

Adorno: A Biographical Sketch

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Theodor Ludwig Wiesengrund-Adorno was born in Frankfurt am Main on Friday September 11, 1903, the only son of Oscar Wiesengrund, a German-Jewish wine merchant, and Maria Calvelli-Adorno della Piana, a talented singer of Corsican-Catholic descent. The young Theodor, known as “Teddie,” was baptized as a Catholic after the faith of his mother, but grew up without a strong sense of religious identity. His household was notably rich in music thanks to the influence of his mother and his maternal aunt Agatha, a singer and pianist whom Teddie called his “second mother.” When he was not occupied with his academic studies and his music lessons the young Teddie would play with friends in the “spookily pleasurable” corners of the cellar beneath the house where his father stored his wines (Müller-Doohm 2005, 20). The young Adorno was a “pampered child,” a “slightly built” and “shy boy” who was taunted on the playground as a “unique person who outshone even the best boys in the class” (quoted in Müller-Doohm 2005, 34; quoting reminiscence of Erich Pfeiffer-Belli).

Adorno received his education in Frankfurt, attending the Kaiser-Wilhelm Gymnasium from 1913 to 1921. In the early 1920s, Adorno forged an intimate friendship with Siegfried Kracauer, and the two met together on regular occasions for an intensive study of Kant’s first *Critique*. Adorno pursued a further education in music at the Hoch conservatory in Frankfurt, where he studied piano and composition; he published music and opera reviews throughout the early 1920s. Around 1923, Adorno met Gretel Karplus, the highly educated and culturally sophisticated daughter of a leather manufacturer in Frankfurt. Gretel received a doctorate in chemistry at age 23 and was known to spend her time in the company of prominent intellectuals such as Brecht, Bloch, and Walter Benjamin, with whom she formed a strong friendship. Teddie and Gretel would be married only in 1937; they had no children, and it is perhaps revealing that in a letter to her friend Benjamin she refers to Adorno her husband as their “problem child” (*Sorgenkind*).

At the age of 17, Adorno entered the new University of Frankfurt, where he studied various fields: sociology, art history, musicology, and psychology, but mostly philosophy. His chief instructor in philosophy, Hans Cornelius, was unusually broad-minded; a specialist in neo-Kantianism but also a pianist, sculptor, and painter. Under his guidance, Adorno completed his dissertation in 1924 on “The Transcendence of the Thingly and the

Noematic in Husserl's Phenomenology." A critical study of Husserl's phenomenology, the dissertation examined the tension in Husserl's work between the immanent objects of consciousness and the consciousness-transcendent objects in the world. Along with an unsuccessful 1927 habilitation on the psychoanalytic concept of the unconscious, the Husserl-dissertation is typically seen as an exercise in purely academic themes, but Adorno's effort to identify contradictions clearly anticipates the philosopher's later practice of immanent critique (Bloch 2017).

Throughout the later 1920s, Adorno found himself poised between two possible careers. While he continued to pursue his philosophical interests, he also dedicated himself with greater energy to musical composition. It was in 1924 that Adorno first made the acquaintance of Alban Berg, the composer who had apprenticed with Arnold Schoenberg and was considered, together with Anton Webern, a member of the so-called "Second Viennese School" of musical modernism. The Schoenbergian breakthrough to atonality, often characterized as "the emancipation of dissonance," had an enormous impact on Adorno, whose early compositional efforts, such as the *String Quartet* (1921) bear obvious affinities to Schoenberg's style; by 1925 Adorno had commenced studies in musical composition with Berg in Vienna. Adorno's talents in musical analysis and composition were considerable (Paddison 1993). Throughout the later 1920s he continued under Berg's tutelage, publishing music reviews while devoting himself in earnest to composition; in December 1926, his *Pieces for String Quartet* was performed by the Kolisch Quartet. Berg, however, recognized that Adorno found himself at a crossroads: "it is your calling," he wrote, "to achieve the *utmost* [and] ... you shall ... fulfill this in the form of great philosophical works. Whether your musical work (I mean your composing), which I have such grand hopes for, will not lose out through it, is a worry that afflicts me whenever I think of you. For it is clear: one day you will, as you are someone who does nothing by halves [...] have to choose either Kant or Beethoven" (Adorno and Berg 2005, 44).

By the later 1920s, Adorno seemed to be moving toward a decision. Although he continued musical composition and would remain seriously committed to musicological criticism, he also selected a topic for a habilitation in philosophy, which he began writing in 1929. Accepted by the theologian Paul Tillich in 1931 and published two years later as *Kierkegaard: The Construction of the Aesthetic*, the book bears the strong imprint of the author's deepening friendship with Walter Benjamin, whom he had first met in 1923 and whose cultural and literary criticism would remain, despite their considerable differences, a primary source of inspiration throughout Adorno's life. In works such as *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928) and in early drafts for a study of the Paris arcades, Benjamin had begun to develop an idiosyncratic style of critical reading that fastened upon particular elements of cultural life in a materialist mode, by plunging into their detail and drawing out allegorical lessons for broader problems of history. Adorno's study of Kierkegaard bears a strong resemblance to his friend's allegorical manner of materialist interpretation: rather than reading Kierkegaard as a theologian or proto-existentialist, Adorno seeks to expose the social-historical underpinnings of the Dane's ideology as a child of the rising bourgeoisie. The typical living space or *intérieur* of the bourgeois apartment is shown to be the materialist correlate to Kierkegaard's subjectivist philosophy. Submitted to the university in February 1931, the habilitation received enthusiastic comments from both Tillich and Horkheimer, and Adorno had every reason to hope that he could now embark on a successful career as a professor of philosophy.

Meanwhile, Adorno's affiliation with the Institute for Social Research had grown in importance and he had developed a lasting friendship with the philosopher Max Horkheimer, who, like Adorno, had been a student of Cornelius and in 1931 was appointed

as the Institute's new director (Jay 1996). That same year Adorno, equipped with a license to teach, gave his inaugural address at Frankfurt, "The Actuality of Philosophy" (Adorno 2000). In the lecture Adorno speaks to the widespread sense of a "crisis" in the various schools of philosophical idealism. He criticizes neo-Kantianism, philosophical anthropology, and Heideggerian ontology, all of which, despite their differences, remain captive to the fantasy that they can grasp all of reality even while they are trapped in "the realm of subjectivity." Against these subjective and idealist tendencies Adorno insists that philosophy must embrace what he calls "the thinking of materialism" (Adorno TP, 32). Whereas traditional philosophy searches for "meta-historical, symbolically meaningful ideas," the way forward will require a strategy of *interpretation*. The task of philosophy will be "to interpret unintentional reality," and this can be done only if philosophy looks away from ideal forms to those that are "non-symbolic" and constituted "inner-historically" (Adorno TP, 32–33). The new emphasis on historical interpretation must look away from truths that are ideal and toward "unintentional truth" (Adorno TP, 33). The materialist approach to interpretation is possible only "dialectically," and this means that much of the effort must involve immanent criticism or even the "liquidation" of reigning philosophical systems that make claims to knowledge of totality (Adorno TP, 34). Philosophy must not seek the security of idealistic systems and it should not protect itself from "the break-in of what is irreducible." Against the illusions of a systematic form, philosophy must embrace the form of the essay with its focus on appearance rather than essence, the particular rather than the general. This critical method could be accused of "unfruitful negativity," but Adorno is ready to accept this charge. "For the mind (*Geist*) is indeed not capable of producing or grasping the totality of the real, but it may be possible to penetrate the detail, to explode in miniature the mass of merely existing reality" (Adorno TP, 38).

The inaugural lecture is striking in its anticipation of themes that would preoccupy Adorno throughout his philosophical career. The appeal to that which is particular and irreducible to thought already points toward the emphasis on the "non-identical" and the turn to the object as points of critical leverage for what Adorno would later call "negative dialectics." Other lectures and seminars from this period also bear witness to Adorno's enormous debts to Walter Benjamin. Despite the fact that his friend had failed to secure a habilitation with the study of German tragic drama, Adorno continued to feel that Benjamin's work deserved serious philosophical attention: he devoted two seminars on aesthetics to the study of Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* book, and in 1932 also presented a lecture, "The Idea of Natural History," to the Kant Society in Frankfurt in which he lavished praise on Benjamin's method of allegorical interpretation as a route beyond the false antithesis between history and nature. Benjamin responded with gratitude even as he took note of the way in which Adorno had made extensive use of his ideas both in the lecture and especially in the Kierkegaard book. "[I]t is true," Benjamin wrote, "that there is something like a shared work after all" (quoted in Müller-Doohm 2005, 129).

With the Nazi seizure of power in 1933 Adorno's chances for a career in Germany came to an end. By the terms of the April "Law for the Restoration of the German Civil Service," Adorno was classified as a "half-Jew" and was no longer permitted to hold a professorship in Germany. Adorno was by no means ashamed of his father's Jewish identity, but the legal designation imposed on him by the state bore little connection to his own self-conception. Baptized in his mother's faith as a Catholic, Adorno had spent his formative years in a strongly Jewish milieu and often found himself characterized as a Jew in spite of his indifference to his father's religious heritage and his general resistance to all categories of ethno-national or religious belonging. His childhood friend Erich Pfeiffer-Belli would later

recall that “We all knew that he was Jewish” but also added that any persecution that the young Adorno had experienced on the playground was “not anti-Semitic” but was simply due to the usual hostility that the “stupid” boys directed at the one who outshone all the others in the classroom (quoted in Müller-Doohm 2005, 34). By the mid-1930s, however, Adorno’s relative indifference to questions of personal identity was to matter far less than the official ruling by the new authoritarian state that defined citizenship in explicitly racist terms. In September 1933, he received a letter that informed him that his license to teach had been revoked, and after some months of hesitation he made the decision to leave Germany and set about seeking employment elsewhere. Uncertain plans for transferring his professorial license to either Istanbul or Vienna fell through, and Adorno then applied himself to the task of securing a position in England, where connections through his paternal uncle seemed to promise greater success. In 1934, he was admitted as an advanced student in philosophy at Oxford.

Adorno’s period of study in England did not prove terribly fruitful, despite some contact with a few philosophers (most notably Gilbert Ryle) who shared his interests in phenomenology and other trends that were in vogue back in Germany but less appreciated in Oxford. A.J. Ayer would later recall Adorno as “a comic figure” whose “dandified manner” could not mask his “anxiety” to be taken seriously (Müller-Doohm 2005, 190). Adorno spent much of his time at Oxford immersed in studies of Husserlian philosophy that would only appear in book-length form after the war as *Metacritique of Epistemology* (1956). His aging parents remained for some time in Germany and he made frequent trips back to Frankfurt to see them and also to visit Gretel, who continued to manage the co-owned factory in Berlin. Oscar Wiesengrund, like many German Jews of his generation, had served in the army during the First World War and had even received a Cross of Honor that he believed would protect him from state persecution. As the political situation deteriorated and the Nazis consolidated their rule over all spheres of government and society, Adorno gradually awakened to the fact that it was no longer safe for his family to remain in Germany.

In these precarious circumstances Adorno could take some comfort in deepening his personal and professional bond with Horkheimer. In fact, he had already begun publishing in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, the Institute’s journal, beginning with the inaugural issue in 1932. His early essays for the journal demonstrate his continued interest in working at the boundary-line between musicology and socially inflected philosophy. In his first essay for the *Zeitschrift*, “On the Social Situation of Music,” (1932) Adorno argues that if music succeeds in resisting its reduction to the commodity form it will be able to portray the antinomies of society within its own formal language. “It is not for music to stare in helpless horror at society,” Adorno writes. Music “fulfills its social function more precisely when it presents social problems through its own material and according to its own formal laws.” Musical autonomy is not a retreat into social irrelevance but a precondition for music’s social meaning; music will “call for change through the coded language of suffering” (Adorno 2002, 393). The alternative was for music to abandon its claims to autonomy and sink to the level of the commodity form where all critical possibilities would be defeated. Adorno developed this point with especially polemical vigor in his essay “On Jazz,” that was written during his stay in Oxford and appeared in the *Zeitschrift* under the pseudonym of Hektor Rottweiler. Jazz, Adorno argued, was a thoroughly commercialized musical form that promised only the illusion of freedom. “The improvisatory immediacy which constitutes its partial success counts strictly among those attempts to break out of a fetishized commodity world which want to escape that world without ever changing it, thus moving ever deeper into its snare” (Adorno 2002, 478). It should be noted that

Adorno's knowledge of jazz was severely limited: he knew virtually nothing about the African-American idiom and aimed his criticism primarily at "dance-band commercial jazz" such as the standardized music played by Paul Whiteman and his Orchestra (Paddison 2004, 113.) He therefore had little patience for romantic claims that jazz could serve as a vehicle for authentic self-expression. "With jazz, a disenfranchized subjectivity plunges from the commodity world into the commodity world; the system does not allow for a way out. Whatever primordial instinct is recovered in this is not a longed-for freedom, but rather a regression through suppression" (Adorno 2002, 478).

The controversy over jazz should be understood within the context of Adorno's general critique of reification in capitalist culture. During the mid-1930s, this critique grew especially pronounced in Adorno's debate with Walter Benjamin, who took a rather more favorable view of the possibilities of mass-produced art. In late February 1936, Benjamin sent to Adorno a draft of his essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility," in which he argued that the dissolution of the aura thanks to modern technical conditions of reproduction and circulation could open up new possibilities for the mass-reception of modern art as a medium for collective politicization. In a long letter sent from London on March 18, 1936, Adorno sharply dissented from his friend's claims. He was especially troubled by what he considered the "anarchistic romanticism" that had distorted Benjamin's views of the proletariat. Under the influence of his friendship with the more militant and communist-inclined Bertholt Brecht, Benjamin was too sanguine concerning the prospect for the masses to awaken to political agency by absorbing mass-reproduced artworks in a state of distraction. Nor was Adorno convinced by Benjamin's critique of the traditional ideal of aesthetic autonomy. "Dialectical though your essay is", Adorno wrote, "it is less than this in the case of the autonomous work of art itself," "for it neglects a fundamental experience which daily becomes increasingly evident to me in my musical work, that precisely the uttermost consistency in the pursuit of the technical laws of autonomous art actually transforms this art itself, and, instead of turning it into a fetish or taboo, brings it that much closer to a state of freedom" (Adorno and Benjamin 2001, 129). Adorno did not mince words; he clearly felt that his intellectual friendship with Benjamin was in jeopardy. "[M]y own task," he wrote, "is to hold your art steady until the Brechtian sun has finally sunk beneath its exotic waters" (Adorno and Benjamin 2001, 132). The debate with Benjamin was to continue even after the latter's death; traces of their dispute can be detected nearly everywhere in Adorno's later work and even in the pages of *Aesthetic Theory*.

Meanwhile, the situation in Europe was growing more ominous. By the autumn of 1937, Adorno had recognized that his chances for a new academic career in England were slim, and as the Nazis expanded their anti-Jewish policies his father's business in Frankfurt was under threat, which meant that he could no longer rely on financial support from his family. On September 8, he and Gretel were at last married, a fact that only enhanced his sense of bourgeois responsibility. Despite his growing attachment to the Institute and especially to Horkheimer, the Institute's own financial difficulties meant that it had only been able to provide him with a half-time position with a diminished salary. It was therefore a great relief when Horkheimer sent him a telegram with the good news of an invitation to move to the United States as a research associate on the Princeton Radio Project with the sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld. Adorno did not hesitate in accepting the offer and, in February 1938, Teddie and Gretel boarded a steamer for New York. Adorno's parents, however, were now in serious danger: Maria was briefly arrested, and his father suffered injuries when his offices were broken into. Oscar caught pneumonia, which delayed their plans for escape.

Eventually they were able to leave Germany: they arrived in Cuba in May 1939, and then made their way to the United States by early February 1940 (Müller-Doohm 2005, 261; Adorno 2006, 36).

As an émigré in the New World Adorno was eager to prove his worth as soon as possible. His earliest essay, written during a summer sojourn in Bar Harbor, Maine, was “On the Fetish-Character in Music and Regression in Hearing,” published in the *Zeitschrift* in 1938. The essay can be read as a rejoinder to Benjamin’s reflections on the artwork and its mechanical reproducibility (Buck-Morss 1977). Music, Adorno writes, has been converted in capitalist culture into a commodity to such a degree that the exchange value of a musical work now colonizes its very content. Mass music has become standardized to the extent that musical works become interchangeable and are structured only for easy consumption. This fetish-character in turn afflicts the consciousness of the mass of listeners, who consume the stereotyped products of mass society in a state of “deconcentration” that bespeaks not freedom but instead regression and a “catastrophic phase” in modern culture (Adorno 2002, 313).

The essay also served as an entry ticket for Adorno’s new position as a researcher with Lazarsfeld in New Jersey. The Princeton Radio Project was meant to be an empirically based study that would examine the role played in daily experience by this relatively new medium of communication. The Vienna-born sociologist Lazarsfeld was the director of the project under the title “The Essential Value of Radio to All Types of Listeners,” for which he recruited Adorno, whose work he had known and admired since the early 1930s. Almost from the start, however, the collaboration was plagued by misunderstanding and dissent. Adorno’s negative attitude toward radio listening comes through with unmistakable force in texts such as “A Social Critique of Radio Music,” which he presented to his fellow researchers in October 1939. “Commodity listening” on the radio allowed the listener to “dispense as far as possible with any effort,” even if such effort were required for genuine understanding. The intellectual element in listening was displaced by merely gustatory experience: “It is the ideal of *Aunt Jemima*’s ready-mix for pancakes extended to the field of music. The listener suspends all intellectual activity when dealing with music and is content with consuming and evaluating its gustatory qualities – just as if the music which tasted best were also the best music possible” (Adorno 2009, 137). Later in life when he reflected on his experiences as a European intellectual in America, Adorno would still recall with disdain what he considered the mindless emphasis on data collection that had characterized the Princeton Radio Project. The machine that allowed research subjects to signal their “like” or “dislike” during the radio performance of a given musical selection seemed to Adorno highly inadequate as a means of comprehending the place of music in mass society, not least because it appeared to isolate the individual stimulus from the total context of society. When he was confronted with the demand to “measure culture,” Adorno responded that “culture might be precisely that condition that excludes a mentality capable of measuring it” (Adorno 1969, 347). Needless to say, such opinions did not sit well with Lazarsfeld’s team. When it came time to renew funding for the project Adorno was not invited to continue.

Fortunately, Horkheimer was able to secure for Adorno a dependable and permanent position as a member of the Institute, which had moved by then into its offices in New York’s Morningside Heights in the vicinity of Columbia University. For reasons of space, Adorno himself did not have an office in the building, but he nonetheless enjoyed a special role as Horkheimer’s closest intellectual companion. By the end of the 1930s, the two men were at the beginning stages of planning a work that they described as a “dialectical logic.” Adorno would never feel entirely at home in the United States, and the experience of

dislocation is a crucial theme in *Minima Moralia*, the book of “reflections from damaged life” that he composed during his exile and dedicated to Horkheimer: “Every intellectual in emigration is, without exception, mutilated, and does well to acknowledge it to himself, if he wishes to avoid being cruelly apprised of it behind the tightly closed doors of his self-esteem.” He felt himself to be a fish out of water, displaced not only from his native language but also from the ambient horizon of cultural references that he cherished. “The isolation,” he added, “is made worse by the formation of closed and politically controlled groups, mistrustful of their members, hostile to those branded different” (Adorno MM, 13; English version, 33). He nonetheless accepted invitations to lecture and made efforts to strengthen his bonds, on the premise that it might prove necessary to remain in his adopted country for the remainder of his life. In February 1940, he gave a lecture on “Kierkegaard’s Doctrine of Love” at Columbia University; and he even spoke on the radio for the first time, offering an introduction to a performance by the Kolisch quartet of musical works by Schoenberg and Krenek (among others) (Müller-Doohm 2005, 262).

But if his friendship with Horkheimer left Adorno with a growing sense of intellectual satisfaction, his feelings of success in the United States were qualified by the daily reports of the darkening political conditions in Europe. He was especially concerned for his friend Walter Benjamin, whose situation in Paris in 1939–1940 had grown increasingly precarious. In September 1939, Benjamin had been interned outside Paris and, later, at Nevers. By February 1940 he had fled southward from Paris to Lourdes: “The complete uncertainty about what the next day, even the next hour, may bring has dominated my life for weeks now,” he wrote. “I am condemned to read every newspaper [...] as if it were a summons served on me in particular” (Adorno and Benjamin Correspondence 2001, Letter 120, 339). Horkheimer was meanwhile struggling to secure a visa for Benjamin’s safe passage from Europe to the United States, but the crucial French exit-visa was still lacking. On September 25, Benjamin wrote a final letter to Henny Gurland from Port Bou: “In a situation with no escape, I have no other choice but to finish it all. It is in a tiny village in the Pyrenees, where no one knows me, that my life must come to an end. I would ask you to pass on my thoughts to my friend Adorno and to explain to him the situation in which I have now found myself” (Adorno and Benjamin Correspondence 2001, Letter 121). When Adorno heard the news that Benjamin had taken his life, he wrote a despairing letter to their mutual friend Gershom Scholem: “It is completely inconceivable,” he wrote. “What it means for us, I cannot say in words, it has transformed our intellectual and empirical existence to the innermost core” (Adorno and Scholem 2015, 33).

In the spring of 1941, Horkheimer moved to Los Angeles and settled in Pacific Palisades, a neighborhood that had already become well-known as a refuge for Central European émigrés such as the novelist Thomas Mann, who lived nearby. Los Angeles had become a kind of “Weimar on the Pacific,” thickly populated with intellectuals and artists such as Arnold Schöneberg, Heinrich Mann, Lion Feuchtwanger, and Bertholt Brecht. Adorno soon came to feel that his proximity to Horkheimer was of highest importance if the two were to embark upon writing their co-authored “dialectical logic.” Once the decision was made, it took several months for Adorno and Gretel to manage all of the logistics for the move. By the end of November, Adorno wrote to his parents in New York about the journey by train that he and Gretel had taken from the East Coast to Los Angeles: “We travelled through the Rockies in the state of Wyoming on Monday night, and did not even notice the difference in altitude. Tuesday through snowy Utah with the big Salt Lake. The landscape seems strange, with those mountains that suddenly shoot up out of the plain like pyramids, and increasingly disappear as one approaches Nevada.” Max Horkheimer and his

wife Maidon were at the station to greet the new arrivals, who marveled at the new surroundings. "The beauty of the region is so incomparable that even such a hard-boiled European as myself can only surrender to it," Adorno wrote. "The shape of the mountain [...] is more reminiscent of Tuscany," he added, noting with pleasure that "one actually has the feeling that this part of the world is inhabited by humanoid beings, not only by gasoline stations and hot dogs" (Adorno 2006, 70).

Adorno and Gretel now lived in a house not far from Horkheimer; a dwelling where Adorno could arrange not only his library but also make room for a grand piano. Adorno and Horkheimer were poised to begin working in earnest on the book that they now planned to call *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In conceiving of its argument, the memory of their recently deceased colleague Walter Benjamin weighed heavily on their minds. Adorno now had in his possession the manuscript of Benjamin's essay, "On the Concept of History," and he shared with Horkheimer his sense of intellectual sympathy for its themes: "It contains Benjamin's final concepts," he wrote, adding that "none of Benjamin's works shows him closer to our intentions than this. This relates above all to the conception of history as permanent catastrophe, the critique of progress and mastery of nature, and the place of culture" (quoted in Wiggershaus 1995, 311; from Adorno to Horkheimer, June 12, 1941). *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was in most every respect a collaborative effort, though traces remain of primary authorship: Adorno, it seems, was responsible for at least the initial drafts of the "excursus" on Odysseus, and the chapter on the "culture-industry." But every portion of the book underwent extensive revision to such a degree that each chapter ultimately reflects the imprint of both authors, who met daily for conversations that were recorded by Gretel and then subjected to scrupulous revision. It took nearly two and a half years for Adorno and Horkheimer to finish the manuscript, and it was published in mimeograph format in May 1944 with a dedication to their Institute colleague Friedrich Pollock.

Dialectic of Enlightenment is a highly speculative exercise that surveys the entire history of human self-assertion from mythic and Homeric times to the twentieth century. "What we had set out to do," the authors write in the 1944 preface, "was nothing less than to explain why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a renewed barbarism" (Adorno and Horkheimer DE, xiv). Its core thesis is that reason has betrayed its emancipatory promise: rather than leading to genuine freedom it has been distorted into a mere instrument for the domination of nature. If primitive myths were already attempts to explain and thereby disenchant the nature that terrified and threatened the human being, then myth was already a species of enlightenment. But because enlightenment has lost its capacity for self-reflection and has become nothing but a compulsive and thoughtless exercise in domination it has come to resemble the myths it wished to dispel. The enlightenment thus describes a transhistorical pattern of self-sabotage whereby reason has become irrational. This general framework permits the authors to examine specific facets of human conduct in distinct chapters that focus on Homer's *Odyssey*, the writings of de Sade, Kant, and Nietzsche, the effects of commodified culture, and the function of anti-Semitism. It is a book that reflects the darkness of the political era in which it was written. In the preface, Adorno and Horkheimer suggest that its critique of enlightenment is meant "to prepare a positive concept of enlightenment which liberates it from its entanglement in blind domination" (Adorno and Horkheimer DE, xviii). But many readers have felt that this positive concept is lacking and inconsistent with the book's overall argument. It circles without resolution around the question as to whether a truly self-reflective species of enlightenment is historically possible.

During his years in Los Angeles, Adorno also devoted a considerable amount of time to writings about music. By 1941, upon his move to the West Coast, he had already completed the final draft of *The Philosophy of New Music*, though the book would not be published in its original German edition until 1949. In many respects it is a musicological statement of its author's own painful yet necessary sense of dissociation from his current surroundings. Music, he writes, must sustain a stance of determinate negation: it "protects its social truth by virtue of its antithesis to society, by virtue of its isolation, yet by the same measure this isolation lets music wither" (Adorno 2006, 20). Adorno portrays the contemporary situation in modern music as a dialectical contest between Schoenberg and Stravinsky, where Schoenberg's early phase of "free" atonality with its strains of subjective lyricism and expressionism signifies "progress," while Stravinsky's compositions with their fusion of modernism and archaism represent the "annihilation of the subject" and a will to "regression." But Adorno complicates this dualism by indicting the mature twelve-tone compositional technique as a mindless mechanism that expels subjectivity. He faults Webern in particular for a "fetishism" of the twelve-tone row (Adorno 2006, 86). Schoenberg's compositions were split between expressionist intensity and "administrative impassivity." This very tension, however, was the culminating phase in the musical tradition. Although old conventions of musical meaning have reached a point of collapse, in Schoenberg's music one can hear how the "fissures" between "twelve-tone mechanics and expression" became the last ciphers of musical meaning. The history of modern music thus describes a dialectic into unfreedom: "The possibility of music itself has become uncertain" (Adorno 2006, 87).

This verdict on modern music repeats themes that were already apparent, for example, in the 1937 essay on Beethoven's "late style," in which Adorno had sought to characterize the fragmentation or dialectical tension that was typical of the German composer's music in his final years (Adorno 2002, 564–568). The essay and the manuscript of *The Philosophy of New Music* drew the attention of Thomas Mann, who by the early 1940s was working in Los Angeles on his novel *Doctor Faustus* and turned to Adorno for assistance in writing the sections of the book that demanded musicological description. Mann borrowed extensively from Adorno's characterization of late style, especially in chapter eight of the novel, in which the character Wendell Kretschmar gives a lecture on Beethoven's final piano sonata, Number 32 in C Minor (Opus 111): "Beethoven's late work," declares Kretschmar, is "untransformed by the subjective"; what is most "conventional" emerges with an "ego-abandonment," as if art itself has abandoned "the appearance of art." In Kretschmar's lecture on the sonata's second movement Mann included a small homage to his musical advisor: written in the form of a theme and variations, the movement begins by stating an aria that opens with three simple notes (C, descending to G, and then a repeated G), a "tranquil figure" which Kretschmar likens to verbal phrases such as "sky of blue," or "meadow-land" (*Wiesen-grund*), a sly reference to Adorno's paternal last name (Mann 1997, 57–58). Mann's debts to Adorno for the musical passages in the book were indeed considerable: Adorno even wrote out extensive passages that describe fictitious works by Adrian Leverkühn, the novel's protagonist, passages that Mann inserted into the novel, in some cases with only minor alteration (for evidence, see Müller-Doohm 2005, 317–318). In a letter to his parents, Adorno reported frequently on the collaboration with Mann, evidently taking great pride in his advisory role even though he called it "a very peculiar relationship" (Adorno 2006, 274).

The end of the war in Europe brought great relief but little optimism for the future. Adorno wrote to his parents that "I at least cannot shake off the feeling of 'too late' – in

truth, the Germans have pulled the whole of civilization down with them” and “there is every reason to believe that the principle upheld by the Nazis will outlast them.” He could therefore hope for little more than “breathing spaces and loopholes” (Adorno 2006, May 1, 1945; quote from 217). In this rather grim mood Adorno did not believe that the United States was in any sense immune from the fascist tendencies that had overwhelmed Europe. The urgent question remained: What were the causes of the political catastrophe and what potential was there for a similar barbarism to overtake the United States?

As early as 1942, Horkheimer had entered into discussions with the American Jewish Committee to secure support for a major research study on anti-Semitism as part of the Institute’s multivolume *Studies in Prejudice*. By 1943, Adorno had agreed to join the study, which demanded that he make frequent trips up the coast from Los Angeles to Berkeley, where he convened with a research group of European émigré and American psychologists. The plan was to use surveys and intensive interviews to develop a social-psychological diagnostic tool that could identify the latent characterological traits of the fascist personality. In helping to develop the questions for the study Adorno had drawn upon the “Elements of Anti-Semitism” chapter in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Müller-Doohm 2005, 296). His intellectual collaboration with the Berkeley group ranks among his most successful experiences in empirical sociology. The completed book was published in 1950 as *The Authoritarian Personality*. But the experience was not without its challenges: Adorno found it especially troubling that the study seemed to place undue stress on psychological rather than social factors in explaining the emergence of authoritarianism. The study also tended to see individuals as identifiable “types,” a problem that Adorno tried to resolve by suggesting that mass society itself was becoming increasingly standardized (Gordon, *Authoritarianism*, 2018). Nor should we neglect the simple fact that by temperament and with a few notable exceptions (Horkheimer, Mann) Adorno did not often find collaboration a congenial experience. His discontent with universities and group research programs is recorded in the very first entry from *Minima Moralia* (1951): “The son of well-do-do parents who, whether from talent or weakness, engages in a so-called intellectual profession, as an artist or a scholar, will have a particularly difficult time with those bearing the distasteful title of colleagues” (Adorno MM, 21).

In mid-summer of 1946, Adorno received the sad word that his father had died. On October 17, 1946 Adorno and Horkheimer received an invitation from Walter Hallstein, the president of Frankfurt University, to return to Germany to assume new posts on the faculty there. Adorno’s decision to return to Germany was not an easy one, not least because his mother was now a widow and living alone in New York. As late as October 1947, he was writing to reassure his anxious mother that he did not plan to return to Germany in the long term (Adorno 2006, 301). By October 1949, however, the decision had been made though not without misgivings. In *Minima Moralia* Adorno had produced an intellectual diary of his experiences in exile: “Nothing less is asked of the thinker today,” he wrote, “than that he should be at every moment both within things and outside them” (Adorno MM, 74). He could not feel that the return to Germany was a return to home since the very idea of a homeland had assumed during his absence a monstrous meaning. “It is part of morality,” he wrote, “not to be at home in one’s home” (Adorno MM, 39).

The Institute for Social Research reopened on November, 1951 in a new building, with Horkheimer as its official director. Adorno found himself confronted with multiple responsibilities that included both university teaching and overseeing numerous research projects for the Institute. His return was also punctuated by personal loss: he had been in

Germany for little more than two years when he received word in late February 1952 that his beloved mother had died. For an intellectual who had always retained certain child-like qualities, emotional delicacy combined with irrepressible imagination, the event marked a symbolic transition: a definitive end to his own childhood. But he would continue to cherish memories of his childhood well into his last years.

As a returned émigré in the postwar Federal Republic, Adorno did not waste time in establishing himself as one of the foremost intellectuals in the public sphere. The atmosphere of repression that pervaded West Germany after the war troubled him; “for the heirs of the Nazis,” he wrote to Horkheimer, “forgetting and cold deceit is the intellectual climate that works best” (quoted in Müller-Doohm 2005, 330). Confronted with this tendency to repression, he asserted himself with even greater energy in public debates, in journals and on the radio, on topics such as “The Meaning of Working Through the Past” (1959) and “Education after Auschwitz” (1968). He also published at an astonishing pace, introducing German readers to texts many of which he had already completed while living abroad: *The Philosophy of New Music* (1949); *Minima Moralia* (1951); *In Search of Wagner* (1952); *Prisms* (1955); the *Metacritique* of Husserlian phenomenology (1956); *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy* (1960); and *Introduction to the Sociology of Music* (1962). Among his many writings on literature were critical essays on Kafka, Hölderlin, and Beckett, all of which bore witness to the author’s stylistic skills as a writer in the German language. In his penchant for irony and in the very difficulty of his prose Adorno drew consciously on antecedent writers such as Heinrich Heine and Karl Kraus. In the 1956 radio address, “Heine the Wound,” Adorno extolled the German-Jewish ironist of nineteenth-century romanticism as a critical resource against present-day apologetics: “Heine’s stereotypical theme, unrequited love, is an image for hopelessness, and the poetry devoted to it is an attempt to draw estrangement itself into the sphere of intimate experience.” In a world that has been injured, all language becomes as injured as was Heine himself. “The wound that is Heine,” he concluded, “will heal only in a society that has achieved reconciliation.” (Adorno 1994, 80–85; 85.)

Of all the literary figures in the modernist canon with whom Adorno felt the deepest affinity, the most significant, it seems, was Samuel Beckett. Adorno had seen a production of *Endgame* in Vienna in April, 1958 and he wrote to Horkheimer that the playwright’s insights “coincide with our own” (Quoted in Müller-Doohm 2005, 357). To Friedrich Pollock he explained that “Beckett is concerned with the same phenomenon as critical theory: to depict the meaninglessness of our society and to protest about it, while preserving the idea of better things in that protest” (Müller-Doohm 2005, 357). In late November, 1958, during a lecture trip to Paris Adorno met Beckett for the first time and the two engaged in an extended conversation. In 1961 he completed the essay, “Trying to Understand *Endgame*.” For Adorno, Beckett’s singular importance lies in the fact that he portrays characters in a landscape of catastrophe. *Endgame* resists any and all interpretation that seeks to discover a universal or humanistic “meaning,” and for this reason the play is opposed to all existentialisms. It “mocks the spectator with the suggestion of something symbolic, something which, like Kafka, it then withholds” (Adorno 1994, 241–275; 251). The absurdity that is staged in Beckett’s work does not represent something ahistorical as the existentialists suppose. On the contrary: it portrays the absurdity of history itself, “the nonsense in which reason terminates” (Adorno 1994, 241–275; 273).

In addition to his literary and musical writings, Adorno continued to devote an equal if not greater share of his attention to lectures on philosophical themes. During his tenure at

Frankfurt throughout the 1950s and 1960s, he offered lecture courses on such topics as metaphysics, moral philosophy, dialectics, and aesthetics. These lectures drew a great many students and helped to establish Adorno as one of the foremost voices in postwar German philosophy. With Horkheimer's retirement from the Institute in 1959, Adorno was confronted with the added burdens of administration. In addition to directing the Institute he also served as Chairman of the German Sociological Society and in 1961 participated in the famous "positivism dispute" with Karl Popper. (See Müller-Doohm 2005, 424–428; also see Adorno et al. *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*.) Especially during the early 1960s, his regular lectures at Frankfurt, and occasional visiting lectures in Paris and elsewhere, also gave him an ongoing forum in which to refine his own philosophical commitments in preparation for writing *Negative Dialectics*, the 1966 book he lovingly described as his "fat child" (*dickes Kind*).

Negative Dialectics is widely seen as the culminating statement of Adorno's philosophical career. But it is a book with diverse themes that are not easily aligned with any systematic intent. Extended sections of the book consist in a vigorous and critical dismantling of major thinkers in the modern philosophical canon, chiefly Kant, Hegel, and Heidegger. All three philosophers were of central importance for Adorno, not only because they represented crucial phases in the history of philosophy; the confrontation with the philosophical tradition also served as the dialectical preparation for his own philosophical arguments. This was especially true in the case of Hegel, whose philosophy had been a constant source of inspiration but also a foil for Adorno as he sought to formulate the principles of a negative dialectic against Hegel's dialectic of rational reconciliation. Already in 1963, Adorno published *Three Studies on Hegel*, a small book that collected his occasional lectures from the late 1950s and early 1960s, which Adorno described in the preface as "preparation for a revised conception of the dialectic" (Adorno 1963, xxxvi). The significance of Heidegger's philosophy for Adorno was less obvious but hardly less dramatic (Macdonald and Ziarek 2008; Lafont 2018). In postwar Germany, Heidegger's existential ontology had grown in importance notwithstanding the well-known secret of Heidegger's scandalous record of public support for the Third Reich. Adorno was a fierce and unsparing critic of Heidegger but not only because of the German philosopher's political conduct; he also saw how the mannered qualities of Heidegger's language had contributed to the flourishing of a pseudo-spiritual cultural style in postwar Germany (Gordon 2016). Because this complaint was directed as much against the cultural discourse of "Heideggerism" (*Heideggerei*) as against Heidegger's actual philosophy, Adorno eventually decided to publish the cultural polemic in a separate and shorter volume as *The Jargon of Authenticity* (1964). The book was a devastating exercise in cultural criticism that punctured the inflated pretensions of existentialism and compared its language to the false promises of modern advertising. The jargon of authenticity, Adorno declared, was "the Wurlitzer organ of the spirit." To mark its appearance Adorno agreed with his publisher Suhrkamp to give a public reading that provoked "laughter and applause" (Müller-Doohm 2005, 433).

Negative Dialectics was a far more challenging book written with far-reaching philosophical ambitions. Adorno had labored over the text for seven years and referred to it with pride as "my chief philosophical work" (Müller-Doohm 2005, 434; letter to Helene Berg). A bold passage in the preface declared his intent "to break through the delusion of constitutive subjectivity by means of the power of the subject" (Adorno ND, 8). If traditional philosophy had assigned itself the task of reconciling thought with reality, Adorno pronounced this task an impossibility. The manifest irrationality and suffering of the world

resisted philosophical comprehension, and the merely conceptual medium by which philosophy had sought to understand the world must now admit its radical insufficiency when confronted with the “non-identical.” After Auschwitz the metaphysical ideal of reconciling the real and the ideal was exposed as an outrage. “The capacity for metaphysics is crippled,” Adorno wrote, “because what occurred smashed the basis of the compatibility of speculative metaphysical thought with experience” (Adorno ND, 354–358). Metaphysics could survive only a state of decay and in fragments that signified the negativity of an unredeemed world. Upon the book’s publication Adorno immediately sent a copy to his friend Gershom Scholem in Jerusalem. In the years since the death of their mutual friend Benjamin, the two scholars had grown to admire one another and had forged a genuine friendship, despite strong differences in philosophical orientation. Scholem wrote that he had never read such a “chaste and restrained defense of metaphysics” but still detected a strain of Marxist dogmatism that played the role of a *deus ex machina* in Adorno’s arguments. (Adorno–Scholem, March 1, 1967; Letter 182, 407). Adorno hastened to respond that the book’s materialism was altogether non-dogmatic; it retained a deep affinity not only with metaphysics but even with theology (Adorno and Scholem 2015, 414).

Negative Dialectics was the last major work to appear during Adorno’s lifetime. But its completion by no means marked an end to the author’s productivity. Already in the fall of 1966, Adorno had begun to work in earnest on his book on aesthetics; he also offered at least three lecture courses on the same topic (Müller-Doohm 2005, 470). In November of that year, however, he also received word of the death of his childhood friend and colleague Siegfried Kracauer; in a letter to Horkheimer he recalled Kracauer’s importance as the person who had first initiated him into philosophy (Müller-Doohm 2005, 436). Adorno himself had now passed his sixty-third birthday and was slowly beginning to grasp the difficult truth that, for many of his students, he had become, despite himself, the embodiment of tradition. In the late 1960s, as opposition to the Vietnam War flowed into a broader spirit of social rebellion, Adorno’s relations with student activists in Frankfurt were growing increasingly difficult.

The tension between Adorno and student activists in Frankfurt was due in part to political controversies that swept through the Federal Republic in the later 1960s. In 1965, the government amended the Basic Law to introduce the emergency powers laws or *Notstandsgesetze*, which students referred to as “NS-Gesetze,” in reference to the Nazi-era. In 1966 the Erhard government collapsed, leading to a grand coalition between the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Social-Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) with Kurt-Georg Kiesinger appointed as chancellor. Between 1933 and 1945, Kiesinger had been not only a member of the Nazi party but also a senior official in Goebbels’s ministry of propaganda. For a great sector of the student movement it now appeared as if the German state was an extension of Nazi-era authoritarianism. Activists who saw the democratic system as rotten to its core identified themselves as the “extra-parliamentary opposition” (*Außerparlamentarische Opposition*, or APO). In early June 1967, during a student protest against the visit by the Shah of Iran, Benno Ohnesorg was shot and killed by police. At a student conference in West Berlin to protest the killing, Rudi Dutschke called for *Kampfaktionen*, provoking Adorno’s student Habermas to issue a warning about “actionism” and the risk of “left-wing fascism.” By the spring of 1968, student groups were beginning to occupy university buildings. Students at Frankfurt declared their school the “Karl Marx University,” and an estimated 2000 students, led by the student activist Hans-Jürgen Krahel, moved to blockade the main building (Kundnani 2018).

Many students expressed great disappointment that Adorno did not speak more forcefully in support of their cause. In September 1968, Krahel recalled that:

six months ago, when we were besieging the council of Frankfurt University, the only professor who came to the students' sit-in was Professor Adorno. He was overwhelmed with ovations. He made straight for the microphone, and just as he reached it, he ducked past and shot into the philosophy seminar. In short, once again, on the threshold of practice, he retreated into theory. (Müller-Doohm 2005, 461)

But Adorno did not feel that participation in political activism was appropriate for someone of his age or character. To student complaints that he had not joined the march on Bonn to protest the emergency laws, Adorno replied: "I do not know if elderly gentlemen with a paunch are the right people to take part in a demonstration" (Müller-Doohm 2005, 461). When the novelist Günther Grass accused Adorno of conformism, Adorno responded with anger. In a letter from late 1968 he wrote to Grass that he would not "let myself be browbeaten into what for years now I have called the principle of unilateral solidarity ... everything I have written makes clear that I have nothing in common with the students' narrow-minded direct action strategies which are already degenerating into an abominable irrationalism" (Müller-Doohm 2005, 461).

In early 1969 Adorno's relations with Krahel and other student activists degenerated. On January 31, students arrived at the Institute with a political program, and then occupied the building. Adorno declared the occupation an illegal trespass and called for police protection. In a written memorandum, he explained that:

The institute's directors ... had no choice, if only for legal reasons, but to accept the confrontation that had been forced on them. They decided to ask for police assistance in clearing the institute of intruders and to request them to bring charges for trespass against Herr Krahel and others who had forced an entry into the building. (Adorno 1969b)

From Adorno's perspective, the student militants appeared as a menacing mob with indeterminate aims. He wrote:

It is vital precisely for those who identify wholeheartedly with this aim of the extra-parliamentary opposition, that they should feel obligated to resist their own criminalization: they should resist all authoritarian tendencies and equally all pseudo-anarchistic acts of violence on the part of ostensibly left-wing activists as well as crypto-fascist actions from groups on the extreme right. (Adorno 1969b)

In an April 1 letter to the film director and philosopher Alexander Kluge, Adorno expressed his fears in rather more drastic and Kafkaesque terms: "[I do not see] why I should make a martyr of myself to Herr Krahel, whom I picture putting a knife to my throat and getting ready to use it and when I utter a mild protest, he responds by saying, 'But Herr Professor, it's wrong to take these things personally'" (Müller-Doohm 2005, 608–608).

The experience left Adorno feeling embittered and defensive. In a February 9 radio address given on the Sender Freies Berlin, Adorno offered remarks on the theme of "Resignation." The remarks read like an explicit rejoinder to Krahel:

We older representatives of what the name 'Frankfurt School' has come to designate have recently and eagerly been accused of resignation. We had indeed developed elements of a

critical theory of society, the accusation runs, but we were not ready to draw the practical consequences from it. And so, we neither provided actionist programs nor did we even support actions by those who felt inspired by critical theory.

In response to such accusations, Adorno insisted that student militants had misconstrued the relation between theory and practice. They preferred “pseudo-activity” to practice informed by thought. What Adorno called “pseudo-activity” was the premature rush to realization that only instrumentalizes thought. If any idea were to be evaluated only in a practical light, for its practical consequences, this would merely strengthen the spirit of instrumental reason that had come to dominate late-modern industrial society. Students who demanded immediate action were therefore the ones who had sabotaged the utopia they claimed to uphold and had thereby betrayed the task of genuine emancipation. “The uncompromisingly critical thinker, who neither signs over his consciousness nor lets himself be terrorized into action, is in truth the one who does not give in” (Adorno 1998, 292). Thinking became for Adorno the best means of protecting utopia against its betrayal and its premature instrumentalization. Thinking in the critical sense was “a form of praxis,” and had more in common with “transformative praxis” than activity that conformed to reality for the sake of praxis. “Prior to all particular content, thinking is actually a force of resistance” (Adorno 1998, 293).

Such claims were unlikely to satisfy student militants who thirsted for the actual transformation of both the university and society at large. On April 22, 1969, Adorno began the first of his lectures for the summer semester in a course on “An Introduction to Dialectical Thinking.” Two students, affiliated with the “leather-jacket party” (a faction of Students for a Democratic Society who were committed to direct action), mounted the podium and insisted that Adorno engage in self-criticism for having called the police and for bringing legal charges against Krahel. Although many students protested against the interruption of the lecture, Adorno quickly found that he could not proceed. Three female students surrounded him on the platform, showered him with flower petals, and then bared their breasts. Adorno fled the hall (Müller-Doohm 2005, 475–476).

The symbolism of this event was overdetermined. To many students it was clear that Adorno had become a symbol of the establishment. After he had rushed from the room, students distributed a leaflet that declared: “Adorno as an Institution is Dead.” To Adorno it felt as if the critical spirit he had worked so tirelessly to awaken among his students had taken its ironic vengeance. He was left personally shaken and humiliated. “To have picked on me of all people,” he despaired, “I who have always spoken out against every type of erotic repression and sexual taboo!” (quoted in Müller-Doohm 2005, 476). Although he tried to resume his lectures in June, protests continued and he determined that it was necessary to cancel his teaching at least for the coming semester. In a letter to Herbert Marcuse he described himself as “a badly battered Teddie” (Müller-Doohm 2005, 478). In a letter to Gershom Scholem he resorted to more drastic imagery: he described the contemporary scene in Frankfurt as “*Tohuwabohu*,” the Hebrew term for primordial chaos (Adorno and Scholem 2015, 521).

In search of solace from the political disruption in Frankfurt, Adorno and Gretel went to Switzerland, and on July 22 they drove to a hotel in Zermatt. Against his physician’s counsel they journeyed by cable-car to a mountain peak, where Adorno began to feel chest pains. Later that day he was taken to the St. Maria hospital. On the morning of August 6, 1969 Gretel was informed that Adorno had died. The funeral was held without religious ceremony in the Frankfurt Central Cemetery, where he was buried in the family tomb. An estimated 2000 mourners were in attendance.

Adorno's intellectual legacy would long outlive his death. In her sadness, Gretel committed herself to preparing the manuscript on aesthetics that Adorno had left in a partially unfinished state. The book, which bore the ambiguous title *Aesthetic Theory*, and that the author had intended to dedicate to Samuel Beckett, was published posthumously in 1970. A searching reflection on the possibility of modern art, it does not seek to resolve the paradox of aesthetic transcendence: "Art is autonomous and it is not," Adorno observed. Only by seeking to rise above worldly conditions can art comment on those conditions. But its commentary succeeds only if it registers through form what it refuses to thematize as content. "The unresolved antagonisms of reality return in artworks as immanent problems of form" (Adorno AT, 6). Adorno's emphasis on formalism aligned him theoretically with traditions of classicism and high modernism (Hammer 2015). But his commitment to the ideal of aesthetic autonomy should not be condemned as a document of political quietism or as a sign of the author's retreat into "mere" aesthetics. On the contrary, Adorno was acutely aware of the social and historical guilt that accompanies art like a shadow, especially after the catastrophes of the mid-twentieth century. He nonetheless insisted that art sustains, through its very claims to autonomy, a dialectical bond with the social conditions it outwardly resists. "[I]t would be preferable," he wrote, "that some fine day art vanish altogether than that it forget the suffering that is its expression" (Adorno 1997, 260).

In the years following Adorno's death, some critics were inclined to dismiss him as a bourgeois aesthete whose contribution to philosophy was either too rarefied in its content or too recondite in its style to merit any lasting importance. More discerning readers, however, continue to discover in his work the resources for a critical style of thinking that resists all complacency and refuses to sever philosophy from the social conditions that first make it possible. The emphasis on the "negative" in Adorno's thought is not mere negativism: it is all the more utopian the more it refuses to accept any image of utopia, since only this refusal unbinds thought from any dogma and from the oppressive power of what passes itself off as fact. "Thinking," Adorno wrote, "is not the intellectual reproduction of what already exists anyway."

As long as it doesn't break off, thinking has a secure hold on possibility. Its insatiable aspect, its aversion to being quickly and easily satisfied, refuses the foolish wisdom of resignation. The utopian moment in thinking is stronger the less it – this too a form of relapse – objectifies itself into a utopia and hence sabotages its realization. Open thinking points beyond itself. (Adorno 1998, 292–293)

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