An approach to literature that acknowledges the role of materiality in the reading process opens up various interpretive possibilities that may or may not be theoretically compatible. The work of Walter Benjamin points to the possibility of developing a critical conception of the literary text as the site of conflict between history and creative experience. From this standpoint, Theodor Adorno developed a tradition of interpretation that Benjamin explored only in a provisional way. This tradition would be aesthetic in some special sense, since it would take into account the perceptual residue that shapes our response to literature and establishes a negative link between art and history that traditional aesthetics fails to clarify. Jacques Derrida might seem to be an unlikely ally of this newly conceived version of aesthetic criticism. And yet, like the Frankfurt School theorists themselves, Derrida is perhaps equally concerned with how the remainders of art are no longer intelligible from a classically modern perspective. Conceived in post-Saussurean terms, Derrida’s approach to literature as writing indicates how language is traced with elements that point beyond the totality of its verbal functions. The present discussion is concerned with how both thinkers offer complementary paradigms that provide new ways of reading some of the signal achievements in modern literature.

**Adorno and modern aesthetics**

As the most impressive representative of Critical Theory in its mature phase, Adorno demonstrates how a return to Kant was necessary in a time when the Hegelian system had fallen into intellectual disrepute, but also how this same return could not be equivalent to a simple reaffirmation of subjectivity at the expense of ambiguity and discord. It is no incident that Adorno takes up the Kantian problematic in
aesthetic terms, rather than as an occasion for epistemological or ethical reflection. Various attempts to assimilate Kant to the philosophy of science have always tended to emphasize how the *Critique of Pure Reason* combined binary oppositions with a persistent, if muted, tendency toward cognitive realism. Adorno, however, was never primarily interested in Kant as a methodologist, but strove to examine the weaknesses of a philosophical position that was constantly over-extending itself. Hence, Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, which was intended to provide a bridge between nature and freedom, occupies a special place in Adorno’s later work, which concerns the limitations of positivist accounts of the human world but also questions the possibility of grounding the subject in a realm that excludes passionate life.

In his monumental *Aesthetic Theory* (*Ästhetische Theorie*, 1970), Adorno argues that both Kant and Freud attempt to separate the aesthetic realm from empirical reality. Kant considers art to be formally constituted, whereas Freud tends to reduce its significance to psychology. While classical readings of Kant and Freud would marginalize the question of the subject in favor of art, Adorno argues that this question guides the two positions on a more crucial level: “For both, the artwork exists only in relation to its observer or its producer.” What Adorno chooses to emphasize instead is the way that the subject is marked with struggle and incompleteness, which filter into the work of art itself.

In re-considering Kant’s legacy, Adorno indicates how the difference between aesthetics and ethics cannot be overcome through recourse to a metaphysical conception of subjectivity: “Through a mechanism to which his moral philosophy is subordinate, even Kant is compelled to think of the existing individual ontically, more than is compatible with the idea of the transcendental subject.”¹ Art becomes the site of an aesthetic subject who cannot be identified with either the practical will, conceived along moral lines, or as the servant of self-interest in a social aggregate. Adorno also contends that art transcends action in the narrow sense when it negates the present in favor of a

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