Epilogue

This book has traced the scientific, aesthetic and literary discourse on 'primitive thinking,' which exercised a decisive influence on how human beings, history, culture, and art were conceived in the early twentieth century. To this end, I have examined the paradigm of the 'primitive' in theories of art, language, and metaphor, as well as in texts representing the human sciences: ethnology, developmental psychology, and psychopathology. The concept of 'primitive thinking' served not only to buttress each field's claims of scientific validity but also to shed light on putative origins by pairing indigenous cultures with the figure of the child and the mentally ill. All three functioned as figurations of humanity's first beginnings, representing different aspects of 'primitive thinking,' e. g., myth and community, play and illusion, delusion and protest. Aesthetic theories of the period took up these aspects to develop their own accounts of the essence and purpose of art. In particular, art scholars as well as artists believed they could solve the riddle of creativity by understanding its workings as a survival of 'primitive thinking'.

At the same time, this book has historicized and contextualized these theories, revealing the questions and processes by which they were governed. At frequent junctures and on multiple registers, their proximity to literary operations comes to light. This is why in this study the 'primitive' is defined not only as a paradigm and figure of thought but also as a scientific reverie or *poème*. In fact, the deconstruction of the concept of 'primitive thinking' began within the field of ethnology itself, notably by Claude Lévi-Strauss, who both critically traced the emergence of primitivist discourse and at the same time perpetuated it in his praise of the "savage mind."[1] The convergence of scientific texts with literature, however, can also be read as a resistance to their usual form and methodology and, in this respect, as an opportunity to *create* the alterity postulated in the texts, yet – as a result of imperialist, pedagogical, or psychiatric colonialization – hardly still in existence at the time or at any rate only marginally appreciated by many scholars. While this resistance holds only in part for texts

1 See, for example, Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship, Totemism, The Savage Mind*, as well as Lienhardt, "Modes of Thought." Regarding the persistence of the paradigm of the 'primitive' in the work even of its critics, see Hsu, "Rethinking the Concept 'Primitive'"; Fabian, *Time and the Other*; Kuper, *The Invention of Primitive Society*; and Derrida on Lévi-Strauss, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 112–115; for a critique of Derrida's critique, cf. Därmann, *Fremde Monde der Vernunft*, chapter 8.

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from the human sciences and art studies, it thoroughly applies to the literary turn explicitly carried out in writings by erstwhile scientists such as Gottfried Benn and Robert Musil.

The discourse of 'primitive thinking' stands in the context of an ambivalent search for origins that seeks to secure its own beginnings in the 'primitive,' but nevertheless feels compelled to demarcate itself from the latter to stabilize its own identity. At the same time, this discourse also expresses a longing for the archaic, in which the 'primitive' functions as a utopian alternative to modern society. Yet, as I have shown above, the 'primitive' served not only as a story of origins and critical utopia but also provided an image of the present, a signature of a "disenchanted" modernity that, in Max Weber's phrase, was nevertheless experienced mythically, exemplifying how, as Alfred Döblin puts it, "Prometheanism" turns back into "primitivism."[2] In view of this diagnosis, writers such as Robert Musil and Walter Benjamin in their treatments of 'primitive thinking' sought to sketch the concept of a critical re-enchantment: instead of ferrying readers off into enchanted worlds of the past, they placed them in a skeptical distance from the "other conditions" (Musil) and "féeries" (Benjamin) of modernity.

This is also what Theodor W. Adorno expected from Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, which he once described as the most important philosophical undertaking of the epoch.[3] Adorno was finely attuned to the "archaizing tendency" of associating myth with a yearning for the enchanted world of nineteenth-century commodities and a classless society of prehistory. (This occurs in the works of Ernst Bloch, as shown in the Introduction.) Instead, he holds, myth must be exposed as the "alienated character of the commodity itself" and repeatedly reminds Benjamin in his letters of the 1930s of his own (i.e., Benjamin's) conviction that the 'primitive archaic' is indeed the condition of the newest, thus comprising "objective constellations in which the condition of society finds itself represented."[4] Indeed, Benjamin's early notes on the *Arcades Project* make it clear that he immersed himself in the nineteenth-century dreamworld precisely in order to awaken from it and thus bring about "the dissolution of 'mythology' into the space of history."[5] At the same time, Adorno recognized his correspondent's desire to salvage procedures attributed to figurations of the 'primitive' (mimetic assimilation, for instance) and put them in the service of demystifica-

2 Alfred Döblin, "Prometheus und das Primitive (1938)," in *Schriften zur Politik und Gesellschaft* (Freiburg: Walter, 1972), 364. Cf. Introduction, 18–19.

3 Adorno to Benjamin, 20 May 1935, in *Complete Correspondence*, 84.

4 Adorno to Benjamin, 2–4 August 1935, in *Complete Correspondence*, 110.

5 Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 458.

tion.[6] Benjamin famously speaks of the "axe of reason" with which the nineteenth century is to be "cleared of the undergrowth of delusion and myth."[7]

Taking distance from the "féeries" of modernity in this way begins with textual operations. Literary primitivism turned features considered central to 'primitive thinking' into formal innovations like associative narration, literal treatments of metaphor, or figures of participation. This holds for authors who approach the phantasm of the 'primitive' in an affirmative manner, such as Robert Müller and Gottfried Benn, as well as for writers who, despite their fascination, are critical of it. In addition, the critical impulse also generated its own innovative methods of writing. Examples include Robert Musil's essayistic style, which interrupts linguistic mimesis of the 'primitive,' and Walter Benjamin's use of bricolage and gesture in his montages of citations.

The literary texts treated in this book thus never resort to 'primitive thinking' as mere imitation. In the best case, literature under the sign of the 'primitive' means not just adaptation, but also critical engagement with 'primitive thinking' and its discourse. The only re-enchantment these texts promise is one from which, as Benjamin demanded, it is necessary to "awaken."

6 Adorno and Horkheimer also pursue this angle in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (trans. Edmund Jephcott [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002]) when they insist on the proximity between word and thing and subject and object in the context of magic (7). The work of art inherits this dynamic and, in "renunciation of external effects," shows "the appearance of the whole in the particular" and potentially affords insight superior to "conceptual knowledge" (14).

7 Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 456 – 457.