ON LATE STYLE

Music and Literature Against the Grain

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Foreword by Mariam C. Said
Introduction by Michael Wood

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The relationship between bodily condition and aesthetic style seems at first to be a subject so irrelevant and perhaps even trivial by comparison with the momentousness of life, mortality, medical science, and health, as to be quickly dismissed. Nevertheless, my contention is as follows: all of us, by virtue of the simple fact of being conscious, are involved in constantly thinking about and making something of our lives, self-making being one of the bases of history, which according to Ibn Khaldun and Vico, the great founders of the science of history, is essentially the product of human labor.

The important distinction therefore is that between the realm of nature on the one hand and secular human history on the other. The body, its health, its care, composition, functioning, and flourishing, its illnesses and demise, belong to the order of nature; what we understand of that nature, however, how we see and live it in our consciousness, how we create a sense of our life individually and collectively, subjectively as well as socially, how we divide it into periods, belongs roughly speaking to the order of history that when we reflect on it we can recall, analyze, and meditate on, constantly changing its shape in the process. There are all sorts of connections between the two realms, between history and nature, but for now I
want to keep them apart and focus only on one of them, history.

Being myself a profoundly secular person, I have for years been studying this self-making process through three great problematics, three great human episodes common to all cultures and traditions, and it is the third of these problematics that I want specifically to discuss in this book. But for purposes of clarity, let me quickly summarize one and two. The first is the whole notion of beginning, the moment of birth and origin, which in the context of history is all the material that goes into thinking about how a given process, its establishment and institution, life, project, and so on, gets started. Thirty years ago I published a book called Beginnings: Intention and Method about how the mind finds it necessary at certain times to retrospectively locate a point of origin for itself as to how things begin in the most elementary sense with birth. In fields like history and the study of culture, memory and retrospection draw us to the onset of important things—for example, the beginnings of industrialization, of scientific medicine, of the romantic period, and so on. Individually, the chronology of discovery is as important for a scientist as it is for someone like Immanuel Kant who reads David Hume for the first time and, he says memorably, is briskly awakened from his dogmatic slumber. In Western literature, the form of the novel is coincidental with the emergence of the bourgeoisie in the late seventeenth century, and this is why, for its first century, the novel is all about birth, possible orphanhood, the discovery of roots, and the creation of a new world, a career, and society. Robinson Crusoe. Tom Jones. Tristram Shandy.

To locate a beginning in retrospective time is to ground a project (such as an experiment, or a governmental commission, or Dickens’s beginning to write Bleak House) in that moment, which is always subject to revision. Beginnings of this sort necessarily involve an intention that either is fulfilled, totally or in part, or is viewed as totally failed, in successive time. And so the second great problematic is about the continuity that occurs after birth, the exfoliation from a beginning: in the time from birth to youth, reproductive generation, maturity. Every culture offers and circulates images of what has been wonderfully called the dialectic of incarnation, or in François Jacob’s phrase, la logique du vivant. Again to give examples from the history of the novel (the Western aesthetic form that offers the largest and most complex image of ourselves that we have), there is the bildungsroman or novel of education, the novel of idealism and disappointment (education sentimentale, illusions perdues), the novel of immaturity and community (like George Eliot’s Middlemarch, which the English critic Gillian Beer has shown was powerfully influenced by what she calls Darwin’s plots for the patterns of generation that structure this great novel of nineteenth-century British society). Other aesthetic forms, in music and painting, follow similar patterns.

But there are also exceptions, examples of deviation from the overall assumed pattern to human life. One thinks of Gulliver’s Travels, Crime and Punishment, and The Trial, works that seem to break away from the amazingly persistent underlying compact between the notion of the successive ages of man (as in Shakespeare) and aesthetic reflections of and on them. For it bears saying explicitly that both in art and in our general ideas about the passage of human life there is assumed to be a general abiding timeliness, by which I mean that what is appropriate to early life is not appropriate for later stages, and vice versa. You will recall, for example, the stern biblical observation that to everything there is a season and a time, to every purpose under the heaven, a time to be born, and a time to die, and so on: “wherefore I perceive that there is nothing better, than that a man should rejoice in his own works; for that is
his portion: for who shall bring him to see what shall be after
him? . . . All things come alike to all: there is one event to the
righteous, and to the wicked; to the good and to the clean, and
to the unclean."

In other words, we assume that the essential health of a
human life has a great deal to do with its correspondence to its
time, the fitting together of one to the other, and therefore
its appropriateness or timeliness. Comedy, for instance, seeks
its material in untimely behavior, an old man falling in love
with a young woman (May in December), as in Molière and
Chaucer, a philosopher acting like a child, a well person feign-
ing illness. But it is also comedy as a form that brings about the
restoration of timeliness through the kōmmοs with which the
work usually concludes, the marriage of young lovers.

I come finally to the last great problematic, which for obvi-
ous personal reasons is my subject here—the last or late period
of life, the decay of the body, the onset of ill health or other fac-
tors that even in a younger person bring on the possibility of an
untimely end. I shall focus on great artists and how near the
end of their lives their work and thought acquires a new idiom,
what I shall be calling a late style.

Does one grow wiser with age, and are there unique quali-
ties of perception and form that artists acquire as a result of
age in the late phase of their career? We meet the accepted
notion of age and wisdom in some last works that reflect a spe-
cial maturity, a new spirit of reconciliation and serenity often
expressed in terms of a miraculous transfiguration of common
reality. In late plays such as The Tempest or The Winter's
Tale, Shakespeare returns to the forms of romance and parable;
similarly, in Sophocles' Oedipus at Colonus, the aged hero
is portrayed as having finally attained a remarkable holiness
and sense of resolution. Or there is the well-known case of
Verdi who, in his final years, produced Otello and Falstaff,
works that exude not so much a spirit of wise resignation as a
renewed, almost youthful energy that attests to an apotheosis
of artistic creativity and power.

Each of us can readily supply evidence of how it is that late
works crown a lifetime of aesthetic endeavor. Rembrandt and
Matisse, Bach and Wagner. But what of artistic lateness not as
harmony and resolution but as intransigence, difficulty, and
unresolved contradiction? What if age and ill health don't pro-
duce the serenity of "ripeness is all"? This is the case with
Ibsen, whose final works, especially When We Dead Awaken,
tear apart the career and the artist's craft and reopen the ques-
tions of meaning, success, and progress that the artist's late
period is supposed to move beyond. Far from resolution, then,
Ibsen's last plays suggest an angry and disturbed artist for
whom the medium of drama provides an occasion to stir up
more anxiety, tamper irrevocably with the possibility of clo-
sure, and leave the audience more perplexed and unsettled than
before.

It is this second type of lateness as a factor of style that I find
deeply interesting. I'd like to explore the experience of late
style that involves a nonharmonious, nonserene tension, and
above all, a sort of deliberately unproductive productiveness
going against . . .

Adorno used the phrase "late style" most memorably in
an essay fragment entitled "Spätstil Beethoven," dated 1937
and included in a 1964 collection of musical essays, Moments
musicaux, then again in Essays on Music, a posthumously pub-
lished (1993) book on Beethoven. For Adorno, far more than
for anyone who has spoken of Beethoven's last works, those
compositions that belong to what is known as the composer's
third period (the last five piano sonatas, the Ninth Symphony,
the Missa Solemnis, the last six string quartets, the seventeen
bagatelles for piano) constitute an event in the history of mod-
ern culture: a moment when the artist who is fully in command of his medium nevertheless abandons communication with the established social order of which he is a part and achieves a contradictory, alienated relationship with it. His late works constitute a form of exile. One of Adorno’s most extraordinary essays, included in the same collection with the late-style fragment, is on the Missa Solemnis, which he calls an alienated masterpiece (verfremdetes Hauptwerk) by virtue of its difficulty, its archaisms, and its strange subjective revaluation of the Mass (EM 569–83).

What Adorno had to say about late Beethoven throughout his voluminous writings (Adorno died in 1969) is clearly a philosophical construction that served as a sort of beginning point for all his analyses of subsequent music. So convincing as cultural symbol to Adorno was the figure of the aging, deaf, and isolated composer that it even turned up as part of Adorno’s contribution to Thomas Mann’s Doktor Faustus, in which young Adrian Leverkühn is impressed by a lecture on Beethoven’s final period given by Wendell Kretschmar, and you can perceive in the following passage how unhealthy it all seems:

Beethoven’s art had overgrown itself, risen out of the habitable regions of tradition, even before the startled gaze of human eyes, into spheres of the entirely and utterly and nothing—but personal—an ego painfully isolated in the absolute, isolated too from sense by the loss of his hearing; lonely prince of a realm of spirits, from whom now only a chilling breath issued to terrify his most willing contemporaries, standing as they did aghast at these communications of which only at moments, only by exception, they could understand anything at all.

This is almost pure Adorno. There is heroism in it but also intransigence. Nothing about the essence of the late Beethoven is reducible to the notion of art as a document—that is, to a reading of the music that stresses “reality breaking through” in the form of history or the composer’s sense of his impending death. For “in this way,” if one stresses the works only as an expression of Beethoven’s personality, Adorno says, “the late works are relegated to the outer reaches of art, in the vicinity of document. In fact, studies of the very late Beethoven seldom fail to make reference to biography and fate. It is as if, confronted by the dignity of human death, the theory of art were to divest itself of its rights and abdicate in favor of reality” (EM 564). Late style is what happens if art does not abdicate its rights in favor of reality.

Impending death is there, of course, and cannot be denied. But Adorno’s stress is on the formal law of Beethoven’s final compositional mode, by which he means the rights of the aesthetic. This law reveals itself to be a peculiar amalgam of subjectivity and convention, evident in such devices as “decorative trill sequences, cadences and fiorituras” (EM 565). In a formulation of what that subjectivity is, Adorno says:

This law is revealed precisely in the thought of death... Death is imposed only on created beings, not on works of art, and thus it has appeared in art only in a refracted mode, as allegory. . . . The power of subjectivity in the late works of art is the irascible gesture with which it takes leave of the works themselves. It breaks their bonds, not in order to express itself, but in order, expressionless, to cast off the appearance of art. Of the works themselves it leaves only fragments behind, and communicates itself, like a cipher, only through the blank spaces from which it has disengaged itself. Touched
by death, the hand of the master sets free the masses of material that he used to form; its tears and fissures, witnesses to the finite powerlessness of the 1 confronted with Being, are its final work [der endlichen Ohnmacht des Ichs vorn Seienden, sind ihr letztes Werk]. (EM 566)

What has evidently gripped Adorno in Beethoven's late work is its episodic character, its apparent disregard for its own continuity. If we compare a middle-period work, such as the Eroica with the opus 110 sonata, we will be struck with the totally cogent and integrative driven logic of the former and the somewhat distracted, often extremely careless and repetitive character of the latter. The opening theme in the thirty-first sonata is spaced very awkwardly, and when it moves on after the trill, its accompaniment—a studentlike, almost clumsy repetitive figure—is, Adorno correctly says, “unabashedly primitive.” And so it goes in the late works, massive polyphonic writing of the most abstruse and difficult sort alternating with what Adorno calls “conventions” that are often seemingly unmotivated rhetorical devices like trills, or appoggiaturas whose role in the work seems unintegrated into the structure. Adorno says: “His late work still remains process, but not as development; rather as a catching fire between extremes, which no longer allow for any secure middle ground or harmony of spontaneity.” Thus, as Kretschmar says in Mann’s Doktor Faustus, Beethoven’s late works often communicate an impression of being unfinished—something that the energetic teacher of Adrian Leverkühn discusses at great and ingenious length in his disquisition about the two movements of opus 111.

Adorno’s thesis is that all this is predicated upon two considerations: first, that when he was a young composer, Beethoven’s work was vigorous and organically whole, whereas it has now become more wayward and eccentric; and second, that as an older man facing death, Beethoven realizes that his work proclaims, as Rose Subotnik puts it, that “no synthesis is conceivable [but is in effect] the remains of a synthesis, the vestige of an individual human subject sorely aware of the wholeness, and consequently the survival, that has eluded it forever.” Beethoven’s late works therefore communicate a tragic sense in spite of their irascibility. How exactly and poignantly Adorno discovers this is readily evident at the end of his essay on Beethoven’s late style. Noting that in Beethoven, as in Goethe, there is a plethora of “unmastered material,” he goes on to observe that in the late sonatas conventions, for instance, are “splintered off” from the main thrust of the compositions, “fallen away and abandoned.” As for the great unisons (in the Ninth Symphony or the Missa), they stand next to huge polyphonic ensembles. Adorno then adds:

It is subjectivity that forcibly brings the extremes together in the moment, fills the dense polyphony with its tensions, breaks it apart with the unisono, and disengages itself, leaving the naked tone behind; that sets the mere phrase as a monument to what has been, marking a subjectivity turned to stone. The cesuras, the sudden discontinuities that more than anything else characterize the very late Beethoven, are those moments of breaking away; the work is silent at the instant when it is left behind, and turns its emptiness outward. (EM 567)

What Adorno describes here is the way Beethoven seems to inhabit the late works as a lamenting personality, then seems to leave the work or phrases in it incomplete, abruptly dropped, as in the opening of the F Major Quartet or the A Minor. The sense of abandonment is peculiarly acute in comparison with the driven and relentless quality of second-period works such
as the Fifth Symphony, where, at moments like the ending of the fourth movement, Beethoven cannot seem to tear himself away from the piece. Thus, to conclude, Adorno says that the style of the late works is both objective and subjective:

Objective is the fractured landscape, subjective the light in which—alone—it glows into life. He does not bring about their harmonious synthesis. As the power of dissociation, he tears them apart in time, in order perhaps, to preserve them for the eternal. In the history of art, late works are the catastrophes. (EM 567)

The crux, as always in Adorno, is the problem of trying to say what holds the works together, gives them unity, makes them more than just a collection of fragments. Here he is at his most paradoxical: one cannot say what connects the parts other than by invoking “the figure they create together.” Neither can one minimize the differences among the parts, and it would appear that actually naming the unity, or giving it a specific identity, would then reduce its catastrophic force. Thus the power of Beethoven’s late style is negative, or rather it is negativity: where one would expect serenity and maturity, one instead finds a bristling, difficult, and unyielding—perhaps even inhuman—challenge. “The maturity of the late works,” Adorno says, “does not resemble the kind one finds in fruit. They are . . . not round, but furrowed, even ravaged. Devoid of sweetness, bitter and spiny, they do not surrender themselves to mere delectation” (EM 564). Beethoven’s late works remain unreconciled, uncoopted by a higher synthesis: they do not fit any scheme, and they cannot be reconciled or resolved, since their irresolution and unsynthesized fragmentariness are constitutive, neither ornamental nor symbolic of something else.

Beethoven’s late compositions are in fact about “lost totality,” and are therefore catastrophic.

Here we must return to the notion of lateness. Late in what sense? For Adorno, lateness is the idea of surviving beyond what is acceptable and normal; in addition, lateness includes the idea that one cannot really go beyond lateness at all, cannot transcend or lift oneself out of lateness, but can only deepen the lateness. There is no transcendence or unity. In his book The Philosophy of New Music, Adorno says Schoenberg essentially prolonged the irreconcilabilities, negations, and immobilities of the late Beethoven. And of course, lateness retains in it the late phase of a human life.

Two further points. The reason Beethoven’s late style so gripped Adorno throughout his writing is that in a completely paradoxic way, Beethoven’s immobilized and socially resistant final works are at the core of what is new in modern music of our own time. In Beethoven’s middle-period opera Fidelio—the quintessential middle-period work—the idea of humanity is manifest throughout, and with it an idea of a better world. Similarly for Hegel, irreconcilable opposites were resolvable by means of the dialectic, with a reconciliation of opposites, a grand synthesis, at the end. Late-style Beethoven keeps the irreconcilable apart, and in so doing “music is transformed more and more from something significant into something obscure—even to itself.”4 Thus late-style Beethoven presides over music’s rejection of the new bourgeois order and forecasts the totally authentic and novel art of Schoenberg, whose “advanced music has no recourse but to insist on its own ossification without concession to that would-be humanitarianism which it sees through. . . . Under the present circumstances [music] is restricted to definitive negation” (PNM 20). Second, far from being simply an eccentric and irrelevant phenome-
non, late-style Beethoven, remorselessly alienated and obscure, becomes the prototypical modern aesthetic form, and by virtue of its distance from and rejection of bourgeois society and even a quiet death, it acquires an even greater significance and defiance for that very reason.

And in so many ways, the concept of lateness, as well as what goes with it in these astonishingly bold and bleak ruminations on the position of an aging artist, comes for Adorno to seem the fundamental aspect of aesthetics and of his own work as critical theorist and philosopher. My reading of Adorno, with his reflections about music at its center, sees him as injecting Marxism with a vaccine so powerful as to dissolve its agitational force almost completely. Not only do the notions of advance and culmination in Marxism crumble under his rigorous negative scorn, but so too does anything that suggests movement at all. With death and senescence before him, with a promising start years behind him, Adorno uses the model of late Beethoven to endure ending in the form of lateness but for itself, its own sake, not as a preparation for or obliteration of something else. Lateness is being at the end, fully conscious, full of memory, and also very (even preternaturally) aware of the present. Adorno, like Beethoven, becomes therefore a figure of lateness itself, an untimely, scandalous, even catastrophic commentator on the present.

No one needs to be reminded that Adorno is exceptionally difficult to read, whether in his original German or in any number of translations. Fredric Jameson speaks very well about the sheer intelligence of his sentences, their incomparable refinement, their programatically complex internal movement, their way of almost routinely foiling a first or second or third attempt at paraphrasing their content. Adorno’s prose style violates various norms: he assumes little community of understanding between himself and his audience; he is slow, unjournalistic, unpackageable, unskimmable. Even an autobiographical text like Minima Moralia is an assault on biographical, narrative, or anecdotal continuity; its form exactly replicates its subtitle—reflections from damaged life—a cascading series of discontinuous fragments, all of them in some way assaulting suspicious “wholes,” fictitious unities presided over by Hegel, whose grand synthesis has derisive contempt for the individual. “The conception of a totality through all its antagonisms compels him [Hegel] to assign to individualism, however much he may designate it a driving moment in the process, an inferior status in the construction of the whole.”

Adorno’s counter to false, and in Hegel’s case untenable, totalities is not just to say that they are inauthentic but in fact to write, to be, an alternative through exile and subjectivity, albeit exile and subjectivity addressed to philosophic issues. Moreover he says, “Social analysis can learn incomparably more from individual experience than Hegel conceded, while conversely the large historical categories . . . are no longer above suspicion of fraud” (MM 17). In the performance of unreconciled individual critical thinking there is “the force of protest.” Yes, such critical thought as Adorno’s is very idiosyncratic and often very obscure but, as he wrote in “Resignation,” his last essay, “the uncompromisingly critical thinker, who neither superscribes his conscience nor permits himself to be terrorized into action, is in truth the one who does not give in.” To work through the silences and fissures is to avoid packaging and administration and is in fact to accept and perform the lateness of his position. “Whatever has once been thought can be suppressed, forgotten, can even vanish. For thinking has the momentum of the general. [Here Adorno means both that individual thought is part of the general culture of the age and that, because it is individual, it generates its own momentum yet veers or swerves off from the general.] What once was
thought cogently must be thought elsewhere, by others: this confidence accompanies even the most solitary and powerless thought.6

Lateness therefore is a kind of self-imposed exile from what is generally acceptable, coming after it, and surviving beyond it. Hence Adorno’s evaluation of the late Beethoven and his own lesson for his reader. The catastrophe represented by late style for Adorno is that in Beethoven’s case the music is episodic, fragmentary, riven with the absences and silences that can neither be filled by supplying some general scheme for them, nor be ignored and diminished by saying “poor Beethoven, he was deaf, he was approaching death, these are lapses we shall overlook.”

Years after the first Beethoven essay appeared and in a sort of counterblast to his book on new music Adorno published an essay called “Das Altern der neuen Musik,” the aging of the new music. He spoke there of advanced music that had inherited the discoveries of the second Viennese School and had gone on “to show symptoms of false satisfaction” by becoming collectivized, affirmative, safe. New music was negative, “the result of something distressing and confused” (EM 181). Adorno recalls how traumatic to their audiences were the first performances of Berg’s Altenberg Songs and Stravinsky’s The Rite of Spring. That was the true force of new music, fearlessly drawing out the consequences of Beethoven’s late-style compositions. Today, however, so-called new music has simply aged beyond Beethoven. “More than a hundred years ago Kierkegaard, speaking as a theologian, said that where once a dreadful abyss yawned a railroad bridge now stretches, from which the passengers can look comfortably down into the depths. The situation of [aged modern] music is no different” (EM 183).

Just as the negative power of late Beethoven derives from its dissonant relationship with the affirmative developmental thrust of his second-period music, so too the dissonances of Webern and Schoenberg occur “surrounded by a shudder”; “they are felt as something uncanny and are introduced by their authors with fear and trembling” (EM 185). To reproduce the dissonances academically or institutionally a generation later without risk or stakes either emotionally or in actuality, says Adorno, is completely to lose the shattering force of the new. If you just line up a bunch of tone rows happily, or if you hold festivals of advanced music, you lose the core of, for instance, Webern’s achievement, which was to juxtapose “twelve tone technique . . . [with] its antithesis, the explosive power of the musically individual”; now an aging as opposed to a late art, modern music amounts to little more than “an empty, high-spirited trip, through thinkably complex scores, in which nothing actually occurs” (EM 185, 187).

There is therefore an inherent tension in late style that abjures mere bourgeois aging and that insists on the increasing sense of apartness and exile and anachronism, which late style expresses and, more important, uses to formally sustain itself. One has the impression reading Adorno, from the aphoristic essays on such things as punctuation marks and book covers collected in Noten zur Literatur to the grand theoretical works like Negative Dialectics and Aesthetic Theory, that what he looked for in style was the evidence he found in late Beethoven of sustained tension, unaccommodated stubbornness, lateness and newness next to each other by virtue of an “inexorable clamp that holds together what no less powerfully strives to break apart” (EM 186). Above all, late style as exemplified by Beethoven and Schoenberg cannot be replicated by invitation, or by lazy reproduction, or by mere dynastic or narrative reproduction. There is a paradox: how essentially unrepeatable, uniquely articulated aesthetic works written not at the
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beginning but at the end of a career can nevertheless have an influence on what comes after them. And how does that influence enter and inform the work of the critic, whose whole enterprise stubbornly prizes its own intransigence and untimeliness?

Philosophically Adorno is unthinkable without the majestic beacon provided by Lukács’s History and Class Consciousness, but he is also unthinkable without his refusal of the earlier work’s triumphalism and implied transcendence. If for Lukács the subject-object relationship and its antinomies, the fragmentation and the lostness, the ironic perspectivism of modernity, were supremely discerned, embodied, and consummated in narrative forms such as the rewritten epics both of the novel and the proletariat’s class consciousness, for Adorno that particular choice was, he said in a famous anti-Lukács essay, a kind of false reconciliation under duress. Modernity was a fallen, unredeemed reality, and new music, as much as Adorno’s own philosophic practice, took its task to be a ceaselessly demonstrated reminder of that reality.

Were this reminder to be simply a repeated no or this will not do, late style and philosophy would be totally uninteresting and repetitive. There must be a constructive element above all, which animates the procedure. What Adorno finds so admirable about Schoenberg is his severity as well as his invention of a technique that provides music with an alternative to tonal harmony and to classical inflection, color, rhythm. Adorno describes the twelve-tone method of Schoenberg in terms taken almost verbatim from Lukács’s drama of the subject-object impasse, but each time there is an opportunity for synthesis, Adorno has Schoenberg turn it down. What we see is Adorno constructing a breathtakingly regressive sequence, an endgame procedure by which he threads his way back along the route taken by Lukács; all the laboriously devised solutions volunteered by Lukács for pulling himself out of the slough of modern despair are just as laboriously dismantled and rendered useless by Adorno’s account of what Schoenberg was really about. Fixated on the new music’s absolute rejection of the commercial sphere, Adorno’s words cut out the social ground from underneath art. For in fighting ornament, illusion, reconciliation, communication, humanism, and success, art becomes untenable.

Everything having no function in the work of art—and therefore everything transcending the law of mere existence—is withdrawn. The function of the work of art lies precisely in its transcendence beyond mere existence. . . . Since the work of art, after all, cannot be reality, the elimination of all illusory features accentuates all the more glaringly the illusory character of its existence. This process is inescapable. (PNM 70)

Are late-style Beethoven and Schoenberg actually like this, we finally ask, and is their music so isolated in its antithesis to society? Or is it the case that Adorno’s descriptions of them are models, paradigms, constructs intended to highlight certain features and thereby give the two composers a certain appearance, a certain profile in and for Adorno’s own writing? What Adorno does is theoretical—that is, his construction isn’t supposed to be a replica of the real thing, which had he attempted it would have been little more than a packaged and domesticated copy. The location of Adorno’s writing is theory, a space where he can construct his demystifying negative dialectics.

Whether he writes about music or literature or abstract philosophy or society, Adorno’s theoretical work is always in a strange way extremely concrete—that is, he writes from the perspective of long experience rather than revolutionary beginnings, and what he writes about is saturated in culture. Adorno’s
position as a theorist of late style and of endgames is an extraordinary knowingness, the polar opposite of Rousseau’s. There is also the supposition (indeed the assumption) of wealth and privilege, what today we call elitism and, more recently, political incorrectness. Adorno’s world is the world of Weimar, of high modernism, of luxury tastes, of an inspired if slightly sated amateurism. Never was he more autobiographical than in the first fragment, entitled “For Marcel Proust,” of Minima Moralia:

The son of well-to-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. It is not merely that his independence is envied, the seriousness of his intentions mistrusted, and that he is suspected of being a secret envoy of the established powers. Such suspicions, though betraying a secret resentment, would usually prove well-founded. But the real resistances lie elsewhere. The occupation with things of the mind has by now itself become “practical,” a business with strict division of labor, departments and restricted entry. The man of independent means who chooses it out of repugnance for the ignominy of earning money will not be disposed to acknowledge the fact. For this he is punished. He is not a “professional,” is ranked in the competitive hierarchy as a dilettante no matter how well he knows his subject, and must, if he wants a career, show himself even more resolutely blinkered than the most inveterate specialist. (MM 21; emphases added)

The dynastic fact of importance here is that his parents were wealthy. No less important is the sentence where, having described his colleagues as being envious as well as suspicious of his relationship with “the established powers,” Adorno adds that these suspicions are well founded. Which is to say that in a contest between the blandishments of an intellectual Faubourg St. Honoré and those afforded by the moral equivalent of a working-class association, Adorno would end up with the former, not the latter. On one level his elitist predilections are of course a function of his class background. But on another what he likes in it, well after his defection from its ranks, is its sense of ease and luxury; this, he implies in Minima Moralia, allows him a continuous familiarity with great works, great masters, and great ideas, not as subjects of professional discipline but rather as practices indulged in by a frequent habitué at a club.

Yet this is another reason why Adorno is impossible to assimilate to any system, even that of upper-class sensuousness: he literally defies predictability, turning his disaffected but rarely cynical eye on virtually everything within range.

Nevertheless Adorno, like Proust, lived and worked his entire life next to, and even as a part of, the great underlying continuities of Western society: families, intellectual associations, musical and concert life, and philosophical traditions, as well as any number of academic institutions. But he was always to one side, never fully a part of any. He was a musician who never had a career as one, a philosopher whose main subject was music. And unlike many of his academic or intellectual counterparts, Adorno never pretended to an apolitical neutrality. His work is like a contrapuntal voice intertwined with fascism, bourgeois mass society, and communism, inexplicable without them, always critical and ironic about them.

I think it is right therefore to see Adorno’s extremely intense lifelong fixation on third-period Beethoven as the carefully maintained choice of a critical model, a construction made for the benefit of his own actuality as a philosopher and cultural critic in an enforced exile from the society that made him possi-
ble in the first place. To be late meant therefore to be late for (and refuse) many of the rewards offered up by being comfortable inside society, not the least of which was to be read and understood easily by a large group of people. On the other hand, people who have read and even admired Adorno sense in themselves a sort of grudging concession to his studious unlikeliness, as if he were not just a serious academic philosopher but an aging, disobliging, and even embarrassingly frank former colleague who, even though he has left one’s circle, persists in making things hard for everyone.

I have spoken about Adorno in this way because around his quite amazingly peculiar and inimitable work a number of general characteristics of endings have coalesced. First of all, like some of the people he admired and knew—Horkheimer, Thomas Mann, Steuermann—Adorno was a worldly person, worldly in the French sense of mondain. Urban and urbane, deliberate, he was incredibly able to find interesting things to say about even so unassuming a thing as a semicolon or an exclamation mark. Along with these qualities goes the late style—that of an aging but mentally agile European man of culture who is absolutely not given to ascetic serenity or mellow maturity: there isn’t much fumbling for references or footnotes or pedantic citations but always a very self-assured well-brought-up ability to talk equally well about Bach and his devotees, about society and sociology.

Adorno is very much a late figure because so much of what he does militated ferociously against his own time. Although he wrote a great deal in many different fields, he attacked the major advances in all of them, functioning like an enormous shower of sulfuric acid poured over the lot. He opposed the very notion of productivity by being himself the author of an overabundance of material, none of it really compressible into an Adornian system or method. In an age of specialization he was catholic, writing on virtually everything that came before him. On his turf—music, philosophy, social tendencies, history, communication, semiotics—Adorno was unashamedly mandarin. There are no concessions to his readers, no summaries, small talk, helpful road signs, or convenient simplifying. And there is never any kind of solace or false optimism. One of the impressions you get as you read Adorno is that he is a sort of furious machine decomposing itself into smaller and smaller parts. He had the miniaturist’s penchant for pitiless detail: he seeks out and hangs out the last blemish, to be looked at with a pedantic little chuckle.

It is the Zeitgeist that Adorno really loathed and that all his writing struggles mightily to insult. Everything about him, to readers who came of age in the 1950s and 1960s, was prewar and therefore unfashionable, perhaps even embarrassing, like his opinions on jazz and on otherwise universally recognized composers like Stravinsky and Wagner. Lateness for him equaled regression, from now to back then, when people discussed Kierkegaard, Hegel, and Kafka with direct knowledge of their work, not with plot summaries or handbooks. The things he wrote about he seems to have known since childhood and were not learned at university or by frequenting fashionable parties.

What is particularly interesting to me about Adorno is that he is a special twentieth-century type, the out-of-his-time latenineteenth-century disappointed or disillusioned romantic who exists almost ecstatically detached from, yet in a kind of complicity with, new and monstrous modern forms—fascism, anti-Semitism, totalitarianism, and bureaucracy, or what Adorno called the administered society and the consciousness industry. He was very secular. Like the Leibnizian monad he often discussed with reference to the artwork, Adorno—and with him rough contemporaries like Richard Strauss, Lampedusa,
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and Visconti—is unwaveringly Eurocentric, unfashionable, and resistant to any assimilative scheme, yet he oddly reflects the predicament of ending without illusory hope or manufactured resignation.

Perhaps in the end it is Adorno's unmatched technicality that is so significant. His analyses of Schoenberg's method in *The Philosophy of New Music* give words and concepts to the inner workings of a formidably complex new outlook in another medium, and he does so with a prodigiously exact technical awareness of both mediums, word and tones. A better way of saying it is that Adorno never lets technical issues get in the way, never lets them awe him by their abstruseness or by the evident mastery they require. He can be more technical by elucidating technique from the perspective of lateness, seeing Stravinskian primitivism in the light of later fascist collectivization.

Late style is *in*, but oddly *apart* from the present. Only certain artists and thinkers care enough about their métier to believe that it too ages and must face death with failing senses and memory. As Adorno said about Beethoven, late style does not admit the definitive cadences of death; instead, death appears in a refracted mode, as irony. But with the kind of opulent, fractured, and somehow inconsistent solemnity of a work such as the *Missa Solemnis*, or in Adorno's own essays, the irony is how often lateness as theme and as style keeps reminding us of death.

TWO

Return to the Eighteenth Century

In my last chapter I began to discuss the phenomenon of late style, to which in a memorable fragment on Beethoven's third and final period Adorno gave extraordinarily dense and profound meaning. This idea about the coherence of "Spätstil," as Adorno called it, runs very consistently through many of his later studies of, for instance, Wagner's *Parsifal*, Schoenberg's last works, and so on. Partly because Adorno himself also represents an example of late style in the twentieth century, I began to study a group of twentieth-century artists, among them Richard Strauss, whose late works—*Capriccio*, the oboe concerto, the wind sonatas, the Second Horn Concerto, *Metamorphosis*, the *Four Last Songs*—impressed me for their undiminished power and yet strangely recapitulatory and even backward-looking and abstracted quality. Along with Strauss I have been interested in the later works of Genet, as well as those of the Italian director Luchino Visconti, particularly his 1963 adaptation of Lampedusa's *The Leopard*, a late novel if there ever was one.

The centrality of Strauss to my investigation of late style is especially acute. Glenn Gould rather extravagantly referred to him as the greatest musical personality of the twentieth cen-