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Lotus and *Pharmakon*: Drugs in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

Abstract:

This essay explicates the position of Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* on the problem of drugs. At the focus of my analysis are the passages in "Excursus I: Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment" which interpret the Homeric myth of the Lotus-eaters in terms of the modern phenomenon of substance abuse. Since the *Dialectic* reads the *Odyssey* as the fundamental history of subjectivity, the indictment of drugs the authors recognize in the myth acquires, as it were, a transhistorical status. Building upon the work of Jacques Derrida and applying his notion of the *pharmakon* as a metaphysical concept of the drug, I show that the *Dialectic* reveals a much more ambivalent picture. The backbone of my argument is a structural comparison between the book's treatment of the Lotus and its interpretations of the myths of the Sirens and Circe, standing, on this account, for art and sex respectively.

Keywords:

drugs, Dialectic of Enlightenment, critical theory, Horkheimer and Adorno, Jacques Derrida

This essay undertakes a reading of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* with an aim of articulating the philosophical perspective this influential work offers on the problem of drugs. Drugs, of course, are a problem. Mind altering substances in contemporary societies are never a neutral subject: they are always a matter of prohibition and control at the practical level, and of unceasing controversy – on the ethical and the legal planes. While sharing the denunciation of drugs almost entirely unquestioned in their time across the cultural spectrum, the text of the *Dialectic* – partly despite the authors' intentions – offers a much more complex and ambivalent picture. Given the overarching ambition and the seminal status of the *Dialectic* for the project of critical theory, the never-yet-undertaken task of making this picture explicit appears to be worthy of pursuit.

The primary focus of my analysis are the passages in the second chapter of the *Dialectic*, "Excursus I: Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment," which interpret the Homeric myth of the Lotus-eaters in terms of the modern phenomenon of drug use. The backbone of my argument is a structural comparison between Horkheimer and Adorno's treatment of this myth and their interpretations of the myths of the Sirens and Circe, standing, on their account, for the phenomena of art and sex respectively. In section 1, after a brief introduction to the core argument of the *Dialectic* and the specificity of its approach to the *Odyssey*, I present Horkheimer and Adorno's interpretation of the Sirens' song as the paradigm of their treatment of other Homeric myths. In section 2, I engage in a close reading of the passages dedicated to the Lotus-eaters, showing that while articulating the very same structural components, this interpretation presents a figure symmetrically opposed to the one put forth in the book's discussion of the Sirens. In section 3, I formulate the problem that arises from this opposition and introduce a strategy for pursuing it that builds upon the work of Jacques Derrida – specifically his notion of the *pharmakon* as theorized in "Plato's Pharmacy." I then deploy this strategy in a further reading of the *Dialectic* in Section 4, demonstrating how the ambiguous logic of the *pharmakon* determines the unthematized modes of drugs' presence in the discussion of the two other myths. Finally, I argue that it is the figure of Circe, integrating the figures of the Lotus and the Sirens, that harbors the most profound lesson the book has to teach about drugs.

1.

Dialectic of Enlightenment narrates the story of civilization as the dialectic of enlightenment and myth. In this story, as it has been recounted by the historical Enlightenment, myth is the ultimate other of the enlightened Reason, which frees humanity from its self-incurred immaturity by refuting mythology with science in the unidirectional development of rational progress. The book, seeking to comprehend the descent of this project to the barbarity of the 1940s, posits enlightenment and myth as two transhistorical entities of a quasi-metaphysical order, whose dialectical interplay constitutes mythology (as, for example, consolidated in the Homeric epos) and the Enlightenment as historical phenomena. The book's theoretical framework is defined by two complementary theses: "myth is already enlightenment; and enlightenment reverts to mythology" (DEJ, xviii).[1]

The dialectic of enlightenment is a narrative of a struggle. Its starting point is the existential horror of defenseless man facing the powers of nature. In opposition to these powers man can only erect his own reason, expressed in the rational cognition of nature, aimed at its domination.[2] The history of man as the story of his survival, acquired through mastery of nature, is at the same time the story of the "disenchantment of the world" – a process that gradually empties nature of any sense that cannot be founded upon the economy of quantitative measurement and exploitation of the resources at hand. The price of the instrumental approach to nature is alienation from it, which is at the same time man's alienation from himself and the alienation of social relations. Domination of nature, acquired through its subjugation to the system of *ratio*, is inseparable from man's domination of himself, insofar as the subject is constituted by overcoming himself as nature. It is likewise inseparable from the domination of man by man – insofar as the latter forms a social condition for the

1) All page numbers in parentheses refer to Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (DE), translated by Jephcott (parenthetically DEJ) except when I indicate the translation has been modified, I am using the earlier translation by Cumming (parenthetically DEC), adding the page number of this edition after a slash " / ".

2) I will refer to the main protagonist of the book, the human subject formed by domination of nature, always in masculine gender – not only because we shall discuss him mostly by the name of Odysseus, but also since the book explicitly points at the patriarchal logic of this domination, and the "identical, purpose-directed, masculine character of human beings" it generates (DEJ, 26).

knowledge production, and, indeed, inasmuch as the subjugation of the particular to the universal is social domination hypostatized in the innermost logic of conceptual thinking (DEJ, 15–17). "The awakening of the subject," say Horkheimer and Adorno, "is bought with the recognition of power (*Macht*) as the principle of all relationships" (DEJ, 9). It is the domineering aspect of its project through which enlightenment necessarily reverts to mythology or rather is prevented from ever escaping it.

In keeping with the Hegelian tradition, the human subject as a metaphysical category – which Horkheimer and Adorno also call "the self" and "the enlightened self" – is itself dialectically constituted. Just as myth and enlightenment are at the same time separate phases and permanent parameters of history, so as in Hegel, Mastery and Slavery are not (only) forced upon human individuals as external social categories but are operative internally as necessary dimensions of the subject's innermost constitution. Yet, for Horkheimer and Adorno, the negativity of these internal power relations is never resolved in any sort of unproblematic unity – neither at the structural nor at the historical level (indeed, they explicitly reject Hegel's postulation of the absolute, crowning the process of negation, as his own lapse into mythology (DEJ, 18)). The narrative their book recounts leaves little hope for the satisfaction of the Citizen in the dialectic's finale: the subject, who must negate himself in order to overcome nature, never manages to recover from this blow and enjoy the hard-won dialectical profit. The economy of self-preservation leaves the preserved self eternally at a loss: "The human being's mastery of itself, on which the self is founded, practically always involves the annihilation of the subject in whose service that mastery is maintained, because the substance which is mastered, suppressed, and disintegrated by self-preservation is … the very thing which is to be preserved" (DEJ, 43).

In order to develop the thesis exposing the dialectic of enlightenment and myth within myth itself, Horkheimer and Adorno undertake an excursus into Homer's *Odyssey*, reading it as a "witness to the dialectic of enlightenment" (DEJ, 35). The adventures of Odysseus, called by Horkheimer and Adorno the "prototype of the bourgeois individual" (DEJ, 35), are read as the "fundamental history" (*Urgeschichte*) of subjectivity (DEJ, 60/ DEC, 78 – trans. modified). The adventures that the hero undergoes are understood as structural moments of its constitution. Furthermore, rather than a series of myths concerning the obstacles the hero overcomes on his journey home,

the epos, on this reading, narrates the hero's strivings with the myths amongst which he wanders – "the subject's flight from the mythical powers" (DEJ, 37) – threatening *nostos* by their very mythical character.

The essence of the various dangers with which Odysseus must deal is not the physical threat of the natural forces, but rather the call of the mythical – that is, not-yet-disenchanted – nature, by the negation of which the selfhood is formed and for which it never ceases to pine. Horkheimer and Adorno's master-concept for the unrestricted pleasure promised by the images of mythical nature is happiness. Insofar as the realization of happiness entails "self-immersion in immediate natural existence" (DEJ, 22), it amounts to the disintegration of the subject, who is structured as a permanent struggle between the thrust to shake off the yoke of subjectivity and the compulsion of self-preservation (DEJ, 25). "Complete, universal, undivided happiness" is denied to the subject of enlightenment (DEJ, 45).[3] The sacrifice of this happiness is the price cunning Odysseus pays for his victories, and the epos narrating them is but a mournful account of self-policing and continual reining in of desire.

In Horkheimer and Adorno's reading, the three myths are directly related to the problem of happiness so understood, offering three distinct figures of its overcoming. In this series, the myth of the Lotus-eaters stands alongside the Sirens' song and Circe's erotic charms – a triad interestingly, and perhaps not accidentally, analogous to the unholy trinity of sex, drugs and rock'n'roll. The account of the Sirens appears in the first chapter of the *Dialectic*, preceding the excursus and setting the paradigm for the interpretative reading of the two other myths.

While the meaning of the threat posed by the Sirens tends to be intuitively, and not irrelevantly, understood in terms of the Rilkean "beauty-as-the-beginning--of-terror," Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis articulates it with a rather different, temporal emphasis. Singing about the Trojan War and the exploits of Odysseus himself, the Sirens, Horkheimer and Adorno argue, are tempting to lose oneself in the past. The disintegration of subjectivity, entailed, as we have seen, by the mythical "promise of joy which has threatened civilization at every moment" (DEJ, 26), targets, in this case, specifically the temporal structure of the self, whose horizon of futurity is premised on the subjugation of the past to the present in the form of representation.

3) Cf. "*Jouissance* is prohibited to whomever speaks" (Lacan, *Écrit*, 696).

Odysseus's famous "solution" to the danger of the Sirens rests upon a hierarchical differentiation among those sailing the ship: he commands his men – that is, his subordinates – to tie him to the mast, while sealing their own ears with wax. Thus, all may stay the course: the Slave, who in advance is immune to the magical call, and the Master who hears the call but cannot follow it, paralyzed by his own Mastery. Once their threat has been stymied, the song of the Sirens is transformed into the object of aesthetic pleasure: "their lure is neutralized as a mere object of contemplation, as art" (DEJ, 27). In civilized society, Horkheimer and Adorno explain, "the urge to rescue the past as something living, instead of using it as the material of progress, has been satisfied only in art" – and only as long as it "does not insist on being treated as knowledge, and thus exclude itself from praxis" (DEJ, 25). Thus, they conclude, the myth offers "a prescient allegory of the dialectic of enlightenment" (DEJ, 27) – for art, as we know it, is the reserved pleasure of the upper classes, bought at the price of social alienation, while the fatal happiness to which the Sirens lure is still the moving force of all art.

I wish now to extract the exegetic model which Horkheimer and Adorno's interpretation of this myth shares with their discussions of the Lotus-eaters and Circe. The danger common to the three myths, again, is the allurement of mythical nature. In the face of this call – in all three cases, as we shall see – the human subject bifurcates into the Master (Odysseus) and the Slave (his men), positioned differently in relation to the respective guises of the threat. (The epic material in this regard is clearly supportive of Horkheimer and Adorno's belief that the domination of nature is inseparable from the domination of man by man.) It is the particular – in each of the three cases different – configuration of these interdependent opposites which will be at the focus of my ensuing analysis. For as the most variable of the model's invariants it appears to maintain the thrust of Horkheimer and Adorno's more specific pronouncements on the phenomena of their historical present, allegorized, as it were, by the three myths.

2.

The plot of the myth of the Lotus-eaters[4] is as follows: Odysseus's ships arrive at the isle inhabited by the innocuous Lotus-eaters, who spend their days collecting and eating the Lotus. Those of Odysseus's men who taste of the flower "forget their home-

4) Homer, *The Odyssey*, IX, 84–105.

land" and wish to remain on the island. Odysseus, who does not himself partake of this food, commands that they be dragged off and tied on board the ship. Thus, they leave and go on their way.

Horkheimer and Adorno characterize the danger of the Lotus-eaters thus:

> Whoever tastes the lotus is as much in thrall as those who listen to the Sirens' song or are touched by the wand of Circe. But no harm is done to those who succumb: "Now it never entered the heads of these natives to kill my friends." They are threatened only by forgetfulness and loss of will. The curse condemns them to nothing worse than a primal state exempt from labor and struggle in the "fertile land": "All who ate the lotus, sweeter than honey, thought no more of reporting to us, or of returning. All they now wished for was to stay with the Lotus-eaters, picking the lotus and forgetting their homeland" (DEJ, 49/ DEC, 62 – trans. modified)

Thus, the first thing to be said about the Lotus-eaters, after characterizing their danger as doubly similar to the dangers of the Sirens and Circe, is that the Lotus is not immediately harmful. As opposed to the Sirens, who threaten those who fall under the spell of their song with physical demise, the lure of the Lotus poses no threat to biological preservation. Its dangers are oblivion and the paralysis of the will, directly targeting the very human dimension of man – his subjectivity. In the Hegelian tradition, this dimension is identified with two acts of negation: work and struggle. The dialectical history of the Spirit begins with the act in which man negates the given situation and preserves it in a new state of affairs through the productivity of work. It continues with the negation of self-as-nature in the fight to the death for recognition. Historicity as the necessary aspect of the subject, always locating him within history, is nothing but the preservation of previous negations in memory.[5] Inasmuch as Odysseus's homeward bound stands for the historicity of the subject, jumping ship is not an option – the return to the homeland of actualized subjectivity, the origin and the goal of the *nostos*, is unidirectional. The effect of the Lotus, identified later in the

5) This reading of Hegel is manifestly present in Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (see especially: 227–32).

passage as a regression to the stage of gathering the fruits of the earth, is an attempt to turn the wheel of history back, to jump off at the prehistoric – or, more accurately, extra-historic – point. It is interpreted, thus, as a "curse," wedding the impossible with the improper in an ambiguous evil.[6]

And then the passage takes the crucial turn that has motivated our investigation. It clarifies the danger of the mythical Lotus through its doubling in the empirical phenomenon of drug use, while formulating the uncompromising policy of transhistorical rationality toward this danger: "This kind of idyll, which recalls the drug-induced happiness [Glück der *Rauschgifte*], by which subordinate classes have been made capable of enduring the unendurable in ossified social orders, is impermissible for the adherents of the rationale of self-preservation" (DEJ, 49/ DEC, 62–63 – trans. modified).

In a perfect conformity to the myth, in which the sailors are those seduced by the Lotus while Odysseus pronounces a categorical refusal, the sociological interpretation of the Lotus in terms of the "drug problem" begins with locating the phenomenon on the Master-Slave axis – namely, associating it with the oppressed strata of society. Narcotic pleasure is the pleasure of the Slave, inducing him to forget the sorrows of Slavery. Such emplacement distances drugs from the "rationale of self-preservation," whose nature is Mastery, and, at the same time, provides an explanation for the practice of abuse, understood as a result of the "unendurable": the origin of this drug-induced pleasure is suffering. This analysis seems to coincide with Kant's opinion on the subject as expressed in *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, where he asserts that all intoxicating and narcotic substances, as "physical means for stimulating or depressing imagination," are "contrary to nature and artificial." Kant thus explains certain people's desire to be "intoxicated or drunk": "all of these media, however, are supposed to make men forget the burden that seems to lie, originally, in life itself."[7] I refer here to this articulation of the "drug problem" in Kant, the "official

6) The lure of the Lotus and the civilizing mission which it endangers are both defined in terms of return: one a return to a prehistoric state, the other a return home. The lure of the Lotus is the substitution of the dialectical return which produces the future with the self-repetition of the same which falls back on itself. The latter kind of repetition, for Horkheimer and Adorno, is at the very core of the mythical existence, of the monsters Odysseus must deal with. They go on performing the same actions until the moment when these are "solved" by the hero, who overcomes and preserves them as epos (DEJ, 45–46).

7) Kant, *Anthropology*, 46.

spokesman" of the historical Enlightenment, not for its philosophical originality of depth, but rather for the fact that since its formulation (at the very historical moment when drugs and their thematization first took on a cultural relevance in Europe), its two clauses – the explanatory and the evaluative – have maintained their status as the almost unchallenged consensus in the hegemonic discourse on drugs. It is thus not surprising that Horkheimer and Adorno – who did not, at least as far as the historical record goes, have any first-hand narcotic or psychedelic experience – are also party to this consensus. Yet, it is noteworthy that while Kant locates the problem at the existential level, seeing "the burden" as a quality of "life itself," for Horkheimer and Adorno, man always faces this burden from within the dialectic of social relations, which, therefore, must be taken as a precondition for theoretical problematization of drugs. The Lotus-passages of the *Dialectic*, as we shall see, search for the fulcrum of this problematization, continuously repositioning it on the Master-Slave axis. Interestingly, while the danger, of which the Lotus is taken to be a particular form, is explained in terms of the call of nature, it is certain that Horkheimer and Adorno agree with Kant on the main aspect of the problem of drugs: artificiality. This, for them, is precisely the vice for which the economy of self-preservation makes Odysseus "just say no" (as Nancy Raegan would recommend much later); but here the naturalness of the promise is what connects it to falsity. "It is actually the mere illusion of happiness, a dull vegetation, as meager as an animal's bare existence, and at best only the absence of the awareness of misfortune. But happiness holds truth, and is of its nature a result, revealing itself with the abrogation of misery" (DEJ, 49/ DEC, 63 – trans. modified).

The danger of the happiness promised by the Sirens' song is in its fatality; the danger of the happiness promised by the Lotus is in falsification. But falsification of what? Paradoxically, it is accused of masquerading as the same danger with which it is claimed to threaten. The description of the drugged state as "a dull vegetation, as meager as an animal's bare existence" – a description worthy of the War on Drugs' best propagandists – adds to the motif of falsity, the motif of dehumanization, still accompanying the castigation of drugs in the hegemonic discourse.[8] But in the *Dialectic* this accusation takes on a special status. The shaking off of subjectivity that bars humanity

8) See on this: Giorgi, Habib, Giorgi, Bellew, Sherman, and Curtis, "Dehumanization Toward Substance Use."

from the natural state, as we have already established, is essential to the promise of happiness *tout court*. The problem of the Lotus lies not only in the shame of animality, but also in the fact of its impossibility. The danger of falsity, with which Lotus specifically threatens, lies in the simulation of the impossible.

The linking of happiness and truth, however, produces a further ambiguity: if, as we have seen, in some places Horkheimer and Adorno present the reserved happiness the enlightened self can afford as small pickings compared to the essential happiness which must be sacrificed, here it is the partial happiness produced in the act of overcoming which is adorned with truth. For rational subjectivity the impossible cannot be true. True happiness is therefore that minimal, dialectical happiness which contains the truth of itself, which preserves within itself the suffering that it has neutralized and the self-negation which made this neutralization possible. Happiness must be historical; it cannot gain its truth outside the dialectic of enlightenment. The happiness of self-oblivion in the eternal present of prehistory is by definition happiness without truth. Thus, since the absence of truth is the essential quality of the happiness provided by the Lotus, it acts in symmetry with the other two kinds of happiness: on the one hand, it is the falsification of the impossible happiness, and on the other hand, it is a substitution for that happiness which is possible.

It should be noted, at this point, that the passage we are reading alludes to the famous passage in Marx, where he poses his views on religion, the criticism of which, as he claims, is "the premise of all criticism":

> Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of the soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.
>
> The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of men, is a demand for their real happiness. The call to abandon their illusions about their condition is a call to abandon a condition that requires illusions.[9]

The claim seems to be the same: the illusory happiness needs to be abandoned for the real happiness to take place. The abandonment of religion is, therefore, a necessary

9) Marx, "Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right," 43–44.

(yet, as Marx argues, not a sufficient) condition for ending self-alienation. Preserving this basic claim, Horkheimer and Adorno relocate its reference from Marx's subject matter to his famous metaphor: from religion to opium. Marx seems to have presupposed the validity of this metaphor – that fact that drugs alleviate pain at the cost of preserving its cause – as a common knowledge or, indeed, as a basic intuition of the Enlightenment, voiced, as we have seen, by Kant himself. Interestingly enough, Horkheimer and Adorno do explicitly suggest this equation earlier in the text, commenting on the Enlightenment's animosity to religion beyond "the bounds of bare reason," so to say:

> In the judgment of enlightenment as of Protestantism, those who entrust themselves directly to life, without any rational reference to self-preservation, revert to the realm of prehistory. Impulse as such, according to this view, is as mythical as superstition, and worship of any God not postulated by the self, as aberrant as drunkenness. (DEJ, 29)

This strange equation foregrounds the profound ambiguity of the denunciation of drugs as it takes place in the Lotus-passages. For inasmuch as the critical gesture itself – toward religious or narcotic false consciousness – stems from the masterly logic of self-preservation, the possibility of expropriating it from the claws of unjust domination appears to be highly problematic. Where does the initiative, the call to "abandon the illusions," come from? Hardly from those who enjoy happiness without truth. The problem becomes clear, when the Lotus-passages in the *Dialectic*, once again relocate the fulcrum of the denouncing gesture from the Master to the Slave or, more precisely, to the Slave on his way to Mastery: "Therefore the sufferer who cannot bear to stay with the Lotus-eaters is justified. He opposes their illusion with that which is like yet unlike: the realization of utopia through historical labor; whereas mere lingering in the shade of the image of bliss removes all vigor from the dream" (DEJ, 49/ DEC, 63 – trans. modified).

The sufferer fighting for "the realization of utopia" does not exist in the Homeric myth; in any case, there is no point in searching him out among Odysseus's men. The idea of the liberation of the Slave is a derivative of the Master's selfhood. Or do these lines refer to the modern social problematic? If so, we may say that narcotic

pleasure is hereby denounced from the perspective of the revolutionary ethos as a contemptible hedonistic alternative to historical labor. (Indeed, this position was stated explicitly by György Lukács and Thomas Mann in their indignant response to Aldous Huxley's *Doors of Perception*.[10]) The gesture of denunciation in the passage moves, so it seems, by a truly dialectical itinerary: from the Master who denies himself the pleasure of the Lotus, to the Slave whom he prohibits from enjoying it, to the potential Mastery of the "rehabilitated" Slave. The drug and the absence of truth associated with it jeopardize Mastery at the deep structural level, which identifies rationality with domination. The drug exists here as an absolute externality opposed to the Mastery-pole of subjectivity, while the act of negation, necessary to maintain it in this state, discloses the violence which is the essential mythical dimension of enlightened selfhood:

> But rationality – Odysseus – acts upon the justice of the case, thereby entering by force the realm of injustice. Odysseus's own action is immediate, and serves domination. This happiness "at the world's bounds" is as impermissible for the rationale of self-preservation as the more dangerous form proved to be in later stages. The indolent are removed by force and transported to the galleys: "But I forced them, weeping, back to ships, dragged them into the capacious vessels and bound them beneath the benches." (DEJ, 49/ DEC, 63 – trans. modified)

The understanding of the danger the Lotus poses to the revolutionary struggle of the sufferers also pertains to the masterly rationality of Odysseus. At the same time his very consciousness of the justness of this understanding implies the injustice of persecution in the name of this justice of those tempted by false happiness. The violence of the Master toward the Slave who refuses to reject Slavery is the barbarism of enlightenment *par excellence*.

10) See on this: Thompson, "From 'Rausch' to Rebellion," 21–24. Thompson's analysis provocatively demonstrates that this response uses rhetoric uncannily similar to both the American and the Nazi official discourses on drugs at the time.

3.

We can now observe an interesting symmetry between the figures of overcoming drawn by the self when facing the Sirens and the Lotus. The Master manages to enjoy the Sirens' song under the condition that this enjoyment is denied to the Slave; the song of the Sirens finds its positive civilizing solution in art. It is important to stress that while the *Dialectic* leaves no doubt concerning the alienation of the "mast-bound" concert audiences as regards the utopian dimension of aesthetic experience, Adorno, as it is well known, sanctifies art precisely as the domain of the bourgeois culture where this alienation is immanently voiced. Thus, as opposed to the products of the "culture industry," analyzed in the fourth chapter of the *Dialectic* as ideological manipulation of the masses, the pleasures that the cultivated minorities find in Beethoven and Schoenberg maintain the dimension of truth continuous with the Sirens' song.

Faced with the temptation of Lotus, in contrast, the Master sounds an unreserved and resolute refusal – "he may not eat the lotus" (DEJ, 45) pure and simple. The Slave, conversely, manages to extract some pleasure this time. Not without reservations, of course. In this case, however, the reserving limit is an external one – the violence of the Master. The Odysseus's gesture is doubled by Horkheimer and Adorno, who denounce the social practice of drug use, in which the dialectical figure of the myth allegedly finds its historical manifestation – seemingly missing the truth-core, intrinsic to art. Administered to alleviate suffering, Heroin or MDMA – one may want to elaborate the argument implied here – are not an expression of suffering, as Adorno understood art to be.[11] Whatever might be the case, our interest here is not in the analysis of the historical phenomena themselves, but in the neatly opposed transhistorical figures Horkheimer and Adorno extract from the Homeric myths. At the structural level, we may say, the primary difference between the two figures is that in the case of the Lotus-eaters, Odysseus's overcoming of the danger is not dialectical. The gesture is of exclusion, not of appropriation.

The structural symmetry between the two figures this analysis yields, may lead to consider them as a culturally legislative opposition between two paradigms of relation to mythical nature: the pleasure of the Master – art, and the pleasure of

11) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 52, 360,

the Slave – drugs. Indeed, as it is common knowledge that the experimentation with narcotic substances enters the European culture approximately at the same time as the modern concept of autonomous art comes to be established, the dialectical interplay of the two phenomena may have a bearing on our understanding of each. In the current study, however, concerned solely with a reading of the *Dialectic*, it is the logic of the interpretative move, establishing this opposition – and specifically the status of the drug within it – that should be examined. If indeed, as Horkheimer and Adorno claim, the mythological figures of the *Odyssey* describe the very constitution of selfhood – is the prohibition of drugs, so easily recognized in the myth of the Lotus-eaters, rooted within the basic structure of subjectivity? Or should we not rather suspect that Horkheimer and Adorno's hermeneutic procedure that discovers the operation of enlightenment within myth, and therefore produces a resonance of the transhistorical in the historical, implicates itself meanwhile as an apologetic anchoring of the historical in the metaphysical?

In the spirit of the latter question, we could perhaps imagine Foucault's hypothetical critique of this exegetic gesture of the *Dialectic*, as it seems that this gesture is headed for the pitfall of which he has warned in "What is Enlightenment?": a retrospective orientation toward the "essential kernel of rationality."[12] A Foucauldian approach to the problem, we may speculate, would not concede any transhistorical status to the drug problem. The modern concept of the drug is a contingent construct, which derives its meaning and power from a particular and complex array of contemporary discursive and social practices. It can have no "fundamental history" – the sweeping refusal resounding in the passages we have read may be accounted for only by a genealogical investigation of a particular historical disposition.[13] Indeed, we could even imagine a reading of the Lotus-passages of the *Dialectic à la* Foucault's famous interpretation of Descartes's exclusion of madness from the skeptical procedure in *Meditations* – an exclusion he claimed to be symptomatic of the cultural paradigm holding sway in all areas of society in the Classical Age.[14] It might be a defensible argument that the

12) Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?," 43.

13) Two years before his death, in an interview accompanying the English translation of his book on Raymond Roussel, Foucault sounded the possibility of this genealogical project which, as we know, he never came to carry out. (Foucault, *Death and the Labyrinth*,182–83).

14) Foucault, *History of Madness*, 44–47.

recognition of Odysseus's position vis-à-vis the Lotus-eaters as a "presentient allegory" of the problem of drugs in the late bourgeois society is, more than anything else, an exemplification of the overarching paradigm informing a variety of this society's practices and discourses, including Horkheimer and Adorno's critical theory.

Without denying the truth there may be to this hypothetical line of argument, in this essay we shall develop a different speculative strategy to deal with the "drug problem" in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Building upon the work of Jacques Derrida, and specifically inspired by his criticism of Foucault on Descartes,[15] this strategy will agree to anchor the special status of the denunciation of drugs in the Lotus-passages in a plane that indeed may be described as transhistorical. This, however, will in turn be interpreted in terms of a logic common to the Homeric myth, modern drug discourses, and the critical text of Horkheimer and Adorno.[16] At the same time, this reading will identify the categorical refusal of the Lotus, the claim to absolute externality of the drug to Mastery, as a symptom of the intimate relations between the drug and this logic. The Master – Odysseus in the *Odyssey* and the Critical Philosopher in the *Dialectic* – denounces the drug precisely because, in a wider metaphysical sense, the drug has always already been taken. This approach will call for a new conceptualization of the drug – as a sort of metaphysical abstraction. But is this not, in fact, what it has been for us from the very beginning? The identification of "drugs" (completely unspecified in the passage that we have read from the *Dialectic*) allegedly consumed by the oppressed strata in modernity with the Homeric Lotus (itself a mythological signifier, to be sure, since the actual lotus plant is not known to have any narcotic qualities) could have been made possible only by availability of such a – not sufficiently thought-through – abstraction. Whereas the Foucauldian clarification of this concept would have focused on its construction from within a particular historical

15) In "Cogito and the History of Madness" Derrida argues that the outright dismissal of madness in the first chapter of the *Meditations*, on which Foucault builds his case, is a rhetorical move preserving for it the key role in the later stages of the skeptical argument – for what is the confrontation with the evil demon if not madness incarnate? Madness, Derrida's argument continues, is related to *cogito* in the most profound manner, since it is only through the overcoming of madness, as the metaphysical Other of *logos*, that *cogito* establishes itself. (Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 31–64.)

16) A homology between Derrida's deconstruction and Adorno's non-identity thinking has been frequently noted (and contested). For a recent elaboration of the topic, see: Zenklusen, *Adorno's Nonidentical and Derrida's Différance*.

disposition of discourse/power, the Derridean approach we shall adopt focuses of the immanent conceptuality of this concept, so to say. The function of the drug in the particular historical discourse of the *Dialectic*, from this point of view, is a derivative of a "drug-function" of *logos* as such, which links it to power on a more basic level.

A short digression on the conceptuality of drugs may be useful here. Without entering into the details of the never-ceasing attempts at the subject's possible definition – let us point at their well-known common trait, which seems to be calling for the metaphysical approach we are planning to take. Whether a definition tries to tether the elusive subject to addictiveness, mind-altering qualities, or legality, at one point or another the concept becomes too fluid or vague to possess adequate elucidating power or normative bearing.[17] The legal discourse tends to tautology: "'drug' means any of the substances in Schedules I and II."[18] Speculative discussions, on the other hand, often stretch the concept to the point of metaphor, enlisting bodybuilding and video games alongside opium and cocaine, or, indeed, including, as Benjamin does, "that most terrible drug – ourselves – which we consume in solitude." [19] The conceptualization of the drug on the plane to which we now turn internalizes its promiscuous metaphorizability as part of the concept itself. This possibility was explicitly raised by Avital Ronell, who argued that "drugs resist conceptual arrest … their strength lies in their virtual and fugitive patterns," and, indeed, that the drug as an object of discourse "resists the revelation of its truth to the point of retaining the status of absolute otherness."[20]

These remarks strongly relate drugs to the central deconstructivist problematic of the inessential, self-differentiating essence that both eludes and enables signification – the problematic of writing or of the *différance*. In "Plato's Pharmacy," Derrida conceptualizes this non-conceptualizable dimension under the name of the *pharmakon*: an ambivalent signifier, whose "fugitive patterns" he famously traces in the text of Plato's *Phaedrus*. As much as a literal sense can be assigned to *pharmakon* at

17) See on this, for example: Keane, *What's Wrong with Addiction?*,17–18; and Schleim, *Mental Health and Enhancement*, 93–102.

18) United Nations, *Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs*, 1

19) Benjamin, "Surrealism," 216.

20) Ronell, *Crack Wars*, 49, 51.

all, it would be – "the drug: the medicine and/or poison."[21] And Derrida continues with a passage that has undoubtedly inspired Ronell's: "The *pharmakon* would be a substance … if we didn't eventually come to recognize it as antisubstance itself: that which resists any philosopheme, indefinitely exceeding its bounds as nonidentity, nonessence, nonsubstance."[22]

To shortly recall the evergreen story: *pharmakon* figures in the famous Platonic myth recounted in *Phaedrus*, as the signifier by which writing is offered by its inventor, the demigod Theuth, to the king of gods Ammon, and rejected by the latter as a bad and indeed a dangerous invention. In this myth – as it is in the whole Western metaphysics or, if you like, the project of enlightenment in the *Dialectic*'s sense – writing is castigated as the mechanical, dead repetition of a sign, as opposed to the self-present speech of the living *logos*. Derrida argues, however, that the thing with which writing is being implicated – the iterability of the sign – is the condition of possibility of the very thing to which it is being opposed. Equated with writing thus understood, the *pharmakon* designates the inveterate dependence of the immaterial *logos* on the materiality of signification, which does not cease to undermine its claim for self-sufficient presence, deferring and differentiating it from itself.

Pharmakon appears in the Platonic text mostly in a metaphorical sense, whereas one of the facts emphasized by the "Pharmacy" is that this metaphor serves Plato in delineating the positive and negative aspects of the same matter. Thus, for example, the word serves to describe the practice of the sophist but also that of Socrates, whose speech, it should be remembered, was described as having a narcotic effect.[23] However, each time that the *pharmakon* is discussed for itself, it is always finally denounced as a negative phenomenon, whether as writing or as the drug itself (without any reference to its mind-altering properties), in philosophy or in medicine. Derrida explains the reason for the denunciation in terms that send us right back to the reason for the denunciation of the drug in Horkheimer and Adorno as well as in Kant: "the pharmaceutical remedy is essentially harmful because it is artificial."[24] But the problem is even

21) Derrida, *Dissemination, 70.*

22) Ibid., 70.

23) Ibid., 117–18.

24) Ibid., 99.

graver since the drug, on whatever plane we relate to it, is also objectionable because it cannot be overcome except through the use of another drug – and thus its artificiality necessarily contaminates the origin in the name of which it is castigated.[25]

Although Derrida warns that the subsumption of the classified substances under the notion of the *pharmakon* "requires … the greatest prudence," he unequivocally relates the commonplace condemnation of drugs in terms of "experience without truth" to the denunciation of writing in *Phaedrus*.[26] One of the most revealing entailments of this congruence is the realization that the very grammar of prohibition – whether on the social or conceptual level – hides under a resolute gesture of denunciation an ambiguous interplay of the "good *pharmakon*" and the "bad *pharmakon*."[27] Having this notion in mind, we shall now continue our reading in the *Dialectic*.

4.

The logic of the *pharmakon* ties the essential falsity associated with the danger of the Lotus to the rhetorical ambiguity of its description. We have left the text at the moment in which Horkheimer and Adorno denounce the happiness offered by drugs as false; in the next passage we discover them characterizing it anew, and rather poetically, as "the memory of the remote and ancient joy" revealed for a moment in the gusta-

25) Ibid., 128.

26) Derrida, "The Rhetoric of Drugs," 23–26. In the same interview, Derrida briefly mentions the Lotus-passages of the *Dialectic* while elaborating on the notion of experience (as an odyssey), implied by the discourse of drugs (ibid., 31). He does find the passages important enough, however, to bring their full text in a note and accompany it with the comment: "I find this reading compelling, at least within the general perspective of the book. But this would raise other types of questions which I cannot go into here" (ibid., 41).It remains to wonder to what extent the questions the current essay is trying to tackle are compatible with those Derrida had in mind.

27) It is important to indicate that on the sociological plane such a program was already realized, two years after the publication of "Plato's Pharmacy" and without any reference to Derrida, in *Ceremonial Chemistry* of Thomas Szasz, who termed the social state constitutive of the modern drug problem *pharmocracy*. According to Szasz's analysis, the prohibition of particular substances in this state is accompanied by solicitation for the use of other substances. The prohibition of recreational drug use, for instance, is another facet of the monopoly granted to health care on the prescription of medications (Szasz, *Ceremonial Chemistry,* 129–41). For the most philosophically informed discussion of Derrida (and Ronell) on drugs, see Boothroyd, *Culture on Drugs*, 30–46.

tory and olfactory experience of eating flowers (DEJ, 50). The passage concludes with a sentence, accounting for the regretful note upon which the story ends in Homer, tracing the prohibited "illusion of happiness" with the nature of happiness itself: "No matter how copious the torments endured by the people of that time, they cannot conceive of a happiness not nourished by the image of that primal age: 'So we left that country and sailed on sick at heart'" (DEJ, 50).

The ambivalence of remembrance and falsification, of drawing from the origin and its simulation, is derived from the pertinence of the logic of the *pharmakon* to happiness itself, the impossible origin of two possible kinds of happiness, dialectic and narcotic. As we have seen, the Lotus gains its property of falsity and the peculiarity of its danger from the fact of its being at once a substitute for the impossible (insofar as any kind of possible happiness is) and for the possible (insofar as it presents the impossible as possible and provides an undesirable alternative to the possible happiness). In this sense, Lotus is a substitute of a substitute – a status analogous to the *pharmakological* account of the written sign. And exactly as in the other case the differentiation between the good and the bad substitution is far from easy. We may learn as much if we note that the first mentioning of drugs in the book – some pages before the Lotus-passages – is made to demonstrate, within the discussion of the Sirens' promise of happiness, the economic formula that informs the production of the limited "mast-bound" happiness of aesthetic pleasure. "Narcotic intoxication, in which the euphoric suspension of the self is expiated by deathlike sleep, is one of the oldest social transactions mediating between self-preservation and self-annihilation, an attempt by the self to survive itself" (DEJ, 26).

The very same thing, claimed to be impermissible for the rationale of self-preservation in the Lotus-passages, so it seems, figures here as the paradigm for the possibility positively realized in Odysseus's dealing with Sirens. The seeming contradiction betrays the very same ambiguous logic of drug-as-*pharmakon*.[28] Notably, here the drug itself is not identified with the fatal happiness that must be reined in or rejected, but rather serves as a mediating point of exchange between the impossible and

28) It has been recently suggested in an illuminating article – which while departing from the discussed passage as an epigraph, does not focus on the *Dialectic*'s position on drugs – that the ambivalence here is indicative of the "tension between critique and intoxication" intrinsic to the emancipatory thinking of the West (Lijster, "Opium of the Masses to Acid Communism").

the possible. Forbidden as an actual thing within this exchange (that is, directly thematized as Lotus), it is affirmed as its condition of possibility – a metaphor explaining the economic character of the restricted success vis-à-vis the Sirens. Metaphorical is, indeed, the proper status of the *pharmakon*. Anyhow, for the understanding of its working in the *Dialectic* and, possibly, of the lesson that might be drawn form it as to the opposition between the aesthetic and the narcotic, the following must be clear: the drug is present at both poles of the opposition that we have established between the figures of Sirens-Art and Lotus-Drugs. The denunciation of drugs in the Lotus-figure, we may suggest, is systematically related – rather than thematically opposed – to the affirmation of art in the Sirens-figure.

When we earlier compared Odysseus's overcoming of the danger of the Sirens to his overcoming of the danger of the Lotus, we pointed out that it was somehow resistant to dialectical appropriation. What we meant was that whereas Odysseus enjoyed the singing of the Sirens within certain limits, he drew no pleasure whatsoever from the effect of the Lotus. The assumption, essential to the doctrine of the *Dialectic*, was the identification of the enlightened self with the Mastery-pole in the structure of the subject and of the social body. But since to any other reason we may have to doubt the externality of the Slave to the Master we can now add the discovered simultaneity of the drug in the two allegedly opposed figures, a more complex picture of their systematic interdependence may be recognized. For it would be inexact to say that the Lotus does not undergo dialectical appropriation by the project of the enlightened self. True, it is not endorsed by the Mastery-pole of its constitution, shared by Odysseus's and the *Dialectic*'s perspectives. But its rejection as a truthless pleasure of the oppressed strata should be read not as an exclusion, but as a constitutive inclusion in the project of the "bad drug" – the repressed condition of the "Master's pleasure" generated vis-à-vis the Sirens. The Lotus boards Odysseus's ships, so to say, in the bloodstream of the weeping slaves.

An interpretation of the myth of Circe,[29] to which we now turn, provides further – and to my view, conclusive – support for the vision of the figures of Sirens and Lotus as structurally interdependent. As much as the danger at the center of the other two adventures, Circe's threat is that of the disintegration of the self involved in the mythical happiness – in this case, promised in the temptation of sexual pleasure.

29) Homer, *Odyssey* X, 207–574.

Its overcoming, for Horkheimer and Adorno, presents the transhistorical figure of the restricting inscription of sexuality in patriarchal society under the institution of marriage. Their astute analysis, to which we could not give its full due here, fleshes out the domination of women intrinsic to this institution, the complementarity of Circe (the hetaera-seducer) and Penelope (the chaste wife) on which it rests, as well as "the ban on love" (DEJ, 57) that confining sex to the economic order of exchange inevitably procures. For our purposes, however, as in the case of Sirens, the important thing to emphasize is the positive aspect of this overcoming: Odysseus sleeps with Circe, and sex – debased as it is under patriarchy – certainly is enjoyed (at least by the male Master). Another fact about the myth, not sufficiently thought through in the *Dialectic*, but crucial for the argument I am trying to make, is that the danger of Circe works on two distinct levels: sorcery, which turns Odysseus's men into pigs, and the properly erotic seduction reserved for Odysseus himself. These levels are diachronic, requiring, as we shall see, two consequent measures on Odysseus's part.

In the first aspect, as Horkheimer and Adorno underline, the danger of Circe is similar to that of the Lotus: once again we witness regression to the animal past, which, here too, is far from being lethal and produces a rather peaceful state of oblivion (the animals at Circe's estate, as Horkheimer and Adorno do not fail to notice, are said to be wagging their tails). But from the perspective of the subjectivized self, once again, such a state is nothing but a "calamitous lapse" into false happiness: "as the idyll of the Lotus-eaters had done earlier, the violent magic which recalls them to an idealized prehistory not only makes them animals but brings about, in however delusive a form, a semblance of reconciliation" (DEJ, 55). It is important to emphasize what Horkheimer and Adorno mention only in passing: for Odysseus's men, the temptation to which they succumbed can be described as an erotic temptation only metaphorically (or metonymically – by extension from Circe's general erotic meaning). The effect of the wand turning men into beasts, in fact, is enabled literally by the "bad drugs" (*kaka pharmaka*) with which the sorceress treats her guests. Thus, we may say, for the position of the Slave the danger of Circe is the very same danger as that of the Lotus – that of the drug; and it is only the Master who gets to face Circe's second, properly erotic danger.

In this myth too, thus, the Master and the Slave, (Odysseus and his men) are polarized by the threat. As in the figure of the Sirens, the Master manages to avoid the danger and to enjoy, conditionally, that which has threatened him. But here the

Slave is not, by force of his Slavery, deafened in advance to the sound of the call; he is tempted and falls into the trap of noxious happiness – as in the case of the Lotus. Thus, indeed, the Circe-episode brings together the "pleasure of the Master" and the "pleasure of the Slave" into one figure. Notably, however, the pleasure of the Master is different in the cases of Sirens (art) and Circe (sex), while the pleasure of the Slave remains the same: drugs with the Lotus-eaters and drugs with Circe the sorceress.

How does Odysseus overcome Circe? In fact, just as her spell has two stages, so does its overcoming. But Horkheimer and Adorno interpret only the second stage, in which Odysseus, directly addressed by Circe's erotic initiative, answers it with strategic refusal. Sexual gratification, denied to those who succumb to their instinct, is granted to the one capable of renouncing it. The recipe for the overcoming of Circe's threat is the elementary structure of male virtue ethics from the Greeks to Foucault's Greeks: self-mastery. The domination of the self, as usual, turns out to be the domination of the – in this case, gendered – other: the next moment Odysseus draws his sword and makes the sorceress swear she will do him no harm, bounding her thus by the strains of discourse. Thus, Horkheimer and Adorno comment, "the equivocation in the relation of man and woman – desire and command (*Sehnsucht und Gebot*) – … assumes the character of a contractually protected exchange" (DEJ, 56/ DEC, 72 – translation modified).

All this is true, but it should not be overlooked that to the direct confrontation with the sexual lure, a successful overcoming of the narcotic stage of Circe's ambiguous hospitality must precede. The way Odysseus accomplishes this task plays no role in the *Dialectic*'s exegesis but could be easily deduced from what we have learned from "Plato's Pharmacy." Indeed, Odysseus's immunity to the bad drug of the sorcerer's potion is achieved with the help of a good drug (*pharmakon esthlon*) – an antidote, given to him by Hermes on the way to Circe's house.[30] The dialectical figure by which the patriarchal *ratio* subjugates its feminine other and appropriates the unrestricted *jouissance* of its promise within the "castrated"[31] enjoyment of "contractually protected

30) Homer, *Odyssey*, X, 292

31) Horkheimer and Adorno suggest no less than what is intimated by such a Lacanian allusion, when they comment on the hero's self-mastery: "that domination, as a permanent suppression of instinct, symbolically performs the self-mutilation of the man in any case" (DEJ, 56).

sexuality" works, thus, through a double conditioning: overcoming the self is the condition for sexual appropriation; overcoming the drug is the condition for overcoming the self.

Thus seen, the figure of Circe provides the strongest support for our Derridean hypothesis that the denunciation of (empirically unspecified) drugs in the figure of the Lotus is symptomatic of their intimate relation – or more precisely the relation of the metaphysical idea of the drug – to the dialectical logic informing Horkheimer and Adorno's reading of the *Odyssey*: that is, the very dialectic of enlightenment. Aspiring to extract the philosophical vision of drugs from the text of the *Dialectic*, we assumed the book's placement of the Lotus, through the interpretation of which drugs are explicitly thematized in the book, alongside the myths of Sirens and Circe. Our analysis has shown that the oddity of the Lotus in this threesome (uncompromised refusal rather than compromised enjoyment) is complemented by the textual presence of drugs – albeit on different theoretical planes – in the book's discussion of all three myths. In the case of Sirens, narcotic intoxication serves as a paradigm employed by the exegetic procedure; in the case of Circe – as an overlooked element of the myth itself. While Sirens and Lotus, as we have suggested, form a structural opposition, it is the figure of Circe combining the two, which reveals the function of the drug as an unacknowledged condition – both enabling and undermining the disjunction of the Master and the Slave vis-à-vis the essential call of the not-yet-disenchanted nature. Enhancing the lesson of the *Dialectic* by a Derridean *pharmakology*, we may see that the myth of Circe discloses the drug as the zero-level of the subject's relation to the danger with which this call threatens, when it polarizes the endangered self into two positions: the Master, who takes the drug and overcomes danger, and the Slave who simply takes drugs.

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