Inscriptions

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Carving out the absence within: negative *rilievo* as a strategy of concept-building

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Abstract

This article explores the technique of *rilievo* (Italian for "relief") employed in Renaissance painting to form a three-dimensional object, usually a figure, which stands out from the background. Transferred to philosophical and literary writing, *rilievo* is used to shape the two-dimensional medium of the text and carve out a concept that stands in a negative relation with the empirical world. Writing, like the work of art, includes what it appropriates from the empirical world, presents it in a new form, and affirms the existence of what is not visible in the material alone. Relying on Theodor W. Adorno's dialectical understanding of the artwork's *self-negation* and Maurice Blanchot's writing of desubjectivation, I argue that, unlike the additive process of shaping a figure or a concept, negative *rilievo* is the process of recovering constitutive absence.

Introduction

During the Italian Renaissance, the paragone debate divided sculptors and painters, each group claiming that their art was superior and stood higher on the hierarchical scale of the arts. Benedetto Varchi launched a survey in 1546 asking artists to justify which art, painting or sculpture, was more noble.[2] The replies came in the form of letters discussing the relative merits of each art form. Michelangelo's enigmatic response to the survey was informed by his experience in both sculpture and painting. As Peter Hecht writes, "[Michelangelo] stated that he had always considered sculpture to be superior, but that he could also agree with Varchi's own elegant standpoint that arts which share a common goal are in fact of equal merit."[3] But in other writings, Michelangelo praised the merits of sculpture over those of painting, "claiming that painting was best the more it resembled sculptural relief, while sculpture was worse the more it resembled painting."[4] Painting, however, proved to be more

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[2] Cerasuolo, *Literature and Artistic Practice in Sixteenth Century Italy*, 123.

[3] Hecht, "The paragone debate," 125.

[4] *Johnson, "Touch, tactility," 71.*

[5] In art, *rilievo* refers to the technique of setting certain elements of sculpture or painting into relief – – that is, making certain elements stand out from the background. Whereas sculpture involves *rilievo* by default, painting relies on such techniques as *impasto* (the use of thick layers of paint), *chiaroscuro*, and colour arrangements to produce the *rilievo* effect. Michelangelo's inclusion of *rilievo* in the comparison between sculpture and painting suggests a broader concern during the Renaissance with perspective and atmosphere in painting, as well as with the use of models, whether sculptures or living subjects.

than capable of shaping the figure and recreating the *rilievo* that Michelangelo praised in sculpture.[5] Perhaps the artist's oscillation shows that he was already aware of painting's ability to incorporate and transform sculpture's *rilievo*. Transferred from the medium of sculpture to that of painting, *rilievo* was the element that brought together all painting and sketching techniques, out of which chiaroscuro had the most resonance for painting during the Renaissance.

In chiaroscuro, which marks the transition from drawing to painting, the contrast between the light and dark areas is the most striking aspect for the observer. However, the painting would lack depth and three-dimensionality if the painter only focused on rendering light and dark objects on a flat plane. Chiaroscuro starts with shading added to the contour in drawing, which detaches the figure from its background. Shading is the precursor of chiaroscuro and relies on more than contrast alone. In chiaroscuro and Renaissance art in general (and, by analogy, in philosophy), the process of figure-making on a flat surface was effected by means of *rilievo*, which translates as "relief" and, in painting, stands for the combined use of techniques, such as linear perspective (since its demonstration, in the fifteenth century, by Filippo Brunelleschi), shading and highlighting, texture, volume, plasticity, and composition, to form a three-dimensional object that stands out from the surface on a two-dimensional canvas. These techniques describe an additive process of creation – an accumulation of information which the artist, by means of craft and understanding, shapes in a specific direction, as much as the material allows, to bring forth a figure or a scene. During the Renaissance, *rilievo* was the connecting element between the three arts of sculpture, drawing

(or sketching), and painting. The artists' appreciation of the role of *rilievo* point to an awareness of style and technique that transcends the realm of painting and develops into a discussion regarding the importance of writing and, more generally, of the relationship between art, world, and the artists' senses.[6]

In this article, I extend the use of the *rilievo* technique to writing, both of literature and philosophy. Concomitantly, I argue that, unlike the sculptural aesthetic of Renaissance sketching and painting, which uses the white background of the canvas to create contrast, rilievo-making in writing relies on a negative aesthetic – on a background that is only background when it is engaged in the building of a figure or concept of *rilievo*. At a more general level, visual artworks employ *rilievo* not only as an artistic technique but also in their relation to the empirical world.

Theodor W. Adorno: between positive and negative *rilievo*

In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno acknowledges the rilievo-like character of artworks: "Artworks detach themselves from the empirical world and bring forth another world, one opposed to the empirical world as if this other world too were an autonomous entity."[7] The mimetic relation between empirical reality and the artwork is positive in that artworks rely on the empirical for their content. However, this positive aspect also hides a negative core. Art brings forward what it appropriates from the empirical world, presenting it in a fresh and autonomous manner, affirming the existence of *that which is not present* in the material alone and creating the space for the empirical to resume the life that was expulsed from it in its integration and circulation in the society of consumption.

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[6] For an elaboration of the history and importance of the written word in the context of paragone, especially as related to Leonardo da Vinci's manuscripts, see Angela Cerasuolo's *Literature and Artistic Practice in Sixteenth Century Italy* (2017), chapter 1: "The 'Libri di Bottega': A Covert Transmission," p. 11-76.

[7] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 2.

Likewise, the dialectical process applied to the development of concepts is the process of carving out a concept by creating the illusion of depth on a flat surface, provided by the metaphysical tradition which sustains the carving of such a concept. Through dialectics, philosophy expropriates concepts from everyday language, transforming their sense and connotation. Such concepts remain marked by their worldliness, while also performing the work of signification in relation to the philosophical discourse that they are introduced into. The concept of "rilievo" can serve as an example: a notion used to discuss an art technique which, provided a new philosophical context, stands, through its foreignness, in relief against conventional (metaphysical) philosophical discourse.

Reflecting on the work of art in its relation to the world, Adorno acknowledges art's power to bring forward a world and the inescapably, in his view, affirmative power of art: "In empirical reality the negation of the negative is hardly ever affirmation, yet in the aesthetic sphere this dialectical maxim bears some truth: The power of immanent negation is not shackled in subjective artistic production as it is externally."[8] Here, Adorno points to the other side of the work's existence, outside of its relation to material or empirical reality: the artistic work's participation in the world of production, in the development of taste and artistic movement, and in the culture industries. Works of art, while creating a world, also participate in negating other works, currents, ideas, or arrangement of matter. For Adorno, the consequence is that "art threatens to become allergic to itself; the quintessence of the determinate negation that art exercises its own negation. Through correspondences with the past, what resurfaces becomes something qualitatively other."[9] Immanent negation is the coexistence, in the same gravitational curvature, of the determinate negations that art performs. Adorno's understanding of art sets it in a continuous negation of the immediate, of what simply is, due to art's ability to appropriate, reinterpret, and completely transform a material. The material, in the context of the work of art, surrounded by other materials, whose presence modifies its original signification, "becomes qualitatively other."[10] However, art's power – – and this is one way in which artistic production differs from technological production, such as manufacturing – – goes beyond simply refashioning a material from one empirical form to another. According to Adorno, the form of material negation involved in art entails the critical gesture of self-negation: in transforming its material, art also transforms itself, thus performing a radical function of self-negation. It is precisely this function that allows art to have any claim to autonomy, beyond simply being co-opted and reified by the system of production: "Art must turn against itself, in opposition to its own concept, and thus become uncertain of itself right into its innermost fiber."[11]

Johanna Malt[12] provides an insightful analysis by juxtaposing Adorno's negative aesthetic theory with negative theology texts, such as those written by Pseudo-Dionysus the Areopagite. In this quotation from the Christian theologian's *Mystical Theology*, *rilievo*, this time in sculpture, is conceived as a negative metaphor:

> If only we lacked sight and knowledge so as to see, so as to know, unseeing and unknowing, that which lies beyond all vi-

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[8] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 48.
[9] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 49.
[10] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 49.
[11] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 2.
[12] Malt, "On not saying."

sion and knowledge. For this would be really to see and to know: to praise the Transcendent One in a transcending way, namely through the denial of all beings. We would be like sculptors who set out to carve a statue. They remove every obstacle to the pure view of the hidden image, and simply by this act of clearing aside they show up the beauty which is hidden.[13]

Pseudo-Dionysus uses this expressive analogy to evoke a process of removing that which is obstructing the essence of the material (the pure form as *rilievo*) rather than a process described positively as a transformation of material. As Malt describes it, "Form is revealed in an act of negation or denial of that which is not it, but which accumulates around it and thus defines it negatively,"[14] pointing also to Preudo-Dionysus's use of the Greek *aphairesis*, from the verb *aphaireo*, meaning "to take from (a person)," "to remove,"[15] translated in the quotation above as an "act of clearing aside." For Adorno, unlike Pseudo-Dionysus, there is no pure form in art, nor is there a transcendent idea that inheres in art's material. Nevertheless, the analogy functions by art's negative identification of that which forms it: the same forces, the very elements that resist being incorporated or that even turn against art itself. As Adorno reiterates, in relation to modern art, "the violence done to the material imitates the violence that issued from the material and that endures in its resistance to form."[16] The self-negation at the core of the work of art is the work of *rilievo*, the carving out of the "beauty which is hidden,"[17] in Pseudo-Dionysus's words.

Adorno's project in *Aesthetic Theory* is to complicate the one-dimensional dialectical tracing of the negative and the affirmative in a work of art, carried forward in abstract terms, with art falling in the same category of expression as philosophy and literature. He considers the work to be integrated into the circle of production, yet to remain to some extent autonomous. Adorno aims, rather, to complicate the negative–affirmative structure internal to the work of art to such an extent that, under the weight of the excess of negative determinations, art's very structure would collapse, uncovering its own instability. Regarding the relation between philosophy and the art object, Malt states the following:

> The accumulation of propositions creates a limit, a place where the discourse comes up against the absence of its object – against art's "not saying." Adorno continually reapplies his language to that place, accumulating new metaphors which displace without replacing the old, shifting the ground from which his critique speaks, multiplying the angles of approach in order to map the surface of that absence. His language is negative, but it does not negate its object … so much as it negates or continually modifies itself.[18]

Whereas Malt merges the discussion of the work of art with the matters of negative philosophy and critical language, for Adorno, the critical dimension in art is essential because it forces art to push its self-negating aspect to the limit, which confers art an ability that philosophy does not have: that of performing the total collapse of all the material and productive forces that it incorporates, in its relation of false

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13 Pseudo-Dionysus quoted in Malt, "On not saying," 202.
14 Malt, "On not saying," 202.
15 Liddell, *A Lexicon Abridged.*
16 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 69.
17 Pseudo-Dionysus quoted in Malt, "On not saying," 202.
18 Malt, "On not saying," 212.

semblance to the world. Speaking about modern art in particular, Adorno argues that art, by its nature, absorbs the accelerated modes of production and discards the old, obsolete forms, which pedants might cling to. Unlike philosophy, which operates with rigid logical operations and which it cannot discard, the work of art, when it is authentic and autonomous, always has something of the new and opposes the Zeitgeist, while also bearing the scars of its past reconfigurations. Unlike philosophy, art does not have reason, order, and clarity inscribed in its content but rather opposes discursive modes of thought and bears truth and criticism in its core. Modern art carries forward the disintegration of what it contains not least by turning against itself, against the forces of accelerated production which it appropriates: "The murderous historical force of the modern is equated with the disintegration of all that to which the proprietors of culture despairingly cling."[19] An illustration of this point is the importance of the ugly in modern art, by which Adorno sees art's power of assimilating what resists it, the amorphous, the material, the banal, the non-transformable.

Malt's reading of Adorno's text also alludes to the stylistic strategies that he uses to defamiliarise images and concepts, usually by employing "an accumulation of propositions,"[20] along with the constant shifting of the signification and his approach to dialectics. These strategies reveal the negative dimension of conceptual *rilievo*, showing at once the rational and the suppressed, the familiar and the uncanny, the imposed and the forbidden. Although Adorno's dialectical style produces depth through the accumulation and constant shifting of the material, the "canvas" that he works with is still two-dimensional. Just like in sketching, where shading builds a range of higher and lower val-

ues, working towards a sculptural rilievo effect, concept-building is carried out by building up language against a limit (a contour of a concept). In that sense Adorno, in Malt's description, works with his text as an artistic material, "accumulating new metaphors which displace without replacing the old, shifting the ground from which his critique speaks,"[21] only with the added dimension of absence. By "multiplying the angles of approach in order to map the surface of that absence,"[22] the text creates the effect of a *negative rilievo*, exposing, if only for a split moment, the negative core of the concept. While a study of Adorno's stylistic strategies would require a much longer study due, no less, to the fact that amplitude and sheer accumulation of conceptual material is part of his method, another twentieth-century thinker exemplifies the absence at the core of negative *rilievo* in a much more condensed form: Maurice Blanchot.

Maurice Blanchot: the void and the sea of language

Blanchot's literary response to the political turmoil of the '50s and '60s, marked by a series of conflicts such as the Algerian War of Independence and the May '68 protests, was to insist on the uselessness of literature along with its inherent ability to defend a language that expresses the fragility and exhaustion of a subject that has been exposed to the conceitedness and self-glorification of the culture industries. Desubjectivation is central to Blanchot's negative *rilievo*, as his writing echoes the era of the death of the author, which allows him reach beyond the subject-centered dialectic of the continental tradition. His insistence on the autonomy of writing and his struggle against the reproduction of the sub-

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[19] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 47.
[20] Malt, "On not saying,"212.
[21] Malt, "On not saying," 212.
[22] Malt, "On not saying," 212.

suming structures of power and language are evidenced by his writing practice, as Daniel Just notes in his analysis of *Le Dernier homme*, one of Blanchot's many narratives in which language, along with the characters, appears to be withdrawing in a negative *rilievo* effect: "[Blanchot] suggests that desubjectivisation is the only literary mechanism capable of fulfilling art's duty at the present historical moment …. Suspended deixis and diminished subjecthood served Blanchot to create a literary work in which communication, like the last man's speech, never gets beyond its moment of the beginning."[23] Desubjectivation is both a political and a creative strategy for Blanchot. Finding himself, after having lived through WWII, at a time of political conflict with a changing set of political demands, Blanchot chose a different strategy from direct action, opposed, in Just's account, to Sartre, who "urged for action in the name of a future, first, free man."[24] Instead, Blanchot advocated a minimised, weakened subject, whose "withdrawal from action [generates] a higher level of connectedness to [the] milieu. If this openness and connectedness is to be a prelude for the future, Blanchot believed that it must first take place in art."[25] Thus, instead of a glorified (though apparently self-effacing) subject asking for justice in the name of all, Blanchot proposes a subject decapitated of its will to act and to impose itself, who, perhaps, from this impossible position, would generate a type of anti-action (especially intellectual or artistic action) that would have more profound effects on thought and, why not, on society (Blanchot was not, in spite of being described so by many, an anti-political intellectual). It should be noted, however, that in order for the withdrawal of the subject to not become a self-indulgent act, the focus, as Blanchot proposes, has to be on something outside of the weakened subject: an event or near-event that extracts the subject from its experience of its own fragility, such as death.

In *Thomas the Obscure*, Blanchot describes the experience of being drawn in by the void that the character, Thomas, becomes immersed in. Being caught in a storm at sea, Thomas almost drowns, reaches a point where he loses the sensation of his body, and becomes, instead of being grasped by the natural panic of death, one with the medium that surrounds him. From that state, which is close to death, he performs a state of depersonalisation, which allows him to continue swimming and reach the shore:

> Then, whether from fatigue or for an unknown reason, his limbs gave him the same sense of foreignness as the water in which they were tossed. This feeling seemed almost pleasant at first. As he swam, he pursued a sort of revery in which he confused himself with the sea. The intoxication of leaving himself, of slipping into the void, of dispersing himself in the thought of water, made him forget every discomfort. And even when this ideal sea which he was becoming ever more intimately had in turn become the real sea, in which he was virtually drowned, he was not moved as he should have been: of course, there was something intolerable about swimming this way, aimlessly, with a body which was of no use to him beyond thinking that he was swimming, but he also experienced a sense of relief, as if he had finally discovered the key to the situation, and, as far as he was concerned, it all came down to continuing his endless journey, with an absence of organism in an absence of sea.[26]

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[23] Just, "The politics of the novel," 45.
[24] Just, "The politics of the novel," 43.
[25] Just, "The politics of the novel," 45.
[26] Blanchot, *Thomas the Obscure*, 8.

As Blanchot describes it in suggestive terms, the experience seems, at first, comparable with what Sigmund Freud describes in *Civilization and its Discontents* as the "oceanic feeling,"[27] of being one with the world outside – a preconscious stage devoid of the division that judgement effects. The momentary paralysis that overcomes Thomas, whose "slipping into the void"[28] comes with the pleasure of dissolving, of becoming one with the sea at first, reaches a turning point when the sea splits into the ideal and real sea. The real sea, of course, in which he is drowning, and the ideal sea, in which he is lost. The ideal sea is nothing but the void at the core of the sea, which Thomas disperses into, "with an absence of organism in an absence of sea."[29] His becoming-sea is the process of self-effacement; at the same time, the sea itself is no longer sea, as it dissolves into Thomas's absence.

The language that expresses the absence of the sea is the same language that acknowledges death, without falling prey to the eternalisation of the subject beyond death. Such language acts by shifting the focus from a character swimming in the sea, by the accumulation of images and the sensations produced, to absence. Not the absence of organism but "an absence of organism in an absence of sea."[30] It is important to note that the negation here is not operational: the absence of organism is not the same thing as the double absence. The form containing the absence of organism – the sea – has been "shaped" by language to communicate a more fundamental absence. In the two-dimensionality of Renaissance panting, *rilievo* is an illusion, through which painting, retaining sculptural elements, represents the world. However, without the illusion of *rilievo*, the painting is no longer what it is. Blanchot's sea, likewise, becomes sea when it ab-

sorbs Thomas's body, while he is still struggling to stay afloat and maintain his separation – his contour. The radical absence – the outside or the nonconceptual – is effected through the accumulation of *absencing* metaphors (the "foreignness," the "revery in which he confused himself with the sea," "the intoxication of leaving himself," the "slipping into the void," the "dispersing himself in the thought of water," being "virtually drowned," and having "a body which was of no use to him").

Absence – Blanchot's figure – comes into relief when the ground – the sea – has already disappeared into the absence of the character (Thomas). The tense cohabitation between the ground and figure is what language needs in order to reach its absolute other – radical absence. This cohabitation is sustained neither by the background nor the figure but by means of worklessness. Worklessness should not be confused with mere absence and should not be approached as the lack or the glitch within a work of art that supposedly ties the artwork together. Rather, worklessness entails an active maintaining of something in the form of an absence. In short, worklessness is a form of absencing. The worklessness of the dialectic between sea and Thomas, the figure's depersonalisation by exposure to the outside, its assimilation by the outside, couples with the figure's loss of the structure that sustains it. But it is through language that worklessness is made possible. The language permeated by the outside does not rely simply on the intensification of its internalised differences; rather, such language mirrors the emptiness of the outside with the dissolution of the subject's overwhelming drive to subsume the outside.

Regarding Blanchot's use of language in a manner that reveals the void towards which it is oriented, Michel Foucault argues that the

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[27] Freud, *Civilization*, 11.
[28] Blanchot, *Thomas the Obscure*, 8.
[29] Blanchot, *Thomas the Obscure*, 8.
[30] Blanchot, *Thomas the Obscure*, 8.

subject's interiority, which is eradicated in the turn to language, is not used as a doubling and negating chamber where the subject (or the figure) could feed and grow its own mythology, the outside (or absence) does not push language into another dialectical operation:

> Blanchot's language does not use negation dialectically. To negate dialectically brings what one negates into the troubled interiority of the mind. To negate one's own discourse, as Blanchot does, is to cast it ceaselessly outside of itself, to deprive it at every moment not only of what it has just said, but of the very ability to speak …. Not reflection, but forgetting; not contradiction, but a contestation that effaces; not reconciliation, but droning on and on; not mind in laborious conquest of its unity, but the endless erosion of the outside; not truth finally shedding light on itself, but the streaming and distress of a language that has always already begun.[31]

In the last phrase, Foucault seeks to replace the language of dialectics – reflection, contradiction, reconciliation, conquest – with processes that allow for the autonomy of the negative that is foreign to dialectics, even to Adorno's negative dialectics. In Foucault's terminology, Blanchot's language is defined by the "endless erosion of the outside"[32] which the subject cannot resist. The subject's erosion is not achieved uniformly, it does not follow a progressive, linear timeline, and there is no absolute truth revealed in the conclusion, as the erosion is endless. There is no greatness or glorification in the process, only an infinite range of expressing the erosion. In this sense, the subject's effacement by language (as Thomas' effacement of the sea, along with the sea's own effacement in the process of worklessness) is

similar to Freud's description of the organism's living towards death in that it allows for the existence of infinite configurations outside of the uniformity imposed by the subject when it is looked at by taking the inorganic (or exteriority) as the starting point. Foucault calls for a reconfiguration of thought, allowing it "to be free for a new beginning,"[33] though only for a beginning premised on a liberation from the past rather than an origin, because "what freed that void was the language of the past in the act of hollowing itself out."

Conclusion

During the Italian Renaissance, the paragone debates pitched the arts against one another to determine their hierarchy, the specificity of each one and the organizing paradigms for the centuries to come. *Rilievo*, for Michelangelo, was the distinguishing element of sculpture and had been integrated into skilled painting through a combination of techniques. In these debates, the beginning of the dialectical relation between the two arts was set up, as sculpture saw itself reflected in painting, while painting incorporated and transformed *rilievo* through its own means, such as the use of chiaroscuro. In the twentieth century, Adorno's negative dialectic as applied to modern art places the work of art in a material and conceptual relation with the empirical world. The work of art is marked by the internal tension between the material that the work incorporates, which resists full assimilation, and the work itself. The work of art imposes its own form on the material; nevertheless, the work of art is not possible without the material, which maintains its relation to the empirical world. At the same time, the material is shaped by art's form, which brings to light the non-identity at the core of the work of art through the fact that

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[31] Foucault, *Maurice Blanchot*, 22.
[32] Foucault, *Maurice Blanchot*, 22.
[33] Foucault, *Maurice Blanchot*, 22.

the material is not equal to itself. The role of *rilievo*, in Adorno's dialectic, is to carve out the hidden negative core that defines the work of art. Adorno's method relies on critique, which drives art to its limit, where it turns against itself – against its own constitution, materiality and the forces of production that it is invested with. Applied to writing, Adorno's negative *rilievo* works through the accumulation and shifting of metaphors, images and references, which create a clearing and point to the nonidentical at the core of concepts.

Blanchot's desubjectivized writing exemplifies the technique of negative *rilievo* in writing, making the figure disappear within its medium while the medium disappears in the absence of itself. During the Renaissance, the figure appeared on the canvas, shaped by the build-up of contours, shadows, light and all the other elements of the painting. In Blanchot's text, the figure disappears through repeated gestures of absencing (or worklessness). Blanchot peels away the layers of character, environment, image, metaphor and language to reach beyond language. Negative *rilievo*, then, is uncovered by the process of erosion that language carries out on itself.

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