The Saving Line: Benjamin, Adorno, and the Caesuras of Hope. Marton Dornbach. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2021. Pp. 240.

Marton Dornbach has written an engaging new book titled *The Saving Line, Benjamin, Adorno, and the Caesuras of Hope*. The backstory for his book arises from when the author was preparing to write a book on the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and discovered the section "Excursus I: Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment," which triggered his interest in the present work.[1] *The Saving Line* focuses on the concept of caesura and its various manifestations as an interpretative tool for examining works of literature. The book, however, covers considerably more territory on caesura, including a focus on Adorno's and Benjamin's own philosophical perspectives.

Citing a passage from Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Dornbach defines caesura as follows:

> The pausing of speech is the caesura that allows the events narrated to be transformed into something long past, and causes to flash up a semblance of freedom that civilization has been unable to wholly to extinguish ever since.[2]

It appears that caesura represents a kind of literary device for Dornbach. It acts as a means for the reader to shift from one idea into another. From the above quotation, caesura also appears dedicated to opening our ideas about matters surrounding politics. Caesura has not enjoyed common usage in the history of philosophy. This may in fact be part of what motivates Dornbach's research, for it appears caesura is a useful interpretation tool for literary texts.

1. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972).
2. Dornbach, *The Saving Line*, 1.

Adorno and Benjamin, both members of the Frankfurt school, had a long relationship, which is famously documented in their correspondences. Adorno was critical of many of Benjamin's ideas, including aura and the usefulness of cinema. However, as their correspondences can attest, many of their respective ideas, including those about caesura, are the result of collaboration: "[T]he Benjaminian caesura model exerted a pervasive influence on Adorno's thinking about art, and especially on his thinking about music" (73). In his discussion of Benjamin, Dornbach focuses on the essay "Goethe's Elective Affinities" (hereafter "Affinities"), while in his analysis of Adorno, his focus surrounds Adorno's interpretations of the *Odyssey*.

Beginning with Benjamin, Dornbach makes reference to one of Benjamin's earlier essays, where Benjamin discusses Kant. Dornbach makes the link between Benjamin's interest in Kant and the concept of caesura. In other words, Dornbach establishes a link between Benjamin's own philosophical journey and the concept of caesura; the way in which the caesura appears for Benjamin's "Affinities" is as much a story about Benjamin's own philosophical journey:

> The task incumbent on art criticism of the Benjaminian sort, then, is not to derive from the work of art the answer to a particular question but to draw attention to a fundamental questionableness, a semblance engendered by something that constantly withdraws from appearing, which the work of art has in common with the open-ended totality of philosophy.[3]

Dornbach searches for the meaning behind Benjamin's theory of art. As the above passage suggests, there are innumerable problems in identifying the meaning behind a work of art. Dornbach explains that some of the clues about Benjamin's theory of art lie in the interplay between beauty and myth. Ultimately, defining a work of art appears to be as much a problem as the work of art itself. From here the author

3. Dornbach, *The Saving Line*, 33.

delivers an analysis of Benjamin's interpretation of the *expressionless*. The expressionless, according to Dornbach, represents that unnamed part of artistic creation that appears *alive* and *petrified* at the same time.

Turning to the chapter on Adorno, Dornbach focuses on Adorno's interpretation of the *Odyssey*. "To recognize our present in the *Odyssey* is to remember that the Homeric epic is not just a literary document from a remote past but a canonical classic, a work that has become constitutive of who we are and how we understand ourselves" (77). Dornbach also titles one section "Myth versus Homeland."

There is considerable intrigue in both writers' treatment of their respective texts. For example, the concept of hope is central in the analysis of the *Odyssey*; and for Benjamin, a constant tension resides between hope and the saving of semblance. The author notes that Benjamin's preoccupation with hope demonstrates a link between Benjamin's thinking and Kant.

Dornbach presents both Benjamin and Adorno as though their association with caesura can be seen as a philosophical problem related to their respective works. For Adorno, when he tries to identify the caesura, he confronts the problem related to Plato's lie. With Benjamin, the problem revolves around how the narrator relates to problems of messianism. Dornbach stresses that Benjamin remains steadfast with the narrator's perspective. In the case of Adorno, he appears to focus on the more general term of freedom.

Next, the author dedicates two chapters to the notion of the soft caesura. Dornbach appears to shift some of his attention to another one of Adorno's major works, namely *Aesthetic Theory*. Using *Aesthetic Theory* as an interpretative tool to understand the *Odyssey*, Dornbach notes Adorno's belief that "the spiritual dimension of art is inextricably bound up with the sensuous phenomenality of the artwork" (110).

Dornbach cites a passage from Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* as follows: "The unity of artwork is their caesura from myth" (113). Indeed,

the author appears to make the connection between Adorno's ideas of the work of art found in *Aesthetic Theory*, and its use as a template to interpret the *Odyssey*. Indeed, Dornbach will even say the ideas drawn from Adorno's analysis of the *Odyssey* are useful for interpreting the *Aesthetic Theory*.

The character of Penelope becomes Adorno's focus: "Cunning enabled Odysseus to turn the mythic forces of dispersal against themselves and thereby to constitute himself as an integrated, enduring, and autonomous subject. Penelope's cunning by contrast allegorizes the preservation of a certain heterogeneity on the side of the object" (116). The shift in Adorno's analysis, towards the character of Penelope, indicates a transient character of caesura.

Turning to Benjamin, Dornbach argues that in "Affinities," Benjamin is engaged in showing two caesura models which "complements one another as positive and negative presentations of a utopian dimension" (129). The author argues that Benjamin shifts his inquiry towards the second caesura in the work, of the novella "Strange Neighbors," which is embedded in the work.

From here Dornbach explores the interrelationship between the narrator and the novella. The author notes that the basis of these two distinct voices is cause for further inquiry. The prehistory of the narrator's voice is intermeshed within the novella.

Dornbach says that Benjamin has made a "theoretical commitment" which, in turn, allows the author to ask questions about Benjamin's approach: "that the second caesura in Affinities is not the novella itself as Benjamin's interpretation implies – but the break that follows upon its equivocal ending" (137).

Dornbach states further: "The caesura that separates the novella from the novel signals a failure on the novelistic narrator's part, and indeed on Goethe's part, to clarify the captain's prehistory and thereby to adopt" (138). In identifying caesura's shift, from the narrator's perspective

to the novella, Dornbach succeeds at identifying another level of meaning. However, the fact that a shift of meaning occurs appears to place emphasis on the style of interpretation rather than the outcome. That is, if the interpretation had not happened, the story would be seen as an integral whole, rather than composed of different parts, as it now appears.

In the final section of the book, Dornbach takes inspiration from Hans Jonas's work on logos, myth, and the "Long Pause" of metaphysics (177). Dornbach questions how the question of the double caesura can be applied using Jonas's philosophy. Dornbach states that Jonas, a former student of Heidegger, who has an interest in Gnosticism and the technical age, may be able to explain the double caesura model.

Dornbach has dealt with a lot of complex subject matter. Despite a generous amount of cross-referencing, giving the book an overly academic feeling, it maintains a feeling of paving something new. Any time we are able to uncover new ideas from thinkers like Adorno and Benjamin, the material functions to open ourselves to new concepts. The author therefore succeeds at showing the reader the unyielding utility caesura brings as an interpretative tool.

Adorno does not treat Benjamin's concept of aura kindly in *Aesthetic Theory*. However, on the basis of a discussion surrounding caesura, we can see how their collaboration runs deeper than Adorno's apparent critique.

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