those composers within the category of 'stabilised music' are reactionary, he does not at this stage see Stravinsky entirely in these terms. While *Oedipus Rex* is regarded as the most representative work of neoclassicism to that point – a work which takes the use of masks and the return to forms and styles of the past to extremes, and which is also striking in its absence of irony – he also singles out for special mention *Renard* and *The Soldier's Tale* as 'authentic' works.

These themes are continued in the second of these articles, the important essay 'Zur gesellschaftlichen Lage der Musik' of 1932.¹¹ While the concept of 'stabilised music' itself is dropped, probably because of its crudity as a means of categorising the main tendencies in the music of the period, its place is taken by a more sophisticated set of dialectical concepts. Adorno now talks of the opposed categories of 'commodity music' and 'avant-garde music'. Historically music has become autonomous, in the process losing its historically associated social functions and acquiring instead a new function, that of the commodity. This leads to the alienation and fetishisation of art music, and drives it in one of two directions: either towards assimilation by market forces, to the point where all that music does is to affirm its commodity character; or towards critical self-reflection, where music becomes aware of itself as a form of cognition in relation to its handed-down materials, and of critical negation of its commodity character. 'Assimilated' music accepts its function as commodity, conceals alienation, and becomes entertainment, embracing market forces; 'critical' music rejects its commodity character, does not conceal alienation, and is considered by Adorno to be 'authentic' and 'true' in its relations to its material. As I have outlined elsewhere,¹² Adorno identifies four distinct types of music within this second category, that of critical, 'authentic' music. As we shall see, Adorno includes Stravinsky within two of these four types of 'authentic music'. The first type, however, is distinctly non-Stravinskian. It refers to a music that crystallises the contradictions of society immanently, within its own structure, and purely in terms

of its relation to handed-down material. Furthermore, it does so without being necessarily conscious of the social and political context within which it finds itself. It is represented for Adorno by Schoenberg.

The second type recognises alienation, but does so through trying to deal with it by turning to styles and formal types of the past, in the belief that these can reconstitute a lost sense of harmony, totality and community. Adorno labels this 'objectivism', and returns to his 1928 article on stabilised music, maintaining that in capitalist societies neoclassicism constitutes 'objectivism', while in the largely pre-capitalist, agrarian societies of south-eastern Europe, as well as in those countries under fascist regimes, it is folk music which provides its material.¹³ For Adorno, Stravinsky represents this type in both its forms. Likewise, the third type: this Adorno calls 'surrealist' music. He maintains that this type is socially conscious, and draws on the material of both art music and consumer/popular music as fragments, clichés and cultural residues, and employs montage techniques which both serve to emphasise the fragmentary character of musical material today as well as pointing to social fragmentation. Stravinsky, particularly of the period of *The Soldier's Tale*, also represents this type, as does Weill in the music he wrote in collaboration with Brecht.

Finally, the fourth type: this is a type which recognises social alienation, but tries to do something about it directly through intervention and engagement, but in the process, Adorno argues, sacrifices the integrity of its form. While critical of this music as 'utility music' (*Gebrauchsmusik*), which he argues simply ends up serving the market, Adorno sees some virtue in its *Gemeinschaftsmusik* version, which developed out of neoclassicism, and is represented for him by Eisler and to some extent Hindemith. Stravinsky is not included under this type.

We can see, therefore, that in his first critique, Adorno is relatively positive towards Stravinsky's music, at least towards certain works, which are included in his category of 'authentic music'. Stravinsky is seen, however, as part of a typology. It is hardly a dialectical critique as such, although it does identify elements that are taken up later. What is clear, however, is that the theoretical approach at this stage allows for a diversity of musics under the category of 'authentic music'. This is very much also in keeping with the diversity and tolerance of the experimental cultural and political milieu of Weimar Germany at this point, something which Adorno's typology seems to reflect, even though it remains distinctly weighted in favour of Schoenberg's music.

In seeing Stravinsky as a 'surrealist' composer, Adorno reads his use of montage, the juxtaposition of fragments (which also include elements of popular music), as an example of the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt avant la lettre* (it is certainly true that Weill was influenced by *The Soldier's Tale*). He

also focuses here on one of the important themes of his writings from the 1920s: *irony*. In this way, *The Soldier's Tale* is seen as a landmark work of the early twentieth century. Adorno's complaint with the recently composed *Oedipus Rex*, however, is that the work is dominated by the use of stylistic montage in the absence of irony. For Adorno at this stage, therefore, the concept of irony in works of art may serve to fulfil the requirement for the necessary level of critical self-reflection in the structure of the work. Irony – saying the opposite of what is really intended – stands for an absent or distanced subjectivity. The seeming capitulation to 'objectivity', the 'way things are', is only apparent. Irony thus indicates the survival of the subject through marking the place where the subject *should* be.

The second critique: Stravinsky, Schoenberg and the *Philosophy of New Music*

Adorno's second Stravinsky critique – that of *Philosophy of New Music* of 1949 – differs fundamentally from the first, in that it sets out to use Schoenberg and Stravinsky antagonistically, as extremes, employing the dialectical method Adorno had derived from Walter Benjamin,¹⁴ although, unlike Benjamin's, his approach is highly polemical in character. The key themes are the regression to myth and archaism, and the disintegration of the bourgeois principle of individuation, as regression to a pre-bourgeois, pre-modern condition. The sacrifice of the individual, as subject, and the identification with the collectivity, the apparent 'objectivity' of 'that which is', is what characterises Stravinsky's music for Adorno. His music fixes a state of fragmentation as the norm, the reification of a state of shock and alienation as the essentially static repetition and permutation of that which is too painful to be experienced by subjectivity. As Adorno puts it: 'In its own material, his music registers the disintegration of life and, simultaneously, the alienated state of the consciousness of the subject.'¹⁵ Adorno's approach in *Philosophy of New Music* also draws heavily on psychoanalytical terminology (in particular Otto Fenichel's *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis*, New York, 1945), arguing that the concern of Stravinsky's music is 'to dominate schizophrenic traits through the aesthetic consciousness.'¹⁶

Adorno maintains that Stravinsky's music is characterised by the grotesque and meaningless sacrifice of the subject: the sacrificial victim in *The Rite of Spring* submits passively as an offering to the interests of the tribe. Stravinsky's delight in the grotesque, the suspension of individual identity, the assumption of roles and the recourse to masks – all of which contribute towards the suppression of expression and subjectivity – brings us to a consideration of the significance Adorno attaches to the figure of

the tragic clown, in the contrasting forms of Stravinsky's *Petrushka* and Schoenberg's *Pierrot lunaire*. Adorno suggests that, with *Pierrot*, 'everything is based upon that lonely subjectivity which withdraws into itself',¹⁷ and reflects upon itself. He points out that the entire last part of *Pierrot lunaire* is a return journey, a voyage home, and that the whole work is in effect a voyage of self-discovery. The subject transcends itself and achieves a kind of liberation. *Pierrot*, through anticipating anxieties and sufferings while at the same time retaining his capacity as subject to reflect upon and experience them, transcends them, and is transformed in the rarefied atmosphere of 'O alter Duft aus Märchenzeit' at the end of the work. In Stravinsky's ballet *Petrushka*, however, even though the central character, *Petrushka* himself, also shows certain subjective traits, the process and its outcome are quite different. Whereas in *Pierrot lunaire* the music itself is the suffering, conflict and final transcendence of *Pierrot*, in Stravinsky's piece, Adorno argues, the music takes instead the part of those who torment and ridicule *Petrushka*. The subject is sacrificed, while the music itself does not identify with the victim but rather with those who destroy him. The music is either indifferent to the sufferings of the subject – who after all is only a puppet – or cruelly parodies him. It plays the part of the crowd, regarding everything as entertainment, a distraction from its own emptiness.¹⁸ Adorno remarks that the whole orchestra in the ballet is made to sound like a gigantic fair-ground organ – rather like one who submerges himself in the tumult to rid himself of his own psyche. Even the 'immortality' of *Petrushka* at the end is in the nature of a tormented spirit condemned to return and haunt its tormentors. Stravinsky's music, as revealed through Adorno's analysis, takes the part of the object, the collectivity that grinds the subject pitilessly within its machinery; Stravinsky's subject exhibits only the most pathetic tatters of humanity, expressed through a mocking sentimentality. 'Authenticity' in Stravinsky's sense could therefore be seen as reflecting a pitiless reality without hope of redemption, where the only way out is to evade suffering by repression and a soulless mimesis of the mechanics of suffering in the absence of a subject able to suffer. 'Authenticity is gained surreptitiously through the denial of the subjective pole,'¹⁹ Adorno claims; only the object is left.

It is instructive to pick up here again the concept of irony, so important in Adorno's first Stravinsky critique. In *Philosophy of New Music* the concept of irony can be seen to be replaced largely by the concept of the grotesque. In his commentary on *Petrushka*, for instance, Adorno argues that 'the element of individuation appeared under the form of the grotesque and was condemned by it'.²⁰ He suggests that the use of the grotesque in modern art serves to make it acceptable to society: the bourgeois wishes to become involved with modern art if, 'by means of its form', it 'assures him it is not meant to be

taken seriously'.²¹ By the 1940s, and certainly by the closing years of the Second World War, Adorno came to see the liquidation of the individual not only as something enciphered within the monadic, closed world of the work of art; it was now a reality in the world after Auschwitz. For him at this stage, such extremes of horror mean not only the end of lyric poetry, as that most intensely individual form of expression, but also the demise of irony, humour and the grotesque as possible means of psychological defence against the shocks of the real world.

I have reduced Adorno's interpretation of Stravinsky as it occurs in *Philosophy of New Music* to the core of his argument regarding the fate of the subject, as Adorno himself considered this to be central to his critique. In drawing the extremes so sharply, and making his value judgements so explicit and condemnatory, Adorno employs the dialectic in such a way that the extremes appear to become fixed, and no further interaction occurs between them. This has something of the polemics of a political pamphlet, designed rhetorically to sway us, in this case, from authoritarianism towards autonomy and freedom. The fact that Adorno began the Schoenberg essay in 1941, in the dark days of the Second World War, himself the victim of political intolerance, is significant. The Stravinsky essay came later, and was not part of the original conception, which was to be a 'dialectical image' of Schoenberg. He was undoubtedly aware of Stravinsky's flirtations with Italian fascism in the late 1920s and early 1930s, and this meant that, in spite of his later refutation of the *ad hominem* accusation, Stravinsky is to a considerable extent pressed into service as representing the regression to myth and archaism and the rejection of historical responsibility which were so much a feature of the fascists' psychotic reaction to the complexities and ambiguities of the modern world.

The third critique: Stravinsky – a dialectical image

In his third critique, that in the essay 'Stravinsky: a dialectical portrait' of 1961, Adorno begins by fielding criticisms of his earlier critique in *Philosophy of New Music*. Having dismissed his critics for misunderstanding his philosophical interpretation, he proceeds to offer his own self-critique:

My critics make me want to begin by giving them a helping hand. Even a straightforward text-based criticism might have found more damaging objections to my Stravinsky chapter. If it is true that his music represents an objectively false consciousness, ideology, then conscientious readers might argue that his music was more than simply identical with reified consciousness. They might insist that his music went beyond it, by contemplating it wordlessly, silently allowing it to speak for itself.

The spirit of the age is deeply inscribed in Stravinsky's art with its dominant gesture of 'This is how it is'. A higher criticism would have to consider whether this gesture does not give it a greater share in the truth than music which aims to give shape to an implicit truth which the spirit of the age denies and which history has rendered dubious in itself.²²

In this significant passage Adorno is not only telling his critics what they could have identified quite justifiably as lacking in his earlier Stravinsky critique; he is, in effect, laying out the programme for his third critique. He also goes on to acknowledge that his previous reading of Stravinsky's essentially static, non-developmental temporality against the yardstick of Schoenberg's organic-developmental model was inappropriate and misleading:

By opposing the static ideal of Stravinsky's music, its immanent timelessness, and by confronting it with a dynamic, emphatically temporal, intrinsically developing music, I arbitrarily applied to him an external norm, a norm which he rejected. In short, I violated my own most cherished principle of criticism.²³

Thus, in his third Stravinsky critique, via such deflecting self-criticism, Adorno returns to some of the features of the first critique, and avoids the polemical character of the second. Bürger, in particular, sees the two readings – *Philosophy of New Music* and 'Stravinsky: a dialectical portrait' – as incompatible, and considers the latter to be the superior one, arguing that:

Whereas the polemical interpretation proceeds in a globalizing fashion, understanding neo-classicism as a unitary movement, the [later] interpretation seeks differentiation. It leaves open at least the possibility of seeing more in neo-classical works than a sheer relapse into a reactionary thinking of order.²⁴

But Adorno still insists that there is, as he puts it, 'quelque chose qui ne va pas' with Stravinsky's music. This remains, in spite of his self-criticisms concerning inappropriate values applied in his second critique, the problem of non-developmental temporal succession in Stravinsky. He writes: 'As a temporal art, music is bound to the fact of succession and is hence as irreversible as time itself. By starting, it commits itself to carrying on, to becoming something new, to developing.'²⁵ In this way, music points beyond itself, and protests against the eternal repetition of myth. Stravinsky's repetitions and permutations negate the temporality and progression of musical events. They constitute a kind of 'marking time', and this has implications, of course, for the identity of the subject. It was precisely this aspect of Adorno's Stravinsky critique that had so irritated Dahlhaus, who had complained of Adorno's dogmatism in considering the only valid mode

of temporal progression to be developmental.²⁶ Jonathan Cross also takes this view, arguing:

The corollary of Adorno's position – that any music which does not display the developmental characteristic of 'becoming' is dangerous because, like the products of the culture industry, it serves to subjugate the freedom of the individual subject, to bring about the dissolution of individual identity – would now seem, from our present perspective, generally untenable.²⁷

Cross considers that, in denying him his modernist credentials in relation to temporal succession and the disintegration of the subject, Adorno has, in effect, 'turned Stravinsky into a *postmodernist*'.²⁸ But in his first critique, as we have seen, Adorno places Stravinsky firmly in the modernist category, as 'authentic' music which opposes and negates music's commodity character and the effects of the culture industry. Stravinsky's music is typified as 'objectivist' and, in certain works which Adorno clearly considers both typical and highly significant (in particular *The Soldier's Tale*, but also other works like *Ragtime* and *Renard*), as 'surrealist'. I argue that, while Adorno does not deviate from this assessment of Stravinsky as an 'authentic modernist' (all appearances to the contrary!), he recognises both the radical character of 'objectivism' and 'surrealism', and also their problematical character. That is to say, while the denial of subjectivity and of expression, the ironic play with the displaced fragments of 'second-hand' material, the rejection of developmental progression and temporal continuity in favour of the juxtaposition of montage structures, are all defining features of important tendencies within modernism, they at the same time carry with them the attendant perils of becoming identical to the world from which they are drawn. They risk losing their critical edge in their regression either to a mythic past through distancing from the real world, or to a cartoon-like mimicking of an unacceptable reality as protection from it. This, it seems to me, is the difficult task Adorno sets himself in his second critique, *Philosophy of New Music*: to explore the philosophical implications of this knife-edge balancing act. Thus, the question posed by Adorno becomes the criterion of 'authenticity' in Stravinsky's music: to what extent does Stravinsky hold fast to his insight into ultimate emptiness and lack of meaning? The judgement in the second critique – by now distinctly existentialist, and having certain affinities with Adorno's later critique of Heidegger in *Jargon of Authenticity* – is that Stravinsky's music recoils from this recognition, and regresses into archaism and myth 'as image[s] of eternity, of salvation from death', through the barbaric suppression of subjectivity and as a defence mechanism against fear.²⁹

In this context, it is again instructive to return to the theme of irony. In Adorno's third critique of Stravinsky it is not irony as the place-holder for an absent self-reflecting subjectivity, but instead the concept of *clowning* (which we have also noted in *Philosophy of New Music*). In 'Stravinsky: a dialectical portrait', Adorno writes: 'This is the element of mimicry, of clowning – of constantly busying himself with something important that turns out to be nothing at all, strenuously working at something without any result.'³⁰ But this was, of course, also the nub of Adorno's criticism of Stravinsky in his second critique. What constitutes a significant shift in Adorno's position on Stravinsky in the third critique lies precisely in his changed interpretation of this aspect of clowning. It is seen to have an ironic relationship to an absent subjectivity, the lack of meaning to an absent meaning, but with the added dimensions now of an implied infinite regress, as an intolerable ambiguity: perhaps the ultimate irony is that there is no subject left to suffer, there is no meaning, nor was there ever any meaning in the absence of illusion and myth. The key to understanding this shift in interpretation is to be found, I suggest, in the fact that between his second and third critiques of Stravinsky Adorno had discovered the work of Samuel Beckett.

Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Beckett: convergence in Adorno's late critique

Adorno's interest in Beckett dates from the mid 1950s, and in the plays and novels Adorno came to see the ultimate *reductio ad absurdum* of the human condition, Walter Benjamin's 'dialectics at a standstill'. He admired Beckett's work greatly, and also came to know him personally, discussing his work with him, particularly in the autumn of 1958 in Paris.³¹ From this came the substantial essay on Beckett, 'Trying to understand *Endgame*', which Adorno published in 1961 – the year before his third Stravinsky critique. The similarities between the two essays are striking, and the revised assessment of Stravinsky from 1962 is clearly the result of his reading of Beckett. Indeed, it is through his Beckett interpretation that Adorno comes to see a kind of reconciliation of Stravinsky and Schoenberg, as opposed to the polemics of *Philosophy of New Music*. Concerning Beckett he writes: 'Not the least of the ways in which Beckett converges with the most contemporary trends in music is that he, a Western man, amalgamates features of Stravinsky's radical past, the oppressive stasis of a continuity that has disintegrated, with advanced expressive and constructive techniques from the Schoenberg school.'³² The influence of Beckett on his third critique is particularly clear in his further interpretation of *The Soldier's Tale*, where the account of the work at times could easily be transferred to Beckett's *Endgame*. He describes

the work now as 'music built out of ruins in which nothing survives of the individual subject but his truncated stumps and the tormented awareness that it will never end.'³³ That is to say, he now concedes that something of the subject seems to survive, however bleakly. And conversely, what he writes of *Endgame* could equally be applied to Stravinsky's music: 'Understanding it can mean only understanding its unintelligibility, concretely reconstructing the meaning of the fact that it has no meaning.'³⁴ But the full import of this thought, which pervades his writing throughout the 1960s and underlies much of his last work, the unfinished *Aesthetic Theory* (which he had intended dedicating to Beckett), is easy to miss. I can perhaps give it added emphasis by restating it another way: 'meaninglessness' – and indeed the resistance to interpretation – becomes itself a structuring principle of the avant-garde work, presenting itself as a formal problem which demands interpretation and understanding, but which at the same time refuses to allow the contradictions presented by its form to be reconciled.³⁵ This principle, which Adorno had previously applied to Schoenberg, he now applies to Stravinsky. However, having recognised the possibility that Stravinsky can also be understood in this way, as a kind of 'positive negativity', reservations regarding the composer's consistency in realising it in practice remain.

Adorno's final verdict on Stravinsky's music is that, in its identification with the object and in its negation of subjectivity, Stravinsky compels absolute negativity 'to appear as if it were the truth'.³⁶ The triumph of taste and technical accomplishment convinces us of its validity, and distracts us, as if by a sleight of hand. But as the soldier realises in *The Soldier's Tale*, 'if the devil did not lie, he would cease to be himself'.³⁷ For Adorno, the false consciousness of Stravinsky's music is its truth, in that it tells us how the world is, while at the same time urbanely convincing us that this is the only way it can be. It is, of course, only when he lies that the devil tells the truth – something that could be seen to apply as well to Adorno as to Stravinsky. For as Adorno said of psychoanalysis, 'nothing is true except the exaggerations'.³⁸