Reflections on an Impossible Life

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Detlev Claussen, *Theodor W. Adorno: One Last Genius*. Trans. Rodney Livingstone. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008. Pp. 440.

Since 2003, no less than four biographies have been published on the life and works of Theodor W. Adorno. With the exception of David Jenemann's *Adorno in America*, which was published in English in 2007, the other three, Lorenz Jäger's *Adorno: A Political Biography*, Stefan Müller-Doohm's *Adorno: A Biography*, and Detlev Claussen's *Theodor W. Adorno: One Last Genius*, were all published in their original German in 2003 on the centenary of Adorno's birth. Claussen's is the last to be translated into English, and if Jäger's is the most critical of Adorno the man as well as his philosophy, Müller-Doohm's the most complete and comprehensive, then it is Claussen's that is the most stylistically difficult, and perhaps also the most complex and nuanced in its approach to presenting Adorno's life and works, perhaps one could say, the most "Adornian." Although for the most part proceeding chronologically, Claussen's narrative is non-linear, and neither puts forth a clear thesis nor presents us with a unified account of a decidedly "non-identical" life. The Adorno that emerges from the pages of *One Last Genius* forms itself around the constellations of people and places that come to make up the life of an individual, rather than around the presentation of an essential character or personality. Indeed, no biographer of Adorno can, in good conscience, proceed as if their subject had not declared that the categories of "life" and "the individual" had been perverted to such an extent that the very writing of biography as the unproblematic retelling of the unified life of the individual was necessarily ideological. With this in mind, Claussen quotes the following in his introduction from a letter that Adorno wrote to Leo Löwenthal:

> 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. 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,

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> 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). (5–6)

Thus, the continual proliferation of biography as a legitimate literary undertaking belies the fact that "life does not live,"[1] that something like a livable, unified life is no longer possible under present conditions, and that by extension, the individual itself as an intact, self-determining subject reconstructed through biographical details is nothing more than ideology, a fiction to cover over the very disappearance and impossibility of its own subject matter. To his credit, Claussen does not simply present us with another such fiction; rather—through an approach that tests the knowledge, imagination, and patience of his readers—the pieces of his puzzle are intricate and often incomplete, offering no definitive version of Adorno and no final resolution on the messy details and events of his life. Sometimes, the direction of a particular narrative does not become clear until many pages into its unfolding, but Claussen is masterful in drawing his reader along in a voice that speaks at once from the distance of an objective observer *and* from a position of deep immersion and investment in both his subject matter and its surrounding intellectual, artistic, and political histories. *One Last Genius* is not a book for the casual or uninformed reader, and Claussen assumes from his audience a familiarity not only with Adorno's critical theory, but also with the work of his colleagues and contemporaries, with German history, with aesthetic modernism, and with American politics and culture in the 1940s and 50s.

If all biographers of Adorno face the task of coming to terms with the contradiction of writing a biography about a man who was not only himself highly critical of biographical writing, but whose entire intellectual circle was equally so, Claussen faces the additional task of dealing with Adorno's critique of the idea of "genius," insofar as this word is also used to describe his late teacher. Adopting the term from Horkheimer, who also described Adorno as a genius after his death, Claussen in fact never slips into presenting *Adorno* as a genius, but rather, the term genius is better suited as a description of Adorno's texts.[2] He writes, "the present study aims to let his texts speak for themselves instead of using biographical information to explain Adorno's works" (5). *One Last Genius* is thus an intellectual biography, one where the primary object of investigation is not so much Adorno the man, but the texts that he left for posterity and their

1. A quote from Ferdinand Kurnberger that Adorno uses as an epigraph to part one of *Minima Moralia* (Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott [London: Verso, 2005], p. 19).

2. "The element of truth in the concept of genius is to be sought in the object, in what is open, not confined by repetition" (Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, ed. Gretel Adorno, Rolf Tiedemann, and Robert Hullot-Kentor [Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1997], p. 171; quoted in Claussen, p. 3).

enduring significance for thinking through the events of the twentieth century and the prospects for the twenty-first. Apart from the personality that shines through the texts themselves, what we do learn about Adorno the man is gleaned from the letters that were exchanged between Adorno and his many correspondents, including Siegfried Kracauer, Thomas Mann, Max Horkheimer, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse, and Hanns Eisler, to name just a few. Claussen is sensitive to and takes seriously Adorno's suggestion that the concepts of "life" and "the individual"—the full realizations of which were "the promise of the bourgeois world" (11)—are no longer possible given the experiences of the Second World War, and consequently, the presentation of Adorno "the individual" can only be partially reconstructed through "the testimony of Adorno's contemporaries" and "the history of his friendships," in short, through the community of peers that shared and took part in the common experience of a damaged life (8). Through Adorno's correspondences and the correspondences of his contemporaries, we begin to get a glimpse of the individual who made critical theory famous and infamous, as well as a view into the context out of which something like a critical theory became necessary.

Claussen instructs us from the outset that each chapter in his book can be read independently of the others and that Adorno's works will be interpreted throughout as a palimpsest, a thought that culminates in the final chapter, "The Palimpsest of Life." Behind this metaphor lies what is as close to a thesis as Claussen allows himself: that it is in Adorno's works themselves that we discern what the life that no longer lives might look like, that it is only through his works that something like a biography of Adorno might be written given the impossibility of life itself. Along with Claussen's instructions on how to read the text, one can also add that his method of proceeding throughout is best described by the Adornian conceptions of "constellation" and "parataxis." The term constellation describes a "juxtaposed rather than integrated cluster of changing elements that resist reduction to a common denominator, essential core, or generative first principle."[3] Adorno often described his own writing as a constellation of paratactic concepts that were both irreducible to a generalized theory or thesis as well as formed the constituent parts of an organized ensemble. Although the structure of a constellation is neither irrational nor arbitrary, the elements that make up *One Last Genius* also do not fit easily into a unified whole, and each part tells its own story, a story not causally related to any other, even as it contributes to clarifying the overall picture of Adorno's life and work. Claussen paratactically places Adorno's relationship with Eisler alongside his relationship with Fritz Lang; a discussion of Felix Weil, the founder of the Institute for Social Research, alongside a discussion of Georg Lukács; Benjamin alongside Alban Berg; Paul Lazarsfeld alongside Adorno's jazz critique. Even Adorno's names, born Theodor Ludwig

3. Martin Jay, *Adorno* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1984), pp. 14–15.

Wiesengrund and later changed to Theodor W. Adorno, when placed alongside one another, tells a certain story of both growth and displacement that Claussen does not reduce to a unified or linear account. Rather, he presents the name change from Wiesengrund to Adorno from various perspectives, with each perspective offering a different account of the matter in question: from the perspective of Adorno's childhood and his relationship with his mother and his aunt, Maria and Agathe Calvelli-Adorno; from the perspective of professional ambition and the difficulty of securing an academic position; from the perspective of the German-Jewish émigré in America; and from the perspective of Adorno's critique of the identity principle, and the corresponding notion of non-identity.

This latter conception of non-identity, so important for Adorno's thinking, is the driving theme of Claussen's biography, and the Adorno that results from his careful reconstruction of texts and correspondences is nothing if not non-identical. Beginning from Adorno's bourgeois upbringing as the only son of a Jewish father and a Catholic mother, Claussen presents Adorno's childhood as relatively idyllic and traces the utopian motifs of his philosophy back to this period of his life. Before the impossibility of life and the individual, "Adorno could still experience the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie as a living reality in which the individual might be oppressed, but by which he was also strengthened, if not indeed produced" (32–33). Paradoxically, this meant that Adorno himself experienced what he later deemed to be impossible, and Claussen reports that much later, Adorno comes to justify his return to Germany from exile by stating, "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" (14). Considered a child prodigy, Adorno was very early on pulled by both musical and philosophical interests, two aspects of his genius that were never quite reconciled, as evidenced through his texts. Claussen shows how Adorno brought social theory to bear on musical practice while studying composition with Alban Berg in Vienna (152), and how Adorno's background in music later informed his theory of society. Although his musical aspirations were eventually superseded by theoretical pursuits, this is a fact that Adorno himself describes as a "trauma" (133), one that gains expression through his continual engagement with music in his philosophical writings.

Non-identity is also the lens through which Claussen presents Adorno's experience as an émigré, as a German-Jewish intellectual forced into exile during the Second World War. Here, the non-identical expresses itself both literally and figuratively through the idea of homelessness, where one is displaced both geographically and spiritually. For Adorno, this experience amounted to "a life lived in contradiction," and Claussen traces the famous statement "There is no right life in the wrong one" to a description of the émigré experience (285). In America, Adorno was also confronted with the problem of the relation between theory and

practice as he faced his first experience with empirical research working with Paul Lazarsfeld on the Princeton Radio Research Project, an experience that, according to Claussen, "changed Adorno's view of himself" and culminated in his transformation from Theodor Wiesengrund to Theodor W. Adorno (181). Adorno was highly suspicious of Lazarsfeld's positivism and of "researching" empirical data as if it were not always already shot through with theoretical and ultimately ideological assumptions, and Adorno's uneasy relationship to American socialization, both in and outside of academic institutions, was formative for the development of his later critical theory. Claussen writes of Adorno's decade in America that it "was marked by the tension between theory and empirical knowledge," and the text that he identifies as the "accompaniment" to Adorno's troubled identity as an émigré is *Minima Moralia* (183).

Indeed, according to Claussen, it is *Minima Moralia* that tells us the most about Adorno's experience in America, as well as being the key text in which the conceptions of "negative dialectics" and "non-identity" find their beginning. He writes, "The key theoretical category of non-identity, which would come to occupy a place in the heart of [Adorno's] work, had its roots in the day-to-day émigré experience in California. *Minima Moralia* should be seen as the reflection of the way in which that life was experienced—or else it runs the risk of not being properly understood" (140). Most of Claussen's remarks concerning Adorno the man, particularly during his years of exile, circle around his interpretation of *Minima Moralia* and are drawn directly from the aphorisms of the book itself. By "letting Adorno's texts speak for themselves," Claussen opposes and dispels the typical characterization of Adorno as a withdrawn, reclusive, elitist intellectual who hated America, and instead shows how Adorno's social critique operates at a level beyond that of simply opposing "German depth to Anglo-American superficiality," an opposition that "Adorno had long since come to detest" (184). According to Claussen, *Minima Moralia* expresses the *collective* experience of exile that Adorno shared with other German-Jewish intellectuals, and the importance of this community in the formation of something like Adorno's own non-identical "identity." Rather than presenting a straightforward picture of exile and return in which the former was rejected and the latter embraced, Claussen paints a picture of continual displacement, claiming that there is a sense in which neither Adorno nor Horkheimer ever truly returned from exile (220). Far from being the return to childhood that Adorno had hoped for, the Germany to which Adorno and his contemporaries returned was experienced as "uncanny," and the reality of postwar Germany was no less ideologically saturated than the America which they had left behind (201).

Claussen remains faithful to his own instructions—that of letting Adorno's texts speak for themselves—throughout his book, refusing to revel in the events surrounding Adorno's clash with the student movement near the end of his life.

Instead, Adorno's years as an intellectual upon his return from exile continue to be cast along the lines of his relationships with other members of the Frankfurt School as well as his philosophical texts, the key works from this period being *Negative Dialectics*, which he called "his main task," and *Aesthetic Theory* (320). The formative significance of *Minima Moralia* is confirmed by Adorno's intentions to continue to work on this project after the completion of *Aesthetic Theory*, this time focusing on "'life after my return'" (321). In the last years of his life, Claussen tells us of an exhausted and overworked Adorno, obsessed with completing what he saw as his life's work. Claussen objects to the standard story of an Adorno who was destroyed by the upheaval of the student movement that brought troubling disruptions to his classes, demonstrating instead an Adorno who had full understanding of the situation, writing to Samuel Beckett, "The feeling of suddenly being attacked as a reactionary comes as something of a surprise. But perhaps you too have had the same experience in the meantime" (338). *One Last Genius* ends by giving Adorno and his correspondents the last word, as Claussen includes in an appendix a series of important letters exchanged between Adorno, Ernst Bloch, Horkheimer, Claus Behncke, and Otto Herz that further illuminate the constellations of people, places, and events that have constituted his disjointed narrative. Presented in a form that is both faithful to his teacher and impressive in its depth and scope, Claussen has written what is an impossible biography, one that perhaps even Adorno himself might have approved of.