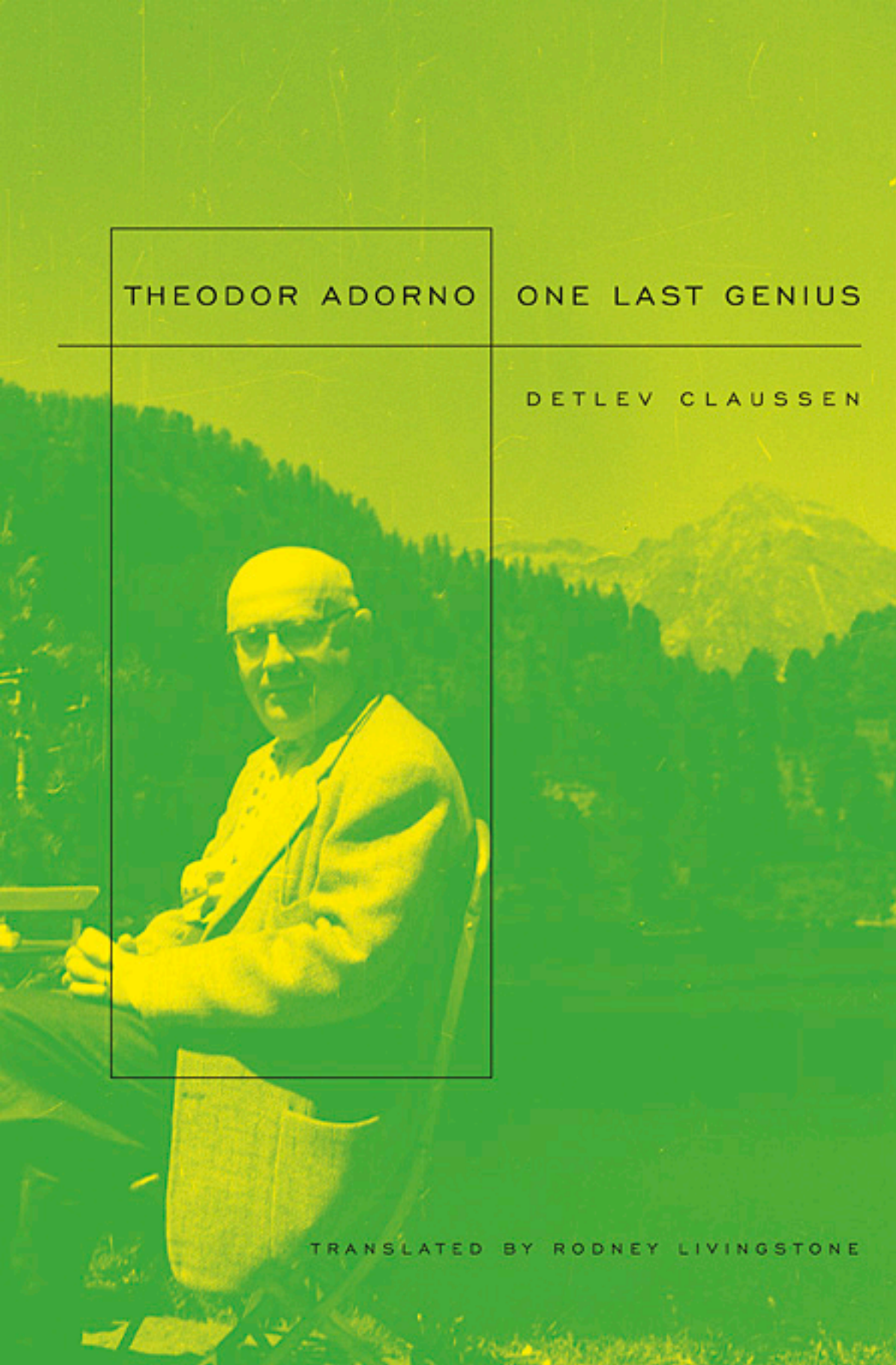


THEODOR ADORNO

ONE LAST GENIUS

DETLEV CLAUSSEN

TRANSLATED BY RODNEY LIVINGSTONE



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Theodor W. Adorno



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THEODOR W. ADORNO

————— *One Last Genius*

DETLEV CLAUSSEN

*Translated by Rodney Livingstone*

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For my mother-in-law, Erna Leszczyńska, and my mother, Carla Claussen,  
both of whom have helped me to understand the twentieth century through  
*experience*.

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Revising a manuscript at Kettenhofweg 123

Lecture Hall VI in the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University, Frankfurt

Adorno in 1962

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## How to Read This Book

The aim of this book is to help Adorno's texts speak for themselves and emerge in their original form from behind the secondary literature that has proliferated endlessly. Each chapter is designed so that it can also be read on its own. Adorno's works are interpreted as a palimpsest, works full of overlapping ideas. References to all sources cited in the text can be found by those who wish to inspect them critically, or extend their reading, in the endnotes or at the end of the book under the heading "Sources."



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*Like most so-called child prodigies, I am a very late developer and I still feel  
today that whatever I truly exist for still lies before me.*

THEODOR W. ADORNO TO ERNST BLOCH, 26 JULY 1962

*I feel very strongly that in my case work is a drug that helps me to overcome  
what would otherwise be an almost unbearable melancholy and loneliness. I  
fear that this is the secret of my so-called productivity.*

31 MARCH 1960, NOTEBOOK F

*. . . and conceive the better state as one in which people could be different  
without fear.*

MINIMA MORALIA, 1945

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## 1. | Instead of an Overture: *No Heirs*

The news of his death came suddenly and quite unexpectedly. People had just started to breathe freely again in Frankfurt after a turbulent summer semester. In mid-July 1969 Theodor Adorno and his wife, Gretel, had escaped from the usual sultry Frankfurt summer heat and, as he had done for the previous two decades, withdrawn to the Swiss mountains “like old mountain cattle changing their pasture.”<sup>1</sup> Even at this distance he was able to deal with essential administrative matters and correspondence. On Wednesday, 6 August, a letter to Herbert Marcuse was being typed up in the office of the Institute for Social Research. The secretarial staff were waiting for alterations and a final approval from Zermatt. After a phone call to the Hotel Bristol, Adorno’s secretary in Frankfurt, Hertha Georg, was told that “Herr Professor” had “gone to the hospital.” It sounded to her as if this was nothing more than an excursion to the Magic Mountain. But toward noon, definitive word arrived in Frankfurt from Gretel Adorno. By Saturday a death notice signed by her appeared in the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, stating simply, “Theodor W. Adorno, born on 11 September 1903, died quietly in his sleep on 6 August 1969.”

The German public was quite unprepared for the news of Adorno’s death in Switzerland. The obituaries lying in the file drawers of newspaper editors had not been updated. Most of the people who might have been entrusted with the task of writing a fresh one were on vacation. Unusually, no one rushed to the fore to make a public comment. The stormy political quarrels with his students that Adorno had endured in 1969 seemed obscure and had never been clarified. The public, which was not particularly well informed, appeared to expect disturbances during the funeral. Although it was the middle of the summer holiday season, almost two thousand mourners turned out for the funeral in the Frankfurt Central Cemetery. Famous faces could be seen following the coffin, accompanying Gretel Adorno. Not just Max Horkheimer, the man who had given a name to the Critical Theory that Adorno had made world-famous. Other old acquaintances were present, too: Ernst Bloch, aged but still very alert, and also Alfred Sohn-Rethel. Adorno had been exchanging ideas with them since the 1920s. The radical students, whom some people regarded as being

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responsible for Adorno's early death, quietly mourned their teacher. Herbert Marcuse was the first to find the right words: "There is no one who can represent Adorno and speak for him."<sup>2</sup>

Adorno's death left a vacuum. Something had disappeared irrevocably. But people were at a loss for words to describe this feeling. Was it because they were so close to this departed genius that they found themselves unable to speak? Adorno himself had skewered the clichés of conventional biography in his writings. He had described the professional gravediggers of the "Culture Industry" so precisely that hardly any space remained for spontaneous statements. His older friend Horkheimer, who had nevertheless outlived him, had no doubt in this moment of loss that the term "genius" was appropriate as a description of Adorno.<sup>3</sup> Knowing as we do how close the two men were during their exile in America, it is inconceivable that he could have been unaware of Adorno's reservations about the traditional concept of genius: "If anything is to be salvaged of this concept it must be stripped away from its crude equation with the creative subject, who through vain exuberance bewitches the work of art into a document of its maker and thus diminishes it."<sup>4</sup> A history of Adorno's life and work that simply ignores his cutting criticism of the biographies of geniuses cannot be written in good faith. One way of diminishing Adorno's work, one that has only become popular since his death, has been to revere him as an artist while spurning him as a scholar. During his lifetime, his critics mostly took the opposite course: they represented him as a failed artist, leaving him to preside over theory in all its grayness.

Readers who take a look at Adorno's last great work, his *Aesthetic Theory*—the work from which this quotation comes—will not need to search far before coming across the name of Goethe. Goethe's name is intimately connected not only with the bourgeois concept of genius but also with the model of a successful life capable of being captured in a biography. For the generation that, like Adorno, was born in the long bourgeois century between 1815 and 1914, Goethe stands at the beginning of this bourgeois epoch, to which even someone born in 1903 could feel he belonged. By the end of this period, of course, Goethe's works had long since been buried beneath the Goethe cult dedicated to the worship of the artistic genius. "This suits crude bourgeois consciousness as much because it implies a work ethic that glorifies pure human creativity regardless of its aim as because the viewer is relieved of taking any trouble with the object itself.

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The viewer is supposed to be satisfied with the personality of the artist—essentially a kitsch biography. Those who produce important works of art are not demigods but fallible, often neurotic and damaged, individuals.”<sup>5</sup> Adorno’s fierce criticism of the bourgeois world and its religion of art does not end up as an ill-tempered rejection of a superannuated form of life. “The element of truth in the concept of genius is to be sought in the object, in what is open, not confined by repetition.”<sup>6</sup> It is not only a Goethe who can be measured against the yardstick of such a concept of genius; Horkheimer’s reference to his deceased younger friend as a genius in “an age of transition” likewise appears entirely appropriate.<sup>7</sup>

Goethe recurs constantly in Horkheimer’s writings, too, as the epitome of the successful individual. In 1961 he wrote in the “Afterword” to his portraits from German Jewish intellectual history: “Origins shine through the thoughts and feelings of the adult human being. Even Goethe was recognizably a citizen of Frankfurt.”<sup>8</sup> Reverence for Goethe, which at that time was still accompanied by a knowledge of his works, continued to play an important role among the educated German middle classes throughout the nineteenth century. The Jews in Germany, however, who took a positive view of assimilation and who experienced their social ascent into the middle classes at this time, saw in Goethe’s life a promise of human community made real. The young Felix Mendelssohn, whom Goethe loved, set the latter’s poems to music. Germanness on the road to humanity: even in Goethe’s lifetime this utopia was sustained by Rahel Varnhagen and Felix’s aunt Dorothea Veit, who later became Dorothea Schlegel, and who had lived for over ten years next door to the house in which Adorno was born, in Schöne Aussicht. Schopenhauer, too, who was highly thought of by Horkheimer though judged more coolly by Adorno, maintained sporadic contact with Goethe and lived in a house redolent of upper-middle-class affluence on the same street. The image of Goethe must have been a constant presence in Adorno’s youth in Frankfurt.

A familiarity with Goethe’s *Poetry and Truth* belonged to the canon of bourgeois knowledge. Its title had acquired common currency as an index of the questionable nature of the relationship between autobiography and truth. Many biographers of Goethe have sought to legitimate their own dealings with the life of that genius by drawing upon the vulgar bourgeois idea of a commerce with truth as distorted by self-interest. Goethe himself talked about the impossibility of biography in the preface to his book:

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For the chief goal of biography appears to be this: to present the subject in his temporal circumstances, to show how these both hinder and help him, how he uses them to construct his view of man and the world, and how he, providing he is an artist, poet or author, mirrors them again for others. But something nearly impossible is required for this, namely, that the individual know himself and his century—himself, as a constant entity in the midst of all the circumstances, and the century, as a force pulling him along willy-nilly, directing and developing him to such an extent that one may well say he would have been a different person if born ten years before or after, as far as his own cultural development and his effect on others are concerned.<sup>9</sup>

“To know himself and his century”: this scarcely attainable ideal of the bourgeois individual was not regarded as a hurdle to the production of large-scale biographies by successful writers of the Weimar Republic such as Emil Ludwig and Stefan Zweig. In an article in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in 1930, Siegfried Kracauer, Adorno’s mentor during his early years in Frankfurt, referred to biography as the “modern bourgeois art form,” as distinct from the old biographies from the “period before the war” which he thought of as “rare works of scholarly learning.”<sup>10</sup> A sense that the old bourgeois society had now become a thing of the past was widely shared. It became standard for the new generation of intellectuals to criticize biographies as the mere product of fashion. Toward the end of the Weimar Republic, conscious of the growing sense of crisis, Kracauer began to talk about biography as an escapist phenomenon surrounded by an “aura of departure.” Kracauer himself tried his hand at biography at a time of crisis, when he was fleeing from the Nazis. He wrote *Orpheus in Paris: Offenbach and the Paris of His Time*, a book which Adorno did not much admire. On 1 October 1950 Kracauer reported to Adorno that he had brought back chests full of manuscripts and old letters from his period of exile in Paris—including texts by Adorno. “But the main point is that this rummaging around in the past, with heaps of letters on top, aroused in me an irresistible desire to write my memoirs—in truly grand style, I mean. But that would be a luxury that I shall perhaps never be able to afford.”<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, he was right about this. A book that aims to depict Adorno’s life and work will be forced to dispense with such a document from Kracauer’s hand. Moreover, it is a matter of regret that even today, permission has still not been granted to quote from important letters written by Adorno to Kracauer.

Writers such as Kracauer and Adorno noticed early on that the emer-

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gence of psychoanalysis in the twentieth century both inspired biography and raised questions about it. Sigmund Freud felt distrustful of his admirer Stefan Zweig; he strongly advised the latter's namesake, Arnold Zweig, to avoid writing biographies of Nietzsche and even Freud himself. In a letter from Vienna on 31 May 1936 he wrote: "Whoever becomes a biographer commits himself to lies, dissimulation, hypocrisy, whitewashing, and even to concealing his own lack of understanding, for biographical truth is not to be had, and if it were, it would not be usable."<sup>12</sup> Yet he was unable to refuse the request of his disciple Marie Bonaparte that he write a preface for her great biography of Poe: "Such enterprises should not explain the poet's genius, but should show what motives stimulated it and what subject matter fate presented him with."<sup>13</sup> Perhaps the most successful psychoanalytical biography of an artist has come from the pen of Kurt R. Eissler, who emigrated to the United States from Vienna in 1938 and who published a two-volume study of Goethe in 1963. This book confirms the presence of "the loving reverence for Goethe . . . in the milieu of assimilated Jewry in Vienna" so familiar to Adorno. The well-documented life of Goethe seems to provide the ideal material for an artist's biography, and one that was familiar to more than just a literary elite. In Eissler's unique analysis, Goethe appears as the exemplary genius—a category of human being "with the ability to recreate the human cosmos or a part of it in a significant manner and one with which earlier attempts at re-creation cannot be compared."<sup>14</sup> This statement really applies to Adorno as well, and it is for this reason that the present study aims to let his texts speak for themselves instead of using biographical information to explain Adorno's works.

Even in American exile the Frankfurt sociologists continued to be fiercely critical of the mass production of biographies as a key to understanding social conditions that were relatively advanced in comparison to those in Europe. Leo Löwenthal, who was the only native Frankfurter besides Adorno in the circle of the Institute for Social Research, produced a study, "Biographies in Popular Magazines," in the early 1940s that stimulated Adorno to write a lengthy letter to him dated 25 November 1942:

At bottom, the concept of life as a meaningful unity unfolding from within itself has ceased to possess any reality, much like the individual himself, and the ideological function of biographies consists in demonstrating to people with reference to various models that something like life still exists, with all the em-

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phatic qualities of life. And the task of biography is to prove this in particular empirical contexts which those people who no longer have any life can easily claim as their own. Life itself, in a highly abstract form, has become ideology, and the very abstractness that distinguishes it from older, fuller conceptions of life is what makes it practicable (the vitalist and existentialist concepts of life are stages on this path).<sup>15</sup>

The routine production of biographies exerted an idiosyncratic charm that opened Adorno's eyes to the possibility of exploiting autobiographical elements in his own writings. His collection of aphorisms titled *Minima Moralia*, which dates back to 1944, bears the programmatic subtitle *Reflections from Damaged Life*.

*Minima Moralia* is an Adorno text that bears repeated rereading, and like the most famous book by Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, it encapsulates experience at a moment in history that calls all traditional experience of the world into question. The reason why it is no longer possible to experience world-historical events in the Goethean sense is formulated "out of the firing-line" in *Minima Moralia* in acknowledgment of Karl Kraus's efforts to comprehend the "destruction of mankind" in the First World War. Every sentence in these books by Adorno and Horkheimer acquires its argumentative force from their consciousness of a world-historical catastrophe that will leave nothing unchanged: "Despair has the accent of irrevocability not because things cannot improve, but because it draws the past too into its vortex."<sup>16</sup> The appalling death of his friend Walter Benjamin during his flight from the National Socialists reverberates in these lines. In his reflections on Kafka, in whom Benjamin, as a connoisseur of Goethe, detected the historical shift, Adorno attempted to think through the implications of what his deceased friend had anticipated with his own suicide: "As in Kafka's twisted narratives, what perished there was that which had provided the criterion of experience—life lived out to its end. Gracchus is the consummate refutation of the possibility banished from the world: to die after a long and fulfilled life."<sup>17</sup> Adorno dated his "Notes on Kafka" to the years 1942–1953, as if he wished to document his contemporaneity precisely. The essays he collected in *Prisms* and published in 1955 speak with a clarity that made him many enemies in post-National Socialist Germany. The historical context in which this interpretation of Kafka is to be read is made quite clear: "In the concentration camps, the boundary between life and death was eradicated. A middle ground was created, inhabited by living skeletons and putrefying bodies, victims un-

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able to take their own lives, Satan's laughter at the hope of abolishing death."<sup>18</sup>

Adorno's most famous saying, "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric," is rooted in this context, one that reappears in his last great publication, his "fat child,"<sup>19</sup> that is, *Negative Dialectics*, under the heading "After Auschwitz." If we have to ask the question "whether after Auschwitz you can go on living,"<sup>20</sup> then the question of the story of an individual life, of a biography, seems utterly obsolete. The experience of the loss of experience is one of the oldest motifs of Critical Theory, one also articulated as early as the 1920s by outsiders such as Kracauer and Benjamin, beyond the circle around Max Horkheimer. Adorno turned this motif into a touchstone of the philosophy of history of Critical Theory. To know oneself and one's century, Goethe's yardstick for biography, holds good for literature as well as for theory. If we ignore the devaluation of experience, it will prove impossible to tell the story either of individuals or of the century as a whole. Like Kracauer, Benjamin regarded the First World War as the crucial turning point in the experience of a generation: "A generation that had gone to school in horse-drawn streetcars now stood under the open sky in a landscape where nothing remained unchanged but the clouds and, beneath those clouds, in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, fragile human being."<sup>21</sup> Adorno's childhood in Frankfurt around 1910 echoes Benjamin's childhood in Berlin around 1900.

Adorno was one of the younger actors to share in his generation's experience of this transition, even though he was too young to take an active part in the war itself. The key aphorism in *Minima Moralia*, the fragment "Out of the Firing-Line," which he wrote in California in 1944, develops Benjamin's ideas of 1928 about the loss of experience in and after the First World War, the inflation, and the crisis in the global economy:

But the Second War is as totally divorced from experience as is the functioning of a machine from the movement of the body, which only begins to resemble it in pathological states. Just as the war lacks continuity, history, an "epic" element, but seems rather to start anew from the beginning in each phase, so it will leave behind no permanent, unconsciously preserved image in the memory. Everywhere, with each explosion, it has breached the barrier against stimuli beneath which experience, the lag between a healing forgetting and a healing recollection, forms. Life has changed into a timeless succession of shocks, interspaced with empty, paralyzed intervals. But nothing, perhaps, is more ominous for the future than the fact that, quite literally, these things will soon be



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past thinking on, for each trauma of the returning combatants, each shock not inwardly absorbed, is a ferment of future destruction.<sup>22</sup>

Adorno's life, reflected in his writings and his friendships, cannot be narrated without the history of the twentieth century. The historian Eric Hobsbawm has coined the memorable expression "the short century" in contrast with the long bourgeois era from 1815 to 1914. Adorno's childhood falls within what had been up to then the longest period of peace in modern European history, but there can be no doubt that what we think of as his century must be the more recent age of contradictions for which it is hard to find an appropriate description. Hobsbawm speaks of the "Age of Extremes." Extremes are indeed prominent: an age of mass misery and unimaginable excess, an age of totalitarian dictatorships and permissive societies, a period of the most terrible wars and a long, sustained peace.<sup>23</sup> The period that included Adorno's death is vividly described by Hobsbawm as the "Golden Age" of the century, a period characterized by sustained economic growth and the worldwide expansion of a consumer lifestyle. The Critical Theorists attempted to grasp the unity of the age in this simultaneous manifestation of living experience and social change. According to their diagnosis, the century has done irreparable damage to the individual. In the present book I attempt to take account of the limitations on individual experience by emphasizing the biographical aspects contained in the testimony of Adorno's contemporaries. In retrospect we can see that we are dealing with the last generation to write letters and to leave behind documents of human relationships. Adorno's life and works can also be revealed through the history of his friendships.

The Critical Theorists, Adorno among them, were extremely distrustful of autobiographical statements. At first glance their writings appear to contain none. Nevertheless, the bourgeois tradition of the public appreciation of friends—in birthday tributes, reviews, and obituaries—can be regarded as legitimate sources of autobiographical information. An obituary for Kracauer in 1967 provides information about Adorno's youth; a congratulatory notice on Horkheimer's seventieth birthday sheds light on Adorno's years as a student. Adorno cryptically formulates the differences he perceived between himself and his older friend Horkheimer, the founder of Critical Theory, in an "Open Letter" he published in 1965 in *Die Zeit*, which at the time was the weekly paper favored by the educated West German middle class:

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But our experiences did not run in parallel. . . . Your primary experience was your indignation about injustice. To transform this into a knowledge of social antagonisms, and in particular your reflections on a practice that was explicitly intended to coincide with theory, forced you in the direction of philosophy as the unremitting rejection of ideology. In contrast, I was an artist, a musician, by both origin and early training, but I was inspired by a desire to give an account of art and its possibilities today that should include objective factors, a sense of the inadequacy of a naïvely aesthetic stance in the face of social tendencies.<sup>24</sup>

In the same way, even public documents need to be decoded if we are to grasp their autobiographical implications. Their meaning is not self-evident. The exiles commonly employed a “slave language” to express, indirectly or in a coded form, thoughts that in earlier days had been uttered openly. Its purpose was to enable them to speak to one another in a foreign land without attracting the attention of the police. It was a language that Adorno never fully abandoned in later years.

In emigration, letter writing had perforce to replace face-to-face discussions. This gives posterity the opportunity to gain an insight into the ideas and feelings of the correspondents that would have been irretrievably lost in the absence of such letters. Of course, these documents need to be handled sensitively: many letters have gone missing, and some have not been released for publication. Moreover, even though those that have survived are communications between friends, they are sometimes couched in diplomatic terms. The self-conscious community of friends, a supra-individual “we,” has been an integral part of the history of utopian ideas ever since the Enlightenment. Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister* characterizes the image of the good society as a community of fraternal émigrés preparing to depart for America. There is a remarkable statement in the decisive letter of 27 November 1937 in which Adorno writes to Walter Benjamin, who was in Paris, that he was proposing to leave Europe for good so as to work with Horkheimer in New York: “The fact that we have no ‘heirs’ rather fits in with the general catastrophic situation.”<sup>25</sup> The utopia of artists and émigrés that Goethe had conceived at the beginning of the bourgeois era is now transformed by the blows inflicted by the actual course of history into a picture of catastrophe, a premonition of annihilation. The same sentiment reappears in a sociologically more precise form in Adorno’s *Notes on Kafka*, a companion piece to Benjamin’s great essay on Kafka, where he writes, “The horror, however, consists in the fact that the bourgeois was unable to find a successor.”<sup>26</sup>

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The emotionally charged relations between Adorno and his students will be incomprehensible to anyone who is unfamiliar with this background. He experienced teacher-pupil relationships for the first time after his return from exile, since he did no teaching in either England or the United States. On 3 January 1949 Adorno wrote to Leo Löwenthal from Frankfurt: “My seminar is like a Talmud school—I wrote to Los Angeles that it was as if the ghosts of the murdered Jewish intellectuals had entered the German students. Slightly uncanny. But for that very reason it was also homely, in the genuine Freudian meaning of the word.”<sup>27</sup> Adorno thought of his return to Germany as part of a common project, one that he calls to mind once again in the “Open Letter” of 1965:

Once we had finished the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, a book that has continued to be our philosophical benchmark, you turned your energies as an academic and organizer to the task of teaching students how to grasp the incomprehensible fact that became known to us in its full implications only toward the end of the war. You started from the insight that if a repetition of the horror is to be prevented, an understanding of the mechanisms at work will be of greater benefit than remaining silent or freezing in impotent indignation. The same motives persuaded you to return to Germany and rebuild the Institute for Social Research, whose director you had been before the Hitler dictatorship.<sup>28</sup>

Horkheimer and Adorno attracted generations of students who longed to discover credible authorities in the landscape of a restored West German society. The ranks of Adorno’s listeners undoubtedly produced many of the political activists who were involved in the large-scale conflicts that arose during the student unrest in the second half of the 1960s. Herbert Marcuse was right to remind Adorno of this on 5 April 1969: “We are in a poor position to deny that these students have been influenced by us (and by you perhaps most of all).”<sup>29</sup> Adorno’s last letter to Marcuse, dated 6 August, a letter he never had time to sign, contains the statement: “I am the last person to underestimate the merits of the student movement; it has disrupted the smooth transition to the totally administered world. But it contains a grain of insanity in which a future totalitarianism is implicit.”<sup>30</sup>

In an interview with *Der Spiegel* on 11 August, Horkheimer, considering the question from a distance, gave a more positive gloss to the relations between Adorno and his students: “The students resisted him at various points, and they also protested against him. But at the same time, not a few of them knew very well what he stood for, and they retained a certain affec-

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tion for him notwithstanding all their protests. Needless to say, he was deeply hurt by their demonstrations. On the other hand, when he talked with them individually, they often said things to him that gave him great pleasure.<sup>31</sup> The dramatic mood that overcame Adorno in the summer of 1969 was intensified by the conflict with students whom he greatly respected for the most part and of whom he felt proud when they declared that they were his pupils. He was upset by the quarrel with Herbert Marcuse, which threatened to cast a shadow over his memories of the community of exiles, particularly since Marcuse had himself reacted with annoyance to some disparaging remarks Horkheimer had made to journalists. Adorno's friendship with Horkheimer remained for him the last utopian relationship, apart from family ties: "From you I have learned solidarity, a concept that has seeped from politics into private life. . . . We are utterly free, you and I, from the illusion that the private person might achieve in isolation what has failed in the public realm."<sup>32</sup> Even earlier, following the traumas of the Second World War, Adorno had thought of the childless marriage as the degenerate form of the bourgeois family. As late as 1955 he had drawn attention to the utopia of the free family from Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, to "the confirmed idea of permanence," "a form of the intimate and happy community of individuals that protects them from barbarism without doing violence to the nature that is preserved within it. Such a family, however, can no more be imagined than any other social utopia."<sup>33</sup>

Individuality was regarded as the possibility and the promise of the bourgeois world. The motif of childhood that seemed to promise everything, and that can be found in Goethe's *Poetry and Truth*, recurs in Benjamin and also in the late Adorno—but the experience of the century belies it. The negativity that became the keynote of Adorno's post-1945 writings can be perceived as the hallmark of the terror of the century. The disappearance of individuality converts the self-determined autobiography into an unsustainable fiction. Chance decides more than life and death. As early as *Minima Moralia*, we find an idea that is by no means peculiar to Adorno: "Freedom has contracted to pure negativity, and what in the days of *art nouveau* was known as a beautiful death has shrunk to the wish to curtail the infinite abasement of living and the infinite torment of dying, in a world where there are far worse things to fear than death."<sup>34</sup> This idea, dating from 1944, reflects a dream about living on beyond the end of the world, a dream that became a lived reality for Adorno. In an essay of 1955,

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“Wird Spengler recht behalten?” (Will Spengler Turn Out to Be Right?), Adorno once again notes in connection with this dream that what seems to be absolutely personal is in fact universal: “We only have any chance at all of withstanding the experiences of recent decades if we do not forget for a moment the paradox that despite everything, we are still alive.”<sup>35</sup>

Unlike Goethe, Adorno formulates something that is “scarcely attainable,” namely, the ever-present experience of the century that birth, marriage, and death have now been abolished as the cornerstones that give meaning to a bourgeois biography. The awareness that “a zone in which it is impossible to die is also the no-man’s-land between man and thing”<sup>36</sup> had become reality in the concentration camps; it also sheds light on the history that had preceded it and is seemingly unconnected with it. The notion that the past can be modified by the present belongs to the inventory of ideas contained in Benjamin’s posthumous *On the Concept of History*, without which the self-image of the group around Horkheimer after 1941 cannot be understood. All the more shocking is the concluding sentence of a reflection that Adorno dates to the period 1946–1947: “But he who dies in despair has lived his whole life in vain.”<sup>37</sup> Gretel Adorno, who was more than just superficially familiar with her husband’s philosophical thinking, must have been aware of the contrast when she wrote in the notice announcing Adorno’s death, “Theodor W. Adorno, born on 11 September 1903, passed away peacefully on 6 August 1969.”

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## 2. | The House in Schöne Aussicht: A Frankfurt Childhood around 1900

*The magical power to manipulate childhood is the strength of the weak.*

THEODOR W. ADORNO, "THE GEORGE-HOFMANNSTHAL  
CORRESPONDENCE, 1891–1906"

One glance at the street known as Schöne Aussicht is enough to see that it has changed. This change is not simply due to the bombing of Frankfurt Old Town during the Second World War, as one is seduced into believing by what one has seen and heard. Admittedly, what has survived includes all sorts of things that lie beneath the earth's surface. The section of the river Main embankment in Frankfurt where Adorno's great-grandfather established his wine merchant's business under the name Bernhard Wiesengrund in 1864 had been built up in 1792 and is still furrowed by deep cellar vaults which provided outstanding storage facilities for wine at the time. A local proverb testifies to this tradition: "In Frankfurt there is more wine in the cellars than water in the wells." The old blue files of the Frankfurt city council contain a petition to the senate in 1867 in which Bernhard Wiesengrund applied for permission to transfer his business to Frankfurt am Main from Dettelbach in Lower Franconia, where it had been established in 1822. The "Register of Old Frankfurt Companies" of 1926 recorded the centenary celebrations of the export-import business of Bernhard Wiesengrund on 25 July 1922. The firm's address, Schöne Aussicht 7, had remained unchanged since 1864. A file card in the Frankfurt tax office notes that the last owner of the business was Adorno's father, Oscar Alexander Wiesengrund, who had been born in 1870. It bears a stamp with the laconic inscription, "Business ceased on 31.12.38—deregistered on 11.4.39."

If we look back from the middle of the twentieth century, the picture of Schöne Aussicht clouds over. As early as the onset of the Nazi period, Adorno's friend Walter Benjamin attempted to capture the "decline of the bourgeoisie" in two projects that Adorno greeted enthusiastically: the volume of letters titled *Deutsche Menschen* (German Men and Women) and the autobiographical sketch *Berliner Kindheit um 1900* (Berlin Child-

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hood around 1900). On 7 November 1936 Adorno wrote from Oxford to Benjamin, who was in Paris:

Your book on “Germans” has indeed been a great delight to me. I read it immediately after it arrived, from the first sentence to the last throughout the night. The expression of grief which the book exudes seems remarkably close to that of the Berlin Childhood, the composition of which may indeed have coincided in time with making the selection of the letters and writing the introduction to them. If the earlier piece reproduced images of a life which a certain class forbade itself to see without revealing any other life, so the perspective you cast on these letters, reproduces, as it were, the very same process of concealment in objective form, where the *Childhood* had testified to its subjective form.<sup>1</sup>

What could have induced Benjamin, who was proud of “never using the word ‘I’” in his published works,<sup>2</sup> to write a memoir of childhood—and what could have led Adorno, who often appears in their correspondence as Benjamin’s implacable literary conscience, to put aside all scruples about autobiography? To both, looking back from exile, childhood appeared a utopia—an age-old utopian motif “that appears to everyone in their childhood and where no one ever was: home.”<sup>3</sup> This was the way it was expressed by a third person, one with whom the two often engaged in discussions: Ernst Bloch, in *The Principle of Hope*.

When asked by the German postal workers’ magazine in 1962 “Why have you returned?” Adorno had no qualms about replying:

I simply wanted to return to where I spent my childhood, and ultimately I acted from my own feeling that what we realize in life is little more than the attempt to recover one’s childhood in a different form. I did not underestimate the risk and the difficulty of my decision, but I have not rued it to this day. Precisely because my work in Germany is essentially critical in character, and because I believe that I make so few concessions to the dominant spirit here, I may perhaps be allowed to express these ideas without exposing myself to accusations of pusillanimity or sentimentality.<sup>4</sup>

Adorno’s reply to this deceptively straightforward question is linked to a second question that he responded to in a broadcast on German radio that same year: “What is German?” The text—which he thought well enough of to include in his last collection of essays in June 1969, the volume titled *Catchwords*—contains the same, perhaps even more highly polished formulations that he had used in the postal workers’ magazine to describe the childhood “in which what is specific to me is imparted down to its inner-

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most essence.”<sup>5</sup> There is an attempt at clarification in the notes he wrote after his return from exile and which were only published posthumously in 2003. These notes, which were conceived as a continuation of *Minima Moralia*, contain a statement from April 1960 in Notebook F in which he says: “It is a wholly irreparable disaster that in Germany everything connected in any way at all with a nearby happiness, with home, has been taken over by the reactionary camp: by philistinism, by cliquishness, by the self-righteousness of the narrow-minded, by the heart-warmingly sentimental, by nationalism and, ultimately, fascism. One cannot enjoy so much as an old nook or cranny without feeling shame or a sense of guilt. This means the loss of something that should have been preserved for the progressive cause.”<sup>6</sup>

What is specific to Adorno, however, cannot be identified simply by attributing to him certain characteristics such as “German” or “Jewish” or “bourgeois,” terms that mainly trigger stereotyped associations. A Frankfurt childhood around 1900 was as much influenced by the long bourgeois century as by the structural changes in the city, the secular bourgeoisification of the Jews in Germany, or indeed the transformation of the German bourgeoisie itself, a topic explored by Thomas Mann in his novel *Buddenbrooks*, which appeared in 1901. Can we perhaps speak of Frankfurt as a spiritual form of life, as Mann spoke of Lübeck? Certainly, like Lübeck, Frankfurt has its own marzipan in the shape of the Bethmännchen, which, like its wine, raises sensuous pleasure to the level of a basic right. If we are mindful of Goethe’s saying about the difference it makes to be born ten years later, we shall have to ask why Adorno’s childhood is so different from that of his considerably older friend and mentor Siegfried Kracauer. Kracauer, who had been born in Frankfurt in 1889, produced a novel, *Ginster: Von ihm selbst geschrieben* (*Ginster: Written by Himself*), which contains an unmistakable picture of Frankfurt:

Ginster came from F., a large town with a long history on a river, set against a low range of hills. Like other towns, it made use of its past to stimulate tourism. Imperial coronations, international congresses, and a Federal Shooting Festival took place within its walls, which have long since been replaced by public parks. A monument has been erected to the garden designer. There are Christian and Jewish families that can trace their roots back to their ancestors. Even families of humble origin have produced banking firms with connections in Paris, London, or New York. Centers of worship are separated only geographically from the stock exchange. The climate is temperate; people who, unlike Ginster, do



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