CHAPTER-I

FORMALISM IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

This chapter takes up for study the aesthetic theories of two twentieth century thinkers, Suzanne Langer and Theodore Adorno, both of whom view the work of art as autonomous. Their theories, therefore, explicate the formalist aesthetic position, but are not entirely identical. Langer's theory may be said to be a purely formalist one, while Adorno's explication of the nature of the work of art admits a strong historicist concern. Langer's aesthetic position may be said to exemplify American New Criticism, and generally, modern Western aesthetics.

The Influence of Ernst Cassirer on Suzanne Langer

One of the eminent thinkers whom Suzanne Langer acknowledges as having exerted a marked influence on the development of her aesthetic thought is Ernst Cassirer. His writing throws light on Langer's conception of the work of art and, therefore, I shall present some of its outstanding features before properly presenting Langer's aesthetic theory.

In his work, "An Essay on Man : An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture" (1944), Cassirer points to the fact that though the human world is governed by biological rules as is the life of all other organisms, yet human life is marked by a distinguishing characteristic. This may be termed a new method of relating to the environment. Between the receptor and
effector systems, found in all organisms, in man there has come into existence a third system, the symbolic one. This new competence has transformed man's whole life. Now an unmistakable difference can be observed between organic reactions and human responses.

In the first case, an external stimulus draws an immediate reaction; in the second, such a reaction is intercepted, withheld or delayed, and a slow, complicated thought-process intervenes. Cassirer refers to some philosophers who do not hold this to be a sign of human progress, but rather a deterioration. But this development can never be reversed, whichever way we evaluate it. Cassirer writes:

"No longer in a merely physical universe, man lives in a symbolic universe. Language, myth, art, and religion are parts of this universe. They are the varied threads which weave the symbolic net, the tangled web of human experience...... No longer can man confront reality immediately; he cannot see reality, as it were, face to face. Physical reality seems to recede in proportion as man's symbolic activity advances. Instead of dealing with the things themselves, man is in a sense constantly conversing with himself. He has so enveloped himself in linguistic forms, in artistic images, in mythical symbols or religious rites that he cannot see or know anything except by the interposition of this artificial medium ......" (Cassirer, 1979, p.25)
This passage serves to show how much the mental activity of creating and using symbols has come to dominate human life, and why Cassirer, Langer, as well as other thinkers whose theories of literature and art are studied in this thesis, give so much importance to symbolism. Cassirer's thought concurs here with that of structuralists and post-structuralists who hold that language or a cultural form determines how we know our world, and that we are, in a sense, trapped within the language or culture that we are born to.

What we see here is a schism between the human being and the natural world, as well as a schism between the human ego and his or her natural desires. We have here what Jacques Lacan refers to as "the cloven subject," as we shall see further on in this thesis.

Cassirer goes on to say that language, which plays so great a part now in human life, is said to bear that characteristic which defines man himself, that is, rationality. Even ancient mythology is not a chaotic conglomeration of superstitions and delusions. But it will be noticed that its conceptual system is not the same as of ordinary language, or of scientific language.

Two Kinds of Language

Cassirer holds that language itself is of two kinds, logical and scientific language, and the language of poetic imagination. This latter is the language which creates symbolic forms, which make up man's cultural life, in all its richness and variety. According to Cassirer, language primarily expresses, not thoughts and ideas, but feelings and affections, and it is more apt to
define man as "animal symbolicum" rather than as "animal rationale".

We can see in Cassirer's theory, development of the concept of autonomy of art. The appearance of a schism or separateness marks the development of the autonomy of any phenomenon. We see that man's life became separated from the natural world through his use of symbolic systems. Furthermore, Cassirer points to a distinction between scientific and poetic language.

In "An Essay on Man", Cassirer writes that till the time of Kant, philosophy always attempted to subject art and the aesthetic experience to some principle alien to itself. According to Cassirer, Kant was the first thinker to argue convincingly for an autonomy of art. Cassirer also points out that Alexander Baumgarten, in his "Aesthetica" of 1750, had made the first systematic attempt to construct a logic of the imagination. But art was still considered an activity inferior to intellectual and moral theory, and not entirely autonomous. It was seen as a means to some higher end, an allegory which concealed an ethical sense beneath its sensuous, superficial form.

According to Cassirer, a great change in the concept of art began with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who turned it away from mimesis of nature towards the expression of human emotions. The Germans, Herder and Goethe took up this new conception, but Goethe held that the expressive as well as formative character of art is important.
Expressing his own understanding of art, Cassirer discusses how it differs from science, yet presents a kind of objective knowledge. He holds that science gives us abstract knowledge, tends towards formulae, and is an impoverishment of reality. Scientific formulae exhibit a surprising simplicity. Our aesthetic perception, on the other hand, exhibits great variety, and is richer than both scientific knowledge and ordinary, everyday perception. The artist brings to light many aspects of experience we normally tend to ignore.

**Universality in Art**

Furthermore, aesthetic forms have a universality, which, Cassirer points out, Kant also acknowledged. Kant distinguished between aesthetic universality and objective validity which we see in logical and scientific judgements. The form perceived in a work of art does not pertain only to an individual work, but is universal. This means it can be perceived universally, by numerous subjects, and that the content of the work has been made objective and permanent.

So, we see in Cassirer's thought, a development of the concept of art as autonomous, having a special character of its own, as well as the idea that the aesthetic experience affords objective knowledge, though this differs from scientific knowledge. We shall see that these ideas are further developed in Langer's aesthetic theory.
Langer's Theory

As scholars of Aesthetics would know, the theory of art Langer presented in "Feeling and Form" of 1953, had its genesis in her earlier work, "Philosophy in a New Key" of 1942. The latter work is dedicated to A.N. Whitehead, and other brilliant thinkers whom Langer acknowledges as the sources of much of her thought are Bertrand Russel, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Sigmund Freud and Ernst Cassirer. We see, therefore, that Langer's theory of art drew much from the philosophy of logic, science and mathematics. The area of overlapping interest in all these fields, which Langer appropriated for her own study of the problems of aesthetics, was the study of symbols.

The relation of art to epistemology is first revealed, Langer says, in the work of Immanuel Kant. (Langer, 1967, p.XIII). But idealists were also concerned about the role of symbols in referring to ideal reality. Langer herself is of the view that a fundamental assumption of a transcendental, human spirit is not necessary for the study of the process of symbolic transformation in human beings. Langer delineates her field of study as that of logical forms, especially those that humans use in art. (Langer, 1967, p. XIV).

We see that Langer's study of art grew out of a close relation to a scientific approach to philosophy adopted by other eminent thinkers of this century, so that she was always concerned about the common ground between science and art, and simultaneously conscious of how symbolism in science and in art
differs. In her words, "The study of symbol and meaning is the starting point of philosophy ..." (Langer, 1967, p.XIV).

Vitally Alive Form

Before turning to Langer's "Feeling and Form" (1953), I shall refer briefly to another work of hers, "Mind—An Essay on Human Feeling" (1967), which was written after "Feeling and Form", and helps towards a better understanding of the former. In "Mind—An Essay...." Langer develops her analogy of the work of art as a vitally alive form and the living organism whose patterns of feelings are expressed in art.

But, she says here, artists are now aware that what they express in their work is not an immediately present feeling in themselves, but their knowledge of it. Thus, an objectivity comes to characterise their work. They do not express emotional upheavals, but ideas about the subjective world. She quotes T.S. Eliot to support this view of hers, as he wrote in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" in "The Sacred Wood: Essays on Criticism and Poetry" of 1920:

"The more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates, the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material."

(Langer, 1967, p.113).

Langer continues:

"Neither did he (Eliot), even in his youth ever regard the music of words as a purely sensuous beauty to please the listening ear. Sound and structure, imagery and
statement all go into the making of a vehicle for a
poet's idea, the developed feeling he means to present".
(Langer, 1967, p.113).

As it is not a straight-forward expression of emotion, nor a
sensuous pleasure, art is seen to differ from reality, and from
ordinary language, characteristics which work to support the
conception of art as autonomous.

It is important to note, as Langer does, that the work of
art conveys, not a direct feeling, but its transformed version as
worked out by an artist.

We find Langer's aesthetic theory fully developed in her
seminal work, "Feeling and Form" (1979). Towards the beginning
of this work, she frames the question, "What does art create?"
characteristically giving the question an objective form.
(Langer, 1979, p.10). Answering this question, she says that a
human being creates artistic objects in which her feelings,
otherwise difficult to express, are embodied and can be perceived
by herself and others.

**Discursive and Non-discursive Symbols**

Langer distinguishes between discursive and artistic
symbols. Discursive symbols, according to Langer's
classification, make up ordinary languages and are inadequate to
express the feelings and experiences which constitute human life,
in all its variety and subtlety. These are expressed through
artistic symbols. The expression of feeling in art is not
catharsis, nor incitement of emotion in the audience. The art-
object does not express the artist's personal feeling in a process of emotional release, nor aims to rouse certain emotions in the audience. The emotive aspects of a work of art are integral to it, Langer holds. They inhere in it, objectively and are independent of the subjectivity of both artist and audience.

Although it seems paradoxical, Langer explains, the work of art expresses feeling which is not subjective. When we call a painting beautiful, we mean that the work has an objective quality of beauty.

Langer holds that we have to distinguish between the subjective feelings and direct experiences we have in the course of living, and those expressed in art. She quotes Otto Baensch in "Logos" (1923), as saying,

"......art, like science, is a mental activity whereby we bring certain concepts of the world into the realm of objectively valid cognition; and that, further, it is the particular office of art to do this with the world's emotional content" (Langer, 1979, p.19)

Concurring with Baensch, Langer holds that art offers a kind of knowledge, objectively, and is not primarily concerned to give pleasure. Elucidating the analogy between art and science, Langer explains that the content of art is known objectively just as a scientist's knowledge becomes acceptable only when it is evaluated objectively by a group of scientists.

Just as the art-object expresses a feeling, an emotional mood or experience, a landscape also appears to us to be cheerful, happy or sorrowful. This is a paradox in aesthetics,
Langer points out. A feeling that belongs to the realm of subjectivity is perceived as inhering in an object, the work of art, or some aspect of nature. Something inanimate is perceived as expressing a feeling, which normally only a sentient being would express. It is due to a process of abstraction in our perception that the work of art is seen in this manner, Langer holds.

Now, the appearance of a work of art is built up through sensory elements, but the feeling conveyed by it is non-sensory and pervades the whole work, and is experienced as such (that is, non-sensory) by the audience of the work, Langer explains. But she distinguishes between this formal experience of art and intellectual concepts. Drawing on Baensch again, she holds that intellectual concepts are inadequate to express the subtlety of our emotional lives.

We see, therefore, that Langer holds the aesthetic experience, or the nature of the art-object to be neither sensory nor intellectual. Here Langer discusses one of the key concepts in her theory: that of the art object as a symbol. This symbol negotiates insight rather than reference, and functions independent of conventional sign systems.

Significance in Art

What, then, is the significance that the symbol, which is the art-object, expresses? This is the next question we come upon in Langer's theory. Once again, characteristically and consciously, Langer frames the question objectively, avoiding
reference to human perception or understanding. In her view, aesthetics must be concerned, not with what goes on in people's minds, but with an objective discussion of the work of art.

In my view, the questions that Langer frames themselves constitute a philosophical position: that aesthetics and the work of art in particular, must be viewed objectively. This position predisposes our thought towards the conclusion that the work of art is autonomous. We have already "bracketted out", to use a phenomenological phrase, the subjective presence of both artist and the viewer of the art-object.

Significance in art, Langer goes on to explain, accrues from the form of human feeling - its growth and attenuation, its conflicts and resolutions, flowing, arrest, excitement, its dreamy lapses, its greatness as well as transience. Such patterns of sentience are worked out in art. For instance, in music, some pattern of feeling is created out of "pure, measured sound and silence. Music is a tonal analogue of emotive life", Langer writes (Langer, 1979, p.27). Her elucidation helps towards an understanding of the nature of the work of art. We see the richness of human sentience which escapes the grasp of ordinary language and finds expression in the work of art.

In Langer's terminology, everything that occurs in our consciousness is "sentience", and the recurrence of feelings is a "pattern" or "rhythm of sentience". A pattern of sentience can be expressed as a pattern in one of the art-forms.

The form expressed in art is not only a pattern, in Langer's view, but is also a logical form. Discursive reason, employed in

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science, philosophy and ordinary communication, is not the only possible reason. Any appreciation of form, of patterns, Langer points out, is the activity of reason. Thus, the arts have a logic of their own. We simply have to distinguish, Langer holds, between discursive and non-discursive logic.

To my understanding, Langer thus defends art from the charge that it refers to a realm of human experience that is outside reason, is irrational. Her argument serves to make us aware that reason need not be only of one kind - the intellectual and scientific kind.

Congruence of structures, Langer goes on to explain, is what is required between a symbol and what it refers to, and such congruence exists between the structure of a work of art and the pattern of human feeling it signifies. Of two congruent structures, however, any one can act as a symbol of the other. Why then, Langer raises the question, does art symbolize human sentience? She answers that this is because the art-object is perceptible, being created in a material medium, and easier to handle, while what it refers to belongs to the intangible realm.

But while some feeling comes to be expressed in the work of art, which has a material existence, Langer hastens to clarify that she sees the aesthetic experience itself as non-sensory. The aesthetic experience consists of a contemplation in which the form of a work of art is held in consciousness. This is the closest Langer comes to a discussion of the subjective experience of art.
The artist presents not the sensory elements, but form in its totality, in a work of art. The aesthetic experience, Langer holds, is not always characterized by enjoyment, but rather by contemplation of form, which is an intellectual activity.

It can be seen that though Langer stresses that the work of art must be understood in an objective manner, she cannot altogether avoid speaking of the world of human feeling to which art refers, nor to the aesthetic experience as the contemplation of a subject.

Langer goes on to distinguish meaning in semantics and in aesthetics. (Langer, 1979, p.31). The former is the fulfilment of the condition of conventional reference. In the arts, symbols do not have a fixed and conventional reference. We are free to associate our feelings with what we see directly, in the work of art. We may speak of meaning in a work of art as its "import", and furthermore it is "vital import", for it expresses the vitality of life. We recognize its vitality as characteristic of our own being.

Langer explains further, that we perceive in a good work of art, a rightness and necessity, as in discursive logical forms. Here, we exercise our faculty of aesthetic judgement.

To my understanding, Langer formulates a universal statement about art here: it is not a conventional system of reference. But, in fact, she is speaking of a particular historical period, when it has broken free of conventional reference. For instance, in primitive societies, the art-object would have a conventional
meaning, understood commonly by all members of the society. Structuralists, like Northrop Frye, would also not agree with Langer, since they see the individual work of art as exemplifying a general structure. Nor would the literary critics who see the work of art as exemplifying or speaking the culture in which it comes to be created.

Ananda Coomaraswamy also presents a view of the work of art as part of a tradition, which means that its meaning is attributed to it according to conventions. These points of view will be examined later in this thesis.

The work of art, according to Langer, has a unified form which carries significance in such a manner that form and content are inseparably intermingled in it. Its sensuous elements are at the service of its whole structure or form.

In Langer's view, the aesthetic object stands apart from the rest of life. The aesthetic experience is different from our other experiences, and the aesthetic emotion is something more than ordinary enjoyment. The making and appreciation of the work of art is "an autonomous and creative function of a typically human mind" (Langer, 1979, p.36). Langer discusses how the art-object is separate through her concepts of the same as a symbol and as a virtual image.

The Realm of Art

Langer disagrees with the views of John Dewey, J.A.Richards and Laurence Buermeyer when they argue that art is not very different from other human activities, and the realm of art is not separate from the realm of everyday reality. (Langer, 1979,
pp.36-37). She argues that true connoisseurs of art do see the aesthetic experience as different from ordinary experience of everyday reality, and the attitude and emotion we bear towards an art-object differs from what we feel towards an automobile, a loved one, or a beautiful morning.

Langer agrees that primitive people also knew what is beautiful, but this fact testifies to their already well-developed aesthetic faculty, and not to the relation of art to our primitive instincts for survival.

The work of art, then, in Langer's theory, is unrelated to our everyday survival activities. It is also independent of any particular individual's reaction to it. It stands in its own right, has objective properties and commands attention. All this constitutes its autonomy. Furthermore, every culture accords its works of art a very special place.

Learning to make anything requires a long period of practice. But the work of art is not like other objects we make. We make ordinary objects by putting some materials together. An art-object is not the sum or arrangement of some materials. Through the art-object a form comes into being, which did not exist before, and furthermore, this form carries some special significance. In Langer's words:

"The making of this expressive form is the creative process that enlists a man's utmost technical skill in the service of his utmost conceptual power, imagination. Not the invention of new original forms
nor the adoption of novel themes, merits the words 'creation', but the making of any work symbolic of feeling, even in the most canonical context and manner, .... A Greek vase was almost always a creation, although its form was traditional and its decoration deviated but little from that of its numberless forerunners ....." (Langer, 1979, p.40)

In stating that a novelty of forms and themes, and the following or not following of conventions is not essential to the creation of a work of art, Langer's view concurs with Ananda Coomaraswamy's, as we shall see later in this thesis, but contradicts her earlier statement.

Langer goes on to explain that a craftsman is said to "produce" goods but when he makes something beautiful, we say he has "created" a thing of beauty. The merely useful object is not called a "creation". The utilitarian and the aesthetic objects are distinguished from each other, although the useful object may also be aesthetic.

Langer rules out the possibility that the aesthetic attitude towards some objects leads to their being termed art-objects. It is rather the special character of the object itself due to which it is so termed. Furthermore, the art-object lures the spectator's attention to itself, and away from its mundane surroundings. The art-object has an enchanting air of illusion about it. This is just what it is - an illusion, a semblance or image, and therefore, it is truly separate from the world of reality. (Langer, 1979, p.45)
Though it is an illusion or image, the work of art is not a mimesis of reality, in Langer's theory. It does not represent things, people, events. It is a creation in its own right, and as an image, it is "an abstraction, a symbol, the bearer of an idea." (Langer, 1979, p.47).

The image or illusion which the work of art is, is sheer form, without practical functions. We usually think of images as visual, but Langer points out, music is also an image, being an auditory one. All the art-forms give us images.

The work of art may also be said to be a "semblance" or mere appearance, having no connections with the world of ordinary reality. Such disengagement with the "normal" world, or everyday life, enables the work of art to become a vehicle for the expression of some significance. Disengagement with the world also affords the artist freedom of imagination to create form.

Decorative design, found on surfaces all over the world, is related to art in that it provides forms for intellectual enjoyment, and serves no other purpose. It has a logic of its own, Langer holds, and this is not related to the logic of geometric forms. It is related rather to vital life. Its liveliness, its dynamic character makes it different from geometric forms.

Langer does not hesitate to relate decorative design to art, pointing out that both give us lively forms which are analogous to our sense of being alive. Thus, art which is expressive and
symbolic, is at the same time not symbolic of anything, but of our feeling of being alive.

Langer holds that a unity of life, and of the various cultures of the world are borne out by the primitive decorative arts. She says, there are

"... astonishing parallels of design which may be found in such unrelated cultural products as Chinese embroideries, Mexican pots, Negro body decorations, and English printers' flowers". (Langer, 1979, p.63)

In this way, Langer supports her universalism in respect of art. The implication here is that her theory of art is applicable to all the art and cultures of the world.

So far, Langer put forward certain concepts, such as "the symbol", "significance", the "image" to elucidate the nature of the work of art, which she argues is autonomous, in the sense of being disconnected with reality, and also in the sense of requiring an objective contemplation. Further on, in her work, "Feeling and Form", she continues to develop this view. Langer's discussion of space in art further develops her view of art as autonomous.

The Space of Art

She points out that space, as we know it in the practical world, has no shape. We infer its existence through our several senses. The space in works of art is not corroborated as real by our senses. Then how is it that we speak of space being organized in art? The answer, says Langer, is that the space of art is an illusionary one. It comes into being when the artist
creates the work and when the viewer dwells on it. This space is discontinuous with the space we live in. This separation is not effected by the frame or any other tangible limit employed around the work of art. For, Langer argues, a boundary both separates and joins two spaces.

The space of the art-object is entirely self-contained and independent. A tangible dividing line can neither separate it from nor join it to actual space. The space of art is virtual space, in Langer's terminology.

A culture, Langer explains, is made up of various activities of human beings. It is a system of interlocking and intersecting actions forming a pattern, which is real. Architecture creates an image of culture. Langer quotes Le Corbusier in "Toward a New Architecture".

"Architecture is the first manifestation of man creating his own universe..." (Langer, 1979, p.96).

Architecture is the semblance of a world. It creates its own space, and expresses the rhythmic pattern of a way of life. Sculpture, Langer explains, exactly complements the art-form of architecture. While architecture creates an environment for humans, sculpture presents symbols of the human self.

"Each articulates one half of the life symbol directly and the other by implication". (Langer, 1979, p.101)

It is noteworthy that Langer implies here that humans and their environment together make a whole, one being half of the other.
In music, Langer explains, we get virtual images of time as well as space. We get an illusion of time passing here, but because music is felt to move, we also get an illusion of space. Dance gives us images of forces engaged in interplay. Dance symbolises the tensions and resolutions of force.

Poetry, literature and drama though linguistic, are non-discursive, Langer explains, and are also characterised, as are the other art-forms, by their own artistic logic. The virtual image here is of life experience. Even if a writer draws from her experience of real life, what she creates is an illusion or myth, dissociated from reality.

Langer further explains that art does not incite emotional responses from us, precisely because we know it is illusionary. Rather than arousing emotion, art organizes our intuition, giving us forms to enjoy. There is a sense of exhilaration in the intellectual experience of organization in the work of art. (Langer, 1979, p.396).

Thus, Langer elucidates her view that art is separate from life. It is an autonomous, virtual realm of space and time, and within this realm it presents virtual forms.

This then is the theory of Suzanne Langer which elucidates a strong formalist position regarding the nature of the work of art.

Theodore Adorno

The very difficult and prolific thought of Theodore Adorno cannot be understood without a reference to the "Frankfurt School", which was the inner core of the Institute of Social
Research founded at Frankfurt in 1923. Eminent thinkers of this group included, besides Adorno, who greatly influenced its thought, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Friedrich Pollock and Leo Lowenthal (Jay, 1984, p.16). To these, George Friedman adds one more name, that of Walter Benjamin. (Friedman, 1981, p.13). I shall therefore present the broad outlines of the thought of this school (which was by no means monolithic) so as to facilitate an understanding of the intellectual climate in which Adorno's ideas came to be formulated and developed.

We shall see that Adorno and other members of the Frankfurt school were keenly concerned with the problem of the autonomy of art, the problems pertaining to culture, and the relation between art and society.

The Universal Faces History

With this stream of thought, the universal and autonomous in art is brought face to face with history. Here we cannot look at art as autonomous and remain untroubled by its possible relations to other spheres of human life, as we can with Langer's theory. Nor can we eliminate the concept of art as autonomous. With the Frankfurt School, a new dimension enters our study of art - that of social philosophy, to be more specific, Marxist social theory. Martin Jay refers to this school of thought as the most creative contingent of Western Marxism, and George Friedman holds that it was not only intellectually brilliant and erudite, but is known for its influence beyond academics.
We will see in this study that while the thought-streams represented by Langer and Adorno both attempted to give philosophic enquiry a scientific tenor, the Frankfurt school had arrived at a consciousness of the limitations of such an enterprise, be it related to aesthetics or any other field of enquiry. This was the case, even when Marxist theory was primarily formulated as a scientific one.

To my understanding, it is in the thought of the Frankfurt School and specifically in that of Adorno, that the full implications of the problem of the autonomy of the work of art are developed, and simultaneously, a critique of culture, to be specific, the culture of modernity. While Langer does make some references to anthropological studies in connection with art, in her work, "Mind - An Essay on Human Feeling" (1967), written after "Feeling and Form" of 1953, it is to the Frankfurt School that we must turn for a study of the problems of art as it exists in society, and it can never escape this condition, however autonomous a stand it appropriates.

Acutely aware of a crisis in modernity, the Frankfurt School set itself the task of explicating this crisis. From the time of the Enlightenment and onwards, man has followed the path of reason and science. He has nurtured a faith in the wisdom of following this path, which faith underlies all the technological progress that characterises modernity.

Hegel celebrated the triumph of reason, particularly as it comes to control nature, or reality. I refer here to George
Friedman's "The Political Philosophy of the Frankfurt School" of 1981. Friedman says of Hegel's thought,

"When he argued that the real and rational had become one, he claimed that humanity had triumphed over the degradations of reality" (Friedman, 1981, p.14)

But, scientific successes brought with them a despair of the sensibilities. The promise of domination over nature has been fulfilled, but it has been accompanied by something unforeseen, brutality. In Europe, the persecution of the Jewish minority community by the Nazi regime shocked intellectuals into an awareness of a void at the centre of their modern, scientific culture. Critical reason had been overpowered by another aspect of reason, the capacity to become a tool of evil in the hands of autocratic rulers. If this was the effectiveness of science, the Frankfurt school was determined to undermine it.

The Crisis From Every Perspective

This school of thought addressed itself to the examination of the crisis of modernity from every possible perspective. Behind its thorough scholarship burned an intense flame of engagement with the world. Therefore, its aestheticism, which sometimes seemed distant from the world of everyday events, must be understood in relation to its political concerns.

The Frankfurt School thinkers saw that the Enlightenment had aimed at demystifying the world. This historical period held that human consciousness had been shrouded in ignorance by traditional mythologies and superstitions which were irrational, and the metaphysical theory of Christianity. Demystification
through the exercise of reason could end suffering, ignorance and injustice in the world. The ideals of the Enlightenment were secularism, humanity, cosmopolitanism and freedom, as Friedman explains, quoting Peter Gay (Friedman, 1981, p.111).

An unexpected warning against the unbridled use of reason in scientific and technological subjugation of nature came from Rousseau, and later Nietzsche declared it to be the principal danger of the age of modernity (Friedman, 1981, pp.112,113). By the twentieth century, the power over nature which led man to a concept of himself as autonomous, had revealed its evils at least to serious thinkers, and the concept of man now seemed rather empty. In Friedman's words:

"Science, which had sought to subjugate nature, had succeeded but had subjugated man as well. Freedom, which had been the promise and premise of reason and science, receded either into an empty formalism or into outright barbarism. What had held forth so much hope before still maintained itself and its principles in theory, but it had turned into horror in practice". (Friedman, 1981, p.113)

The problems arising out of the Enlightenment were the basis of the political/critical theory of the Frankfurt School. Aware of the disasters modernity, with its roots in the Enlightenment, had run into, they still held faith in the "negativity" of reason, that is, its power to turn back upon itself, and review itself critically. An aspect of this same competence is its
power to formulate a critique of reality which can lead to a deconstruction and reconstitution of history.

As I cannot devote further space to the political concerns of this school of thought, I hope this will suffice to show how deeply it was aware of the problems of modernity and that it still held a faith in the critical powers of reason. This throws some light, I hope, on Adorno's concerns, as he formulated his very complex aesthetic theory.

Falsification by Economic Values

In the light of the above, it becomes somewhat easier to understand Adorno's defense of art in a world which has largely been "falsified" by the domination of economic exchange values in the social sphere. It would be fitting to begin a study of Adorno with his own words:

"If material reality is called the world of exchange value, and culture, no matter what, refuses to accept the domination of that world, then it is true that such refusal is illusory as long as the existent exists. Since, however, free and honest exchange is a lie, to deny it is at the same time to speak for truth: in face of the lie of the commodity world, even the lie that denounces becomes a corrective." (Jay, 1984, p.115).

These are Adorno's words from "Minima Moralia" (Adorno, 1978, p.43), quoted by Martin Jay, whose work titled "Adorno" (1984) I shall refer to throughout this study, besides Adorno's own works.
From the above passage, we see that tortured contemplation of the problems relating to art that characterize all Adorno's writings on art and culture. He refuses to see the art-object solely as a unitary, beautiful, independent form, and leave the matter at that. Nor will he adopt a reductionist stand, relating art to some other aspect of human life, that is to an ontological reality, or to a sociological, or historical reality, and rest assured at that.

**Culture as Resistance**

We see from the above passage that Adorno speaks of culture as a form of resistance to a social reality almost completely dominated by economic values. But the social reality is all-pervasive: nothing escapes its pernicious grasp. All culture that is produced today has this socio-economic reality as its base. In any case, Marxist aestheticians held that the existential, or material base produces culture, which they termed "the superstructure". Art which speak of pure, good and beautiful things while existing reality is everywhere of an opposite character, and is even the base on which this art is produced, is therefore "a lie".

But "a lie" which denounces the existing "lie", or evil, of socio-economic reality speaks truth, and is a valuable source of correction. It must be noted therefore that art is seen here as incapable of autonomy at its source, being produced by a given existential reality, but yet harbouring an autonomous critical power: it is competent to critically confront the very reality on which it is dependent at its origin.
I quote again from "Minima Moralia":

"... An appeal to truth is scarcely a prerogative of a society which dragoons its members to own up the better to hunt them down. It ill befits universal untruth to insist on particular truth...." (Adorno, 1978, p.30).

In the "Jargon of Authenticity" we see Adorno again exploring the relation between a dishonest society and art. An administrator uses jargon to pretend that he knows much about art, science and philosophy. The jargon:

"..... by its very nature, it always unites the appearance of an absent concreteness with the ennobling of that concreteness. It could be described as an ideological replica of the paralyzing quality of official functions. Their horror is made present to us by Kalka's dry language, which is itself a complete contrary to the jargon". (Adorno, 1986, p. 81).

It was important for Adorno to acknowledge that the artist and critic are firmly embedded in their historical situations - there is no autonomy in this sense. There is, he held, no free-floating intelligentsia. Even so, the artist and critic have creative roles to enact.

At this juncture, Adorno points to an important distinction or schism, a disharmonious, one might even say a dishonest or deceptive relationship between culture and objective reality. Furthermore, we have here a dual conception of culture itself. I shall try to clarify these complex distinctions in Adorno's
aesthetic theory. The schism we are referring to comes into being when a set of ideas, or ideology comes to prevail in society as a dominant cultural form, and assumes to be a true reflection of existing society. This cultural form presents society as a happy, successful or progressive one, and the individual as autonomous, but in fact manipulates the facts about society, and manipulates the individual. It is, therefore, one of the two aspects of culture which is deceptive, even pernicious. This kind of culture relinquishes its autonomy to the strongholds of power operating in, and controlling society at large.

This culture is divorced from objective reality. But there is another kind of culture, Adorno holds, one which exposes the schism between deceptive culture and objective reality. It exposes the pretensions of the first form of culture we have described here. This critical role is possible, Adorno held, in the space between deceptive culture and objective reality. This then, I would say, is a realm in which autonomy of art comes into being—an in-between space.

Adorno wrote at length on the methodology of deceptive ideology, its machinations, as it aims to keep large sections of society from arriving at a consciousness of objective reality. The deceptive ideology debases the human spirit and secretly leads it to reproduce itself in its debased form.

Adorno even explicates a situation, and he means, to my understanding, the situation actually obtaining as a historical reality of late capitalism, in which the human spirit is so
debased, and the false or deceptive ideology so pervasive, that the space from which criticism may arise is greatly diminished, perhaps lost altogether. Resistance to existing conditions becomes increasingly difficult.

A Realm of Hope

But again, to my understanding, Adorno reconstitutes a realm of hope, though most scholars hold Adorno's writings to be pessimistic. Adorno saw a realm of possible resistance in certain individuals who succeed in retaining a speculative power through their imagination, memory and experience. (Jay, 1984, p.117). Jay explains that Adorno did not develop this aspect of his theory fully, and it was taken up later by Jurgen Habermas. In my view, however, it is important that Adorno did make this point, for it contributes to making his theory hopeful rather than pessimistic, and to the assertion of an autonomous, critical power of culture in general and the work of art in particular.

As for the question of whether the critical freedom of art could be "immanent" or "transcendental", Adorno held that neither is sufficient by itself. Here, I must clarify that "immanence" or "transcendence" are among those terms which come to mean something only in relation to something else - that to which something is immanent, or that to which something is transcendent.

Adorno was concerned here about the problem of whether art could produce criticism of a social reality from within it, or whether it would require a point outside it from which it could
operate in almost complete autonomy.

With respect to this problem he increasingly came to hold that culture must remain outside the grasp of scientists, that is, social scientists, that it

"is a condition that excludes the attempt to measure it'.......(to Adorno) the objective social and aesthetic meaning of a work is not reducible to an external process of communication between a producer and a consumer. Only a theoretically informed investigation of the mediated social relations within the cultural artefact itself can illuminate its full significance". (Jay, 1984, p.118) (Parenthetical mine. The first sentence is Adorno's quoted by Jay.)

It is clear from the above that for all his intense historical concern, Adorno held that the work of art must be looked at "objectively", that is, its qualities must be seen as inhering in itself, rather than as explicating the subjective universe of the artist who made it, or of the viewer or reader who interprets it. This is one more aspect of autonomy that Adorno granted to the work of art, the first one being its critical competence. In this view, Adorno retains a kinship with Langer's formalist view of the work of art.

And surprisingly, for he maintained a constant dialogue with eminent Marxist intellectuals, his overall view of art remained elitist, and in this sense too, it was a defense of aesthetic autonomy and again, is related to Langer's theory. Mass culture appeared to Adorno nothing but a part of the "culture industry"
or the deceptive aspect of culture, and part of the debasement of humankind. It was in elitist or high culture that he saw the possibility of redemption. He held on to this view inspite of his avowed, staunch political position as a Marxist and inspite of the sharp difference his view posed to the thought of Marxists such as Habermas and Gramsci, who saw revolutionary possibilities in the art of masses. (Jay, 1984, p.121).

What makes Adorno's aesthetic theory interestingly different from Langer's inspite of the concurrence of important points between the two, is that even while Adorno saw the work of art as autonomous, he brought to it his strong social concerns, which are conspicuous by their absence in Langer's aesthetic thought.

A Unique Concept of Mimesis

It becomes necessary at this point to return to the concept of "autonomy" as "autonomy from", and in this respect, we discover in Adorno a unique concept of aesthetic mimesis. In the history of aesthetic thought, the concept of mimesis has largely meant a representation of nature. The autonomy of art was, therefore, worked out as a change in the relation of art to natural or empirical reality: it meant an autonomy from natural reality, or a freedom from the mimetic function. Adorno formulates an entirely different meaning of mimesis. Mimesis meant to him the representation of socio-economic reality in art.

And the relation of art to socio-economic reality is highly problematic in his theory. This representation could be honest
and true, or it could be deceptive. In this respect, it is not art as autonomous or related, mimetic or non-mimetic that is of consequence to Adorno, but whether it is honest or deceptive. Secondly, art could not merely represent socio-economic reality, but had to exercise a critical competence. Thus, where Adorno accepts the mimetic character of art, he also asserts that the mimetic function must be accompanied by critical insight. Adorno wrote at great length about the increasing difficulties of such an enterprise in the historical circumstance of late capitalism in the West, but he never gave up the faith in its possibility.

Unlike George Lukacs, an eminent Marxist intellectual and literary critic, Adorno did not condemn modernity entirely, but, writes Jay,

"Adorno shared his distrust of those versions that seemed all too willing to mirror the reification of modern life without protest......(Jay, 1984, p.129).

Thus, the capacity for protest, resistance and criticism were important characteristics of the work of art, to Adorno. The 'reification' that Marxist critics of culture speak about is the reduction of all things to the status of commodities that can be exchanged in the economic sphere. Art, Adorno held, must resist such appropriation.

To my understanding then, in Adorno's theory, the universal in art faces the given historical situation rather than remaining isolated. It relates to offer criticism, but resists when threatened with absorption into the historical reality.
Adorno further elaborated that the work of art has certain qualities, inhering in it objectively, which are analogues of the tensions in social reality, and the work of art as a whole represents the whole of a society. Furthermore, its social content could not be seen as separate from its aesthetic quality. This would mean, to my understanding, that aesthetic quality in a work of art inherently represented the good in society, and that tension and resolution in art represented the same in the social sphere. This representation was functional even as the work of art remained purely aesthetic and thus autonomous.

We may note, therefore, that Adorno says about Beethoven's music:

"It is in fitting together under their own law, as becoming, negating, confirming themselves and the whole without looking outward, that his movements come to resemble the world whose forces move them; they do not do it by imitating that world". (Jay, 1984, p.142).

Jay quotes these words from Adorno's "Introduction to the Sociology of Music".

Against Totalization

Adorno was largely aware of the dangers of universal thought or "totalizations", as deconstructionist thinkers never fail to point out, later in the history of ideas.

To my understanding, these dangers consist in a central agency coming to dominate the whole structure, the elimination of differences within the whole leading to various injustices, a
false harmonizing without acknowledgement of tensions, and a closure of the whole preventing dynamic phenomena.

While Langer posited the work of art as a formal, unified whole and therefore autonomous, she still held it to be an analogue of organic and emotional human life. Adorno posits the work of art as whole and autonomous, but sees it as the analogue of human subjectivity and social reality.

For this reason, Adorno could never appreciate the portrayal of disjointed human subjectivity in art, as Walter Benjamin could. Martin Jay explains,

"Thus, in contrast to Benjamin, he had no use for Surrealism's anti-subjectivist use of juxtaposed images, which he saw as lifeless and static". (Jay, 1984, p.129).

In the beginning of his major work in Aesthetics, titled "Aesthetic Theory", first published in German in 1970, Adorno writes that the freedom of art newly discovered at the beginning of this century was quickly lost because artists began to redefine the rules and articulate new foundations of their art.

Actually, the newly gained autonomy of art was still dependent on one ideal, that of humanity, Adorno holds. "As society grew less humane, art became less autonomous " (Adorno, 1986, p.1). I presume Adorno refers here to the inhumanity resulting from the two world wars and the advancement of Western science and technology. That which expressed the ideal in humanity has lost its force. Even so, Adorno holds, "autonomy is an irrevocable aspect of art". (Adorno, 1986, p.1)
The question of the freedom or non-freedom of art cannot be resolved, in Adorno's view, by giving it a social role. Even so, what art is at a particular historical moment depends on that moment. Art should be free of functions external to itself, but simultaneously, Adorno holds, it changes with history. With reference to the changing character rather than an enduring essence of art, he writes:

"It is through its dynamic laws, not through some invariable principle that art can be understood. It is defined by its relation to what is different from art. This other makes it possible for us to arrive at a substantive understanding of the specifically artistic in art. It is this approach to art that alone meets the criteria of a materialistic and dialectical aesthetic, which evolves by segregating itself from its own matrix. Its law of motion and law of form are one and the same". (Adorno, 1986, p.4)

From this we see that Marxist materialism and dialectic social theory were basic presuppositions for Adorno, a framework he accepted prior to formulating an aesthetic theory. Accordingly, he saw the form of the work of art, though created independently, as related to forms of social life, and though he posited the artistic form as a whole, he also posited it as a dynamic one. Furthermore, the dynamics or unstable relations within a work of art corresponded to those obtaining in societies. Adorno never saw any facile resolutions of the
conflicting aspects of art that he posited. He writes, about the
dynamic character of art:

"Now, if something is conceived to be possible only as
an emergent phenomenon, it makes little sense to claim
simultaneously that it is integral and 'complete'. Here
is a dilemma from which art cannot extricate itself by
an effort of will". (Adorno, 1986, p.39).

Against Essentialism

Adorno did not hold any essence - spiritual, intentional,
ideal, any kind of absolutism - to be the basis of the autonomy
of art. For he says:

"Artists who think that the content of their works is
what they consciously put into them are naive and
rationalistic in the worst sense of the word. Brecht is
one of them...... What the vulgar Heideggerians call
'message' is something that can no more be squeezed out
of Shakespearian dramas than out of Beckett's. But the
increasing darkness is in turn a function of a change in
content. As negation of the absolute idea, content can
no longer be identified with reason in the manner of
idealism. Content is critical of the omnipotence of
reason, therefore it can no longer be rational in
accordance with the norms of discursive thinking. The
darkness of the absurd is the darkness of old surfacing
again in the new. This darkness has to be interpreted
rather than replaced by some artificial brightness or
This passage reveals Adorno's rejection of the absolute, as the universal substratum of culture. By "content", Adorno refers, of course, to the content of works of art. Like Langer and the Frankfurt school in general, this passage shows an awareness of the limitations of rationality in the sphere of art, or at least the need to acknowledge different kinds of reason. To my understanding, "the darkness of old" that Adorno speaks of is all the suffering of humanity and nature, all the unresolved problems in society that continue to creep into works of art. If art were to dispel this darkness and show itself as radiant, it would be false art, according to Adorno. It must be noted here that Adorno did also see the possibility of "light", in this context, when art, even in its expression of disharmonies and pain in society, holds out some utopian hope. What he warned against was an art that refused to acknowledge the real problems, and offered easy solace. Adorno's disillusionment with raitonality seen here is what he shared with the Frankfurt School's critique of the rationality of the Enlightenment.

With regard to enduring essence, on which an autonomy of art may be based, Adorno says:

"....If an artist were to root out all the time-related facets of his work, retaining only what he thinks is timeless, he could not thereby hope to achieve duration because he would be sacrificing the ground on which duration is constituted......People confuse what a rather dreadful nationalistic manifesto once called the
value-constancy of works of art—all that is dead, formal and conformist about them—with the hidden seeds of survival which do represent real duration." (Adorno, 1986, p.41).

Just when we think that Adorno is arguing for the ephemerality of all art and the impossibility of asserting the existence of anything that endures in art, he speaks of "hidden seeds of survival". He says, further:

"......Certain works of art of the highest calibre seem to want to lose themselves as it were in time in order to avoid becoming its prey........

If art were to discard the long demystified illusion of duration and incorporate into itself its mortality out of sympathy with the ephemeral, which is life, then it would live up to a concept of truth at the core of which is time rather than some enduring abstract essence.

"........The survival of disintegrated art is more than a phenomenon of cultural lag or in Marxist terms, an overly tardy dislocation of the superstructure. Art draws its power of resistance from the fact that the realization of materialism would also be the abolition of materialism, that is, of the domination of material interests" (Adorno, 1986, pp. 42,43).

Here we see the difficulties of keeping up with the turns Adorno's thought takes. In any case, it is clear that he values the historical content of works of art, as well as their
momentary liveliness as, paradoxically, their claim to lasting value.

The Ephemerality of Art

In the above quoted passage, we see that in Adorno's thought, art which acknowledges its own ephemerality and is oriented towards its own death, after having enacted its role in relation to a particular moment of history, is the kind of art later Western thinkers who are widely referred to as deconstructionists speak about. It is my view, if I may coin a term here, that there is a distinct "interflow" between Marxist aesthetics and the deconstructionist aesthetics that followed, their concerns about both art and social life having traces in each other. The above quoted passage supports such a view, and hence my related assertion that Adorno was an eminent proto-deconstructionist.

In Adorno's thought, the elusive absolute essence and the tendency to posit, rather, the passing of all things in time, is related to the Marxist materialist cosmology as well as social philosophy. But again, Adorno remains enigmatic, for, standing as he does in the Marxist heartland of the Frankfurt school, he speaks of a time to come when materialism will cease to be the dominating force in human life (and art as well, I presume).

The power of resistance Adorno attributes to art here is contributive to its autonomy. In his view, as I understand it, art resists eternal essence in order to retain its vitality; it submits to time precisely to escape its grasp, and it resists the
historical situation to which it relates precisely because it has an autonomous spirit capable of a dynamic towards future time.

Adorno is critical of the legacy of Greek aesthetic thought, which he holds should have been objective, given the general tenor of Greek thought, but failed, and rather submitted art to various social functions, and even allowed art to fall into the hands of ruling political powers. Thus, after all, Adorno does expect art and aesthetics to be objective. It may be political but not an instrument for an oppressive political power. He writes that Plato

".... hated poets for their mendicancy, ignoring the fact that poetic lies are part and parcel of the illusory quality of art. These are blemishes on the aesthetic theory of Plato, the first philosopher to reflect seriously on the concept of art. By contrast, the key notion of effective catharsis in Aristotle's "Poetics" has a less obvious link with the ruling interests. There is a connection just the same ......."

(Adorno, 1986, p.338)

Adorno is too sophisticated a thinker to misunderstand the "lies", the artistic distortion and irony of genuine cultural products. We see here that he concurs with Langer on the illusionary character of works of art, which the latter said, marks them as autonomous. While accepting this concept of art, Adorno, however, emphasizes its autonomy on the basis of certain other competence.
Though Adorno sees art as related to historical reality, he has no respect for art which is comforting, or offers any kind of substitute for the pleasures and sorrows of a given situation. For this reason he indicts Aristotle's concept of art as offering substitute gratification of pleasures, through sublimation and release of emotions through catharsis. Thus, in Adorno's theory, there obtains a highly complex concept of art which is, as I have tried to show, prescriptive of uncompromising autonomy within historicity.

Non-dominating Unified Form

Even as he was aware of the dangers of totalization, or universalism, Adorno saw something positive, or hopeful, in such a form, both in art and in society. He saw the possibility of a unified form which would not be dominating and would not aim at the destruction of that which is different, and therefore considered "other". This was particularly expressible in art: the wholeness of art is most apt to express non-dominating wholeness in society. Music was also particularly suited to the expression of this concept, and especially Beethoven's music of his middle period, Adorno held. (Jay, 1984, p.143)

In fact, Adorno came increasingly to believe that in art and aesthetics as a source of critical theory lay the only hope of revolutionary insight and action. He tended to choose aesthetics consciously, in preference to politics. He believed that genuine art contained a legitimate utopian potential for socio-political transformation of society. In this positive view of art, Adorno included the ability of art to express a tender relation between
man and nature, and to affirm the sensuous as well as the utopian or idealistic aspects of human life. Yet another competence Adorno attributed to art was the expression of the pain of humanity when all other avenues for such expression are closed.

In Adorno's theory, we note a new connotation of the age-old aesthetic term of mimesis, and furthermore, even a reversal of mimesis. He holds that in some future period of history, life will imitate the utopian possibilities expressed for long in art. In the final analysis, Adorno values the autonomy of art as "useless" or non-utilitarian objects created by humans. But his concept of the non-utilitarian nature of art also has a new nuance to it: art as autonomous offers critical resistance to the utilitarian world, and as such, harbours the potential of a world to come, which will engage in a reversed, mimetic relation to art.