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Detlev Claussen. *Theodor W. Adorno: One Last Genius.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008. 440 pp. Illustrations. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-02618-6.

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Portrait of a Damaged Life

"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 emphatic qualities of life."[1] Detlev Claussen cites this letter from Theodor W. Adorno to Leo LÃ¶wenthal of November 25, 1942 in his introduction, facing directly the issues of writing a biography about a man who famously disdained the genre. It is not simply that Adorno disliked biographies from a literary perspective; what was at stake, and what he and his colleagues of the Frankfurt School were convinced had been lost for the individual in the age heralded by the First World War, was nothing less than meaningful experience (*Erfahrung*) as such. The integrity of the individual had become permanently undermined by a world transformed "into a timeless succession of shocks, interspaced with empty, paralyzed intervals";[2] in other words, into the totally administered world. If one accepts this vision, how could one give coherence to a life, moreover under the category of genius, the very model of the individual unfolding itself into a meaningful unity?

The answer is to be found in Adorno's treatment of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in his posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), in which the bourgeois cult of the artistic genius is rejected, but one aspect of the traditional concept is retained: "The element of truth in the concept of genius is to be sought in the object, in what is open, not confined by repetition."[3] On this basis, Claussen claims, he intends to "let his texts speak for themselves instead of using biographical information to explain Adorno's works" (p. 5). He largely adheres to this rule, but to grasp fully Claussen's methodology one must further explicate Adorno's statement. The object is not open by virtue of an autonomous act of creation but rather is socially and historically "mediated," in Adorno's Hegelian terminology, or determined in its concrete particularity in relation to the social "totality" or whole, though precisely without being subsumed harmoniously under the universal (G. W. F. Hegel's *Geist*). Claussen's ambitious solution to these problems of bi-

ography and genius is to take Adorno's thesis about the fate of the individual in the modern world seriously, reading both his life and works as "palimpsests" thoroughly marked by the events of the "short twentieth century."

It is an approach that can be accurately characterized as dialectical: Claussen works back and forth through Adorno's writings, often taking up passages repeatedly and elucidating their seemingly opaque meanings by reconstructing their historical mediations, and then using these insights about his particular object–Adorno–to reflect on the historical events at a more universal level. In the spirit of Adorno's "negative dialectics," moreover, the portrait that emerges is fragmented, "non-identical" with itself. It becomes clear that the book's subject is just as much about the fate of modern experience analyzed by Critical Theory as it is about Adorno: "Fifty years later these fragments [from *Minima Moralia*] emerge as an individual construct that encompasses an entire social experience, a broken promise of happiness that was evoked in the bourgeois century and then disavowed in the short twentieth century of Adorno's lifetime" (p. 49). Claussen follows this thread carefully, examining the hopes for assimilation of German Jews of the generation of Adorno's parents and grandparents and the disillusionment felt by the future members of the Frankfurt School after the revolutionary failures of the Left following the end of World War I. In both the bourgeois family and sometimes troubled series of friendships with elder-brother figures that began with Siegfried Kracauer and would soon include Walter Benjamin and Max Horkheimer, a utopian possibility seemed to exist that would continue to structure Adorno's thinking, despite his gradual loss of political naivetÃ© and, following the rise of fascism, his constant attention to threat of catastrophe. While Claussen demonstrates that Kracauer and LÃ¶wenthal overestimated considerably the sheltered security of the musical Wiesengrund home in which Adorno cultivated himself as a childhood prodigy–in Adorno's words, a "hothouse plant"–the effect was that "a secularized cultural utopia seemed to be a genuine possibility" (p. 63). The tension between this *promesse de bonheur* and the subsequent events and social transformations that produced its seeming impossibility would become a key to Adorno's version of immanent critique, which has been misunderstood all too often as a form of resignation and total despair. Rather than simply rejecting ideology as false, critique could also bring forth ideology's "truth content," its recognition of human claims to autonomy and happiness, and demand that it fulfill its own promises.

Considerable attention is given to Adorno's complex relationships with members of the German Ã©migrÃ© community in Los Angeles in the 1940s, including Thomas Mann, Bertolt Brecht and, with greater novelty, the radical Arnold Schoenberg student and composer Hanns Eisler, with whom he wrote *Composing for the Films* (1947). These chapters help to underscore the crucial importance of the Frankfurt School's experiences in America, which, as corroborated by another recent book on Adorno, were in crucial respects positive and by no means amounted to a flat rejection of the products of the culture industry.[4] The difficulties of life in exile and the sense that their ideas could not really be understood in America ultimately led to the decision to return to Germany in the early 1950s, but this was by no means a foregone conclusion. Throughout the book, Claussen recaptures the repeated moments of uncertainty in Adorno's rise to the status of a major public intellectual in West Germany in the late 1950s and 1960s: "The triumphant reception for the returnees that was talked about later did not in fact happen" (p. 176). Despite the diffuseness and difficulty of his writings, he was able, through radio and newspapers, the very weapons of the culture industry he attacked, to find an audience as a cultural and social critic. Claussen goes so far as to interpret the tone of Adorno's voice in his interventions against a return to a false postwar normality: "Through every sentence of this interpretation [of Gustav Mahler] we glimpse Adorno's awareness of the concentration camps, which, as the dark side of European society, accompany all the diurnal manifestations of culture. Adorno's voice, with a clarity of articulation that borders on the artificial, carried this seriousness into every introductory academic class and every radio talk" (p. 257).

Finally, Claussen seeks to correct the legends that grew out of the Frankfurt School's confrontations with the German student movement, in which neither he nor Horkheimer have appeared in a very flattering light. He explains the uneasiness with which they viewed the student protests as a sense of dÃ©jÃ vu from the avant-garde of the Weimar years; 1968 signified "a conformist fad disguised as left-wing radicalism" (p. 326). But more importantly, using as evidence a projected new preface in February 1969 for a reissue of *Dialektik der AufklÃ¤rung*, he shows that Adorno, rather than adhering to a pessimistic apoliticism, found a certain hope in the protest movements, to which he believed the book could positively contribute: "young people at least have set out to resist the transition to the totally administered world which is not being accomplished seamlessly, but by means of dictatorships and wars.... If this book assists

the cause of resistance to achieve a consciousness that illuminates and that prevents people from submitting to blind practice out of despair and from succumbing to collective narcissism, that would give it a genuine function" (p. 338).

Claussen, a journalist and social theorist at the University of Hannover and a former student of Adorno, writes with a fondness for and uncommon depth of knowledge about his subject. Ably translated by Rodney Livingstone, his book originally appeared in 2003 during the centennial of Adorno's birth, along with several other biographies. The book's organization is only roughly chronological, with each chapter intended to be self-standing. This structure produces occasional repetitiveness, but on the whole is effective in preserving the fragmentary, "non-identical" character appropriate to a biography attempting to do justice to Adorno's strictures. He is a sensitive and subtle reader, mining the sometimes opaque references and curious affectations found in the correspondences among Adorno, Benjamin, Kracauer, Horkheimer, Eisler, Brecht, and Ernst Bloch in order to reconstruct the dynamics of the intense friendships and rivalries in an atmosphere of both dwindling professional chances and physical and cultural homelessness. If he does refrain from explaining Adorno's works through biographical details, he does provide many of the latter. The resulting image is of an Adorno fundamentally shaped by vulnerability, from the subtly antisemitic "terrors of socialization" (p. 253) that occurred as a schoolboy to his role within the inner circle of the Institute for Social Research, in which Critical Theory was produced out of "the common experience of an all-pervasive heteronomy" and "the loss of all bourgeois security" (pp. 240-241).

In aiming to allow Adorno's work to speak for itself without confronting the reader with the decades of accumulated commentary, Claussen's writing achieves a literary quality, if not fluidity, that would not be possible for a strictly academic work. This comes at some cost, however, because he challenges a variety of existing assumptions about and interpretations of Adorno indirectly. Moreover, drawing on his expertise in antisemitism and Jewish-German history, he uses historical and sociological analysis to explain, for example, the specific social and economic position of the Wiesengrund household in Frankfurt and the impact of this environment on Adorno, but he does this without referring substantively to any secondary literature. His analyses seem plausible, but in some cases would require reference to scholarly debates about these contentious fields to be fully convincing. Moreover, in some instances Claussen's proximity to Adorno risks a veneration of genius in the sense he seeks to avoid. He notes, for example, that Adorno "found each interruption during a lecture painful, not because it offended his vanity, but because it represented time wasted during which his teachings could not be transmitted" (p. 315). This formulation accurately reflects the seriousness with which Adorno viewed his work as an intellectual, but it problematically casts him as a prophetic figure.

The book does presume considerable previous knowledge about both the figures of the Frankfurt School and the ideas of Critical Theory, but it should also be of general interest for its novel approach to understanding the short twentieth century. As Claussen demonstrates, frequently noting Horkheimer's chilling sense that "it was we [the Jews] who had been spared who really belonged in a concentration camp" (p. 355), Auschwitz was the century's quintessential event. In interpreting Adorno's corpus as a historical palimpsest, Claussen clearly accepts Horkheimer and Adorno's philosophy of history, in which (to simplify grossly) enlightenment and myth are fundamentally, though not categorically, intertwined. This, of course, is not the only way to understand modernity, not even within the tradition of Critical Theory: JÃ¼rgen Habermas, Adorno's most famous assistant and the leading representative of the second generation of the Frankfurt School, took this philosophy of history to be the Achilles' heel of classical Critical Theory, because it could not distinguish the growth of instrumental rationality from the increased potential for communicative rationality in modern society. For him, what is needed is more reason, not less. But for those who find this criticism simplistic and see in Adorno's writings a way to grasp the barbarity that has unfortunately already transcended the twentieth century,[5] Claussen's biography will offer a compelling portrait. Above all, the book succeeds in capturing the multiple sources of Adorno's "unwavering radicalism of spirit": "Adorno's critical theory is nourished by a feeling of solidarity with suffering that distinguishes it from all forms of academic scholarship" (p. 267).

Notes

[1]. Theodor W. Adorno, to Leo LÃ¶wenthal, November 24, 1942, in Leo LÃ¶wenthal, *Schriften*, vol. 4 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1984), 158.

[2]. Theodor W. Adorno, "Out of the Firing Line," in *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (London: Verso, 1974), 54.

[3]. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 171, quoted (and modified by Livingstone), 3.

[4]. David Jenemann, *Adorno in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007). See also part 1 of Martin Jay, *Permanent Exiles: Essays on the Intellectual Migration from Germany to America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

[5]. Robert Hullot-Kentor, "Origin is the Goal," in *Things Beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 1-22.