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THE LIFE AND WORK OF GRETEL KARPLUS/ADORNO: HER CONTRIBUTIONS TO FRANKFURT SCHOOL THEORY

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BY

STACI LYNN VON BOECKMANN
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THE LIFE AND WORK OF GRETEL KARPLUS/ADORNO:
HER CONTRIBUTIONS TO FRANKFURT SCHOOL THEORY

A Dissertation APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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To the memory of my grandmother,

Norma Lee Von Boeckman

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Table of Contents

Dedication iv
Acknowledgements v
Table of Contents vii
List of Abbreviations viii
Introduction 1
Chapter 1: Feminist Critiques of the Biographical Tradition 26
Chapter 2: Gretel Karplus/Adorno: Reconstructing a Life, Part I . . . 51
Chapter 3: Felicitas, The Correspondence of Gretel Karplus and Walter Benjamin, 1933-1940 75
Chapter 4: Reconstructing a Life, Part II 124
Conclusion 158
Works Cited 163
List of Archives 168

List of Abbreviations

HGS	*Horkheimer Gesammelte Schriften*
AHBW	*Adorno/Horkheimer Briefwechsel*
ALBW	*Adorno/Lenk Briefwechsel*
WBGS	*Walter Benjamin Gesammelte Schriften*
WBGB	*Walter Benjamin Gesammelte Briefe*
CC	*Adorno/Benjamin Complete Correspondence*

Introduction

Origins and evolution of the project

I became interested in Gretel Karplus when I read the *Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, while preparing for my doctoral examinations. I had not known until then that Benjamin had enjoyed a close relationship with Adorno's wife. I had always and only ever heard of the intimate, intellectual ties between the two men. Thus, it struck me as peculiar that in the letters of this volume such a significant number were addressed to Karplus. These letters reveal a close friendship based on mutual trust. Benjamin discusses his daily life, his worries, his hopes, and his work with Karplus, particularly the *Passagenarbeit*, on which he worked so passionately during his Paris exile. Turning to the index of correspondents in the back of the volume of letters, I was further intrigued to find that Karplus had held a PhD. She was an accomplished woman, who had intimate intellectual ties to two of the most influential philosophers of the 20th century.

These appearances of Karplus in the margins of Benjamin's writing were complemented by Horkheimer and Adorno's reference to her in the preface to the 1969 edition of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as nothing less than a collaborator. There they write, "In the extension of our theory and the accompanying mutual experiences, Gretel Adorno has been a precious helper" (x). Karplus is further

listed as the co-editor of many of her husband's texts and of his collected works, as well as the first editions of Benjamin's posthumous writings in 1955. My early investigations revealed that she was also a regular presence at the Institute of Social Research, where she had an office on the third floor. In response to my letter of inquiry in 1996, Professor Martin Jay, whose history of the Frankfurt School, *The Dialectical Imagination*, has become a seminal text for the study of critical theory, encouraged my project, saying that Karplus certainly deserved a serious study. In later correspondence he informed me of Karplus' suicide attempt the year after Adorno's death, but could not tell me much more about her, having not dealt specifically with Karplus in his own work. Intrigued and motivated by these traces of Karplus in the life and work of these leading figures of the Frankfurt School, I traveled to Frankfurt to find out the rest of the story – and write about it.

When I began my research in late 1996, I arrived in Frankfurt full of optimism, eager to learn more of this woman about whom I knew so little, but with whom I had become so fascinated. In the two years I spent in Frankfurt I was befriended by the librarian at the Institute of Social Research, who after a time managed to secure me an unofficial work space in the basement of the building across the hall from the library. As a result, I spent a great deal of time there and became acquainted with some of the younger employees of the Institute, as well as some of its more prominent figures. Professor Ludwig von Friedeburg, co-director of the Institute together with Adorno until the latter's death in 1969 and, thereafter, director until his retirement in 2001, was my first and

most enthusiastic contact in Frankfurt. He was one of several members of an older generation who had known Karplus personally and who was convinced Adorno could not have accomplished all he had in his lifetime without the assistance of his wife. Unfortunately, however, when it came to spelling out the exact nature of her contribution to Adorno's work, no one seemed to know quite what Karplus had done.

Reviews of the literature on the history of the Frankfurt School yielded little in the way of information about Karplus, specifically, or any other women participating in the work of the Institute. Rolf Wiggershaus' 1986 history of the Frankfurt School focuses on the history of the Institute of Social Research, its theoretical developments and its political heritage. In 1987 a colloquium was held at the Institute at which Wiggershaus discussed the goals of his text in a presentation followed by lively debate. Among the several topics of discussion that evening were the relationship of individual creativity to collective theoretical work and production, both within the Frankfurt School and in general; and the role of women in regard to the collective output of the Institute.

Crystal Eckart, Professor of Sociology and member of the Institute, challenged Wiggershaus' account of the Frankfurt School's history for its complete lack of attention to women. He responded that women would not have played a role in his history had he taken them into account, arguing that from the typical secretarial role of Gretel Adorno to the simple woman [*einfache Frau aus dem Volk*] like Maidon Horkheimer through to Benjamin's misogynist remarks, the spectrum was complete, whereby these absences would be neither unusual nor

relevant. Eckart emphasized that not only a study of the participating women but an analysis of the absence of women would have a powerful influence on our understanding of the nature of the men's theoretical collaboration. Wiggershaus countered that to include women in his history would have required a reconstruction of the "Alltag," or daily life, of the critical intellectuals, which would have gone outside the scope of his work. Ludwig von Friedeburg voiced strong opposition, arguing that his experience at the Institute had been very different. Gretel Adorno, for example, was directly and constitutively involved in the writing of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. She regularly drew up the protocols of the discussions between Horkheimer and Adorno, which she also annotated. Maidon Horkheimer, he maintained, had also been substantially involved. According to von Freideburg, "Women should not be pushed into the category of *Alltag* – one need not leave the rooms of the Institute to take them into account. In fact, Gretel Adorno was at the Institute everyday."[1]

The discussion at this colloquium represents a genuine effort to call for the recognition of women in the Frankfurt School, but it lacked follow-through. There are no further details offered and no research has yet been done which could actually attest to the presence and productivity of these or other women involved in the Institute's work.[2] So how exactly can the task of drawing Karplus out of these margins be approached? She was certainly no "*einfache Frau aus dem*

[1] From Protokoll der Diskussion von Rolf Wiggershaus' "Die Frankfurter Schule" im Institut für Sozialforschung am 7.5.1987. Recorded by Bert Koegler. My translation.

[2] There are references to women such as, Käthe Weil, Hedda Korsch, Christiane Sorge, Rose Wittfogel and Margarete Lissauer, who were involved in the early years of Frankfurt School, before the Institute was founded, many of whom were wives or partners to some of the prominent male figures who established the institute. These women all attended the "Marxistische Arbeitswoche" in 1923 initiated by Karl Korsch and Felix Weil, whose father, Herman Weil, was prepared to finance an institute.

Volk" (or simple woman) and clearly more than *merely* a secretary. These traditional ways of categorizing women's work conceal Karplus' actual productivity. The fact that her work is not available as a product in its own right does not diminish its value. Rather, it underscores the often unquantifiable character of women's work. This is especially true of women working in the shadows, as it were, of their famous husbands or male companions.

After speaking with Rolf Tiedemann, then director of the Theodor W. Adorno Archive and former student of Adorno's, the situation changed, but not altogether for the better. Tiedemann informed me during our conversation that he himself had done the major part of the editing of *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique*, of *Aesthetic Theory*, and of the *Collected Works*. He said that Karplus had helped mainly with decisions about the structure of *Aesthetic Theory* and the conclusion and had proofed his work, critiquing chiefly his word choice. I was left with the impression that her name appeared as co-editor on the texts, a number of which were edited after Karplus' attempted suicide which left her partially mentally incapacitated, as a sort of acknowledgement of the woman she had once been. Karplus' letters to Adorno, journals she may have kept, and any commentary she may have made on Benjamin's essays mentioned in their correspondence were other materials of great import to this research, but my expectations there were also met with disappointment. I learned that Karplus had destroyed most of her personal papers before her attempted suicide and that, according to Tiedemann, her correspondence with Adorno mysteriously

vanished from their home in the years just after her suicide attempt and has never been recovered.

The Adorno Archive – which more properly should be named the Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno Archive, as it has procured a generous portion of the Benjamin estate over the years – is a privately-owned archive, infamous among Benjamin and Adorno scholars for restricting access to its materials.[3] Over the course of two years between 1996 and 1998, I made repeated requests to examine the Benjamin-Karplus correspondence, which were rejected initially because the archive staff was compiling the new six-volume edition of Benjamin's correspondence.[4] However, as I will discuss in Chapter 3, this edition, which has in the meantime been completed (the last volume appeared in late 2000), proved a great disappointment for those interested in Benjamin's female friendships. Though the edition includes some previously unpublished excerpts and references to Karplus' letters to Benjamin, her letters are not included in the volumes. The archive reportedly plans to publish these letters, as

[3] In the Author's note to his 1990 Walter Benjamin: A Biography (English ed. 1996, Verso), Momme Brodersen expresses his exasperation with the archive after thanking the numerous institutions and individuals who supported his work. He writes, "By contrast, my work received no support whatsoever from the trustees of the Benjamin estate in Frankfurt. My numerous requests for information and access to certain documents were all flatly refused, and the door was closed in my face when I attempted to enter the hallowed sanctuary of the Adorno archive" (Author's note x). In 2003, the Adorno Archive sold its Benjamin holdings to the Benjamin Archive at the Universität der Künste in Berlin. It has recently come to my attention that this year the Adorno Archive itself has been moved to the same location. Materials available there are photocopies of original documents which will themselves remain in Frankfurt, housed at the Institute of Social Research and largely unavailable to public access.

[4] My relationship with the Adorno Archive seemed to get off to good enough start during my interview with Rolf Tiedemann. He allowed me to tape our interview, which I later transcribed (with the assistance of several German native speakers) and sent to him with additional questions. Unfortunately, Tiedemann saw this as an opportunity to rescind the interview and, in a rather nasty letter, claimed that everything in the transcript was completely erroneous. My questions, he informed me, he would not answer: To do so would require him to write a short book, for which he really had no time. I had obviously not been able to convince him that if he would simply cooperate I would eagerly take the job off his hands. That letter was the last contact I had with the archive under Tiedemann's directorship.

well as those of Benjamin's numerous other correspondents, in the course of time.

In late 2001, I received news from my colleagues in Frankfurt that a new director had been appointed to the Adorno Archive. In hopes that the tide was finally changing, I repeated my request to examine the correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gretel Karplus along with other material relevant to my research. In January 2002, I was granted permission to read the correspondence. To my greatest surprise and pleasure, I was met with a welcoming attitude at the Adorno Archive by its new director, Dr. Gabriele Ewenz, but again faced disappointment when she explained that the correspondence between Karplus and Benjamin represented the extent of the archive's material concerning Adorno's wife, with the exception of some photos from her youth and with Adorno in America and in Frankfurt in the later years. Dr. Ewenz was herself puzzled by the deficiency of material on Karplus in the archive, as was I, having been given the impression by its former director that material was there and simply not being made available. It is certainly puzzling, in any case, since Karplus lived in the home she and Adorno had shared on Kettenhofweg in Frankfurt's Westend until her death in 1993. Her possessions and, for the most part, those of Adorno remained in the home until that time, when they were first placed in the custody of the archive. One wonders what could have become of Karplus' belongings during the liquidation of the Adorno estate. Not so much as a letterhead remains.

Investigating Karplus' early life presents difficulties of another sort, connected to the Second World War and to Karplus' Jewish ethnicity. Though

most of her university records and dissertation were attainable, specific information concerning the leather production factory half-owned by her father and later by her, which may have provided insight into Karplus' financial situation, was only partially available. Records of the *Landesarchiv – Berlin* (the archives of the state office in Berlin) provided some insight into the longevity of the factory, as well as details about who owned the factory during which periods of its existence. The factory's financial records are still listed under pre-war catalogue numbers, which no longer correspond to the archive's contemporary cataloging system. Any documents that may have survived the war are now located in a "dead record office" of sorts, in practice inaccessible. Synagogue records, Jewish business association records, and other such material which may have told us more about her parents' relationship to Judaism, and thus her childhood, were likewise destroyed or inaccessible. Records from the secondary school Karplus attended were scarcely accessible, because they were so poorly, if at all, archived. Karplus' *Lebenslauf* [curriculum vitae], which she wrote for the university at Berlin upon application for her doctoral examinations, is the primary source for such information.

In addition to these strategic difficulties, one of the most powerful forms of resistance I encountered was the attitude toward research on wives. In my enthusiasm, it never occurred to me that others might question the seriousness of my project. The responses I received when I began talking to people in Frankfurt about my project came as a rather sobering shock to me. As I began broaching the subject of my research with others, I found that one after another,

especially the younger generation of students in Frankfurt, perceived Gretel Adorno as “that poor woman.” Though I could well imagine that life with Adorno had not been uncomplicated, I was at a loss when confronted with this image of Karplus. It simply did not fit with the fragments of her life I had been able to piece together so far. It didn’t take me long, however, to learn that these students were implicitly referring to the taboo subject of Adorno’s rather public personal life – his publicly acknowledged extra-marital relationships. I suddenly found myself in a rather sticky, quite uncomfortable situation. Determined to get beyond this stigma, I continued seeking out other sources of information on Karplus. But this facet of her personal history loomed above my research and her story like a threatening storm cloud.

“Was kann man da schreiben, außer lauter Klatsch und Tratsch?” **What can you write about her but gossip and hearsay?**

Klatsch und Tratsch, gossip and hearsay, these are the categories that come to the minds of many when one begins to talk about researching a famous man’s wife. In Frankfurt am Main, in any case, it is the response I got from one particular individual and the implied response I got from many when I began inquiring about Gretel Karplus’ role at the Institute and in the life and work of her husband and Walter Benjamin. This reaction exposes the hidden assumption that information about women, or perhaps only wives, can be nothing more than

gossip, as well as suggesting that women produce knowledge in the form of gossip. It is at once an insult to Karplus, as well as to me. It silences me as scholar and erases our historical memory of Karplus, portraying her as a subject unworthy of serious scholarly investigation. I use the terms “knowledge” and “information”, but, in fact, gossip and hearsay are understood as their binary oppositions.

Labeling something *gossip* discredits it as a form of knowledge-producing discourse. Gossip takes place in the private sphere; it is secretive, scandalous. It is associated with women, the home, the kitchen, coffee drinking and “talking” about people, usually other women. Gossip is defined in the American Heritage Dictionary as “1. Rumor or talk of a personal, sensational, or intimate nature 2. A person who habitually spreads gossip 3. Trivial, chatty talk or writing.” Gossip not only takes place in the private sphere but is about private matters – Karplus, as wife, is automatically subsumed within the realm of the private. Gossip is insignificant, light-hearted, unimportant – writing about Karplus is not scholarship. The authority to name, Linda Wagner-Martin reminds us, is a central mechanism for maintaining gendered power structures. “Culturally and literarily, the content of women’s talk, as compared with men’s talk, has been consistently diminished. Groups with power retain authoritative speech” (87). The association of women’s discourse with gossip devalues women’s narrative, be it Karplus’ own history or my reconstruction of it.

This association of my interest in Karplus with the desire to gossip also reveals the hidden assumption that Karplus cannot be treated as a subject in her

own right, but only as a factor in the life of her husband. It assumes that my real interest is, in fact, Theodor W. Adorno himself, specifically to "dig up some dirt" on the philosopher-hero. Admittedly, the issue of extramarital affairs, taken on its own, can indeed slip all too easily into the realm of gossip and hearsay. Yet, the Adornos' marital arrangement, because it is hard to understand, or perhaps because it is so easily misunderstood, becomes yet another way of keeping Karplus in the shadows. The conspiracy of silence built up around it functions as a barrier where Karplus is concerned. Moreover, by adding a touch of the scandalous, it functions as reinforcement of an intellectual posture which discredits investigation of the private sphere in general, and of famous men's wives in particular. Viewed from the position of a feminist researcher, however, it becomes a symptom of the presence of gendered space not yet properly examined. In whatever way this issue be approached, it should not be from the position of bourgeois morality which would shake a finger at Adorno and find Karplus pathetic. The matter is clearly more complicated than that.

My own interviews with some of Adorno's protégés and former members of the Institute, as I will discuss in Chapter 2, revealed a different understanding of the Adornos' marriage. When asked to describe the relationship between Karplus and Adorno, Manfred Teschner, Professor of Sociology at the University of Darmstadt who wrote both his dissertation and habilitation[5] under Adorno's directorship, replied that one could not understand the Adornos' relationship in

[5] The Habilitationsschrift is equivalent in the American university system to the first book. The German university system, however, requires the habilitation after the doctoral thesis and before candidates are able to apply for professorships. Recent university reforms have done away with it and introduced the position of Junior Professor, much like the American Assistant Professor.

terms of romantic love; the bond between them was much more than that. Their relationship, he maintains, must be understood in the context of "*zusammenwachsen"* [to grow together, to intertwine, to close (as in the healing of a wound)], of solidarity and sympathy with one another achieved through struggle, and, insofar, must be viewed dialectically as "*ein Stück tranzendierendes Moment*" [a moment of dialectical transcendence]. An inquiry into the circumstances of the Adornos' marriage would, at any rate, offer explanations for only some of the erasures effected on Karplus' life, perhaps most readily her destruction of personal papers in which she may have recorded her own thoughts and feeling about her marriage to Adorno.

One of the reasons Karplus makes such an interesting figure for feminist investigation is her not easily definable position as a woman on the boundaries between bourgeois culture and the liberal culture of the Twenties. Karplus grew up in the Weimar period, a blooming period of liberation, in Germany's capital city, Berlin, a center of great cultural and intellectual development. But the limits of Weimar's liberation for women can be drawn by the still predominant belief that a woman's place was in the home. The question about Karplus' own position on the feminism of her day is one which, given the lack of material, can only be answered through speculation. The little we do know, however, makes it clear that Karplus managed to create a space for herself outside the domestic sphere, playing an active public role in her early adult life as manager of a factory and participant in the intellectual circles of her day in Berlin – circles which included both Walter Benjamin and her future husband, Theodor W. Adorno, among

others – and later as a collaborator in the life and work of Adorno and the Institute of Social Research. To reduce her story to *Klatsch und Tratsch* is an injustice.

The association of biography with the voyeuristic gaze, an intrusion into the private sphere, has a long tradition and has only begun to change in the past two decades. Adorno's position regarding his own biography is fairly well known. He proclaimed that his biography could not be written and his private papers remain inaccessible.[6] Adorno's view reflects a certain attitude common among German academics in general, which places a low value on biography. In his review of Manfred Kuehn's *Kant: A Biography*, Kurt Flasch briefly discusses the biographical tradition in Germany, writing that biography fell into disrepute in Germany sometime after 1924. Biographical studies of great thinkers, he writes, were seen as an indiscreet look through the keyhole, which could only yield a chamber servant's perspective. Most German philosophers saw biographical studies as a contemptible distraction from the 'real thing' (*FAZ* 24.12.01).

This attitude is so predominant, in fact, that even a reputable scholar like Martin Jay, who wrote an intellectual history of the Institute and its leading members, could not escape being classed as a voyeur and gossip. In his *Salmagundi* column from Summer 1999 entitled "The Ungrateful Dead," Jay relates the experience of discovering a previously unpublished letter written by Adorno to Herbert Marcuse, which had been included in a recently published three-volume work chronicling the relationship of the German student movement

[6] According to Evelyn Wilcock, an Adorno researcher out of Britain who has been working on a biography of Adorno for some years now, "[Adorno's] private papers remain closed for a period of fifty years from the death of his widow in 1993" (324).

to the Frankfurt School. In his letter Adorno makes brief reference to Martin Jay's visit to Frankfurt in 1969, where Jay interviewed Adorno as part of his research for his dissertation, which later became *The Dialectical Imagination*. There, Adorno reports to Marcuse in passing, "This Mr. Jay is a horrible guy. Beyond that he has an unerring instinct to direct himself to the dirt. I gave him as little of my time as possible. He is now in Montagnola pestering Max." Jay was absolutely shocked at discovering 30 years later what Adorno had thought of him at the time he was undertaking his research. Adorno's judgment come from the grave led Jay to question what he had done to evoke such a reaction from Adorno. Was it that he wasn't well enough versed in Adorno's philosophy? Or perhaps it had been his questions about Adorno's relationship to Benjamin and to the edition of Benjamin's work? Or, perhaps questions about his relationship to Schoenberg? Try as he may, Jay couldn't find anything else in his notes that seemed provocative.

It is common knowledge that many people found Adorno personally unbearable, Jay explains, but Jay had at all times sought to maintain the distinction between personal and academic information, taking as his guide Hegel's dictum, *Niemand gelte bei seinem Kammerdiener als Held* [No one is a hero in the eyes of his servant]. Yet despite his commitment to stay focused on the work, Jay now found himself being portrayed to the world as a repulsive fellow who enjoyed digging around in other people's dirty laundry – in short, a gossip. In the Preface to *The Dialectical Imagination*, Jay even refers to the book's positive reception in Germany as a result of its objective stance. "Unlike

certain later treatments, reflecting a more disillusioned and debunking mood," he writes, "it luckily avoided what the Germans call *Kammerdienerperspektive*: The view from below by a servant who washes dirty linen" (xv). The only consolation in the sea of mixed emotions Jay experienced upon reading this letter to Marcuse in 1999 was that it said more about Adorno's own distrusting character than about Jay himself or his putative transgressions.

It is never pleasant to be characterized as a gossip, especially for someone like Jay who, after all, devoted "over half of [his] career" to ensuring the intellectual legacy of Adorno in America and beyond. Jay, at least, had the benefit of not being directly confronted with this attitude at the time he was engaged in his research. The association of my interests in Karplus with *Klatsch und Tratsch* and the subsequent suspicion regarding the motivations of my research, however, were apparent to me at every turn, even when it proved not to be a barrier. My requests for interviews with former students and protégés of Adorno evoked a range of responses from silence to, in rare but welcome cases, enthusiasm.[7]

[7] My letter provided a brief account of my academic background, along with an explanation of my research interests and goals. Additionally, I offered to send a more detailed outline of my dissertation plans if desired and requested that I be contacted by mail or phone. An interesting pattern of response developed, in which the male professors to whom I sent requests either declined by letter, or wrote to ask for further information. Of the eight male professors to whom I sent requests, only two, Ludwig von Friedeburg and Manfred Teschner, agreed to meet with me. The two female professors to whom I wrote, Helgard Kramer and Regina Becker-Schmidt, both phoned to speak with me personally about my project and arrange a meeting. My other potential female contacts included a former staff member of the Institute's publications department where Karplus had also been engaged and the former secretaries of Horkheimer and Adorno. Liselotte Mohl, who worked in the publications department with Karplus, phoned to arrange our meeting at her home. Milli Weinbrenner, Horkheimer's secretary, declined to meet with me out of a sense of loyalty to her former employer. Elfriede Olbrich, Adorno's secretary from the time he returned to Germany until his death, also initially declined. After a year of seeing me regularly at the Institute and with the support of Elizabeth Matthias, the Institute's librarian with whom she enjoys a close friendship, Ms. Olbrich finally agreed to meet with me.

An additional context for the hesitant, sometimes dismissive, attitude toward research on Karplus may be the general decline in popularity of (first-generation) Critical Theory, at least in Frankfurt. Contemporary students, having experienced German reunification, or as some see it, the collapse of socialism and the failure of Marxism, no longer look to critical theory for answers, to develop a critical apparatus with which to interpret the world around them. The majority of students thumb their noses at ideology critique as a thing of the past. In such an atmosphere, Adorno becomes a figure to defend and protect. Suspicion about the real motivation for research on Adorno's wife, who never published anything after all, may seem legitimate. Now is not the time to invite a "castrating feminist" into your archives, to finish off the hero, so to speak. Perhaps, at some level, I was even associated with the breast-baring SDS members, who rushed the stage during one of Adorno's lectures in 1969.

One might say the cards were stacked against me. When I explained to German Professors that I was a graduate student in the Composition/Rhetoric /Literacy (CRL) program in the English Department at the University of Oklahoma, I was accorded little respect. Rhetoric in Germany is still housed in the philology department and has not experienced the revolution the field has undergone in the United States over the last few decades. As far as composition is concerned, the idea of teaching writing is absurd to most German academics, who hold fast to their notions of the romantic genius. In the German university system, students are either "natural" writers or eventually fall through the cracks.

German universities have neither composition programs nor writing centers, which would be considered remedial.

The concept of rhetoric as a methodology for research, a new angle for examining historical evidence was not enthusiastically received. Rhetoric is more readily perceived as the opposite of philosophy, the search for truth, than as language-centered inquiry. The popular association of rhetoric with empty speech and double-talk puts it in a category not far removed from gossip and hearsay as something of which to be wary. The goal of this dissertation, however, has nothing in common with the aims of such discourses; rather, it draws on the insights of contemporary rhetorical theory and feminist historiography in an effort to acknowledge the contributions of Gretel Karplus to the lives and work of Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin.

Toward a Feminist Rhetorical Methodology

> *"Every presentation of history must begin with awakening. In fact, it should deal with nothing else." (*Walter Benjamin, *Passagen Arbeit*, *Konvolut N)*

The metaphor of awakening has long been used to describe the task of feminist historiography. This is the sense in which awakening means bringing to consciousness, where revisionist history is an awakening *to* women as subjects

overlooked in histories written within the paradigm of continuity between great masters or heroes. This now commonplace critique of masculinist or patriarchal history has resulted in a massive rewriting of history, which includes women. Indeed, as Joan Wallach Scott suggests, the shelves are filled with projects of feminist recovery, to the point that we have begun, again, to rethink and redefine a feminist historiography (Introduction). However, the model of progress for writing history (whether used by feminist or traditional historians) still functions to exclude certain women, because of its presumptions about authorship and productivity, which causes historians to "unintentionally marginalize or devalue a significant portion of female . . . experience" (Ezell 7).

Recent work by women historiographers in a variety of disciplines seeks to go beyond the limitations of adopting a male model of history for feminist purposes. These efforts have focused mainly on questioning the presumptions about authorship and printing that derive from this model, but also on the issues of evidence regarding women's intellectual productivity and historical activity. Christa Bürger's work, "Women Question Philosophers," in which she examines the letters of Immanuel Kant's female correspondents, for example, acknowledges the contributions of women as philosophers in their own right, whose response to the philosophical tradition in the form of letters should itself be acknowledged as philosophical discourse.

Shari Benstock describes her work on the women of expatriate Paris from 1900 – 1940 in *Women of the Left Bank* as writing "the underside" of history. In Benstock's case, this underside is composed of a group of women who, on the

one hand, were writers, producing texts and manifestos, and on the other, were women whose production was behind the scenes and took the form of publishing and distribution, and who established an entire network of support that facilitated and in some cases allowed for the work of others, largely men, to come into existence or to achieve renown.

The work of Natalie Zemon Davis provides yet another example of pushing the boundaries of phallogocentric historiography. The idea that to write history is to construct (from a situated and ideological position) a story, composed in a narrative structure not unlike a novel, rather than a retrieval of facts to be objectively reconstructed by the disinterested historian is now widely acknowledged, if not always put into practice. But Zemon Davis' work, especially her Martin Guerre book (perhaps it would be more accurate to call it her Bertrande de Rols book), demonstrates the possibilities opened up for us by an historiography which effectuates these theoretical lessons. Her work not only uses all of the traditional stories and forms of evidence of masculinist histories, but uses them as points of departure for re-visioning history in a more dialogical, rhetorical manner.

Cheryl Glenn's feminist revision of the history of rhetoric through her successful reconstruction of the figure of Aspasia represents one of a host of studies undertaken in the last decade by theorists and historians of rhetoric to expand and complicate our traditional view of the rhetorical canon. Faced with a lack of "proof" or "hard evidence" of Aspasia's existence and productivity, Glenn takes up a variety of "angles" – historiography, feminism, gender studies – a

"postmodern slant" from which to view the paternal narrative of rhetorical history in an effort to see something new. Taking seriously the implications of postmodernism for the study of history in which "[n]arratives are no longer unquestioned or overarching," Glenn writes, means that "historiographers study the shape of each narrative to determine how 'form outlines the contour of a loss, an absence, a voice, a silence, which in turn is assumed to be the ground of history'" (Conley 8 qtd. in Glenn 291). To be the ground of history is to serve as a supporting structure, the invisible, upon which the visible is constructed. Like Bürger, Benstock, Zemon Davis and a host of other women, Glenn seeks to peel back the layers of inherited stories to begin to give shape to alternative narratives which offer a fuller, more inclusive understanding of her subject.

It is in this spirit that my project endeavors to bring Gretel Karplus out of the shadows of the history of the Frankfurt School, more specifically, out of shadows of the lives of her husband, Theodor W. Adorno, and of Walter Benjamin, by creating a rhetorical space in which her presence and productivity can be recognized. To construct this rhetorical space, I will be drawing on the work of feminist biographers Phyllis Rose, Carolyn G. Heilbrun, Linda Wagner-Martin and Mary Catherine Bateson, whose work has begun re-visioning the biographical tradition from and for a female perspective. Their work demonstrates the necessity of rethinking conventional biographic methodology when writing about female subjects and offers alternative approaches for envisioning the lives of women. It helps create rhetorical space for telling women's lives, in the first instance, through critiquing inherited assumptions

about which subjects are deemed worthy of biography and, secondly, by calling attention to concerns specific to female biographical subjects. Interrogating the criteria used to construct biographical narratives reveals the inadequacy of conventional paradigms for writing women's biography. I use this material in chapter one to examine existing accounts of the life of Gretel Karplus and, in chapters two and four, to interpret the material clues of her life in an effort to offer alternative and complementary constructions of her story. In chapter three, I turn to Karplus' seven-year correspondence with Walter Benjamin. This correspondence represents a rhetorical space in which she is both constructed by Benjamin as correspondent and in which she constructs herself. My examination of the correspondence in chapter three constitutes a reading between the lines in an effort to shape the woman, Gretel Karplus, and to examine the roles she played in the life of Walter Benjamin.

My work, further, seeks to acknowledge Karplus as a collaborator in various forms in the life of her husband and of the Institute of Social Research. Here, I turn to the work of Karen Burke LeFevre whose *Invention as a Social Act* (1987) remains a seminal text on invention in rhetorical studies. LeFevre examines the strong hold of Platonic rhetoric and romantic individualism on our understanding of the creative process and argues for a broader conception of invention which acknowledges the interactions of authors with other people, professional communities and their socio-cultural environments. Her focus on the social and collaborative aspects of invention allows for a move away from product-centered approaches that privilege the myth of the solitary writer/genius

through their conception of the creative process as something which takes place internally. The Platonic view of invention "assumes that the individual possesses innate knowledge or mental structures that are the chief source of invention" (LeFevre 11). In this scenario, the solitary, creative self works introspectively. "Invention," writes LeFevre, thus "is the unfolding of the individual's ideas, feelings, personality, patterns, or voice, all of which are seen as existing independently of others" (12). This romantic view of the inspired writer perpetuates the notion of the solitary genius – the master or hero of traditional biographies.

The myth of genius encourages an emphasis on product rather than creative process by shrouding the latter in mystery. Additionally, it perpetuates an understanding of collaboration as that which can be pin-pointed or isolated, attributed to an individual. "Words spoken or actions taken seldom count as authorship: what counts is what is fixed and can be pointed to: what is written in a text" (LeFevre 31). This emphasis on the production of a text, i.e. on the final product, devalues a host of activities comprising the creative process as a whole. Demystifying the inventive process expands our view of the individual author and text to include a variety of influences and agents, ranging from co-writers and sounding-boards to "hidden enablers," involved in composition. In practice, the writing process often involves others who work "as editors and evaluators whose comments aid further invention; as 'resonators' who nourish and sustain the inventor as well as the invention; as collaborators who interact to create new ideas; and as opponents or devil's advocates who provide challenges and

alternate perspectives to work against" (LeFevre 34). Acknowledging these elements of the inventive process broadens our view of "authorship," allowing us to recognize creative forces at the margins of texts and in the shadows of their authors.[8]

The implications of a Platonic view of invention on women, for example, have been to undervalue or dismiss their creative input. The "'to my wife without whom' syndrome," as LeFevre puts it, is prevalent in the history of ideas. "Women find that their ideas receive little or no acknowledgment and come to expect that their proper role is to play the supporting part of enabling creativity in others" (LeFevre 30). Emphasis on the masculine in the history of ideas coincides with the tendency to privilege the autonomous individual. Even where women are the focus of inquiry, the pattern of solitary, exceptional (masculine) accomplishment dominates. "In effect . . . it seems likely that if we look through patriarchal spectacles to see how new ideas have developed, we will tend to find the solitary agent [male or female] of invention whom we seek, even as we overlook the often necessary others" (LeFevre 21). Such a patriarchal gaze becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy: assumptions about what it is possible to see cause us to overlook evidence to the contrary.

The Rubin vase/faces illusion from Gestalt psychology offers a visual metaphor for the way in which patriarchal assumptions about invention shape our construction of history, as well as our understanding of the autonomous individual's relationship to the supporting structures and socio-cultural

[8] Post-structuralist and deconstructive literary theory similarly opens up the margins of texts and de-centers the authority of the writer. However, unlike rhetorical views of invention, these theories still serve the interpretation of the text as product.

environment in which the subject is embedded. The terms figure and ground are used by psychologists to refer to a subject and its background, respectively. The background against which an image is made visible constitutes the negative space surrounding the positive space consumed by the subject and lending the subject its form. Yet negative space is not negligible. It is not simply the absence of something, but itself constitutes figures having a mass and substance of their own.

The classification of an item as a figure or as part of the background is not intrinsic to the item; rather, it depends on the observer. It is in this sense that the vase/faces illusion conveys the experience of ideology. It visually represents the shifting and somewhat tension-filled relationship between background and foreground and emphasizes the role of perspective in determining what we "see." If we know what we expect to see, we see what we expect. The obviousness of the vase causes one at first not to see the faces, and once we see the faces we find it difficult to see the vase. To sustain the two images in the same gaze is only achieved fleetingly, if at all, with great difficulty and concentration. Taken as a metaphor of history, the image provokes one to examine the relationship between the two worlds which mutually shape one another. Given the initial primacy of the vase in our field of vision, we may begin to ask about the faces at its margins and who these figures might be.

What follows is a rhetorical performance which uses the insights of contemporary rhetorical theory and feminist historiography to bring into focus a woman whose life unfolded in the shadows of great philosopher-heroes: Gretel

Adorno, born Karplus, wife of Theodor W. Adorno, friend and patron of Walter Benjamin. It is perhaps prudent to clarify at the start that this is not the story of a woman who was really the secret genius behind the work. Karplus was an important participant in the intellectual dialogues of Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Walter Benjamin, yet her exact contributions to the work of these philosophers cannot be recovered. She was Adorno's confidant, companion, secretary, manager, editor, and buffer to the outside world. Hers is Adorno's most enduring relationship. She was Benjamin's most important correspondent from the beginning of his exile in 1933 until his suicide in 1940: She was his patron, counselor, friend, and link to the rapidly dissolving community of scholars of which he had once been a part. Moreover, she was his connection to Adorno and the Institute of Social Research.

The roles assumed by Karplus in her relationships with these key figures of the Frankfurt School do not comprise the stuff of traditional biography. Drawing Karplus out of the shadows necessitates a rethinking of the concept of achievement through the insights of feminist historiography and its critique of the biographical tradition, to which we will attend in chapter one, and a move away from product-centered investigations of collaboration toward a process-centered understanding of invention which allows for the inclusion of those often necessary others at the margins.

Chapter 1

Feminist Critiques of the Biographical Tradition

One of the most difficult problems facing the biographer of women is to make what may be only moderate achievement as important to the reader as it was to the subject.

Linda Wagner-Martin, *Telling Women's Lives*

Exceptional women are the chief imprisoners of nonexceptional women, simultaneously proving that any woman could do it and assuring, in their uniqueness among men, that no other woman will.

Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life*

Telling her story

A development of second-wave feminism in the 1970's, the term "her-story" is now a dated, rather unpopular one, whose didacticism comes across with a lack of finesse and a certain dreadful "we-have-an-axe-to-grind" connotation that no longer appeals to current-day women's and gender studies scholars. (Indeed, the word "feminist" today, for many a man and woman alike, has become synonymous with "rabid" and is more likely to conjure up images of Lorena Bobbit than of Elizabeth Cady Stanton.) Yet, despite the contemporary

aversion to “her-story,” and the sometimes disdainful reference to it as “victim-studies” by those who are either not feminists or who wish to set themselves apart from “old-fashioned” feminist practices, her-story was and remains a vital force in the struggle for the advancement of women. Without its groundbreaking battles with the establishment, there would be no women's and gender studies on the disciplinary map today.

The her-story movement is founded on the critique of traditional historicism – the idea that historians (at that time, almost exclusively men) have made “man” the sole agent of history by privileging certain kinds of stories – about wars, international politics, conquerors, and conquests – those plots of male fantasy dating back to mythological narratives in which women appear in passive roles, if at all, as the muse, or the goal of an heroic quest. In response to this situation, the her-story movement seeks, as Joan W. Scott explains, “to give value to an experience that had been ignored (hence devalued) and to insist on female agency in the making of history” (18). Her-story makes women a subject **of** history rather than subject **to** it. The demand that we tell her-story has had important reverberations across the academic disciplines and addresses a variety of feminist concerns by 1. adding women to the canon of history makers and establishing a female heritage, 2. illuminating the lives of both ordinary and notable women in order to discover the nature of the feminist or female consciousness that motivated their behavior, and 3. using women's experience as a means of challenging generalizations about human progress (Scott 19). In

response to the universalization of male subjectivity, her-story focuses on the particularity of women, of women's experience.

By the 1980s, however, some feminist scholars began voicing concern about the narrow focus of her-story on white middle-class women and its failure to respect women's differences from one another, seeking as it did to unite all women under the common banner of oppression, the experience of being "the Other" in a patriarchal society. Moreover, many felt the emphasis on particularity in women's studies did not adequately account for the complex interrelationships of men and women. These scholars looked, instead, to the category of gender as the basis for a relational approach.

Gender studies arose out of the post-structuralist critique of essentialism which understands the "masculine" and "feminine" as meanings produced within and through language. It recognizes difference as a relational concept, maintaining that, since women and men are defined in terms of one another, information about women is necessarily information about men. As Cheryl Glenn describes, "Humans of different sex experience the power of societal gendering differently. This power is embedded in the expectations, strictures, and possibilities made available to each" (295). Gender theory examines the social origins of male and female subjectivities, the dynamics through which gendered meaning and value are ascribed to sexed bodies.

For the writing of women's history and biography, both her-story and gender studies approaches have generated important critiques of the masculinist tradition ranging from the issue of public/private life to the related concerns of

determining what information merits attention, what kind of accomplishments can be considered historically significant, what cultural norms direct and shape the subject's life choices, and what material can be considered evidential. As a result, feminist scholars have begun revising biographical methodology, scrutinizing the conventions of the genre to reveal the masculinist assumptions underlying the tradition.

What *différance* does it make?

The relationship between feminism and postmodernism, however, has never been entirely unproblematic. While the "postmodern slant," as Glenn puts it, fosters our ability to call into question master narratives and definitive accounts by working against the grain of totalization, one of its primary targets of critique is the very subjectivity that feminism has struggled to achieve for women. In short, poststructuralism prematurely deconstructs the female subject before she has had the opportunity to constitute herself. Serving as validation of feminine identity, women's autobiography and biography have played key roles in the establishment of female subjectivity and of a female heritage. In the context of poststructuralism, however, the questions arise: Is the genre of (auto)biography so invested in the concept of the unified subject as to have died with the author? If the subject no longer constitutes the reference point of experiences related there, can (auto)biography be politically useful?

The epistemological shift engendered by "the linguistic turn" discredits the subject as the source and origin of meaning – and of action – and exposes the

concept of intention as an illusion.[9] Emphasis on the differing and deferring of meaning in discourse – both operations subsumed in Derrida's term *différance* – foregrounds the notion that the "I" can only be constituted through its opposition to "you" and is little more than a metaphor, a temporary effect of discourse. While constituting the subject within the humanist tradition is equivalent to forming identity, the "I" of poststructuralism is manifold, unstable, continually constructing and deconstructing itself.

This conception of the "I" has, in turn, impacted the writing of biography. Roland Barthes' "Death of the Author" was itself, in part, a response to biographical literary criticism which took authorial intention to be the ultimate reference point of literary interpretation. In the same way the author's death opens up the text to plural, contradictory readings (or writings, as Barthes and Derrida would have it) "by refusing to assign a 'secret,' an ultimate meaning," (Barthes 147), the critique of humanist subjectivity necessarily alters our approach to the biographical subject. The unified and transcendent self whose story is related in a "developmental narrative which orders both time and the personality according to a purpose or goal" (Anderson 8) no longer represents

[9] What is commonly referred to as "the linguistic turn" refers to the shift among social scientists from scientific to literary paradigms. This epistemological shift can be said to have begun with the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, whose seminal lectures in linguistics were compiled and published posthumously in 1916. The radical feature of Saussure's work is its contention that language is not a way of naming things which already exist independently in the world, but, rather, language is a system of differences among signs in which meaning takes place within a matrix of cultural possibilities. It posits language as a system of signs and distinguishes the signifier (sound-image) from the signified (concept). Words don't stand for pre-existing concepts, but instead develop those concepts through a process of differentiation among other word/concepts in the language. Meaning, then, is a structural phenomenon based on the relationship of words to one another. This work was taken a step further by post-structuralism which foregrounded the discrepancies between signifier and signified within a given structure, arguing that meaning proliferates outside the historical and temporal boundaries of structure, that words resonate with this excess and put into play the would-be stability of meaning.

the “Truth” of biography. Instead, much like the literary critic, the biographer now has the freedom to look beneath the mask of the centered-self, to interpret, question, and critique representations of the biographical subject.

For the female subject, however, who has historically been denied opportunities for self-representation and representation outside the masculine gaze, this deconstructive move may very well undercut the political effort to make themselves heard. As Linda Anderson argues:

> There remains . . . a *political* imperative for women to constitute themselves as subjects if they are to escape being never-endingly determined as objects. This may not mean returning to the same (masculine) subjectivity which saw itself as unitary and complete, simply expanding it to include women within its definition, but rather imagining multiple subjectivities, which are without foundation but located, instead, in particular times and places. (90)

The notion of self as unitary and complete has been historically unavailable to women whose subjectivity has been based on the notion of contingency. As Mary Catherine Bateson describes, women are practiced protean subjects, reinventing themselves to adapt to new situations and demands. It is this kind of situated identity that lends itself to the art of improvisation. For Bateson, women’s skills become resources for a “new” way of being which no longer operates on the principles of continuity, permanency, and sameness. “[T]he ability to shift from one preoccupation to another, to divide one’s attention, to improvise in new circumstances, has always been important to women,” Bateson

explains (203). From them we can learn the skills necessary to live in an age of fluidity and discontinuity. Perhaps now more than ever, then, telling the stories of women's lives has become a political imperative. The political efficacy of women's (auto)biography, however, is not limited to the stories it relates but consists as well in its method of relating them.

What difference does it make?

Theorists of women's biography all begin by posing the same question, what is different about telling the story of a woman's life? At the broadest level, the answer is inevitably the issue of private life. Historically, not only have women's lives unfolded within the confines of domesticity, but they have been held to standards of propriety more stringent than those applied to men. The injunction to "keep the meddling hands off the life" reflects a lady-like behavior, respecting the proper separation of public and private and perpetuating the ideals of safety and closure for women (Heilbrun 14). Because women tend to lead what psychologist Carol Gilligan calls "connected lives," defined by the struggle to integrate multiple commitments to self, family, work, community and a keen awareness of the ways their decisions affect the lives of others, women's lives are characterized by a dual focus, both inward and outward. Their stories can seldom be framed within the quest or adventure plot common to men's biography. In fact, as Linda Wagner-Martin observes, "The writing of women's lives is problematic in part because so few women have had the kind of success that attracts notice. Women's biography is more often based on private events

because few women. . . live public lives" (7). As a result, writers of women's history and biography have refashioned inherited methodologies in order to bring their subjects into view. "We are learning," writes Joan Wallach Scott, "that the writing of women into history necessarily involves redefining and enlarging traditional notions of historical significance to encompass personal, subjective experience as well as public political activities" (29). Accordingly, traditional boundaries between public and private life are continually being renegotiated.

It is not an interest in the lives of female subjects alone, however, that has introduced changes to the genre. The audience for women's biography, constituted chiefly by women, wants to read contextualized lives which reflect their own experiences. These readers call for a view of the biographical subject which portrays both her interior life, as well as the external values and conflicts with which she *as a woman* has been confronted. Women's biography, thus, turns its attention to concerns such as the subject's position as a child in the family, her relationship with parents & siblings, her school experiences, her physical prowess or lack thereof, as well as her sexual history (Wagner-Martin 4). Issues such as the subject's relationship to her body, including menstruation, childbirth, miscarriage, and menopause may also play an important part in portraying the female subject. While the introduction of such controversial material represents a risk for the biographer, life processes such as these constitute important developments in a woman's life. Biographers of women may also pay considerable attention to the subject's everyday life, including information about running her household, budgeting, caring for children, or

managing social affairs. Such information is not typically considered worthy of inclusion in traditional (masculinist) biography, because the lives of its subjects are focused outward and the events it narrates are both external and public. Yet, as Wagner-Martin emphasizes, “If what a woman does within her household, in her domestic life, on a daily basis, is considered to be of no value to women’s biography, then the representation of women’s lives will be badly skewed” (12). Adopting for female subjects the criteria of masculinist biography which discredit the examination of daily life may exclude certain forms of female achievement.

Writing women’s biography necessitates invention, discovery, and retelling. Among the chief obstacles to telling women’s stories from alternative perspectives, however, is the hold of stereotypes on the imaginations of both readers and biographers alike. For example, the tendency to approach female subjects through their connections to men, recognizing them as daughters, sisters, lovers, wives, and mothers, rather than as individuals in their own right. Each of these mutually constricting roles is laden with cultural assumptions about gender and reflects women’s social and economic dependence (Wagner-Martin 21). Nevertheless, these roles remain so significant primarily because of the long-lived marriage plot, the traditional narrative structure of 18th and 19th century women’s fiction.

Writing about women as wives and mothers represents one of the greatest challenges to the biographer of a female subject. It is one of the most persistent cultural myths that marriage represents the high point of a woman’s life. Yet, marriage is an institution that has historically constrained women’s capacity for

self-invention. Traditionally, it is a place of safety and closure for women – the climax of the romantic plot. "For the most part, marriage has suited the man, and appeared to suit the woman because she was satisfied with the rewards offered in place of her own self-determination" (Heilbrun 76). Writing about women as wives sets certain parameters: the subject is probably heterosexual, dependent in some way on her husband, and accustomed to being recognized as one half of a couple. "For a woman to accept such social conformity may mean a less idiosyncratic, or a less mysterious, persona" (Wagner-Martin 43). In fact, this kind of female existence is what Heilbrun might refer to as being "unambiguously a woman," that is, making a man the central focus of one's life and allowing to occur only that which honors his primary position (21). The difficulty for the biographer lies in examining the subject's would-bedestiny to become "unambiguously a woman" and signs of her longing to be something else.

Marriage remains a central category in writing women's biography. But, as Heilbrun cautions, it can be misleading to biographers precisely because so little re-inventing has been done where marriage is concerned. "Marriage," Heilbrun writes, "without children at its center, understood as a system of mutual support has largely been beyond the imaginative reach of either biographers or living women" (77). Re-inventing marriage, and the power structures within it, continues to hold pride of place on the feminist agenda as women assume power and take control of their own stories. "Power," as Heilbrun defines it, "is the ability to take one's place in whatever discourse is essential to action and the right to have one's part matter. This is true in the Pentagon, in marriage, in

friendship, and in politics" (18). It is this sort of power women have sought in their daily lives.

Biography serves as recognition that one's part mattered. Yet, as Wagner-Martin explains, "while writing biography of men means concentrating on the subject's accomplishments, one of the main questions in writing women's biography is, What are the accomplishments in a woman's life?" (6). Feminist biographers, thus, interrogate the criteria determining which lives are worth telling. Virginia Woolf's reflections on the biographical subject led her to question the principles of biography and the nature of historical understanding which privileges the topoi of "progress" and "greatness". "Is not anyone," she asks, "who has lived a life, and left a record of that life, worthy of biography – the failures as well as the successes, the humble as well as the illustrious? And what is greatness? And what is smallness?" (Art 227). The focus of history on great men, Woolf suggests, obscures the lives of "forgotten worthies," men and women whose memoirs have been relegated to the dustbin. Searching through the stacks for these "stranded ghosts," she finds the "dim light is exquisitely refreshing to the eyes" (Lives 122). Women's history, Scott contends, is not concerned with "the recounting of great deeds performed by women but the exposure of the often silent and hidden operations of gender that are nonetheless present and defining forces in the organization of most societies" (27). The life histories of women, too, must examine their subjects from outside the masculinist tradition of "great deeds" and seek to define women's achievements within the matrix of possibilities open to them.

The question of female achievement is complicated, moreover, by the fact that women's accomplishments may never be available as a matter of public record. Many women have devoted their lives to what Arlene Kaplan Daniels refers to as "invisible careers." In Daniels' work, women's accomplishment fades into the invisible world of volunteer work, but this category can be extended to include collaborative work in a variety of forms between wives and husbands subsumed under his name. This type of achievement is seldom a matter of public record, or, as we have already discussed, where record has been made, it is kept from view, cordoned off among private papers. Because much of female experience is always already considered insignificant, taking place as it does in the private realm, or devalued as such, the records of women's lives are often few in number and fragmentary or recorded only as second-hand narratives. The latter are not traditionally considered reliable historical evidence.

The lack of public record, on the one hand, and paucity of "reliable" sources, on the other, make women's biography particularly vulnerable to critiques of fictionality. Like history, biography remains entrenched in the objective fallacy. "[D]espite today's greater cultural awareness of how complicated the shaping of identity is, biography is still thought to be an art dependent on fact" (Wagner-Martin 9). Woolf reflects on the distinctions between fiction and biography in her essay "The Art of Biography," where she describes the genre as the "most restricted of all arts" (221). The biographer is limited by the restriction to "facts"; the artist free to invent. Yet, Woolf goes on to differentiate, the facts of biography "are not like the facts of science – once they

are discovered, always the same. They are subject to changes of opinion; opinions change as the times change" (226). The way we understand and approach the facts of a life is historically contingent, our selection and presentation ideologically informed. It is in this sense that the biographer takes on the role of adventurer, explorer, the advance guard:

> Thus, the biographer must go ahead of the rest of us, like the miner's canary, testing the atmosphere, detecting falsity, unreality, and the presence of obsolete conventions. His sense of truth must be alive and on tiptoe. Then again, since we live in an age when a thousand cameras are pointed, by newspapers, letters, and diaries, at every character from every angle, he must be prepared to admit contradictory versions of the same face. Biography will enlarge its scope by hanging up looking-glasses at odd corners. (226)

As with much of her writing, Woolf's thoughts here on the biographical subject prefigure post-structuralist theory by foregrounding the constructedness of identity. The "truth" of a life, as Woolf writes here, is multiple, even contradictory. It is, finally, a matter of perspective. In this sophistic embrace of "both/and," Woolf conveys the multitude of forces shaping the self.

There is, Woolf maintains, always an "intangibility" about the person that exceeds the historical fact. Instead of relying on simple facts, she argues, biographers should be giving readers the "creative fact; the fertile fact; the fact that suggests and engenders" (228). Indeed, what intrigues Woolf most about

the lives of the obscure is the way they invigorate the imagination. In the nocturnal rambling among forgotten worthies, she writes,

> It is so difficult to keep, as we must with highly authenticated people, strictly to the facts. It is so difficult to refrain from making scenes which, if the past could be recalled, might perhaps be found lacking in accuracy. . . . Certain scenes have the fascination which belongs rather to the abundance of fiction than to the sobriety of fact. For instance, we conjure up all the drama of poor Mrs. Edgeworth's daily life; her bewilderment, her loneliness, her despair, how she must have wondered whether anyone really wanted machines to climb walls, and assured the gentlemen that turnips were better cut simply with a knife. ("Lives" 126)

Poor Mrs. Edgeworth was the wife of a frustrated inventor, himself obscured by lack of success. She is but a sketchy figure in the memoirs of her husband, still her appearance there inspires a different kind of engagement with the historical past, spurring the reader to think beyond the facts of her life presented there.

Yet, the "creative fact" does not amount to a rejection of "authentic information". It can be likened, instead, to what historian Natalie Zemon Davis calls "grounded speculation," an informed leap of the imagination within a matrix of probability. In writing a woman's life, biographers often search for subjects under erasure. Working with fragments of lives not well-recorded, clues leading to dead-ends, the biographer is "urged to invent" yet checked by that which is known. It is precisely the kind of nether world described by Woolf, an "ambiguous world, between fact and fiction, neither embodied nor disembodied"

("Art" 225) in which many a feminist project resides and, unfortunately, sometimes meets its end as well. Joan Bolker relates her experience writing the first dissertation which she eventually abandoned, "What ultimately kept me from completing [my thesis on Chaucer's sources for the wife of Bath] was the same failure of nerve that kept me mired in detail: the leap into speculation, into my own ideas about what Chaucer was doing, did not feel like 'real research' to me; it was too much fun, too exciting, and too creative" (16). Recent feminist projects have gone some way toward realizing Woolf's vision of a future biographical methodology "subtle and bold enough to present that queer amalgamation of dream and reality." Feminist scholars are becoming more daring "creating facts where few exist" (Wagner-Martin 163). Perhaps we have entered an age in which we are able to embrace the narratological nature of human knowledge.

The "art" of biography, Wagner-Martin argues, lies in selection, refashioning and revising the life narrative. While the biographer shapes a life story from material clues of the subject's life, the interpretation of these clues is strongly influenced by inherited notions of plausibility where a woman's life is concerned (what it is allowable to think a woman might have done, what she might have thought, or been motivated by) (Heilbrun 51). Catherine Bateson describes the tendency of our imaginations to revert to inherited notions even in the act of composing our own lives:

> We edit the past to make it more intelligible in cultural terms. As memories blur, we supply details from a pool of general knowledge. With

> every retelling, words that barely fit begin to seem more appropriate as the meaning slips and slides to fit the stereotype. . . . Even for the recent past and in situations where there would seem to be little motivation for distortion, memories are modified and details supplied to fit cultural expectations. (32)

This tendency to call on familiar narrative patterns in telling stories of our past (as well as in composing our lives and planning our futures in the present), this filling-in-the-blanks from a "pool of general knowledge," is fundamental to human existence. It is ideology at work. As Phyllis Rose suggests, ideology plays a central role in how people envision their lives, providing frameworks for understanding that, in turn, make their lives turn out the way they have ("Writing" 76). We will see this dynamic at work in Chapter 3, as we consider the ways conventional female types (mother, sister, daughter) operate in Gretel Karplus' construction of her own self-representation as well as in Benjamin's representation of her. Here, however, what interests me is the way these "habits of mind," to borrow Fredric Jameson's phrase, function to limit our engagement with the lives of others in writing biography. Our internalization of cultural expectations, especially those related to gender, may cause us to overlook or undervalue contributions and accomplishments of women that shape their lives differently from conventional patterns, even as they find themselves assuming traditionally female roles. The shape of defiance, after all, is variable. "Observing women's lives," Wagner-Martin reminds us, "may require a different kind of sensitivity, an eye for different kinds of details" (112). Before turning to

Karplus' life history, however, I would like to briefly examine some of the more prominent constructions of Gretel Karplus/Adorno, which my own perspective attempts to see beyond, behind or through.

Depictions of a life

Rolf Wiggershaus, as we have already discussed, characterizes Karplus' role as that of a "typical secretary" and does not deal with her directly in his history of the Frankfurt School. Karplus does, however, appear there on several occasions, chiefly in connection with Walter Benjamin. She is the "girlfriend, who was also friendly with Benjamin," whom Adorno visited in Berlin from 1927 on (82). She is mentioned as one of those present "from time to time" at the discussions which Benjamin had with Adorno concerning the arcades project in Königstein.[10] Additionally, Karplus, "a mutual friend of [Benjamin's] and Adorno's who at that time was still a shareholder in a Berlin leather factory" is listed as one of several sources of financial support for Benjamin during his exile (191). Finally, Karplus is cited in the context of the Adorno-Benjamin debate, specifically her letter warning Benjamin about the dangers for his work of publishing in the Institute's journal. On the whole, Wiggershaus presents certain facts of Karplus' life without interpretation. She is perceived as "only" a wife and secretary, the categories left to speak for themselves.

[10] Generally referred to in Benjamin and Adorno scholarship as "the Königstein talks," these discussions (probably in September or October of 1929) are the first time Benjamin shared details of his work on the Arcades project with Adorno and Karplus, reading out passages from his early drafts.

Similarly, Susan Buck-Morss in *The Origin of Negative Dialectics* mentions Karplus in the context of the Adorno's "Berlin circle," the group of people Adorno and Karplus mixed with in Berlin in the late 1920s, including "Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer, Ernst Bloch, Otto Klemperer, Moholy-Nagy, and . . . Bertolt Brecht and his friends: the composers Hanns Eisler and Kurt Weill and Weill's wife, the actress Lotte Lenya" (20). Karplus is also listed as a participant in the Königstein talks. The most remarkable reference to Karplus, however, is not within the text itself but rather appears in a footnote to her name. Buck-Morss writes, "They married in 1938, when Adorno was in England. Adorno was not a feminist. Although his wife was university-educated, her 'career' was largely as Adorno's secretary. They had no children" (20). The categorical dismissal of Adorno as "not a feminist" serves as a dismissal of Karplus as well. The ironic emphasis placed on the word "career" denigrates Karplus' productivity and, again, presents certain facts of Karplus' life as self-evident, requiring no interpretation or explanation, which she as "merely" wife and secretary does not merit. Likewise, the fact that the couple "had no children" almost conveys, in this context, a sense of deficiency.

While his treatment of her is also limited to footnotes, one gets a considerably different impression of Karplus from Martin Jay's *The Dialectical Imagination*. There she is portrayed as an intellectual and partner to Adorno. Jay writes in a footnote concerning Horkheimer's wife, Maidon, "Although never an intellectual like Adorno's wife, Gretel, Mrs. Horkheimer was a constant source of support until her death in the fall of 1969" (308). Jay also

corresponded with Karplus during his research regarding his depiction of Walter Benjamin.

In his biography of Benjamin, Momme Broderson mentions Karplus along with other “friends & acquaintances” from whom Benjamin sought opinion on his work (205). Broderson mentions her again as one of the members of the group in Königstein with whom Benjamin first discussed his arcades project: “The work only began to assume clearer contours in 1929, after conversations with Wiesengrund-Adorno, his fiancée Gretel Karplus, Asja Lacis, and Horkheimer” (234). Lastly, Broderson cites a letter from Karplus to Benjamin from February 1940 in which she urges him to write down for her his ideas about his theory of progress. These notes were eventually published in the Institute’s journal after Benjamin’s death as the “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (248). Broderson’s biography strongly indicates the significance of Karplus’ relationship to Benjamin.

The memoirs of Monika Plessner, *Die Argonauten auf Long Island*, relate her encounters with a number of prominent members of the German exile community, including, among others, the Adornos and Max Horkheimer. In 1952, she and her husband, Helmuth Plessner, served as replacements for Gretel and Theodor Adorno at the Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt when the latter had to return to America for a year in order to secure their citizenship. Plessner gives an account of “an evening at the Adornos’” which conveys her impression of Gretel Adorno as sovereign, deliberate and shrewd. Later in her account of a meeting with Horkheimer to discuss her

responsibilities as Karplus' replacement, Plessner expressed apprehension at her ability to fulfill her duties, as she was not, after all, a sociologist. She recalls Horkheimer's assurances to her: "Gretel Adorno is a chemist. Is that any comfort to her? And yet she is the life and soul of the Institute. The students trust her more than me and Adorno" (60). Plessner's depictions of Karplus in her memoirs amount to little more than impressions of a woman gathered during brief encounters. Nevertheless, they evoke an image of Karplus that seems to conflict with the image of her as a demure secretary to her husband, uninvolved in the wider concerns of the Institute and his work.

The only text of any length devoted to telling the life of Gretel Karplus is the obituary written by Rolf Tiedemann, former student of Adorno's and executor of the Adorno estate, which appeared in the *Frankfurter Rundschau* shortly after her death. Written, as with all obituaries, to rescue a life from the forgetfulness of history, Tiedemann's obituary presents a condensed account of the life of Gretel Adorno. Its sincerity is without question: Tiedemann wants to acknowledge that Gretel played a central and crucial role in her husband's life and laments that this has gone (and will go) unrecognized. In its pathos, however, the text reveals a tension between its desire to present a narrative of Gretel's life and its tendency to overshadow her by praising her self-effacement and sacrifice for the life and work of her husband. On several occasions, the narrative raises the issue of the "real" Gretel Adorno, whom we will never know. This specter of the "Other" woman haunts the text, creating an almost tangible tension for the reader. These pressure points, as I call

them, are places in the narrative where the text attempts to inscribe the unspeakable, to say something without saying it.[11]

The almost aggressive tone early in the obituary makes the narrative take on the character of something rather like a defense of the life, as if responding to critics of Gretel's life and choices.

> Gretel Adorno spent her life, so it may appear to some, in shadows – the shadows of another life. Yet the life of Theodor W. Adorno *was* his work, and his wife dedicated herself to that work as well. She once said it was more important to her than her own life. Nowadays, one might easily be tempted to speak here of domination, of unrealized promise, of the renunciation of autonomy. But none would have the right to do so, for Gretel herself wanted it that way. Knowing full well what she was doing, she chose to take responsibility for the life and work of her husband. Those who only met Gretel in the last 24 years of her life never knew the woman she had once been. Twenty-four years ago when Adorno was laid to rest in Frankfurt's main cemetery, thousands of mourners, some of whom were merely curious, followed his casket. At Gretel's grave stood only a few, all of them friends of a younger generation. No doubt, Gretel herself would not have wished it otherwise, and yet the injustice that lies in this absurd discrepancy remains to be acknowledged.

The audience constructed by the obituary, its implied addressee, is contemporary feminists. The "some" to whom the text refers are the same people who, later,

[11] These pressure points become especially clear in the act of translation, when one struggles to put into another language the 'unsaid' or 'unspoken' or 'tabooed,' in short, to translate an evasion.

might speak of domination, unrealized promise and the renunciation of autonomy, and the same who "never knew the woman she had once been." They are, likewise, the "none" who have no right to question the facts laid before them. The argument here turns on the notion of agency, of conscious awareness: Gretel Adorno "knew full well" what she was doing; we learn what it is she "wanted," "chose," "wished," dedicated herself to, took responsibility for. Rather than criticize, the reader is urged to admire her self-sacrifice.

We are admonished for not recognizing her worth, "few" stood at her grave, yet cautioned not to make a fuss about it, for "Gretel herself would not have wished it otherwise." By asserting that none has the right to question Gretel's choice to live in the shadows – indeed, that it would be an act of violence to draw her out of the shadows where she herself willfully chose to be – the obituary closes the door to inquiry at the same time it laments and underscores the injustice of the fact that the significance of her life has gone unregistered. The emphasis on her actions as the result of a fully-conscious decision becomes, in effect, a valorization of the image of the bourgeois wife based on an ideal of femininity whose natural expression is to subordinate itself to a masculine counterpart.

It is not entirely clear, though, who the subject of this would-be criticism might be, just whose life is being defended – Gretel or Theodor Adorno's. We are warned not to read her life as one defined by domination; quite possibly a defense of Teddie against those who would accuse him of being a dominating, tyrannical husband. Such *ad hominem* attacks, however, would appear

historically naive “nowadays” when domination, especially where gender is involved, is more properly understood as an overdetermined, yet undeniable, historical phenomenon.

Almost against its will, the text turns again and again to Theodor Adorno. The masculine narrative begins to overwrite the feminine one as Theodor and his work become the object of Gretel’s concern and the readers’ through the narrative’s emphasis on her role as guardian angel:

> Throughout their years together, Gretel carefully limited the demands of the outside world on Adorno, enabling him to produce his oeuvre – a work which is incomparable not only in this century. . . . Everyday, from 1937 to 1969, Gretel kept watch over Adorno's life and work – both would have been unthinkable without her helping and protective hand. So passed the conscious part of her life. Gretel got the publication of Adorno's *Collected Works* underway and saw to it that his artistic and scientific work found its permanent home in the Theodor W. Adorno Archive, but to survive her “Teddie” – that was something she did not want to do and, in a way, did not. The last two decades – as difficult as they were – do not fully come to bear on this life and cannot in principle be counted among those she lived.

The conscious part of Gretel’s life ended a little over a year after Theodor’s death in 1969 following a suicide attempt which left her incapacitated and in need of twenty-four-hour care. When her life began and what constituted her productivity in her lifetime, however, is something subject to interpretation. The “conscious part of her life” is defined here as the period between 1937, when Gretel married

Theodor, and 1969, the year that he died. And, yet, she entered into marriage at the age of 36 as a mature, experienced woman with over a third of her life already behind her.

Though the text acknowledges her life before marriage, Gretel's accomplishments are only vaguely defined within the parameters of Adorno's work. She is called a collaborator "in the fullest sense of the word" and a "precious helper." Finally, though we scarcely knew her, we are called upon to show gratitude to Karplus, above all, for making Adorno's work possible and for her contributions to it, but we are left empty handed when it comes to a depiction of her work. While her productivity is acknowledged, it remains shrouded in darkness. The overriding image of Gretel Adorno left to the reader is that of devoted wife who preferred to remain in the shadows. If we are ever to begin the daunting task of pursuing the elusive figure of "the woman she had once been," however, we must start by realizing that we must ask different questions about Karplus' life than we would about Adorno's; we must look at the evidence in a new way. We cannot measure her accomplishments against his; more accurately, we cannot separate her accomplishments from his.

One text which begins to take steps in this direction is Stefan Müller-Doohm's recent biography of Adorno, the only biography of the three released in 2003 in honor of the 100th anniversary of Adorno's birth[12] which devotes entire sections to Karplus. Müller-Doohm's depiction of Karplus emphasizes the strong bond she and Adorno established from the beginning, how quickly she became

[12] See also Detlev Claussen Theodor W. Adorno. Ein letztes Genie. Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 2003. and Lorenz Jäger Adorno. Eine politische Biographie. Munich: DVA, 2003.

part of Adorno's life and community. He also calls attention to Gretel's independent existence in Berlin, where she established relationships of her own with their mutual friends. Müller-Doohm attempts to get beyond the image of Gretel as merely secretary by offering a broader picture of their marriage than has yet been presented, which tries to unpack the meaning of the role Karplus assumed in Adorno's life.

I will refer more specifically to Müller-Doohm's text in chapters two and four, which constitute my own attempt to offer a picture of Karplus. While my reconstruction of her life is necessarily partial, working with no more material, in effect, than the people whose work we have just reviewed, it is my ambition that perspective will "make the difference." My sketch of Gretel Karplus will attempt to examine the available material through her perspective, to look at the events of Adorno's life through her eyes, to pose questions that spur our imaginations and breath life into this shadowy figure.

Chapter 2

Gretel Karplus/Adorno: Reconstructing a Life, Part I

> *It is often said that it was the painters who invented Photography (by bequeathing it their framing, the Albertian perspective, and the optic of the* camera obscura*). I say: no, it was the chemists. For the* noeme *"That-has-been" was possible only on the day when a scientific circumstance (the discovery that silver halogens were sensitive to light) made it possible to recover and print directly the luminous rays emitted by a variously lighted object. The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. From the real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here; . . . the photograph of the missing being, as Sontag says, will touch me like the delayed rays of a star.*
>
> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

For the would-be biographer in search of a woman obscured, seeing photographs of her subject for the first time is an exhilarating, titillating, if paradoxical experience. It is at once confirmation, conferring on the shadowy figure a sense of flesh and blood, of the tangible, the "That-has-been," as Barthes puts it; and, at the same time, alienation, underscoring the time and distance between the "woman she had once been" and the fragments left behind

which no longer piece together to form a whole story. The images intrigue and spark the imagination like no other medium, perhaps because, like Barthes, I feel her presence radiating from the paper, her light penetrating the shadows.[13]

Looking at Gretel Karplus, I see she was a beautiful young woman, tall and broad shouldered with a strong neck; her face, round with full lips and a regal nose, is dominated by large, dark, intelligent eyes. She wears no visible makeup, no jewelry, a white blouse (perhaps a dress) simple and elegant. Her dark hair is long and pulled back, wavy, refined. Another photo of the 23 year old student about to finish her studies at university, suggests a playful side. She sits with one hand on her hip, the other drawn to her face, as if to offer support. She smiles almost mischievously at the camera. Two snapshots from a vacation with Adorno to Italy in 1928 reveal a coquettish, sexy young woman, now at the beginning of her career. A few years later, in 1931, she is poised on the edge of a small table, half sitting, half standing, looking thoughtfully away from the camera, in profile. She wears a dark, silk satin, high-necked, long sleeved dress typical of the period, cut on-the-bias to reveal her feminine figure and shapely legs. In a companion photo, a close-up, she has donned the coordinating gold and satin weaved evening coat with its extravagant high padded collar, turned up to frame her face; her hand, holding the coat closed, rests just beneath her chin;

[13] Of the handful of published photographs of Gretel Karplus, there are a small number of formal studio pictures from her childhood and early adult life in the mid 20's to early 30's. These are the only images of her that predate her marriage to Theodor Adorno. The remaining photographs, the majority of them informal, show her in the company of her husband. All photographs discussed here are published in Adorno: Eine Bildmonographie and Stefan Müller-Doohm Adorno: Eine Biographie

her downward gaze is serious, contemplative. She looks mature, experienced, worldly, a Berlin business woman with her own factory.

Nearly two decades later in 1949 some time after her marriage to Adorno and immigration to the United States, she is pictured in her Santa Monica home together with Adorno playing “66,” their regular evening card game which Karplus taught him to play. Gretel has a grin on her face as she reaches to draw the next card. Is she smiling absent-mindedly for the camera, or winning the game? Adorno’s somewhat accusatory sideward glance at her suggests the latter. Though they sit at a table in the foreground, they are dwarfed by a wall of books, literally from floor to ceiling, which towers above them, almost consuming the picture. The image could be construed as a metaphor of their lives, both overshadowed by their nearly constant theoretical production.

Sometime in the 60s, returned now to Germany where Adorno has become the star of Frankfurt’s cultural scene, she is pictured with Alfred Hitchcock, Adorno and Hitchcock’s distributor in a suite at Frankfurt’s Intercontinental Hotel. Two tables covered with half-empty champagne glasses convey the joviality of the meeting, likely a private one, where they might have chatted about old times in California. Hitchcock is framed by the Adornos, Gretel to the left, Teddie to the right. The conversation appears to have taken a humorous turn. Perhaps, as the caption suggests, Hitchcock has made one of his typical jokes. The distributor has a broad smile, while a grin is just beginning to form on Teddie’s face, and Gretel, whose long draw on a cigarette was unfortunately timed, appears to be on the verge of hearty laughter. She is sitting

on the edge of her seat, turned toward Hitchcock, actively engaged in the conversation.

These images of Karplus are minor clues about the woman she had once been. Though she spent the majority of her adult life living in the shadow of her husband, these pictures raise questions about what exactly that might have meant. She was not a demure, sheepish, figure in the background, the passive, inert "negative space" surrounding the primary figure of Adorno. Much more, the two of them formed a recursive figure, one in which the ground supporting the central object of focus can be seen as a figure in its own right. More than merely living in his shadow, she may better be seen as the shadow itself – his partner in the truest sense, contributing her abilities to his productivity and playing an active role in every aspect of their life together.

Under the sign of Mercury: Berlin Childhood, Student Years and Career

> *Gemini have a keen, intuitive, sometimes brilliant intelligence and they love cerebral challenges. But their concentration, though intense for a while, does not last. Their mental agility and energy give them a voracious appetite for knowledge from youth onward, though they dislike the labor of learning. They easily grasp almost everything requiring intelligence and mental dexterity, and are often able to marry manual skills to their qualities of mind. Their intellect is strongly analytical and sometimes gives them so*

great an ability to see both sides of a question that they vacillate and find it hard to make decisions. But their intelligence may very well be used to control and unify the duality of their natures into a most efficient unit.

Margarete Karplus was born at 1:30 p.m. at a clinic on Königin-Augusta-Straße in Berlin on June 10, 1902 to Emilie Karplus, nèe Cahn, and her husband, Josef Albert Karplus, engineer, chemist and factory owner. Karplus' father, who went by his second name, Albert, came from Vienna, where his father had been a major industrialist.[14] Moving to Berlin in 1887, he made his own fortune there as the owner (with his partner Hans Herzberger) of a leather factory, Karplus & Herzberger, producing leather for jackets, gloves, and other clothing items. Together the partners patented a number of procedures concerning the preparation and cleaning of leather goods.[15] Gretel Karplus would eventually take her father's place as half-owner of the leather factory, but only after she had completed her doctoral degree in Chemistry at Friedrich Wilhelm University, Berlin.

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[14] On January 15, 1934, Gretel Karplus wrote to Walter Benjamin explaining that her German citizenship had been revoked. Karplus writes, "The situation with my passport is that we [her family] have been expatriated [ausgebuergert] erroneously as Eastern Jews in accordance with the July directives [Julibestimmungen], despite that father has lived on Prinzenallee for the last 47 years and his father was a major industrialist in Vienna" (WB Briefe, vol 4, 331). This “error” seems to have remained on the records, as Margarete Karplus was entered as Czechoslovakian in the Gedenkbuch Berlins der jüdischen Opfer des Nationalsozialismus. According to the librarians at the Centrum Judaicum in Berlin, there was no source listed for this information. In his obituary for Karplus, Rolf Tiedemann writes that Karplus came from a Viennese family of medical doctors. He may have been referring to her uncle, Paul Karplus, who was a neurologist and professor at the University of Vienna, where Adorno considered transferring to complete his habilitation in order to get out of Nazi Germany (see Müller-Doohm 282).

[15] The patents for these procedures, dated June 12, 1912, and August 27, 1913, are housed at the Patent Office on Gitschiner str. in Berlin. The viability of these procedures by today’s standards is questionable, however, according to leather production experts at the Leather Museum in Offenbach, just outside of Frankfurt am Main.

Karplus' childhood and early adult life unfolded in what might be considered a window of opportunity with regard to women's education. At the age of six, Gretel Karplus began school at the *Schillerlyzeum*, then *Schiller Schule*, a girls' school, which she attended until the close of December 1914. The year Karplus would have entered *Schillerlyzeum* was 1908, the same year women and girls were first included in the normal university and pre-university systems throughout the German Reich. Until 1908 the course of study at girls' schools led neither to employment opportunities nor to qualification for admission to the university (Frevert 316-317).[16] During the six years Karplus attended *Schillerlyzeum*, the curriculum, likely in response to the new opportunities for female education, had been standardized to consist of eight academic subjects – Religion (which seems to have focused primarily on Protestantism, with special sections devoted to Catholicism and Judaism), German, French, English, History and Art History, Geography, Natural Science, and Math – and five technical subjects – writing, drawing, needlework, singing, and gymnastics (Fischer 3).

Prior to 1908, the German women's fight for equality had been focused on girls' rights to attend *Gymnasium*, roughly the equivalent of an American high school, which at the time were boys-only institutions, but which were the only institutions granting the *Abitur*, the examination required for admission to university. After 1908, preparing for the *Abitur* at *Gymnasium* became one of

[16] As Frevert explains, 1908 marks a system wide change for women's education in Prussia. Women had been allowed to attend as guest students at Prussian universities as early as 1896. In 1900, Heidelberg University officially registered a female student for the first time and Freiburg University began admitting women, as well, but not until 1908 was general, university level education for women instituted throughout Prussia.

three possible choices for girls leaving primary schools.[17] Despite new legislation calling for the admittance of women to university, German Universities remained virtually closed to women until 1914, and there was no equivalent in girls' education to the boys' preparatory *Gymnasium*. Girls could attend *Höhere Töchterschule* for young ladies of "good" families, a kind of "white gloves and party manners" schooling with training in clever conversation and dilettantism (Hackett). As a member of the *haut bourgeois* and daughter of a wealthy Jewish businessman, Karplus had the advantage of being prepared for *Gymnasium* through private instruction during the spring of 1915, after leaving *Schillerlyzeum*. She successfully completed the entrance exam for *Realgymnasium* in April of that year. Six years later, in the spring of 1921, she completed her exit exams (receiving the *Abitur*) and began her studies at Friedrich Wilhelm University, Berlin.

Karplus grew up in an assimilated Jewish family. She designated herself *evangelisch* [protestant] in her university records. On May 15, 1905, when she was about to turn 3 years old, her father officially left the synagogue where he had been a registered voting member of the Jewish community since at least 1892. Education clearly held a high priority in Karplus' family. Both she and her younger sister were prepared through their early education for university study and both went on to earn doctoral degrees.[18] In the years Karplus attended

[17] After 1908 girls could also choose to attend "women's school classes (Frauenschulklassen)" to receive "women's education (Frauenbildung)," a path which led to no formal qualifications; or they could train to be teachers in three academic years, plus one year of practical training (Frevert 121).

[18] Gretel's sister Liselotte (1909), or Lotte as she called herself, held a medical degree in dentistry.

university, female enrollment was roughly between 1150 and 1520 women per year, about one-fifth that of male enrollment.[19] Karplus majored in Chemistry, one of 53 women in her class to do so, and minored in Physics and Philosophy. In March and December of 1923, after two years of course work and laboratory hours, Karplus successfully completed her doctoral examinations in each of these academic areas with a summary evaluation of *cum laude* and began work on her dissertation in January 1924, under the directorship of Professor Dr. Wilhelm Schlenk.[20] On August 4, 1925, upon the completion of her dissertation, entitled "On the Influence of Calcium-hydrate on Cetane," she was promoted to Doctor of Philosophy.

It is likely that Karplus, though she herself dreamed of becoming a medical doctor,[21] pursued her doctorate in chemistry at her father's request so that she could take up the role of successor to the family business. Though perhaps not her own ambition, this nevertheless seems to have been an exceptional fate for a woman at that time. Many women who held doctoral degrees found themselves “displaced persons” after completing their studies. In the words of one woman, whose professor told her on the day of her graduation in 1933, "Now, go forth and marry," she was perplexed by the discrepancy between feeling accepted, even encouraged, at university and being nearly totally rejected by society upon

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[19]These estimates are based on my examination of the catalogue of registered students for the years 1921 through 1925 at the Humboldt University Archive, formerly Friedrich Wilhelm University, Berlin.

[20] Tiedemann's obituary cites Max Born as the Professor with whom Karplus promoted. Karplus' signed curriculum vitae in her student file at the Humboldt University Archives names Hofrat Wilhelm Schlenk as her major Professor.

[21] I learned about Karplus' wishes to study medicine in an interview with Professor Regina Becker-Schmitt, one of Adorno's former students, who was quite close to Karplus during her years of study at Frankfurt.

leaving its hallowed halls. Isolde Troendle-Weintritt and Petra Herkert, who edited a collection of auto/biographical essays by and about women graduates of this period, explain in their forward to the volume that it was "entering into professional life that was problematic [for these women]. The idea that university study for women was purely a luxury, that they would marry and so never practice their profession, was more wide spread in the 20s and 30s than in our own time, and, in very many cases, social conditions made it a forgone conclusion" (8). At some point after completing her degree, Karplus underwent practical training as a chemist at IG Farben AG in Frankfurt am Main before assuming responsibility for the family business in 1930. At this point in the Registry of Commerce in the *Landesarchiv* [state archive] in Berlin, "Dr. Margarete Karplus" is listed as partner, in joint ownership with Hans Herzberger. Her sister, Liselotte, is not listed in the registry. Gretel Karplus appears to have been the sole inheritor of her father's share of the leather business.

There is little we can say with certainty about Karplus' relationship to her family. According to those who were close to Karplus, she rarely spoke of her family and childhood. Her mother died when Karplus was still a girl, and she reportedly had a difficult relationship with her step-mother.[22] Perhaps for these very reasons, her relationship to her father, however, played the most formative role for her life. In a condolence letter from Max Horkheimer to Karplus on the occasion of her father's death in June 1936, he writes, “I know that your

[22] Other than her name on Gretel’s birth certificate, I was unable to locate further records of Emilie Karplus, nee Cahn. She is not buried in any of the Jewish cemeteries in Berlin. According to the editors of Adorno’s letters to his parents, Karplus’ step-mother was Amalia Karplus (1878 – 1956), nee Jacak, went by the name of “Melly” and was from Neuheusel, Czechoslovakia.

relationship with [your father] was decisive, both outwardly and inwardly, into the final years [of his life]. For the new life beginning for you now, I wish you all the best." (Horkheimer Archive, letter #281). As the eldest daughter, Karplus seems to have served as a sort of son-replacement for her father; she lived the majority of her life in the same house with him and cared for him in his later years. Her letters to Benjamin reveal that this arrangement infringed upon her need for independence and was sometimes experienced as a burden but one she felt obligated to bear. It is difficult to say if her father's plans for her life thwarted other ambitions she may have had, though, unlike Horkheimer, who rejected his father's plans for him to take over the family business in order to pursue a career in philosophy, she as a woman may have been more dependent on her father's support.

Karplus was half owner of Karplus & Herzberger from 1930 until the close of 1932, when she sold her share of the factory, apparently to Herzberger. The factory is listed in the registry of commerce under the name Karplus & Herzberger until 1936, at which point its name was changed to Knöll & Co., with Hans Herzberger listed as sole proprietor.[23] The factory existed until 1947 under his ownership. The editors of the new, six volume edition of Walter Benjamin's correspondence record that Karplus began as an apprentice/trainee at *George Tengler*, a leather glove factory, on April 1, 1933, after the family factory had been liquidated. According to her own statement given during the

[23] Karplus writes in a letter to Adorno's parents from May 23, 1947, "I've finally enclosed the letter from Dr. Knöll, our one-time chemist who took over K + H [Karplus and Herzberger]. Perhaps you could be so kind as to forward it to Lottchen in Boston; I'm sure she would find it interesting as well" (403).

Wiedergutmachungsverfahren [indemnification processes] in 1956, Karplus joined the company *Georg Tengler* in Berlin on January 1, 1933, as a Junior Partner and assumed full responsibility for the company and its over 200 employees after the death of her business partner, Tengler, in 1934. As a result of ever intensifying anti-Jewish propaganda and difficulties with the district auditing agency, she writes, “I felt compelled, after otherwise accommodating my long-time employees, to liquidate my company in 1936” (*Bildmonographie* 116). In a letter to Horkheimer dated December 15, 1936, Theodor Adorno writes, "Gretel sold her factory and is free as of April 1" (AHBW 265). Karplus does not discuss the circumstances of the sale of her company or how much she earned in the sale. No records of the transaction could be located in the state archives of the city of Berlin or the archives of the Chamber of Commerce, and were likely destroyed in the war. Karplus records her approximate income for the years 1930-33 as RM [*Reichsmark*] 18-20,000, from 1933-34 as 8,000 and from 1934-35 as 12,000, decreasing steadily and markedly thereafter (*Bildmongraphie* 116).

It was with the sale of her company that her life in Berlin came to a close. Less than a year later, she left the city of her birth to join Adorno in London, England, where the two were married in September 1937. In October, just a month after their wedding, Adorno received a telegram from Horkheimer in New York informing him, as Adorno put it, that "there was a possibility for my speedy emigration to America if I were prepared to collaborate on a 'radio project.' After a brief deliberation, I agreed by telegraph. The truth [is] that I didn't know what a 'radio project' was" (Intellectual Migration 340). Nevertheless, Adorno and

Karplus found themselves in February 1938 in America, where they would stay for the next twelve years. From this point forward, Karplus' productivity was connected with the work of Adorno and the Institute.

Go Forth and Marry?

> *There is a side to Geminians which can become deeply involved emotionally, and another, hostile to sentimentality, which stands back from a romantic situation, laughing at it and the protagonists in it, including themselves, while analyzing it intellectually.*

In 1923, the year she took her doctoral examinations, Gretel Karplus met her future husband, Theodor W. Adorno. It was through the business connections of their parents that they first came into contact with one another. As the owner of a leather production factory, Karplus' father required a supplier of tannin, a substance used in the processing of leather, which happens, also, to be a by-product in the production of wine. Theodor Adorno's father, Oskar Wiesengrund, the proprietor of a wholesale wine business in Frankfurt am Main, apparently furnished Karplus & Herzberger's with this necessary material. Gretel and "Teddie," as she would later call him, first met during one of her stays in Frankfurt, introduced to one another by Else Herzberger, a mutual friend of both their families. The two built a close friendship during the year she spent in Frankfurt for practical training as a chemist at IG Farben AG and were soon

thereafter engaged. Though they continued to live in separate cities for the next 14 years, they spent a great deal of time together in Berlin, Frankfurt and on vacations within Germany, Italy and France.

The circumstances of their marriage are described by Evelyn Wilcock, an Adorno researcher out of England who is currently working on a book about Adorno's English Exile, according to whom, Karplus and Adorno were married in London, because in Germany "under the Nuremberg Laws of November 1935, Grade 1 'Mischlinge' [those with one Jewish parent and one non-Jewish] could marry only 'Mischlinge' like themselves. Because Karplus was not a ‘Mischling’ but Jewish, this marriage would have been against the law in Germany. They were married instead at Marylebone Registry Office, London, [on 8] September 1937 and celebrated with lunch at Magdalen College. Gretel's widowed stepmother and Adorno's parents all came to the wedding and the lunch" (328). Max Horkheimer and Redvers Opie served as witnesses.

Wilcock writes that Adorno waited to marry until he could "afford to support a wife" (328), but this explanation of their long engagement is perhaps too simple. Though Adorno and Karplus had already been a couple for some fourteen years, Karplus' life in Berlin was marked by her geographical and financial independence. In the correspondence between Horkheimer and Adorno around the time of Adorno's exile and marriage, monetary concerns appear with frequency. Given the circumstances of their impending exile, considerations about securing a home and an income for himself and his recently unemployed wife would clearly become a chief concern. His teaching privileges having been

revoked by recent Nazi legislation and otherwise unable to find gainful employment, Adorno had himself been relying on his parents as his chief source of financial support, though this too was made logistically impossible once Adorno was in exile in England as a result of Nazi restrictions on foreign currency exchange. Karplus brought with her her income from the last fiscal year and her earnings from the sale of her factory, though there is no record of this sum. It appears that any portion of her father's estate she may have inherited after his death in 1936 was signed over to her step-mother Melly, perhaps due to the difficulties of getting money out of Nazi Germany.[24] However, by the time of their wedding, the couple had already secured living quarters and were having their possessions shipped to London to set up household.

Their long courtship, nevertheless, does raise questions about their decision to marry. Ludwig von Friedeburg, suggested in an interview that the Adornos married on Horkheimer's recommendation as it would "look better" in America's puritanical culture.[25] In any case, marriage certainly facilitated their ability to remain together in exile. Müller-Doohm writes that, though marriage was by no means merely a formal act undertaken at the behest of parents and friends, "they were both deeply skeptical of the conventional form of bourgeois marriage from the very beginning" (93). Indeed, the two had led an unconventional relationship for many years, what we would today call "open." Regina Becker-Schmidt describes the Adornos' relationship as one she admired

[24] In letters to Adorno's parents, both Karplus and Adorno write about contacting Melly in order to settle the matter of Gretel's inheritance after the war.

[25] See also "Der Teddie und sein Drachodond: Theodor W. Adorno und Gretel Karplus" by Julika Tillmanns in Hessen: Wo die Liebe hinfällt: Paare und Passionen in Hessen, Hadwiga Fertsch-Röver and Birgit Spielmann, Eds. Marburg: Jonas Verlag, 2001.

and sought to emulate, marked by "loyalty in spite of everything, dependability, an almost symbiotic, mutual devotion on the one hand, and the ability to grant each other freedom, on the other" (210). Though this freedom, as Becker-Schmidt emphasizes, was a two-way street, Adorno himself seems to have had the lion's share, at least as far as the historical record is concerned. Adorno's letters to friends and family are filled with references to his many affairs, and he was infamous for his weakness for all things feminine. To be certain, Karplus, who often typed his letters to these women, as well as protocols of her husband's erotic dreams about other women, was aware of and tolerated these liaisons.

The question of how Karplus acted on her freedom within her relationship is one which we can never really answer with certainty, since very little of her correspondence and no diaries or journals in which she may have recorded any liaisons or her feelings about those of her husband's have survived. Though Weimar culture was "liberal" in many respects, moral standards for women were more stringent than those for men, not to mention the internal strictures on sexuality resulting from female socialization. Karplus may not have been enough at ease to enjoy her "open" relationship. During the fourteen years she and Adorno lived apart, however, she developed her own friendships with a number of people in their circle of mutual friends, Elisabeth Hauptmann, Kurt Weill and Lotte Lenya, but especially Ernst Bloch and Walter Benjamin, as well as Benjamin's cousin, Egon Wissing. Her correspondence with Benjamin during his exile clearly reveals the intensity of these relationships for her. Though Müller-Doohm reports that Karplus knew straightaway when she met Teddie that "He

and only he's the one!" (86), according to Becker-Schmidt, she was not altogether certain for a time which genius, Teddie or Walter, she preferred. Some have suggested that Karplus and Benjamin had a romance, but there is no evidence to support this. However, though she and Adorno were clearly partners, given the nonexclusive nature of their relationship, perhaps it cannot be entirely ruled out.

In her correspondence with Benjamin she also writes about her other relationships, chiefly to Ernst Bloch and Egon Wissing. In October 1934, she mentions an invitation from Ernst Bloch to meet in Prague. The trip never took place as Karplus was unable to get away. In another letter she refers to tension between herself and Bloch as a result of a squabble between himself and Adorno regarding the latter's critique of one of Bloch's books. It is clear from her letters that the situation created complications for her; Bloch does not answer her letter, and, upset, she jests about the unfortunate timing of it all, as she might fancy a trip to Prague after all. Karplus also writes in February 1935 about her plans to take a trip to East Africa with Egon Wissing.[26] The plans fell through, however, and in a later letter she asks for Benjamin's discretion regarding Wissing's visit to her in Berlin, as the latter had fallen out of favor with Adorno because of the foiled trip, and Karplus did not want to complicate matters if Teddie were to learn she was in contact with him again.

[26] Karplus met Wissing in 1933, shortly after his wife's death. Benjamin, who was living in Paris, asked Karplus to send some of his books via Wissing. She expressed misgivings at the time, feeling uncomfortable entrusting his books to someone she did not know. Apparently, she and Wissing hit it off, however, to the point that even she was taken aback by the intensity of their relationship and how quickly it had developed. Something, she assures Benjamin, was very rare with her. Wissing eventually married Karplus' sister, Lotte, in June 1940, and the two lived in Boston where he worked at Massachusetts Memorial Hospital.

It was apparently common for Karplus and Adorno to show concern about how they were being treated within their other relationships. As her letter to Benjamin suggests, Adorno was disappointed on Karplus' behalf, even resentful, that her plans with Wissing fell through. Later in the 50s when Karplus was working at the Institute in Frankfurt, Adorno reportedly came into Karplus' office on her birthday not only to congratulate her but to make sure that "so-and-so" had sent her favorite flowers.[27] As for Adorno's amorous disappointments, the record abounds with instances when he describes the, in his own words, "undeserved" care and patience with which his wife nursed his spirits back to health when everything went wrong. In response to the question of Karplus' feelings about her husband's affairs, Lotte Tobisch, one of Adorno's girlfriends in the early 60s, maintains, "It didn't have anything to do with acceptance or tolerance; Gretel was his Siamese twin: one heart, one pair of lungs, two heads: the one cerebral, the other practical" (Schütte). Karplus putatively viewed these women as daughters, and according to Müller-Doohm, one should not overestimate the erotic moment with Adorno. It is likely that most of his liaisons were not sexual ("*Intellektueller*" 19). Adorno, Müller-Doohm suggests, required the thrill of infatuation to feed his creative force.

The Adornos' identity as a couple is a complex matter. Their union was one of spirit and intellect, a companionship that went beyond the bounds of romantic love and marital ties. The Adornos' marriage, one might say, was sustained by a non-possessiveness which sought to preserve the specificity of the individual, by loyalty through time rather than exclusivity. Though their union

[27] Interview Regina Becker-Schmidt.

had begun some decade before the Nazi rise to power, it was deepened and intensified by their mutual experiences of anti-Semitism, of the horrors and barbarism of fascism, and the uncertainties of life in exile. Perhaps Gretel and Teddie had their own marriage in mind as he dictated and she transcribed the aphorism *Morality and temporal sequence* from Mininma Moralia. These "reflections from a damaged life" reveal Adorno at his most personal. Here, he contemplates the dialectic of love, "warmth and protection," and brutality, when "all warmth and shelter explode into nothingness." The fatal moment that brings this dialectic into play "lies in the exclusive character of what comes first. . . . But the desire to possess reflects time as a fear of losing, of the irrecoverable. Whatever is, is experienced in relation to its possible non-being." This dynamic gives way to fear of the other and hence to brutality. That which is cherished in its specificity, in that which is "quite definite" about it, has the assurance that it cannot be repeated, replaced and hence need not fear "what is different." Such a love, embodied by the refusal to possess, to turn people into objects, to petrify them into "something functional that can be exchanged for other, equivalent possessions," is one in which true affection resides. There, the beloved need not fear infidelity.

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In a letter to Horkheimer from May 13, 1935, Adorno writes, "I feel virtually obligated to marry Gretel, just to get her out of this hell" (HGS B15 348). Many

have sited this passage as the grounds for the Adornos' decision to marry, and, indeed, life for Karplus in Berlin had certainly taken a turn for the worse in the last year. Her chronic migraines were intensifying to the point where they caused nausea, loss of equilibrium and general apathy. As she relates to Benjamin, her physical condition was compounded by deep depression which kept her in her apartment sometimes for entire days. She was given injections of various kinds, but nothing seemed to alleviate her suffering. Though according to her doctors she had a generally weak constitution, having been born two months premature and kept for a time in an incubator, no one was ever able to identify the cause of her affliction, from which she suffered her entire adult life. Adorno was convinced of their psychological origins.

By 1935, Karplus was virtually alone in Berlin, most of their circle having fled the country, and she saw Adorno only on occasion, as he was living in London attempting to secure a future for himself there – it was not clear at this point in what form this future would include Karplus. To make her situation even more tenuous, the Nazis had expatriated Karplus and her family as "eastern Jews" in January 1934 in accordance with the July directives, leaving her without a passport and unable to travel. It took several months, until summer that year, for their citizenship to be reinstated. Her sister completed her *Staatsexamen* [exit exams] in late 1934 and herself left for America, arriving some time between late 1935 and early 1936 and eventually settling in Boston, Massachusetts. Karplus remained in Berlin with her father and stepmother and continued to run her leather factory. Karplus' letters to Benjamin provide a clear picture of her

uncertainty in this period. Her commitments at home obviously prevented her from leaving Berlin with her sister, while her long-standing ties to Adorno meant she also needed to take him into consideration in her planning. She writes to Benjamin about Teddie's impending visit to Berlin and their intentions to discuss their future together.

One wonders why Adorno would write that he felt obligated to get Karplus out of Berlin when she clearly had the financial and logistical wherewithal to make the journey on her own. Though her sister's financial resources were quite limited, she could certainly have offered Karplus sanctuary. Liselotte Karplus later provided affidavits to the American Consulate in London on the Adornos' behalf to facilitate their entry into the country, stating that she would support both her sister and Adorno in the event that they should fall into financial need,[28] though the Adornos did not submit the testament with their Visa application materials for fear that her limited means might jeopardize rather than facilitate their entry. The letter to Horkheimer in which Adorno writes of his intentions regarding Karplus is a highly charged one in which he is also making the case for his centrality to the Institute's work and his deepest wishes to work together with Horkheimer. There are numerous letters in his correspondence showing Adorno's maneuvering among the Institute's staff to position himself as Horkheimer's closest intellectual ally. In short, Adorno is pulling out all the rhetorical stops to get a commitment from Horkheimer regarding his future at the Institute. The emphasis on Karplus' precarious situation in Germany and on the danger presented to himself by traveling in and out of the country to see both her

[28] Letter from Horkheimer to Liselotte Karplus, November 16, 1937.

and his parents is at the same time an attempt to convey the genuine nightmare Nazi Germany had become since Horkheimer's departure (over two years earlier) and both of their needs to be "rescued" by Max.

The experience of persecution in Nazi Germany and the barbarism of fascism had long lasting effects on the couple, too, in influencing their decision not to have children. In a letter to Ernst Bloch from October 2, 1937, congratulating him on the birth of his son, Adorno writes, "Beautiful and courageous to have a child right now. It almost puts us to shame that we don't dare, as one never knows with whom it might have to march one day" (AHBW 537). The decision not to have children seems to have been mutual, reflecting a shared sense of uncertainty about the future and anxiety about bringing children into a world gone mad. As early as 1933, however, Karplus writes to Benjamin that she would "adopt him in place of the child [she] will never have" (Luhr 85). It is possible that she and Adorno, by then a couple for nearly a decade already, had discussed the matter and decided against having children; alternatively, Karplus, as the owner/manager of a leather factory and business woman, may simply not have seen children as a genuine possibility for her demanding life-style. Perhaps under different circumstances the couple might have considered having children. Adorno later expressed regret about being childless, and Karplus certainly seems to have had a soft spot for children. She writes in a letter to Benjamin that meeting the 12 year old daughter of Alfred Sohn-Rethel had delighted her to no end, just as meeting Asja Lacis' daughter, Daga, had done years before. It is clear, however, that, had she had children of her own,

Karplus' life could have taken a markedly different shape than it did. Regina Becker-Schmidt, who enjoyed a close relationship with Karplus during her time as Adorno's assistant at the Institute in the late 50s, suggested the decision not to have children was also a form of emancipation for Karplus, to lead a life different from the motherhood cliché with a household and childrearing taking central position instead of her husband's philosophical production.

Even without children at its center, Karplus' marriage to Adorno must be understood as something like a paradigm shift in her life. For the first time in their many years together, she and Adorno were sharing the same domicile, though they maintained separate bedrooms for the duration of their marriage.[29] Karplus suddenly found herself responsible for setting up their mutual household; as Adorno writes in a letter to Leo Löwenthal a few days after their wedding, "a honeymoon is out of the question, as we have to organize our apartment, wait for the furniture to arrive and other such nonsense. . . . Gretel sends her warmest regards; in the meantime she is busy setting up household, a chore in which I refuse in the most cynical manner to participate" (Letter Adorno to Löwenthal, 15 September 1937, Löwenthal Archive). He writes to Horkheimer around the same time that Gretel is "learning" to take care of the household. As Müller-Doohm describes, Adorno clearly indicated that the division of labor in their marriage would follow traditional gender patterns; "The practical matters of everyday life were completely in Gretel's hands. This went so far that she later ordered her husband's suits" (348). Though Karplus is always described as "practical,"

[29] See letter to Horkheimer (8.2.1938) in which he asks Max to find quarters with two bedrooms, as they "always sleep separately".

running the household was indeed something she had had to learn after her marriage to Adorno, since she had spent the majority of her time up to that point taking care of her business in Berlin and in all likelihood employed domestic help at home. Her marriage became the center of Karplus' life. If she was to remain childless, she nevertheless had her *Sorgenkind*, or "problem child," as she called Adorno, to worry about. Though, as Müller-Doohm records, she made a considerable effort to play the "house-wife," clarifying questions of style and taste in furnishing their home, tending to their diet and preparing meals, and a host of other daily tasks (357), it was her husband's work that would become the central focus of their married life. From this point forward, her practical and intellectual productivity was channeled into the success of her husband's artistic and philosophical work. Their love was intellectual; their progeny a brainchild, which, as we will see in Chapter 4, she nursed at every turn.

But Adorno's was not the only work she supported and nursed. Karplus would come to play a similar role in the life of Walter Benjamin. She was the first to push Benjamin out of Berlin in 1933 and, having herself stayed behind, furnished him with materials and portions of his Berlin library as he required them. She acted as a patron to Benjamin in the early years of his exile on Ibiza and in Paris, contributing small but frequent sums of money to enable him to pursue his work on the *Berlin Childhood around 1900* and, later, the *Passagenarbeit*. Without her help, both financial and psychological, there would surely be less of this last and major (though unfinished) work of Benjamin's left to us. Karplus was one of Benjamin's closest correspondents during his Paris exile.

His letters to her chronicle his own relationship to the *Passagenarbeit* intimately and provide a rather vivid account of the last years of his life faced with the haunting specter of fascism which pursued him across the borders of both Germany and France, until he finally took refuge in suicide at the Spanish border. The letters between Karplus and Benjamin, to which we will turn in the next chapter, show that she played not only financial and "secretarial" roles, but that Benjamin saw Karplus as an intellectual sounding board for his texts and as a confidant in personal matters.

Chapter 3

Felicitas,

The Correspondence of Gretel Karplus and Walter Benjamin, 1933-1940.

Gretel Karplus and Walter Benjamin became acquainted through their mutual friend Ernst Bloch in 1928. There is virtually no record of the first years of their acquaintance, except through accounts of meetings between Benjamin and Adorno at which Karplus was also present, such as the Königstein talks in 1929 where the two men formulated their joint theoretical program, and references to a common circle of friends in Berlin. By the early thirties, however, Karplus and Benjamin had developed an intimate friendship, a record of which has been handed down to us through their seven-year correspondence in the years between 1933 when Benjamin left Germany and his death in 1940.[30]

While Karplus enjoyed one of the closest relationships to Benjamin, the list of Benjamin's female friendships is sizable and of varying significance. Perhaps the one most widely acknowledged is his friendship with Hannah Arendt, who was for a time married to Benjamin's cousin Günter Stern. To be counted among his female friends are also his former wife, Dora Sophie Kellner; his cousin,

[30] Aside from her letters to Theodor Adorno's parents, her letters to Benjamin represent the extent of Gretel Karplus/Adorno's correspondence in the Theodor W. Adorno Archive. Additionally, a few letters and memoranda written to Max Horkheimer are housed at the Horkheimer Archive. According to the regulations of the Adorno Archive, the unpublished letters of Gretel Adorno cannot be quoted. All references to her unpublished letters herein are paraphrases of the German originals. Quotations taken from her letters and excerpts already appearing in print will be noted with standard in-text citations.

Gertrud Kolmar; the sculptor, Jula Radt; and theater director, Asja Lacis; as well as Elisabeth Hauptmann and Margarete Steffin, both belonging to Brecht's circle of co-writers; and the artist, Anna Maria Blaupot ten Cate. During his time in Paris Benjamin also established friendships with Adrienne Monnier, Gisèle Freund and Germaine Krull.

Little attention has been given in Benjamin scholarship to his female friendships and their significance for Benjamin remains unexamined. In her 1993 essay, "Walter Benjamin – Adressat literarischer Frauen: Zur Überlieferung von Briefen an Walter Benjamin," [Walter Benjamin – Correspondent of Literary Women: On the Inheritance of Letters to Walter Benjamin] Chryssoula Kambas calls attention to this deficit in Benjamin scholarship, arguing that the criterion according to which editions of his correspondence have been compiled fail to appreciate his relationships with women. Specifically, Kambas points to Benjamin's letters to his former wife, Dora Sophie Kellner and to Gertrud Kolmar, as well as to Margarete Steffin, all of whose inclusion would allow for the recognition of women as producers of texts and as key-participants in the processes of textual production. Though Kambas' chief concern is with acknowledging women in the literary avant garde of the twenties, her arguments can be extended to other women with whom Benjamin corresponded, such as Karplus, whose significance and contributions have been largely overlooked.

An author's legacy, Kambas writes, is dependent not only on the availability of reliable editions of his or her work but on the publication of correspondence. The 1966 edition of Benjamin's letters compiled by Theodor

Adorno and Gershom Scholem excerpts many of the letters and contains almost exclusively letters from Benjamin to his correspondents. As a result, the significant influence of Benjamin's female friendships on his "*geistige Haltung*" [emotional and intellectual attitude] cannot be taken into adequate consideration (Kambas 242). The latest six-volume edition of Benjamin's correspondence, completed in 2000 and edited by the Theodor W. Adorno Archive, suffers similar inadequacies to those Kambas sites in the earlier edition. In addition to reprinting letters already available in other publications, it also reproduces only Benjamin's side of the correspondence. This does not pose any particular problem for those interested in Benjamin's male friendships, as editions of two-way exchanges between Benjamin and a host of his male correspondents are available elsewhere. However, this one-sided dialogue is a particularly striking deficiency where his female correspondents are concerned.

A recent contribution to the literature on Benjamin's years in exile, entitled *"was noch begraben lag"* [what remained buried], goes some way to addressing these shortcomings, making available for the first time several unabridged letters to Benjamin from his wife, Dora Benjamin, Gretel Karplus, Elisabeth Hauptmann, Anna Maria Blaupot ten Cate, Asja Lacis and Heidi Hey. These letters and other personal documents, as the editors of this volume suggest, offer a look into Benjamin's inner life, providing a subjective view of his life in exile which gives new contour to our understanding of Walter Benjamin, the man, and his years of struggle to find forums for publishing his work and to sustain his philosophical writing.

In 1990-91 the Theodor W. Adorno Archive together with the German Literature Archive in Marbach, Germany, organized an exhibition on Benjamin's life and works, including some material not previously available to the public – pictures, letters, journal entries, and maps of Berlin from Benjamin's years there. Among the new material was a portion of the exhibit devoted to "Three Women" with whom Benjamin had romantic relationships or intentions: Dora Sophie Pollak, born Kellner, his ex-wife; Jula Cohn, the sister of one of Benjamin's closest friends to whom he dedicated his monograph "Goethe's *Elective Affinities"*; and Asja Lacis, the Russian theater and film producer, who was Benjamin's co-author of the "Moscow Diary" and lover. At least until 1932, these women represented for Benjamin the three great loves of his life. Jula Cohn, a sculptor, with whom he fell in love, did not return his affections. Benjamin met Asja Lacis in 1924, when his marriage was already in trouble. He had hoped to marry Lacis once his divorce was final, but lengthy divorce proceedings and Lacis' own plans to return to Moscow put an end to the relationship. Though the majority of the time Dora Pollak and Benjamin were married was spent in the process of separation and divorce, or perhaps for this very reason, Benjamin's marriage to Pollak represents a particularly significant period in his life. In fact, he continued to refer to her as "my wife" until his death. To provide a broader context for examining Benjamin's relationship to Karplus and her significance for his life in this period, I would like to turn briefly to his relationship with his wife Dora which offers insight into Benjamin's character and the role women played in his life.

*

Benjamin met Dora Sophie Pollak in May 1914 at his opening address to the Berlin Free Students' Union whose chairmanship he was about to assume. At the time she was married to Max Pollak, from whom in 1916 she was divorced, and Benjamin was about to become engaged to Grete Radt. In the course of the two years between 1914 and 1916, these other relationships were dissolved and on April 16, 1917, Dora Pollak and Walter Benjamin married (*Marbacher Magazin* 146-8). Their marriage, however, was soon thereafter on rough waters. It was evident already by the spring of 1921, reports Scholem, that their marriage was coming to an end (*Freundschaft* 120).

In a brief journal piece entitled, "The Absolute Naive Egoist: On Walter and Dora Benjamin," Jochen Schimmang contends that what is amazing about Benjamin's marriage is not that it ended, but that he ever entered into it in the first place. According to Schimmang, Benjamin's character, "the naive egoist" and solitary genius, was not cut out for familial life. "He was for nothing less suited," writes Schimmang, by which he means "not only marriage but for the institution of the family in general" (1150). Benjamin could never get beyond the self-referentiality that allowed him to immerse himself in his work. As Dora Pollak put it, two years before she and Benjamin were married, "If you love him, you must know that his words are great and divine, his thoughts and work meaningful, his feelings small and constrained, and his actions just as accords all of these" (Schimmang 1150). Although she apparently entered the marriage with an

awareness of his shortcomings, Dora Pollak nevertheless later came to lament the roles into which life with a "genius" had pushed her. In an article written for the popular women's magazine, *Die Dame*, composed in the midst of her divorce proceedings twelve years after her marriage, she writes, "the creative man requires principally the kind of marriage in which he only gives by receiving. Without being conscious of it, the wife becomes a mother to him, for his mind has actually never left the realm of fantasy, which is the realm of the child" (quoted in Schimmang 1151). Dora resisted the role of wife to the "*schoepferischer Charakter*" [creative character]. Though she generalizes here for her wider audience, her insights were no doubt inspired by her personal experience.

Dora Benjamin was by no means "an ambitious goose who wanted to be taken along in the latest intellectual current" as their one-time close friend Herbert Belmore angrily accused after the break-up of his friendship with Benjamin, for which he held Dora responsible (Belmore 123). Quite the contrary, Dora Benjamin was herself an accomplished translator, author and journalist, as well as editor of a well-known Berlin ladies' journal *Die Praktische Berlinerin* [The Practical Berlin Woman] and was chiefly responsible for supporting the family. She worked for a Berlin radio show, which broadcast a series of her lectures on "Women's concerns and questions" in early 1928. Her pulp-fiction novel *Gas gegen Gas* [Gas against Gas], which deals with the issues raised in the First World War about the use of chemical weapons, was published serially in the *Suedwestdeutsche Rundfunk Zeitung* beginning in 1930, and she also made contributions to the Berlin journal *Literarische Welt* [Literary World], to which

Benjamin and Adorno had also submitted their work (Marbacher Magazine 152). Her forceful, independent character is revealed in the letters she writes to Scholem during the divorce proceedings:

> This disputing has completely undermined him [Walter Benjamin] spiritually and morally. I do not deny that his thought is again sharp, pointed, and deep. I think, too, that the work he is now doing on the Paris arcades, of which he has shared with me, naturally, not a single word, is in its way excellent. And you cannot say, Gerhard, that his intellectual development is more important to you than to me. I have devoted my entire existence to him for too long to now play only the embittered, abandoned wife. (quoted in Schimmang 1153).

It appears that Dora too had been ill-suited for this partnership in which she did all the giving, while getting little in return. Perhaps her vision of partnership had been a different one, in which its partners mutually supported each other's goals.

According to Herbert Belmore, "Walter Benjamin was completely self-centered, an absolute egoist, and these qualities, paired with a certain lack of healthy common sense, constitute the core of his failure" (123). Likewise, Schimmang describes Walter Benjamin as an *Ausbeuter* and *Schmarotzer* [exploiter and freeloader], but contends that this egotism served as a form of protection against distraction from his work. It is a trait of Benjamin's genius, he argues, that must be excused. In her introduction to the English edition of *One Way Street,* Susan Sontag writes, "The need to be solitary – along with bitterness

over one's loneliness – is characteristic of the melancholic. To get work done, one must be solitary – or at least, not bound to any permanent relationship" (23).

Yet, if Benjamin was so poorly suited for bourgeois marriage, he nevertheless seems to have been unable to live without a woman in his life. He only made the decision to finally end the marriage with Dora after meeting Asja Lacis. In the Spring of 1932, barely two years after his divorce was finalized, Benjamin proposed marriage to a woman by the name of Ola Parem. Parem rejected the proposal, which seems to have put Benjamin in a hopeless, even suicidal, mood. Benjamin biographer, Momme Brodersen describes this period of Benjamin's life as one of "profound spiritual fatigue" (197) resulting from great personal and professional disappointments. In a letter to Egon and Gert Wissing on 27 July 1932, some days after his 40th birthday, Benjamin depicts his state of mind and the hopelessness of his situation in which he is no longer able to find forums for his work and no means of gainful intellectual employment. Speaking of himself in third-person, he writes, "Only life with a woman or a specific, precise work could give him the desire the go on in the face of such great uncertainty. He has neither." Benjamin enclosed a last will and testament with the letter in which he specified how his possessions were to be divided. Karplus is listed along with some other female friends, including his ex-wife, Dora Benjamin, Asja Lacis, Jula Radt, and Elisabeth Hauptmann. Interestingly, he does not mention Adorno at all and bequeaths to Karplus an ashtray decorated with painted chickens. What may at first glance seem a feeble gift, however, is perhaps better seen within the context of Benjamin's own philosophy, which sought to redeem

what others might consider the refuse of history, the neglected details or “fringe of the dress” which is easily considered insignificant but which has a tale of its own to tell. Perhaps this little ashtray was a very personal gift whose significance was best known to Karplus herself.

Karplus, after all, had become one of Benjamin’s most trusted friends, and, as the correspondence between Karplus and Benjamin reveals, she came to fulfill the needs Benjamin so explicitly states in his suicide letter – without impinging on his need for isolation, despite his claims to desire company and companionship. As Theodor Adorno explains in his essay, *Benjamin: The Letter Writer*, “The letter form suited [Benjamin] because it predisposes to mediated, objectified immediacy. Letter writing simulates life in the medium of the frozen word. In a letter one can disavow isolation and nonetheless remain distant, apart, isolated” (xviii). Though talk of their meeting seemed to sustain both Benjamin and Karplus during their years of mutual isolation, from one another and from an eroding world they once shared in Berlin, their relationship was chiefly epistolary in the years of Benjamin’s exile. As a result, Karplus became the ideal companion for him: at once, the woman who shared his life and the person whose spiritual, logistical and financial support he relied on so that he could devote himself to “the specific, precise work” – the *Passagen Arbeit* – which was to be his greatest contribution to *prima philosophia*.

One of the most fascinating aspects of these letters, however, is their status as the only place where we see Karplus constructing herself. They provide a key to her character in a way other existing documents do not, though

one cannot forget the unique rhetorical situation in which they were written: she was a Jewish business woman living and working in Nazi Berlin; she was virtually alone, her circle of friends having already gone one after another into exile; she saw Adorno only sporadically; and she faced a very uncertain future. In her letters to Benjamin, one sees her taking up the role of provider and advisor, as well as the traditional female roles of guardian angel, mother, even little sister. The letters convey her great desire to be useful, central and cherished by her friend, and, indeed, she became an important channel of communication regarding many personal and logistical matters directly affecting Benjamin's state of mind and his relationship to Adorno and the Institute of Social Research.

*

Though Benjamin did not enter permanent exile until the spring of 1933, he spent the majority of the year 1932 abroad as a result of increasing difficulties in Berlin with living arrangements and finances. He stayed on the island of Ibiza from early April until mid-July 1932, traveling then, on invitation from his friend Wilhelm Speyer, to Poveromo, Italy, to collaborate on Speyer's play, *A Coat, A Hat, A Glove*. In November, the two men returned in Speyer's car to Berlin, where Benjamin would remain until he entered exile on 17 March 1933. The three-act play Benjamin co-wrote with Speyer was never performed nor reproduced, though it was printed by Drei Masken Verlag in Berlin under Speyer's name. The play, however, became the source of Karplus' alter ego,

"Felicitas,"[31] as she came to be addressed by Benjamin in their correspondence, while she in turn addressed him as "Detlef" after his pseudonym from the book *Deutsche Menschen*. There is no record of Karplus having read the play, though it is likely Benjamin shared it with her, as he did most of his work in this period, during his final stay in Berlin between November 1932 and March 1933.

Though Benjamin never explained his choice of "Felicitas," perhaps the fiery main character reminded him of Karplus in some way. Felicitas is described as fatalistic, with the composure of a schoolgirl who was always first in the class and trusts that everything will turn out for the best. She is something of an untamable spirit, a young woman from the southern province married to an older city attorney with traditional values. Her husband constantly scolds her for her appearance, demanding that she come appropriately styled with a hat when she goes out. For her part, she resists his efforts to mold her, preferring to go without a hat and feel the wind in her hair. As the play begins, she has just left her husband for a younger, more modern lover. Her lover is sporty and exciting; they go for car and motorcycle rides or sometimes by boat to camp. Her lover describes her as an "extraordinary" woman. Coy and playful with purpose, she always gets what she wants and enjoys being at the center of intrigue. Such a depiction might well be suited to Karplus, who once remarked to Benjamin about her childhood wish to be nothing more than a character in a novel. Though her relationship to Benjamin was by no means illicit, Karplus did enjoy and cultivate its exclusive character, introducing a touch of the mysterious between them.

[31] The spelling of the name varies in the correspondence between "Felizitas" with a "z" and "Felicitas" with a "c".

Karplus writes in regard to their use of pseudonyms, “I, in any case, love a hint of secrecy, and find the retreat into names virtually reserved for us alone spectacular” (Luhr 86). Within the first month of their correspondence, Karplus expresses her desire to keep her relationship with Benjamin independent of Adorno. She writes that since Teddie would be staying at her home in Prinzenallee, Benjamin should double his letters and write to her on occasion at her factory address, as well. She later annuls the request, saying, “My last postcard was purely alarm. Teddie will be staying at the pension, thus, everything as usual regarding our arrangements” (Luhr 77). Indeed, there are also times when their relationship closed Adorno out altogether: In the summer of 1933, Karplus speaks of her hopes of legitimizing a trip to Paris in connection with her work – as Europe’s fashion capital, Paris was the perfect place for her to catch up on the latest trends for leather clothing and accessories. She adds in a moment of hesitation, that she is unsure, however, what the “problem child” will think of the idea and expresses some concern that he might even want to join her.

On several occasions, Karplus speaks to Benjamin about her need for greater independence and her plans to move into her own apartment and out of the home she shared with her father and stepmother in Prinzenallee. In 1932 the family company of which she was half-owner was liquidated, and she joined a new partner, George Tengler, as junior partner of the company in the spring of 1933. She writes to Benjamin about how pleased she is with the positive developments in her career, “After a month now, I can say of my new job thus far

that I hardly think I could have found a better place. The people and the boss are delightful, I have a lot to do, I'm settling into the job quite well, and I believe they are pleased with me" (Luhr 80). A few months later, she writes boasting of her latest success:

> Two new winter designs have been born with considerable contribution on my part. For the life of me I would love to show them to you. As an old fashion-lover, I wanted to ask you why it is that at the beginning of a new season one finds oneself simply impossible in the old clothes and hats, even though one has not grown fatter or thinner and hasn't changed hairstyles. Does fashion really change us so that we have a different impression of ourselves? (Luhr 86).

Karplus' interest in her work, as this letter indicates, went beyond purely financial concerns to include what we might today call "fashion theory," and the subject was one which she and Benjamin apparently discussed. In 1935, Benjamin writes about having rekindled his acquaintance with a woman by the name of Helen Hessel, who was active in the fashion industry. He was pleased at the prospect of attending a fashion show or two once again as a result of this chance reunion. He adds, "By the way, she recently wrote a little book about the Parisian fashion industry, which is thoroughly excellent in its presentation of [the industry's] social origins" (WBGB V5 133). Karplus responds with enthusiasm, desperately wishing she could talk to Hessel herself, not only about the designs of the most prominent fashion houses but about the law according to which

fashion makes its way to the middle-classes. She writes, “I come upon this problem almost daily in my work, but it doesn’t interest me for purely business reasons. This phenomenon has perplexed me for years now, and I almost want to say the closer I am to it, the more difficult the solution appears and the more questionable the concept of taste” (Letter from Karplus to Benjamin, 28 August 1935, excerpted in editor’s note to WBGB V5 155). The exchanges between Benjamin and Karplus always include references to her life and her concerns, as well, and give some indication of the amount of time they spent together in Berlin. They often went for walks through the city and frequently spent their evenings together. Though Karplus, at one point, complains to Benjamin that she knows so little about his earlier life and friendships and that he sometimes even kept his other Berlin friends from her, she accepts that perhaps he only wanted her to know a certain side of him, that their relationship should have an exclusive character, unique among the others.

Karplus relished the position she held in Benjamin’s life and clearly considered his letters as something to be cherished. She writes in June 1933, “I am very proud of your letters. They are all being saved and in a very small way serve as a substitute for our evenings” (Luhr 84). Karplus not only saved Benjamin’s letters, but suggested in the early days of their correspondence that they take to numbering them as well. For Benjamin, Karplus’ letters, especially in the first three years of his exile, were a life line. He frequently asks her for information about their mutual friends and complains about not hearing from any of them. He writes, “As you can see, my correspondence is sparse. I don’t even

know if it has occurred to you that in it you hold the position of first-violinist. In this case, you have to appreciate the orchestra more for the attention of its only listener than for the strength of its numbers" (WBGB V4 249). Though Benjamin frequently expressed the central role she played in his life – she was not only the "first-violinist" but "the rarest and most enduring blossom on his rather leafless tree" – Karplus, perhaps as a result of her own isolation in an increasingly empty Berlin, sometimes worried about the effects of separation on their relationship. "The tone of your last letter made me rather sad," she writes on 6 May 1933, "It is so distanced, as if you didn't count me among your trusted friends anymore" (Luhr 80). As Benjamin explains in his response, the highs and lows of his own mood resulting from the tenuousness of his situation sometimes gave his letters a less friendly face than he would desire. Again he reassures her of the solidity of their friendship, writing that he had always secretly wondered "if there were not a single person who would answer the questions in [his] letters without [his] having to repeat them five times or who could meet his requests, which naturally require greater effort to fulfill the smaller they are." He continues, "You have answered this secret question and can be certain that I know what that means" (WBGB V4 206).

Karplus sought to maintain her role as Benjamin's advisor, which began with her "pushing" him out of Berlin in March of 1933, and continually urged him to turn to her in practical and personal matters. "I would be extraordinarily thankful," she writes on 6 May 1933, "if you would inform me a bit about your financial concerns; I know much more about business matters than you and can

perhaps help and advise you in some things" (Luhr 80). Karplus, whose own circumstances in Berlin were growing increasingly oppressive, seems to have sought refuge in her role as "Felicitas," Benjamin's most trusted friend. She continues, "Please place your trust in me and consider me at your disposal, as far as one can be at such distance" (Luhr 81). It seems to have renewed her sense of purpose to support Benjamin in his greatest time of need. She speaks of the pleasure it gives her to be able to provide for him, saying "I know now once again why I have to earn money; I will adopt you in place of the child I will never have" (Luhr 85). Benjamin, for his part, was quite aware of Karplus' tendency toward self-sacrifice, to focus her energies outward, and called her attention to it in his response, writing, "I sometimes wonder, dear Felizitas, if you don't suffer on account of your blessed children - a problem child and an adoptive child. Don't you sometimes long for an adult? I could take up the role for you, if only you were here; as it is, the distance makes my figure even smaller yet" (WBGB V4 249).

Though Karplus is often depicted by her contemporaries as cool, distanced, practical and unemotional, her letters to Benjamin reveal a side of her that is rather fragile and timid. She embraces Benjamin's offer of mutual emotional support, writing, "You're right. I am only a little girl and very much in need of an adult. I am overjoyed that you would like to take up this role for me. I never would have dared to ask for fear that you would think it too forward of me. But your little Felicitas feels very safe with you and thanks you a thousand times for this rare bouquet" (Luhr 86). To be sure, Karplus was also in a time of need

during this period of her life. Though Adorno visited her in Berlin as often as possible and the two continued to spend the holidays together, the periods of isolation in between their meetings were sometimes unbearable for her. On several occasions she writes to Benjamin that she has heard little from "Frankfurt," i.e. Teddie, or sometimes that she is not sure where he is at the moment. Though she tried to present a brave face, she was not always able to sustain it. "My letter has grown a bit dull," she writes on 17 June 1933, "not as positive as I like to keep my letters to you. Perhaps it is a reflection of my continual effort not to let things get me down" (Luhr 85). Compounded by her chronic migraines and physical suffering, her isolation led to such deep depression that she speaks of losing interest in "real life" altogether. By 1935, Karplus was anguished by a number of negative developments in her situation: difficulties with her business as a result of increasing anti-Jewish sentiment, complications with her personal plans for moving out of her parent's home into her own apartment, intensifying isolation as more and more friends and acquaintances left Germany, and the lack of prospect for change.

In the seven years of Benjamin's exile, he and Karplus met only three times, once alone in Denmark in September 1934, in Paris in May 1937 and in San Remo (on both occasions together with Adorn) just after her marriage in December 1937. Isolation in general and from Karplus in particular is a frequent complaint of Benjamin's. "You can hardly imagine," he writes on 24 May 1934, "how much I miss being able to talk to you just now. We are already in our second year of separation and our meeting is not yet in the foreseeable future"

(WBGB V4 431). He frequently reports to Karplus about the difficulties of his circumstances and his "unimaginable isolation," cut-off from all intellectual and social life. As salvation he can think of only one thing, "that we see one another. If only I could count on that with certainty" (WBGB V5 42). Though the two of them planned meetings on numerous occasions, these plans never came to fruition given the variety of variables with which they both had to contend, which ranged from Benjamin's lack of funds to Karplus' ill health and an inability to leave her business, as well as a brief period in which she was without a passport and unable to leave Germany altogether.

Nevertheless, Karplus continually made her presence felt in Benjamin's life through her spiritual and financial support. Benjamin's financial need was acute during his exile, and Karplus was his most constant source of support in this period. He writes in April 1935, after receiving one of her fund transfers, that it had given him hope for "two or three days of normal existence" and offered him proof of her "alone unquestionable and steadfast presence, even in [her] absence" (WBGB V5 61). Again in September of that year, he reiterates, "Let me thank you for your last rosy parcel,[32] and tell you, once again, how much reassurance of your presence radiates even from these little signs, which sometimes look more like great wonders" (WBGB V5 151). Karplus had begun sending Benjamin money transfers in the spring of 1932 and continued to do so until her marriage to Adorno in September 1937, when she no longer had her own income.

[32] Pink slips of paper were used for money transfers, hence Benjamin's reference to them as "rosy parcels" throughout their correspondence.

Benjamin frequently draws a direct connection between Karplus' financial support and his ability to work. He writes in February 1934:

> [. . .] Without you I could face the coming weeks only with uncertainty and apathy. I am no longer a dilettante at either state. But may I count on you?
>
> In my condition, I hardly have the strength to pose the question. I have been lying in bed for days – simply in order not to require anything and to see no one – and work however good or bad it goes.
>
> Think about what you can do. I need 1000 [francs] to cover the essentials and to make it through March. There is hope for a payment from Geneva[33] in April. Right now I don't know what to do.
>
> [. . .] At the moment, the*Passagenarbeit* is, between me and fate, the *tertius guadens* [the laughing third-party]. (WBGB V4 356)

Though Benjamin's situation was certainly no secret to Adorno or the directors of the Institute, Horkheimer and Friedrich Pollock, Karplus was the one with whom he spoke most openly about his need and its effects on his ability to pursue his work. This candor toward Karplus, however, had the perhaps desired effect of being passed on to Adorno, who subsequently sought help for Benjamin through

[33] This is a reference to the Institute of Social Research. The Institute's journal continued to be published during its exile, and it commissioned work from Benjamin as well. Benjamin is referring here to payment for the first article of his to be published by the journal, "The Current Social Situation of the French Writer," which appeared in March 1934. Horkheimer had not yet committed to a regular salary for Benjamin.

his connections, including appeals to Horkheimer to commit to a fixed salary for Benjamin.

On numerous occasions Karplus' intimate knowledge of Benjamin's circumstances and progress on his work lead her to serve as an intermediary. The above letter arrived at Karplus' address while Adorno was visiting, and she took the opportunity to show it to him as well. Consequently, he and Karplus wired Benjamin money for the short term, and Adorno began to seek long-term financial support for Benjamin through Else Herzberger and her brother, wealthy friends of the Wiesengrund family. Karplus writes to Benjamin that she hopes he will forgive her for showing Adorno his letter, above all, since it was not without its positive effects. Indeed, Benjamin did receive support on several occasions from Else Herzberger and Arnold Levy, but it did not turn out to be the consistent, reliable source of funding they had all hoped for. As a result, Karplus' small but steady money transfers continued to provide Benjamin peace of mind. He writes at the end of March 1934, the period in which he had once again taken up his arcades project, "If I have come to myself again, then I have you to thank. And to myself means only to my work. I have, in fact, returned to the *Passagenarbeit* with a decisiveness, which just a short time ago I would not have believed possible . . . ." (WBGB V4 375).

By November 1934, Benjamin had left Paris and was staying at his ex-wife's pension in San Remo, where life was much cheaper though work proved more difficult. In May 1935, he returned to Paris in order to continue his work on the exposé of the *Passagenarbeit*, which he had promised to Pollock, who had

expressed interest in the project on the Institute's behalf. Paris was becoming increasingly uncomfortable, especially for German expatriates, as a result of Hitler's influence throughout Europe. These developments were making themselves felt on the economic front as well. Because the *Bibliothèque Nationale* was indispensable for his work, however, Benjamin remained in the city. He writes to Karplus in September 1935 from within the safety of its walls, "I don't dare to think about the world outside; the coming weeks once again appear all too dismal at the moment. As long as I am sitting here everything seems possible. But how long? If you can, could you send me a parcel in September?" (WBGB V5 163). Benjamin's request for a "parcel," another money transfer, was prefaced by a progress report on his work – perhaps an offer of proof that her money was being put to good use. He almost always writes to Karplus of his latest bibliographic discoveries while working in the library and of his latest map of the project. This connection between his productivity and his economic stability is continually reinforced, sometimes subtly, sometimes explicitly, throughout their correspondence, and Karplus came to feel a genuine responsibility for not only "Detlef," her adoptive child, but for his philosophical production.

In October 1935, Benjamin's situation had become critical enough that he writes to Karplus almost pleading for intervention, worried about how long he will be able to remain in western Europe:

> In short: what I need is not support for myself – an infinitely reducible mass – but support for my work, which poses modest

> requirements, but certain ones, nevertheless. If I am forced to give up hope in this regard, I could hardly find the courage to formulate the sentence. At the moment it is not quite that far. . . . I have recently made decisive progress in the construction [of the arcades project]. I could tell you so much about it; and yet how difficult it is to write [in a letter]! (WBGB V5 170)

Again, Benjamin's letter had the desired effect of relating his situation to those in the position to help him out of his most urgent need. In fact, as will be discussed below, Benjamin had not corresponded directly with Adorno since the letter from 2-4 and 5 August 1935, in which Adorno and Karplus sent a detailed critique of Benjamin's exposé. It was perhaps the long silence between the two men that prompted Karplus to write in her letter of 25 January 1936 to remind Benjamin that Adorno was a more sincere friend to him than he appeared to think. She reports, as well, of Adorno's efforts to get more money from the Institute on Benjamin's behalf and of Horkheimer's intention to support Benjamin's work. Indeed, through Adorno, Benjamin had established a relationship to the Institute beginning in 1934, when the *Journal of Social Research* began being printed in Paris, and he became involved in part in its administration. The Institute began giving Benjamin modest monthly payments of 500 francs and, on occasion, larger allocations of funds. In January 1936, Adorno pushed Horkheimer to provide a larger salary of 1000 francs for Benjamin. Benjamin met with Horkheimer personally in Paris in January and arrangements were made for the Benjamin to receive the required funds.

It was not until late March 1939 that Benjamin wrote to Karplus about Horkheimer's letter informing him of the Institute's financial hardship and, though the Institute was pursuing a grant in America on his behalf, suggesting that Benjamin try to attain grants from other sources within France. Benjamin explains to Karplus that he knows of no one pursuing intellectual work, who was able to earn or receive money, either for their writing or teaching. "There is, thus, no question," he writes, "that there is nothing to be done here for the long-term" (WBGB V6 239). It is with this turn of events that Benjamin began looking toward America. With no connections on the continent, however, he placed virtually all his hope on the efforts of the Institute. In an attempt to reassure him, Karplus writes in May 1939:

> Don't worry unnecessarily about your future, as Max says, *on ne mourra pas de faim* [you won't die of hunger]. Teddie and I will do all that we can for you (it weighs on us heavily that our own finances are unfortunately no longer such that we can take care of things ourselves) and Max knows what is at stake. Your work *must* not be interrupted by this as well. (excerpted in editor's note WBGB V6 286).

Karplus was eager for Benjamin to finish the revisions of his Baudelaire essay, the developments of which she had followed very closely. Indeed, Karplus' role as financial support and, at times, mediator, in this respect, between Benjamin and Adorno and, in turn, the Institute was founded on a deeper intellectual intimacy with Benjamin's philosophical production, which she had followed since

1929 when he first read his sketches of the *Passagenarbeit* to the group in Königstein. She continued to be involved in his philosophical production at a variety of stages – from sounding board for his ideas and drafts to her efforts, in collaboration with Adorno, to place his work for publication. It is in the development and publication history of Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood around 1900* that her contribution in these respects can best be seen.

*

Benjamin took up the project of reworking his "Berlin Chronicle" into *Berlin Childhood around 1900* while staying in Poveromo with Speyer. In September of 1932 he considered the project more or less finished and hoped initially to have the work published in book form by Rowohlt press (Brodersen 198). This revised text was one of the things he shared with Karplus upon his return to Berlin in November that year, and he writes to Adorno, "I have done some serious re-working on some of the sketches. It was very gratifying to see how G K [Karplus] responded to some of the material which I read out to her" (CC 21). Benjamin was anxious to place the work for publication, but his efforts were continually frustrated by a variety of unfortunate circumstances related to the increasing Nazification of Germany's press – the same phenomenon that put an end to his contributions to radio and newspapers and eventually drove him into exile. In a case of bitter irony, however, it was sometimes the work's lack of Jewish thematic that kept it from finding a home in presses with a more Zionist lean. As

Brodersen points out, however, “The circumstances which seemed to have made it impossible to find a publisher for [the book] allowed it to ripen in a way that Benjamin found ‘not disagreeable’” (210).

In May, June and July of 1933, Benjamin composed five new pieces for his “little book”: He writes to Karplus in June:

> I have recently carved another figure out of the green wood[34]: I think you will have seen it by now. Really it is nothing new but rather the revision of a piece I certainly read out to you in Berlin. You probably will have also seen another, which is in fact entirely new, but which, in the form in which you will perhaps see it, is not new enough. (WBGB V4 248)

These new selections for the *Berlin Childhood* appeared in the entertainment section of the *Vossische Zeitung (VZ)* under the pseudonym Detlef Holz, and Karplus, who read all of them, was kept abreast of the work’s development. Benjamin writes her in August, “I hope to finish another piece for the *Berlin Childhood*, called “The Moon”. The similarities you noted between “Loggien” and “Fever” are naturally there, but the two pieces are very dear to me in different ways” (WBGB V4 275). “The Moon” was printed in the *VZ* in September, and Karplus wastes no time in writing Benjamin of her enthusiasm for the piece, which she thought was “tremendous.”

In April 1934, Karplus writes to Benjamin that a man by the name of Hans Henneke, a former reader at Reiss Publishing House and a great admirer of Benjamin’s work, had visited her and Adorno at her home. Though Henneke, a

[34] A reference to the “green wood” of contemporary pencils, i.e. he wrote a new piece.

Christian, had recently been forced to leave his position at the publishing house, which had become staunchly Zionist, Henneke felt he could interest Reiss in the *Berlin Childhood*. She writes, “I will probably be asking you for a print-ready manuscript very soon” (letter from Karplus to Benjamin, 3 April 1934; excerpted in editor’s note WBGB V4 383). By the close of May, however, these negotiations had come to a disappointing end. The publishing house rejected the manuscript for its lack of Jewish orientation. In May and June, Karplus made another attempt to publish the text at a press under the ownership of an Erich Lichtenstein. Benjamin writes in his letter of 24 May, “I am enclosing in any case a power of attorney, authorizing you to negotiate with Lichtenstein about the *Berlin Childhood.* I thank you in advance for all the effort and time you are investing” (WBGB V4 432). By June, however, Karplus reports that the Lichtenstein prospect had also fallen through.

Benjamin continued to add pieces to the book until 1935 and additional attempts to publish the text were made at various publishers by himself, Karplus and Adorno. As a result, the manuscript existed in several forms and sometimes laid about at publishing houses longer than was comfortable for its author. Benjamin writes to Karplus in September 1935 asking if she could retrieve the copy of the manuscript he had sent to Max Tau, a reader at Bruno Cassirer’s publishing house in Germany, as he himself was no longer in possession of a copy. She was apparently successful, as in his next letter Benjamin writes, “It’s a relief to know that the *Berlin Childhood* is once again [in our hands]” (WBGB V5 161). At the end of April 1940, after years of effort to find a home for the

manuscript, Benjamin sent his copy to Karplus for “safekeeping” (WBGB V6 437). The manuscript did not ultimately appear in book form in print until 1950, when, as we will see in Chapter 4, the Adornos compiled their edition for Suhrkamp. In the end, Karplus’ intimate knowledge of the work and her commitment to seeing it published elevated her role in its production from “literary agent” to “posthumous editor.”

*

As committed as she had been to the *Berlin Childhood*, Karplus’ passion for Benjamin’s *Passagenarbeit* and her desire to see the work finished was even stronger, and her interest in the work lead her into the roles of advisor, dialogue partner, and mediator. In his capacity as free-lance associate to the Institute, Benjamin agreed to write a series of articles for the *Journal of Social Research*, including an essay on Eduard Fuchs, an essay on social-democratic cultural politics in the pre-war period, and, later, on Baudelaire. He continued to seek out other sources of income, however, trying to place his work in journals which one after another seemed to shut down before his work could appear. Such was the fate of a planned article on Baron von Hausmann, the architect responsible for the massive redesign (some might say destruction) of Paris between 1860 and 1880. Benjamin’s work on the essay in January 1934, however, led him back to the “arcades.” He writes to Karplus, “You’ll be glad to hear as well that through [my work on the Hausmann article] I have once again come into the immediate

proximity of my *Passagenarbeit*" (WBGB V4 330). Benjamin worked through his notes on the *Passagenarbeit* during his stay in San Remo from November 1934 until his return to Paris in April 1935, when he began expanding his thoughts on the project while sitting in the great reading halls of the *Bibliothèque Nationale*. Ever the meticulous, particular writer, he asked Karplus on several occasions to send him a specific grade and blend of paper so that he could maintain the harmony of the extensive manuscript's external form.

But Karplus did more than merely supply paper for the project. She had been following its development since the late 20's when Benjamin first shared his ideas for the *Passagenarbeit* to the group in Königstein, and she remained intimately involved with its progress throughout Benjamin's exile. She dialogued with him about it again in Denmark in the fall of 1934 and followed its development from the exposé to the various drafts of the Baudelaire essay, which Benjamin composed for the *Journal of Social Research*. Though her specific feedback to Benjamin did not become a part of the historical record, Karplus' involvement with the project is clear from the exchanges between them and between Benjamin and Adorno. There is no question that Karplus read, discussed and responded to Benjamin's texts. Her roles as a driving force for Benjamin, encouraging him to "get it done," and as mediator, keeping the lines of communication open between Adorno and Benjamin, however, constitute another vital contribution to the Benjamin's productivity.

Shortly after his return to Paris, Benjamin met with Pollock, who had expressed interest in the *Passagenarbeit* on the Institute's behalf, and Benjamin

set to work writing an exposé. While Benjamin himself was quite pleased at the prospect of steady support for his project, both Adorno and Karplus expressed hesitation about the work's suitability for the forum. Karplus writes on 28 May 1935:

> And now to that which lies closest to my heart: the *Passagenarbeit*. When I think about our conversation in September in Denmark, I am quite disheartened that I don't even know which of your plans you are now following through. It amazes me that Fritz [Pollock] has expressed interest in your sketches. Are you considering writing something for the Journal? Actually, I would see this as a great danger, since the framework is relatively speaking quite narrow and you could never write that for which your true friends have been waiting for years – the major philosophical work which exists only for its own sake, which has made no concessions and which through its significance is to repay you for so much that has happened in the last years. Detlef, it is not enough to save you alone, this work must be saved as well. Everything that could endanger it should be kept anxiously far from you; everything conducive to it done with the greatest commitment. You will have seldom seen me so enthusiastic about anything, which should indicate to you, above all, my expectations of the *Passagen*. – I hope you don't take my ecstasy the wrong way. I wait with longing and anxiety for news from you. Please write me about the exposé.

> – I have so much time, if only I could give you some company in your lonely hours and hear something out of your sketches. (WBGS V2 1115)

Though Karplus complains here about wanting more details from Benjamin regarding the developments in his work, of not having seen anything since their meeting in Denmark in September 1934, her intimate knowledge of the project as a whole leads her to caution Benjamin about writing it within the frameworks of the Institute's research program, especially for its Journal, which would limit both the scope and thematic of the project as well as its audience. At the same time, she underscores her commitment to the work and its author and urges him toward the project's final completion.

Benjamin sent the exposé, entitled "Paris, the Capital of the 19th Century" (a titled suggested, in fact, by Pollock) to Adorno at the end of May 1935. It wasn't until early July, however, when Karplus met Adorno in Frankfurt that she was finally able to read it. She writes to Benjamin on 3 July:

> Since my last letter I was in Frankfurt for two days, where I found Teddie deeply depressed by Agathe's death[35], but where I also had the opportunity to read your letter and the exposé. From your letter, which is actually addressed to both me and Teddie, it seems to me as if you don't appreciate it when your friends talk about your work in your absence and then what's more talk to you about it under the influence of their conversation. For this reason, in order to avoid with certainty any discrepancy between us, I don't want to

[35] Adorno's Aunt Agathe, who was like a second mother to him, died in May 1935.

> anticipate Teddie's reaction, this all the more, since I know that I can only create a proper picture for myself from the finished work and often stand somewhat helpless before a sketch. I find particular elements marvelous, right now section V interests me most, but this with the proviso of a first impression. I am dying to be able to read the completed book as soon as possible. (WBGS V2 1124)

Though Karplus explains her reasons for not writing in greater detail at this time, this very provisional response to the exposé was all that Benjamin received until early August. Though Adorno had written an enthusiastic letter about the exposé to Horkheimer in June, after only a preliminary glance at the text, he had not yet written to the author himself. By the end of July Benjamin was growing anxious to hear Adorno's response and expressed this explicitly in a letter to Karplus. It wasn't until the first week of August that Adorno finally composed a response to Benjamin's text in the form of a joint letter from himself and Karplus, which he begins by stating, "At long last I would like to say something to you today about your exposé, which I have now studied very carefully and discussed with Felizitas again; she is in full agreement with the views expressed here" (CC 104). Adorno's emphasis on Karplus' agreement with the critiques formulated in the letter acknowledge Benjamin's respect for her opinion, adding weight to the significance of the critiques expressed therein. What followed was a rather forceful and detailed critique of the plan, centered on Benjamin's "undialectical" formulation of the dialectical image, its use of the concept of the collective

unconscious, and their fear that this draft had abandoned certain aspects of the first sketches for the project he had shared with them in Königstein, namely in its over-emphasis on dream language and neglect of the concept of "hell" which offered the dialectical corrective to such utopian categories as the "dream."

Though some have called this critique nothing short of "devastating," Benjamin seems to have taken it well and even have seen it as a sign of the depth of their friendship. He replied in a letter to Karplus and Adorno on 16 August 1935, where he writes, "Dear Felizitas":

> I think I am doing right if I consign these few lines into your hands.
>
> If, contrary to expectation, you should no longer both be there together when they arrive, you will surely pass them on directly to Wiesengrund yourself.
>
> They contain no detailed response to the substantial and marvelous letter which I received from both of you on the 4th. . . .
>
> No, not a detailed response then, but simply, if you wish, an acknowledgement of its arrival. . . .
>
> The most remarkable aspect of your letter, and something which is extremely significant and fruitful for me given your precisely formulated and penetrating objections, is the way in which it constantly brings the central issue into the closest possible connection with the previous history of our thoughts on this matter; that all of your reflections, or almost all of them, go precisely to the

productive heart of the issue, and hardly a single one fails to do so. In whatever form your reflections will also continue to affect my thinking, . . . at least two things seem quite certain to me: firstly, that your response can only serve to benefit the work, and secondly, that it can only confirm and strengthen the friendship between us. . . .

One thing I would like to say immediately: if your letter makes such emphatic reference to the ‘first’ sketch of the Arcades, I can confirm that absolutely nothing has been abandoned, and not a single word relinquished, from the ‘first’ version. And the piece you had in front of you is not, if I could put it this way, the ‘second’ sketch but rather a *different* one. The two sketches have a polar relationship to one another. They represent the thesis and the antithesis of the work. . . .

Now I have the two ends of the bow in hand – but still lack the strength to bend and string it properly. Only a long period of ‘training’ can prepare me for this, and directly working in the material itself is one element, amongst others, of the process. . . .

These quite preliminary remarks are confined to certain very general questions. Without exploring the latter to their full extent, my remarks must leave all the detailed points unaddressed. I shall come back to many of them on a later occasion. . . . (CC 116 – 119)

Benjamin explicitly states here on three occasions that his letter does not constitute a response to their critique, but is merely a letter of acknowledgement, yet he goes on to defend the exposé and his use of the concept of dream figures nonetheless. Twice he asks Karplus to excuse the "confessional" tone of his letter, in which he emphasizes the outline as representing only one element of his plan for the whole work. He "confesses" that he still has a lot of work to do, "a bow needs to be stretched, and a dialectic forged" between the two poles of his thought represented by the two sketches under discussion. He is in "training," he promises, to meet the demands of this task.

Karplus replied to Benjamin on 28 August:

> It gave me great pleasure to discuss your reply [to our letter] regarding the exposé with Teddie, and your answer is exactly as I had hoped; no, in the nuance of its address to me, it even went beyond my wildest expectations, and I thank you most dearly. It is a great relief to me, that you yourself speak of a first and different sketch and reject the idea that the first one has been abandoned. You share our opinion in this that the second alone is not adequate by any means; one would never suspect the hand of WB in it. I am already quite anxious for your second letter to Teddie. (WBGS V2 1140)

Despite his claims that he would provide a more detailed response "on a later occasion" – and Karplus here even refers to this "second letter" – Benjamin never does write another letter regarding the exposé to either Adorno or Karplus. His

"confessional" letter to "Felizitas" is ultimately the only place where he expresses his view of their critique. In fact, Benjamin and Adorno did not correspond with one another directly between his receipt of their critique and December 1935. Benjamin expresses his concern about this silence to Karplus on several occasions, while at the same time providing her with continuous "progress reports" on his work on the *Passagenarbeit* and his latest bibliographic discoveries. He writes on 10 September, "Why haven't I heard anything from TW?" and on 9 October, "I am impatiently waiting to hear from Teddie soon", and finally on 3 December, "[Teddie's] silence continues to puzzle me." It was not until the close of December that Benjamin first wrote to Adorno at Horkheimer's request regarding official Institute business, breaking the silence between them.

Karplus came to serve in this period of silence as a mediator between the two men as well as a participant in their dialogue. As her remarks in her letter of 28 August suggest, however, the role of mediator seems to have made her a bit uneasy at times – her solidarity with Adorno's intellectual position had already cost her her friendship with Ernst Bloch in January of this same year, and was likely still fresh in her mind. Karplus seems almost relieved, here, about the outcome of their exchange – Benjamin's answer was "exactly as she had hoped," that is, received in a tone of solidarity and friendship, and "even went beyond her wildest expectations" in its address to her, directly acknowledging his respect for her as a participant in their continuing dialogue. Still, Karplus' role as mediator sometimes put her in the awkward position of representing Benjamin to Adorno, in the same way she had put Adorno's mind at ease about Brecht's influence on

Benjamin after her visit to Denmark in September 1934. Benjamin's response to Karplus' letter of 28 August is another case in point. He writes:

> When you write of my "second sketch" that "one would never suspect the hand of WB in it," I think you are being a bit too direct and you surely cross the boundary of my accord – though certainly not of my friendship. And I don't want to be presumptuous, but I don't think you can speak here for TW. WB – and this does not go without saying for every author – has two hands, and it is something he sees as his responsibility and his every right. One day, fourteen years ago, I got it into my head that I had to learn to write with my left hand. I can still see myself sitting and practicing hour after hour at my school desk in Haubinda. Today my desk is in the *Bibliothèque Nationale* – I have resumed my writing lessons at a higher level – of time! Will you not see it *this way*, *with* me, dear Felizitas? I don't want to be more specific here at the moment. (WBGB V5 151)

What at first may seem like a reprimand to Karplus, "I don't think you can speak here for TW," is perhaps rather a plea for understanding and mediation. Benjamin believes that Adorno would not agree with Karplus' argument that "one would never suspect the hand of WB" in the second draft of the *Passagenarbeit,* yet he cannot be certain. After all, Karplus writes her letter after discussing Benjamin's response in person with Adorno. Benjamin's somewhat cryptic references to his "two hands" is an allusion to his methodology for the

Passagenarbeit and the two poles of his thought, which he has yet to bring into dialectical relation. His plea to Karplus to see things "*with*" him "*this way*," may in fact be an effort to communicate this to Adorno as well, who had certainly felt that the second draft was a dangerously "undialectical" departure from Benjamin's early sketches of the project, and he may have expressed such a sentiment in this moment of hesitation regarding the project while discussing the exposé with Karplus. After all, he had put himself on the line for Benjamin's exposé with Horkheimer and was also concerned with how Benjamin's text would reflect on him.[36]

It was not only that Adorno had been promoting Benjamin and his work to the Institute, but that one of his duties as an associate of the Institute was the editorial supervision of the *Journal*, a responsibility he shared with Leo Löwenthal. Adorno was deeply devoted to the Journal's success and placed the highest demands on the quality of its content (Müller-Doohm 393). Benjamin published a number of essays in the journal during his exile, but not one of them was accepted for publication without revision, often substantial, and the job of relating the Institute's "suggestions for improvement" fell almost without exception to Adorno. Despite a series of harsh critiques of Benjamin's work by Adorno, however, the friendship was never jeopardized. Karplus, Adorno and Benjamin met for what would be the last time in December 1937 in San Remo,

[36] Rolf Wiggershaus writes, "Adorno was . . . hoping to bring his own position and that of his theological-materialist friends to the forefront in the journal. But he clearly doubted whether the decisive presentation of this position would be possible within the framework of the Institute's work, and, on the other hand, he did not want to take responsibility for anything which might stir up doubts about his loyalty to Horkheimer and the Institute" (193).

just before the newly-wed Adornos were to make their way to the United States.[37] There, in the hotel owned by Benjamin's ex wife, Dora Sophie, they had the opportunity to discuss the *Passagenarbeit* at length. In the end, Benjamin agreed to write a miniature version of the project first in the form of an essay on Charles Baudelaire, which was to serve as a model for the arcades project. As we follow the development of Benjamin's Baudelaire essays, Karplus' role as mediator comes again to fore. As with the period following the critique of Benjamin's exposé, the period between the submission and rejection of Benjamin's first Baudelaire manuscript and the submission of his second version was characterized by silence between himself and Adorno, while he remained in constant contact with Karplus, providing her with detailed reports on his progress.

Benjamin wrote the first essay in 1938 under tremendous stress as the situation in Europe was growing critical. As Benjamin put it, he felt as if her were "racing against the war" (CC 278). Benjamin speaks of the suffocating anxiety he experienced during the essay's composition, and twice he writes to Karplus about his worries of not meeting his September deadline. In July he writes from Skovsbostrand, Denmark, where he was staying with Brecht, that he has for months devoted 8-9 hours a day to the project and hopes to have completed a rough draft before returning to Paris. He adds, however:

> . . . I am reluctant to confide this to you [. . .] I won't be able to meet the 15 September deadline by all exertions.

[37] Though Karplus went by the name Gretel Adorno after her marriage, I will continue to refer to her as Karplus for the remainder of this discussion to avoid confusion.

> . . . [A] work like the Baudelaire depends decisively on its conception; it is that in which nothing can be forced and in which compromise can be admitted nowhere. In addition, several of the fundamental categories of the *Passagen* are being developed here for the first time. Principal among these are, as I already explained in San Remo, those of the new and ever-same. Further – and this will perhaps give you the best conception of the work – motifs are put in relation to one another for the first time, which until now had appeared to me in conceptual domains more or less isolated from one another: the allegory, *Jugendstil* and the aura. – The denser the conceptual context becomes, the more elegance is, naturally, required in the expression.
>
> And then there are the difficulties which lie not in the matter but in the [epoch]. What I wouldn't give to see you – if only for a week! Because you so often understand me with only half a word, how much, for that very reason, you would enable me to seize its other half. There is nothing comparable to speak of here. . . . (WBGB V6 137)

Though Benjamin's letter also expresses his gratitude to Brecht for providing him with quarters that offered him splendid isolation and an impressively-sized desk at which to work, he also yearns for dialogue about his work which would have quickened his pace of production. Yet, Benjamin was not likely to turn to Brecht, whose alleged influence on Benjamin had been the source of much of his

difficulty with Adorno and the Institute to date.[38] Too, Brecht had not followed the project's developments as closely as Karplus, whose presence Benjamin longs for especially now because of her intimate knowledge of not just the *Passagenarbeit* but of his intellect in general. Through her ability to comprehend him with merely half a word, he feels empowered to grasp and express his own thought. Benjamin goes on to confess that he is writing to her because he needs her help and understanding in this "editorial difficulty," as well as that of Adorno, and all but directly asks her to inform Horkheimer of the situation on his behalf. Again, she is put in the position of relating Benjamin, his state of mind and his circumstances to those making the decisions affecting his life.

Unfortunately for Benjamin, Karplus' answer was not quite as favorable as he had hoped – this time his mediator was helpless to change the circumstances in New York. She writes on 3 August:

> Fortuitously, your letter arrived just as Leo Löwenthal was visiting us here for a few days. We thought it best to let him read your letter himself. (I'm sure you won't see this as a breach of trust.) Leo was beside himself and explained that he absolutely had to have the essay for the next issue, that he didn't have a substitute and couldn't commission one either, since there isn't enough time anymore. This year there is only going to be the double issue and the one at the end of the year, which must be first-rate with the three essays from you, Grossman and Teddie. The only solution

[38] This is especially true for his essays, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," and "The Storyteller".

> he could envision was for you to submit the essay exactly one month later, on 15 October, for review in New York. Dearest Detlef, I know your arguments, and we are definitely in agreement on this question, and yet, I would like you to consider the following: The Institute is relying on you at the moment for the sake of its reputation and its unique standing. You shouldn't miss this opportunity under any circumstances. You yourself write of needing an extension of about five weeks. The 15th of October would give you almost that amount of time; won't it be possible to get it done? Dearest, I hate to press you, but for your own sake make the impossible possible. Do it for me as well – as the American's say, I put my money on you. (WBGS V1-3 1087)

Karplus' mothering role comes most clearly to fore in this passage. Her direct appeals to their unique understanding for and of one another, her regrets at having to exert pressure on him, and finally her entreaty to "do it for me" add an emotional level to her well-thought-out bgistical arguments for his accepting the new deadline. The significance of this kind of emotional appeal for Benjamin is difficult to assess, yet this kind of personal attachment and understanding seem to have played a central role in his life. He has been referred to as one of the most "sensitive" authors in the Institute's inner circle (Müller-Doohm 393) and, as we saw in our discussion of his suicide letter to Egon and Gert Wissing, this kind of intense emotional attachment to "a woman" and his work is what sustained him.

Benjamin, at any rate, rose to the occasion and submitted the essay, entitled “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,” on time. Karplus congratulates him, saying “I knew from the first moment on that you would meet the deadline and couldn’t really understand the Institute’s worries about the next number of the Journal” (WBGS V1/3 1089). Benjamin himself was quite proud of his achievement given the stress he was under resulting from the “collision of historical events and editorial deadlines” (CC 277), and he was certainly anxious to hear feedback on his manuscript. He writes to Karplus on 1 November, “I expect news in the coming days about [the essay’s] reception in New York, and I certainly hope Teddie will take part” (WBGB V6 173). The next few days did, indeed, bring news from New York, more specifically, as Benjamin had wished, from Adorno, but certainly not the news Benjamin was expecting. Quite the contrary, Adorno’s letter from 10 November must have been nothing short of a shock to Benjamin. As Müller-Doohm suggests, he must have rubbed his eyes in disbelief and read the lengthy letter numerous times before being able to take in its contents (394). Though Adorno acknowledged his admiration for Benjamin’s having completed the essay on time, the letter turns immediately to the “objective reasons” that created conflict between his “passionate expectations and the text itself” (CC 280). Adorno was deeply disappointed by what he considered the lack of genuine materialist engagement with its subject. “Motifs are assembled but not elaborated,” he writes. Material is presented “without interpretation. . . . Unless I am very much mistaken, your dialectic is lacking in one thing: mediation.” He goes on to explain, “I regard it as methodologically inappropriate

to give conspicuous individual features from the realm of the superstructure a 'materialist' turn by relating them immediately, and perhaps even causally, to certain corresponding features of the substructure." In effect, he was accusing Benjamin of vulgar Marxism, "a wide-eyed presentation of mere facts," whose mediation was "obscured by materialistic-historiographical evocation" without theory. "This study," he concludes, "does not represent you as this, of all your writings, must represent you. But since I am of the firm and unshakeable conviction that it will be quite possible for you to produce a Baudelaire manuscript of undiminished impact, I would earnestly entreat you to forgo publication of the present version and to compose that other version."

It took Benjamin a good month to formulate his response to Adorno's criticisms. Writing on 9 December, Benjamin begins by admitting to Adorno that his letter had delivered "quite a blow" (CC 289), but he goes on to express his own disappointment at Adorno's misjudgments on some points and to defend his attention to details, what Adorno had referred to as "the wide-eyed presentation of mere facts," as the basis of a philological approach which informed his essay. He reminds Adorno that the essay represents only the second part of a three-part study of Baudelaire and was, moreover, the only part of the planned book that could be written independently of the others. In effect, this element of his response to Adorno's criticism echoes the concerns voiced by Karplus and Adorno in 1935 when Benjamin first considered the possibility of publishing his work on the arcades within the parameters of the Institute's research program. Adorno's expectations for the essay seemed to have been nearly equal to his

expectations of the larger project – as he wrote in his letter of 10 November, "Your idea of providing a model for the Arcades study with the Baudelaire piece was something I took extremely seriously" – hence he was bound to be disappointed. Though Benjamin continued to keep his long-term focus on his larger plan for the *Passagenarbeit,* it continued to be whittled down for publication until finally only one section of the essay submitted in October, the *Flâneur,* was developed and resubmitted to the Journal as an essay in its own right.

After reaching an agreement in February 1939 that Benjamin would reconstruct the *Flâneur* for the next issue of the *Journal*, Adorno and Benjamin did not correspond until mid-July when the essay was completed. Karplus, however, was kept abreast of his progress on the revisions. Again, these were undertaken in increasingly precarious circumstances, as Benjamin's ability to remain in Paris, in Europe at all, was put into question both financially and politically. In March he writes to Karplus about the ominous news he had received from Horkheimer that the Institute might not be able to support him in the coming months due to its own financial difficulties. Again, he was working under the pressure of not knowing when he would be forced to flee and, if so, how and to where. Still, as he had done repeatedly throughout his exile, he managed to somehow take refuge in his books from "the world outside." Benjamin's sense of intellectual and personal isolation, however, became acute in this period of uncertainty. Consequently, one of Karplus' most important

functions was to reassure him and provide constant affirmative interest in what and how he was doing.

At the beginning of April, Benjamin sends Karplus a progress report on his work:

> I now have a thoroughly new outline of the *Flâneur* chapter, which I would like to think will speak especially to Teddie. The *flâneur* now appears within the framework of an examination of the specific character of idleness in the bourgeois era in the face of its dominant work ethic. How much it would mean to me if I could talk to you, to a reasonable creature, about it. How it would expedite my work. (WBGB V6 248).

Benjamin here begins to pave the way for the new essay's reception by giving Karplus an idea of the focus of his revisions to "pass on" to Teddie, no doubt. And, again, he evokes his need for Karplus' presence and dialogue. He even begins his next letter by suggesting that they meet in their minds, as it were. He writes that, if his last letter (written in French) had awakened her desire for the language again, she should crack open a copy of *les fleurs du mal* and "explore it with [his] eyes." He continues, "Since my thoughts are now fixed on this text day and night, we would most certainly encounter one another" (WBGB V6 308). What follows is a both a progress report of sorts, but more a justification of the path he is following in his composition of the new piece:

> Concerning the expression of these thoughts [on *les fleurs du mal*], you will not readily recognize the Baudelaire from last summer in

> them. The new version of the *Flâneur*chapter – it is the development of this chapter alone which occupies me – will attempt to integrate important motifs of the reproduction essay and the storyteller, as well as similar [motifs] from the *Passagen*. With none of my earlier work have I been so certain . . . of the focal point around which all of my reflections from the most divergent origins converge. I didn't have to be told twice that you [both] are determined to try it even with the most extreme reflections from my old fund [i.e. his earliest drafts of the *Passagen*]. One qualification remains, naturally: it is only the *flâneur*, not the entire complex of the Baudelaire with which you will have to do at this point. Even without this [entire complex], the chapter will go far beyond the parameters of last year's *Flâneur*. . . . I am still quite far from writing the final copy. But, the era of laborious development is behind me and not a day goes by without writing. (WBGB V6 308)

Benjamin is here preparing his audience for what is coming and reminding them how they are to read his text. Though motifs of all of his work are flowing together for the first time in this one essay, it is still "only the *flâneur*" with which he is dealing, not, as they seem to insist "the entire complex of the Baudelaire". Too, Benjamin makes an appeal to be allowed, in effect, to grow and change as an intellectual, hoping they will be receptive to the integration of his thoughts from "the most divergent points" and not forever hold him to his initial reflections on the *Passagenarbeit*. Thus, his letters to Karplus during the period of the

essay's composition pave the way for its reception, constructing the proper context in which it is to be read.

Benjamin sent the rewritten essay, entitled "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," to Horkheimer at the end of July. Karplus writes on 1 September, "I am fully enthusiastic about the new version of your Baudelaire. I have to study it much more carefully, but already now I see the marvelous construction" (WBGS V1/3 1125). This second essay was well-received in New York, with Adorno writing on 21 November, "[M]y enthusiasm about the Baudelaire increases steadily" (CC 318). The essay appeared – without further revision – in the *Journal's* first issue of 1939 and was the last piece of Benjamin's to be published in his lifetime.

*

Benjamin's greatest bequest to the Institute and Adorno, in short, to the development of what came to be known as "critical theory," however, would be an unassuming sketch of his "theory of progress" which later became known as the "Theses on the Philosophy of History." Almost as if in passing, Karplus writes to Benjamin on 10 February 1940 recalling to Benjamin a dinner they had in Paris in May 1937 with Teddie and their mutual friend Alfred Sohn-Rethel at which Benjamin had discussed his theory of progress. She goes on to request that he send her some of his notes on the subject if he should have any. Benjamin wrote to Karplus in late April/early May with a promise to send his

sketches and a proviso that they were by no means intended for publication, especially in the form she would be receiving them. Benjamin had seen the *Theses* as a continuation of his work on Baudelaire and adds, "By the way, these reflections . . . serve not only methodologically in the extension of the 'Baudelaire.' They make me think the problem of remembering (and of forgetting), which appears here at another level, will occupy me for a long time to come" (WBGB V6 436). Perhaps Karplus' worries about "something happening" to Benjamin had led her to take these final reflections of his into safekeeping. It is thanks to her initiative, in any case, that this central text of Benjamin's legacy survived. The *Theses* were first published by the Institute as "On the Concept of History" in the posthumous, mimeographed volume *In Memory of Walter Benjamin* in 1942.

As we will see in Chapter 4, Benjamin's productivity and life came to a tragic halt in September 1940. Karplus' close monitoring of his work and his personal circumstances put her, as we have seen here, into the roles of advisor, literary agent and posthumous publisher, as well as dialogue partner and intermediary. Her intense friendship and solidarity with Benjamin also made their separation very difficult for Karplus, and she had been encouraging Benjamin to turn his eyes to America since her own arrival there at the beginning of 1938. Karplus knew, however, that Benjamin's commitment to his work on the *Passagenarbeit* would keep him from leaving Paris willingly, that he would have to be forced out, in the end. Still, she never relinquished the hope of being reunited with her dear friend and resuming their life together as it had once been

in Berlin, only this time their evening strolls would be through the streets of New York City, which she was convinced Benjamin would grow to love.

Chapter 4

Reconstructing a life, Part II

Whither thou goest, I shall go.

Book of Ruth 16-17

On February 16, 1938, Gretel and Theodor Adorno[39] boarded the *Champlain,* a ship of the French Line, to embark on their journey to America. On February 23, after a week-long voyage, the ship arrived in New York City, where the newlyweds would spend the first two years of their American exile. They wasted no time in writing to Benjamin of their safe arrival and began planting seeds to lure him away from Paris to join them in America. Teddie, who reported that the city was much more European than London, compared 7th Ave to boulevard Montparnasse and Greenwich Village (where their first provisional apartment was located on Christopher Street) to Mont St Geneviève. Gretel, who was impressed by the city's juxtaposition of the "extremely modern" and the "downright shabby," writes, "Not only do I feel much more comfortable here than I did in London, but I am quite convinced that you would too" (CC 241). She adds, "One does not have to search for surrealistic things here, for one stumbles across them all the time," in an effort to make the city more enticing for Benjamin and his work.

[39] From this point forward, I will use first names, Gretel and Theodor or Teddie, to refer to the Adornos in order to distinguish them from one another in an equitable manner.

The Adornos were anxious for Benjamin to arrive in America, for the progress of the war in Europe had made his situation in France increasingly precarious. France declared war on September 3, 1939, two days after Germany's invasion of Poland, and created camps for its many foreign exiles, chief among them the "citizens of the German Reich." It was not until after his own two-month internment in one of these work camps in Vernuche, between Paris and Lyon, from early September until the end of November 1939, that Benjamin began "warming up" to the idea of emigrating to the United States (Brodersen 247). Still he considered America a necessary evil and continued to envision his eventual stay there as a temporary one (ibid). Gretel's fears that Benjamin was "so at home amongst [his] Arcades that [he would] never want to leave the splendid structure" proved all-too real (CC 242). Benjamin's hasty departure from France took place only when Hitler was at his heels, and in Summer 1940 he fled from Paris to relative safety in the province of Lourdes.

In a letter to his parents from July 23, 1940, Teddie writes, "We are doing everything imaginable to get [Benjamin] over here and have made him a permanent member of the Institute" (BE 97). Horkheimer had managed to get Benjamin an emergency visa to enter the United States, which Benjamin obtained in August in Marseilles. From there, he planned to travel via Spain to Lisbon, Portugal, and on to New York. Unable to obtain an exit visa, however, Benjamin crossed the French border illegally on September 25, 1940, going on foot over the Pyrenees with a group of other German refugees. Though the group safely reached Port Bou, Spain, that same day, they were informed on

arrival that their transit visas for Spain had become “null and void overnight on the orders of the government, and that all refugees from France had to be sent back at once” (Brodersen 254). Faced with the prospect of being handed over to the Nazis, Benjamin chose to take his own life that night at the Spanish border with an overdose of morphine tablets.

News of Benjamin’s death reached the Adornos in the first weeks of October through Henny Gurland, one of the members of Benjamin’s group crossing the Pyrenees.[40] Benjamin had written a postcard to Gurland the night of his death, which she reconstructed from memory once in New York, having destroyed the original. It read, ”In a situation with no way out, I have no choice but to end it. My life will finish in a little village in the Pyrenees where no one knows me. Please pass on my thoughts to my friend Adorno and explain to him the situation in which I find myself. There is not enough time to write all the letters I had wanted to write” (Brodersen 257). For the Adornos, who were eagerly awaiting Benjamin’s arrival and had already begun searching for an apartment, the news was devastating. In an attempt to describe their despair to Gershom Scholem, Teddie writes, “What this means to us I cannot put into words. It has altered our spiritual and empirical existence to the very core, and Gretel and I have been seized by an apathy whose limts can probably be found

[40] After Benjamin’s death, Spanish authorities waived regulations and permitted Gurland and the rest of the group to cross the border and continue their passage to the United States. Brodersen explains, “It has sometimes been claimed that they did this out of compassion, moved by his suicide. This seems highly unlikely: customs officials in war-time are rarely given to displays of generosity, and in any case they would not have known that Benjamin had committed suicide. Perhaps their orders were unclear, or had changed. As with so many aspects of these events, muddle and human error probably played the determining role” (261).

only in our own immediate demise."[41] For Gretel, the pain of Benjamin's suicide must have been unimaginable. Though there is no record of her own reactions to his death, she was left, like the others, with many troubling questions about his fate as well as that of his work, especially the *Passagenarbeit* whose development she had so closely followed. She would doubtless have been among the recipients of one of the letters Benjamin had had no time to write, and how she must have longed to hear from him just then.

Gretel and Teddie seemed to have found their only solace in their work with Horkheimer, which represented for all of them a last vestige of hope in a world grown otherwise hopeless. Horkheimer was convinced that the kind of intellectual work of an older European humanist tradition was needed more than anything else in this historical moment, for "pragmatism and empiricism and the lack of genuine philosophy are some of the foremost reasons which are responsible for the crisis which civilization would have faced even if the war had not come."[42] They all shared a sense of urgency to make at least some of their philosophical work available to the public, so that, in Teddie's humble words, "it might prove not altogether worthless at some future point in time" (BE 85). Thus, they continued to devote their energies to the philosophical analysis of culture in the form of their mutual project on "dialectical logic," in addition to their work on the Institute's first anti-Semitism project, as well as a study on "Cultural Aspects of National Socialism." Gretel's involvement with Teddie's and Horkheimer's work represents a sort of second, if invisible, career which culminated in her

[41] Letter from Adorno to Scholem from November 19, 1940, in Frankfurter Adorno Blätter V p.151.

[42] Letter to Pollock, June 9, 1943.

active participation in the work of the Institute and its staff in the 1950s and beyond.

A Second Career: The Forties

To my wife, without whom . . .

Though Gretel's association with the Institute would not become official until after its return to Germany in 1950, she had already begun acting as an unofficial part of its support network as early as 1936, during the period she carried on in Berlin after the Nazi rise to power. At Teddie's request, she met with an historian by the name of Hans Baron, who had been a lecturer at the university in Berlin until 1933 when as a Jew he lost his teaching privileges. Baron was trying to publish his work within the framework of the Institute's publications, and the purpose of their meeting was for Gretel to make an initial assessment on the Institute's behalf. In a letter from late May 1936 Teddie reports to Horkheimer, "I asked Gretel to meet with Baron. She wrote, and asked me to forward her thoughts to you, that her impression was not positive. According to her, he is thoroughly naive, hidden behind his academic neutrality and (as far as I can judge by her letter from Germany) very distant from us politically. She counsels caution in the close of her letter. . . . Gretel's instincts are very reliable as a rule, and she would rather say something positive about someone she meets through me than anything else" (AHBW 150). Over their

years together, Teddie came to rely on Gretel's shrewd judge of character and keen awareness of the personal-political context for his writing, including his correspondence as well as his philosophical works. She was the first to read all his manuscripts and functioned as a sort of gentle censor. Aside from editorial comments regarding word choice and repetitions, the majority of her annotations, such as "Careful, TWA" or "Watch out," served to check his sometimes irreverent disposition. When Teddie became particularly polemical, she often cautioned "better leave this out" or "delete" rather than turn so-and-so into an archenemy. Later, in 1947 as the Adornos and Horkheimer were preparing the manuscript of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* for publication, Teddie writes to his parents, "Gretel is editing the proofs – politically as well" (BE 265).

After her marriage to Teddie, Gretel quickly became an integral part of her husband's productivity. In a letter to Horkheimer from October 19, 1937, Teddie writes, "This letter is an historical document in one sense anyway: I dictated it to Gretel and she typed it up on the machine" (439). Even before the wedding, she began retooling her skills for life in exile, writing to Horkheimer, "I would already like your advice on how best to prepare myself so that I can be useful to the Institute later. . . . I would be very happy if there were anything I can do here [in London] to be of assistance" (AHBW 399). Though Gretel never became an "employee" of the Institute during its American exile, her hours of input were used as grounds to justify an increase in Adorno's salary by the close of 1938, despite the Institute's financial difficulties at the time.[43] Once married, Theodor Adorno

[43] In the late 30s the Institute's capital suffered losses on the market, as well as through real estate transactions gone awry.

turned exclusively to the practice of dictation. Working from notes, sketches and key words, he would dictate a first draft to Gretel, who would then type up a manuscript which would be revised in several phases. Every sentence would be rewritten, so that no stone was left unturned.[44] It was this collaboration, as Müller-Doohm describes, that enabled Theodor Adorno to produce at an almost super-human pace and in such a wide variety of literary forms (245). The Adornos' letters to Teddie's parents, in which Gretel even speaks of "our" desk, illuminate the intensity of their collaboration. Like a "good boy," Teddie frequently reports to his parents how industrious he has been, listing on several occasions the number of projects on which he is working simultaneously with Gretel's support. She frequently turned down invitations to visit his parents on account of their work load and was determined to keep up with the pace of production, though she continued to be plagued by regular bouts of migraines. Teddie writes, "Gretel has been doing well the last few weeks, thankfully; I don't know how I could survive right now without her" (BE 81).

Theodor Adorno contemplates the benefits of dictation in aphorism 135 of *Minima Moralia*. In the English edition, the title of the aphorism is translated as *Sacrificial Lamb*, perhaps in part a reference to the etymology of the German word (and title) *Lämmergeier*, which means large, bearded vulture thought (erroneously) to feed on lambs. It is a somewhat unfortunate translation, however, in the context of defining Gretel's participation in Teddie's work process, as it emphasizes the passive element of taking dictation, namely

[44] This is the way Adorno's secretary, Elfriede Olbrich, described his work process. See also interview with Müller-Doohm "Intellektueller".

subjecting oneself to the wrath of the writer, absorbing the frustration and "bad conscience" with which the writer would otherwise approach the subject of the text. The English title's emphasis on sacrifice, however, detracts from recognizing Gretel as the crucial and active element in the dialectical process Theodor Adorno himself seeks here to acknowledge.

The German title, in fact, is a reference to Teddie's personal word for the creative process – *lämmergeiern* – a noun-turned-verb which captures the idea of dialectic as the picking apart of a problem. *Der Lämmergeier*, or bearded vulture, lives in high-mountain terrains, feeding chiefly on carcasses and sometimes small mammals and other birds. Their species is especially adept at consuming bones, carrying large bones into the air and dropping them on the rocks below, so that the birds can pick out the nutrient bone marrow within. "This method of getting to the core of something that at first appears too massive, too unapproachable, cracking it open in order to get at its essence," Müller-Doohm suggests, could be the source of Adorno's pet name for the inventive process (90).

There is a "substantive benefit" to dictation, writes Theodor Adorno, in that it eliminates the "fear of committing something inadequate to paper," makes the "risk of formulation" innocuous. It allows the writer to assume the role of critic "in the earliest phases of production," to look at the spoken text now transcribed with the benefit of estrangement and "some measure" of objectivity. Adorno characterizes dictation as a way of outwitting the writing process by not being the one who brings word to paper. But dictation changes the writer's relationship to

the text, as well, by placing the person taking dictation between the writer and the text, "purif[ying] his relation to [the] subject." Thanks are due to this person, he writes, "if at the right moment he pulls up the writer by contradiction, irony, nervosity, impatience and disrespect. He incurs wrath, so diverting it from the store of bad conscience with which otherwise the writer would mistrust his own work and therefore dig in his heels all the more defiantly over his supposedly sacred text" (212). By becoming an active part of the writing process in these various ways – contradiction, irony, nervosity, impatience and disrespect – the person taking dictation serves to remind the writer of the provisional character of the text and fosters dialogue with the subject.

Accordingly, the pet-name *Lämmergeier* , or one engaged in the dialectical process, was not a name reserved exclusively for Teddie, but used in reference to Gretel as well. In the early summer of 1941, when work on their long-discussed book on "dialectical logic" was interrupted by Horkheimer's move to Los Angeles (Teddie and Gretel did not join the Institute's director on the West coast until the end of the year), Teddie continued to put pressure on Horkheimer not to lose sight of their joint philosophical project. Gretel writes in a postscript to Teddie's letter from June 2, 1941, "I find the new project extraordinarily interesting. In our revisions we always try to imagine what your objections might be as well" (Horkheimer Archive V1 #118). Teddie and Gretel had begun working with Horkheimer on the project in New York in the spring and fall of 1939, holding discussions, which she protocoled, concerning the "critique of positivism," the "concept of the individual," the "concept of myth," and "perception

and truth" (Müller-Doohm 397). Horkheimer, who was apparently troubled by the separation from the Adornos as well and by the disruption to their work, writes in response to Teddie's letter of June 2, "To the same extent I find our separation painful and irresponsible – for it is too difficult for one alone" (HGS, V17, 58). In a postscript Horkheimer adds, "A note for the *Giraffe Moderne* [Gretel]: the last sentence originally read, 'I am too dumb to do it alone – and it doesn't work without a little *Lämmergeiern*,' but I erased it out of vanity" (ibid). Teddie writes in turn, "The *Giraffe Gazelle* [Gretel], who was particularly pleased by your note, [swears under oath] that under no circumstances will she so thoroughly oversee Mammut and Archibald [Horkheimer and Teddie] only at a distance . . . . Still there is no need to fear that the *Lämmergeier* will be replaced by swans, doves or similarly affirmative species of bird" (HGS, V17, 57). The *Lämmergeier*, not an "affirmative" bird, spurs the process of picking apart a problem. This exchange conveys a sense of the volleying that took place during their writing sessions, of the dialectical method of thinking both sides of the question, of assertion and negation, and of Gretel as a sort of involved referee. She was not, as is commonly perceived, merely a human tape recorder, passively and mindlessly writing down words, but following the arguments (enough, in fact, that she and Teddie could later imagine what Horkheimer's response would be) and even interrupting the men's exchange.

Looking at Theodor Adorno's manuscripts to find traces of Gretel's input yields little in the way of substantive commentary. As discussed earlier, one finds there chiefly editorial and censor-like marginalia that do not deal directly

with the theoretical concerns of the text. Perhaps, however, Gretel's contributions to these texts, as suggested by these exchanges, took a different form more suited to the dialogical nature of these inventive sessions. Having made an initial (verbal) contribution during the early phases of the inventive process, then, those comments appearing in the margins concern the text at another, more editorial level. Because so much took place in dialogue, however, Gretel's comments concerning matters of content would not have become part of the historical record. In their preface to *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* Horkheimer and Adorno include an acknowledgement of Gretel's contribution, recognizing as much. They write, "In the extension of our theory and the accompanying mutual experiences, Gretel Adorno has been a precious helper" (x). Though the question of the nature of her input can never be answered with certainty, it is clear that Gretel was perceived by both her husband and Horkheimer as an essential element of their writing process, as an active participant in these dialogues, which constitute a critical part of their inventive practice.

Gretel also read all of Teddie's manuscripts before they went to press. In addition to any verbal feedback she may have provided in the early phases of production, her written commentary often dealt with matters of word choice and repetition. But there may be more to this activity than meets the eye. A letter from Teddie to two of his students in which he discusses the process of textual revision offers some insight here. He writes, "Oddly enough, it seems to me as if . . . the entire, actually quite dense, text could be further condensed and the argument made, thus, even clearer. I am quite familiar with the phenomenon from my own

work; one attempts, through various conceptualizations, to adequately express an obstinate thought and can then no longer let go of the various formulations, each of which usually has something to be said for it, to let only the outcome of self-critical processes remain. Thus, the appearance is created, especially in densely written texts, that something new is being said where there is really only variation. [This] unfulfilled promise of dynamic disrupts the prose and the material" (*Bildmonographie* 241). Rather than simply referring to a literal repetition of a word or phrase, then, Gretel's marginalia may better be understood as those of a more insightful reader with an eye toward streamlining the argument of the text in the manner described above by recognizing the underlying sameness of the seemingly "new." In most cases, only the input of a careful reader with a grasp of the material can bring such issues to fore.

Gretel was an avid reader and, on occasion, also provided feedback to Horkheimer's work, in the following example, not only with regard to its "concise structure" but to matters of content as well. Teddie writes to Horkheimer on October 1, 1937, "Gretel sends her warmest regards. She read [your] latest attack on metaphysics with great enthusiasm and finds it even better than the egotism essay due to its concise structure. Incidentally, she takes as one of the fundamental mistakes of the logical positivists their application of natural scientific methods to the wrong subjects, where they only serve to make a great fuss over nothing" (AHBW 419). As this letter reveals, Gretel brought her knowledge of chemistry, physics and philosophy together to provide a unique perspective on the material she read.

That same October Teddie submitted a draft of an article on Husserl to Horkheimer for the Institute's *Journal of Social Research*. Though Horkheimer was impressed by Teddie's work and supported the critical position of the essay, which concurred with the Institute's theoretical program, he felt the text was not publishable, for it took too much for granted that the journal's readers would be as well-versed in Husserl's philosophy as the author himself. Horkheimer argued that Teddie had failed to narrow his thesis enough to be adequately fleshed out in the space of an essay-length work. As a result, many significant critiques and insights were left unclear, or worse unsubstantiated, so that even he and Marcuse had difficulty following his argument (AHBW 423-430). "We have, as yet, for example," writes Horkheimer, "for these and other reasons, been unable to determine if your critique of categorical intuition as a paradoxical unity of rationalism and empiricism really hits the mark. Yet, it appears to us to build one of the key elements of your argumentation" (AHBW 424). In his response Teddie writes, "Your critique [regarding chapter two and categorical intuition] was also raised by Benjamin and Gretel independently of one another and independently of you, and I have no doubt that you are right" (AHBW 443-444). Though the article went through several revisions, likely with Gretel's involvement, it was never published in the *Journal*.

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In mid-November 1941, the Adornos packed their bags once again, this time for a move to the West Coast to join Horkheimer, who for health reasons as

well as financial ones – the entire Institute's apparatus could be run more cheaply there than in New York – had opted to relocate to California. After a two-day train journey across America, the Adornos were met at the station by Max and Maidon Horkheimer and soon thereafter settled into a rental home in Brentwood Heights near Los Angeles. Horkheimer had even furnished them with their first car, a Plymouth, which was not only a necessity with California's distances, but quickly became one of the greatest sources of pleasure in their lives – they even christened it with the name "Baldchen" (BE 137). Gretel, who continued to manage the practical aspects of their lives, had developed "a taste for gasoline" while getting her driver's license in New York and was anxious to practice her skill, since their original plans to travel cross-country by car had fallen through (HGS, V17, 56). Shortly after their arrival in California, Teddie reported to his parents, "Max has already bought us a car, quite sensibly an older one, so that, until Gretel has become a more experienced chauffeur, we don't have to worry about every scratch" (BE 109). Gretel consoles her in-laws in a postscript, "My driving is improving every day, and I am very careful. You needn't worry" (BE 110). Evening drives along the shoreline at sundown with its "incredibly intense colors, beyond description or reproduction" (BE 108) became a regular part of their daily life in California, and counted among the deepest impressions they would take away with them.

The Adornos enjoyed the relative isolation in which they lived, at least initially, in California, because it was so conducive to work. But this soon gave way to frequent visits and invitations from many members of California's

prominent German exile community. Among those they saw most often were Bert Brecht and Helene Weigel, Hans and Lou Eisler, Fritz Lang and Lily Latté, Thomas and Katia Mann, and Salka Viertel, Greta Garbo's screenplay writer at MGM, who served as something like a salon figure for Hollywood's intellectuals (BE 118). In letters to his parents Teddie seems almost proud at their having become favored guests of Hollywood society and boasts about the success of their own soirées, planned and executed largely by Gretel.

In February 1942, life changed drastically for all of Hollywood's German exile community, who after America's entry into the war had become "alien enemies" in accordance with Executive Order 9066, along with the nation's Italian and, chiefly, Japanese populations. Curfew and travel restrictions were enforced for these groups on the country's western coast, which resulted in their virtual imprisonment at home. Teddie reports to his parents that they were not allowed to be more than five miles from their homes at any time and had to be inside by 8 pm every night. Their evening drives along the coast, their "only source of recuperation" had to be given up for the foreseeable future (BE 131). Unlike their Japanese counterparts, German and Italian aliens were spared the fate of internment, though this was not initially clear. The uncertainty of their situation in California lasted over six months. In June Teddie writes to his parents, "It is still not certain if we will be allowed to stay. The evacuation order under which we fall was not rescinded, but there have still been no measures undertaken to enforce it. Although, the evacuation of Japanese from 'Zone I,' in which we [also] fall, has already been carried out" (BE 145). The Adornos

continued to take solace in their work and in their lovely little home with its garden and blooming trees. However, Gretel's migraine attacks intensified in this period and were accompanied by fever and nausea to the point that she was sometimes incapacitated, while Adorno complains of a deep depression brought on by concerns about their future. It was not until September that they were assured they would not be evacuated, and not until December were curfew and travel restrictions lifted for all German aliens in the eight western states. Just under a year later, on November 26, 1943, the Adornos became naturalized citizens of the United States.

Despite their general happiness in California, however,Teddie had always retained the hope of returning to Germany, raising the question on numerous occasions in his letters to his parents throughout the forties. The "refusal to make himself over as an American" and his critical stance toward American culture defined his relationship to his adoptive country throughout their exile (Jay 189).[45] Even their social circle was comprised exclusively of members of the German exile community, and one imagines German continued to be the language in which they lived. In September 1949, Teddie received an invitation from the University of Frankfurt to return to the institution and resume his teaching post. He answered swiftly that he was pleased by the invitation and that he would very carefully consider their offer, as the Institute of Social Research was going to be reestablished in Frankfurt and he would soon be joining its staff there as well. Two weeks later, Gretel, accompanied by Fritz Lang and Lilly

[45] But this was not merely a matter of personal preference, insofar as Horkheimer and the Institute sought to preserve a European tradition of the humanities in exile and continued to publish in the German language until well into the forties.

Latté, drove Horkheimer and Teddie to the train station in Los Angeles; from there Teddie would travel via New York and Paris to Frankfurt am Main. (*Bildmonographie* 200). It was not, however, without some trepidation that he travelled. Gretel stayed behind in California, waiting for the matter of Teddie's post at the university and of the Institute's relocation to be settled. Teddie writes in his travel journal from October 11, 1949, the day of his departure, "I leave with sadness. Eternal bond with Gretel, unto death. I do not want to die without her by my side" (*Bildmonographie* 200).

Teddie's thoughts of death may have arisen from the long, perhaps lonely, journey before him, or possibly they reflected deeper misgivings about returning to Germany. His hesitation, however, seems to have diminished after his arrival in Europe. He writes, almost with a sense of relief, upon arriving in Paris, "The return to Europe moved me with such force, I cannot find the words to describe it. The beauty of Paris shines through the tattered rags of poverty more movingly than ever before" (HGS, V18, 67). It must have been nothing short of a shock, however, to see the devastation in Frankfurt. Teddie reports to his mother that virtually nothing remained of their former home and business at *Schöneaussicht* 7 and 9. In fact, that quarter of the city so familiar to him from childhood was "the most depressing of all – not only buildings, but entire streets were destroyed," turning it into a foreign land (BE 533). Though he was pleasantly surprised at how well he was received by the faculty and students at the university, he could not deny that it was "sometimes very disturbing to be a stranger in your own country" (ibid). Being in Germany without Gretel, who was anxiously awaiting

word that she should make the journey to join him, most certainly added to his sense of estrangement.

Though she and Teddie stayed in very close contact – indeed, so much so that Maidon Horkheimer complains in a letter to Max, "she knows everything that goes on there, down to the smallest detail"[46] – Gretel found the separation from her husband quite unbearable. Maidon reports to Max that Gretel was furious at the news that her trip may have had to be postponed by two weeks, as she did not want to be apart from Teddie any longer.[47] In the meantime, she continued to spend time with her close friend Lilly Latté, as well as accepting the occasional invitation from Thomas and Katia Mann. It was not until April 1950, over five months after Teddie's departure for Germany, that Gretel finally arrived in Frankfurt. She and Maidon made the journey together, leaving Los Angeles on March 30th, arriving in New York on April 2nd and continuing on April 5th aboard the "Mauritania" to Le Havre, France. Regrettably, there is no record of Gretel's reaction to seeing postwar-Germany. Most likely her travels took her directly to Frankfurt where she was reunited with her husband in the city of his birth. One wonders, though, when she made the trip to Berlin to see what had become of her former home and factory. Her father, as previously discussed, died of natural causes before her emigration, while her step-mother, Melly, who was not Jewish, had emigrated to Austria in 1943 to escape the war and perhaps even the numerous questionings from the Gestapo regarding her association with Theodor

[46] Letter from Maidon to Max Horkheimer, February 17, 1950. Horkheimer Archive.
[47] Letter from Maidon to Max Horkheimer, February 26, 1950. Horkheimer Archive.

Adorno (BE 346). Gretel's sister Lotte remained in Boston with her husband, which meant Gretel no longer had family ties of her own in Germany.

Though Frankfurt was still in a state of great devastation, the Adornos must, nevertheless, have been relieved to move into their new residence on Kettenhofweg in the city's west end, just around the corner from the site of the Institute and the university grounds. Unlike Horkheimer, whose commitment to return to Germany remained tenuous until the mid-50s due in large part to fears of a resurgence of Nazism, the Adornos seem to have settled into life in Frankfurt with relative ease and a sense of clarity that Germany was where they belonged, though they were deeply troubled by the contemporary political situation in Germany. As Teddie writes in a letter to Mann,

> I would love to speak with you in person about the progress of my experience here in Germany. The moment of negativity has become increasingly visible [to me] with Gretel's help. I speak here not so much of nationalism, neofascism, [and] anti-Semitism – though I am not deceived by the fact that I saw little of it into thinking that it doesn't exist – but of the more essential phenomenon of German regression. . . . I won't deny all that is germinating here, but I often doubt whether it is the proverbial new life or merely a swarm crawling out into the light after the stone has been turned. In the face of such innervations, it is sometimes hard to ward off the feeling of futility in one's intellectual undertakings. In comparison to what one sees here, California – against which I rebelled at times for its unreality – has the merit of the utterly real. In other words, one is not at home anywhere

> anymore. A circumstance, on the other hand, that one in the business of demythologizing, admittedly, shouldn't complain about too much. (AMBW 62)

Many of the aspects of "German regression" Teddie mentions in his letter would later become the focus of the Institute's first empirical studies: unarticulated political convictions, the willingness of the German people to devote themselves to any power, to adapt to every new situation. Both Gretel and Teddie would take part in these studies, whose underlying concern was with the question of the capacity of the German people to become effective members of a democratic society.

Despite their misgivings, however, the Adornos were as at home in Germany as was possible after their experience in exile. The return to Europe allowed them to enjoy an active cultural life, with frequent visits to the theater, opera house, concerts and art exhibits – a welcome change from the relative isolation of "living in the countryside" of California, over half an hour's drive from any major city. They quickly developed close ties to the poet and writer Marie Luise Kaschnitz, who reports to her husband in a letter from May 26, 1950: "I invited Adorno for coffee yesterday. He came gladly, accompanied by his wife, who is very thin, very intelligent and stimulating. Gadamer came as well, and instead of a half-hour, they stayed three solid hours. Discussions about Joyce and his successors, about religion, philosophy and fairytales,[48] very lively" (Gersdorff 181). Just as in California, they continued to have a busy social calendar, accepting invitations from publishers and radio producers and holding a

[48] Gretel, who was an avid reader, had also worked together with Luli von Bodenhausen, one of the Adornos' dearest friends in California, on a novel-length fairytale.

regular Tuesday evening soirée at their home with a small circle of guests from Frankfurt's intellectual and cultural scene (Müller-Doohm 709). It was here in Frankfurt that the Adornos would live out the final and most productive chapter of their lives.

The Institute in the 1950s-60s: The "Trachodon" and her Teddie

> *[W]omen who acquire power are more likely to be criticized for it than are the men who have always had it.*
>
> Carolyn Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life*

It was after the Institute's return to Frankfurt in the 1950s that its significance became associated primarily with Theodor Adorno and his work, his "incessant productivity," as Jürgen Habermas put it. For Gretel the return to their homeland marks a significant development in the scope and intensity of her involvement with her husband's work and that of the Institute. The Institute's return to Germany also meant a sense of permanence, returning at first to the bombed-out remains of the old building and eventually constructing a *Neubau* whose modern design soon emerged from the blackened earth of Frankfurt's ruins like a phoenix from the ash. This sense of permanence was tangible at a personal level for both Teddie and Gretel, who went from working primarily from their home to having their own offices in the new Institute headquarters. Gretel

quickly became as central a presence at the Institute as her husband. It would have been unthinkable for Teddie to come to the Institute without her each day, and she seldom missed one of his lectures. Teddie's long-time secretary, Elfriede Olbrich, described their routine: they would arrive at the Institute punctually at 9:30 am every morning, take their afternoon break precisely between 1 and 3 pm, and leave every evening at 6pm. But even before the official opening of the new building on November 14, 1951, Gretel had begun on a project dear to her heart.

In Gretel's office on the third floor hung Benjamin's *Angelus Novus* by Paul Klee, which he had purchased in Munich in 1921 for 1,000 Deutsch Marks and which had been hidden in Paris' *Bibliothèque Nationale* by his friend and then librarian George Bataille, along with Benjamin's papers (Brodersen 261). Though the painting would later be turned over to Gershom Scholem to become part of Benjamin's book collection housed at Hebrew University, it must have been a treasured and tragic reminder to Gretel of her dear friend and his work. While for the Adornos Benjamin's legacy was still very much alive, his work was virtually unknown to an entire generation of German students and, indeed, to the world. Benjamin, along with a host of others from the German-Jewish scholarly tradition who had been forced out-of-print and into exile, was now in danger of being forgotten. This temporal gap created a strange atmosphere at the Institute, which Habermas, himself a student at the time, describes as "dual-layered time":

> During the fifties there was probably no other place in the whole Federal Republic, in which the intellectual twenties were so explicitly present. . . .

> names like Benjamin and Scholem, Kracauer and Bloch, Brecht and Lukács, Alfred Sohn-Rethel and Norbert Elias, naturally, Thomas and Erika Mann, Alban Berg and Arnold Schönberg or Kurt Eisler, Lotte Lenya and Fritz Lang circulated in a completely natural fashion between Adorno, Gretel and Horkheimer. . . . "For us" the Weimar Republic was lying beyond an abyss-like caesura, whereas "for them" the continuation of the twenties had only recently ended in emigration. Three decades had hardly passed since the time Adorno used to visit his future wife in Berlin where . . . on one of these occasions he had also met Benjamin.

Though the Adornos and Horkheimer enjoyed a sense of intellectual and cultural continuity with pre-war Germany, they must have been painfully aware of the disparity between their worlds and those of their students and, perhaps, colleagues. This must have contributed greatly to the sense of urgency in getting Benjamin's work published, which both Gretel and Teddie shared. Indeed, just a few months after Gretel's return to Germany, she had already prepared a manuscript of Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood around 1900* and submitted it for publication. Though Theodor Adorno is widely acknowledged as the sole editor of this edition, he records Gretel's contribution to its compilation in a letter to Thomas Mann from August 1, 1950. He writes, "[Suhrkamp has] accepted Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood*, for the arrangement of which Gretel was responsible, for publication" (AMBW 81). The book, published that same year in Frankfurt am Main, was only their first contribution to a Benjamin revival. In 1955 Suhrkamp published a two-volume edition of Benjamin's writings, edited by

Theodor and Gretel Adorno together with Friedrich Podszus from the publishing house. Recognizing that availability was not the only factor in resuscitating Benjamin's work, however, Gretel took additional measures to stimulate public interest, asking Habermas to review their new edition.

Officially, Gretel headed the Institute's publications department, though she took an active role in its various projects and with its students as well. Shortly after the Institute's return to Germany, Gretel became involved in Horkheimer's "pet-project," the group experiment, working with the student-staff and drawing up questionnaires. The Institute's research assistants were to employ the freshly imported empirical methods of American sociological research "to investigate the attitudes of the German population towards foreign countries, the occupying powers, the Third Reich and the question of joint responsibility for its crimes, democracy and Germany's place in the world" (Wiggershaus 435). According to Monika Plessner's portrayal of her duties, Gretel worked closely with the students on their write-ups for the group study. In fact, despite their absence from the Institute in 1952-53, when the Adornos returned to the United States in order to maintain their legal citizenship, they were kept abreast of the project's progress. Teddie exchanged letters with two of his students, Rainer Koehne and Herman Schweppenhäuser, regarding their contribution to the study, which clearly indicate that Gretel also read and discussed the manuscript with her husband. In his letter from June 7, 1953, Teddie offers a gentle critique of their work and advises them on how best to refine their presentation. He writes, "In general . . . the entire text has something oddly static about it. It is as if

Denkbilder [thought images] – Gretel spoke of *Abziehbilder*[49] – were lined up next to one another without the thought for the most part really being developed. This presentation leads, in the midst of all the vibrance, to a certain monotony – as if you were always saying the same thing, though each is really something different (*Bildmonographie* 241). This kind of fine-tuning of an argument is something with which both Gretel and Teddie were well versed, and she clearly brought her experience working on her husband's texts to bear on their discussions of his students' work as well. Gretel continued to take a great deal of responsibility for Teddie's students throughout their years at the Institute, reading and commenting on every student text at least once before it was submitted to her husband (Interview Becker-Schmidt).

Plessner reports that the students spoke of Gretel with great reverence. She seems to have served as a kind of "mother confessor" for them, Plessner writes, "It was she, not Horkheimer or Adorno, who granted them absolution from their venial, political sins" (63). According to Plessner, Horkheimer even referred to Gretel as the "heart and soul of the Institute," who inspired greater trust in the students than did he or Teddie (60). Manfred Teschner, one of Teddie's former students, described Gretel as a bridge between Teddie and the students, the majority of whom had little contact with him. Teschner recalled her generosity and friendliness and emphasized the importance of her contribution to a positive work environment. Student-staff often struggled to come to terms with their roles as researchers at the Institute and as people in post-war Germany with families

[49] Pictures on foil removed by rubbing the reverse side and removing the foil; something like children's temporary tattoos.

and, in some cases, children. Gretel was someone students could talk to about the contradictions they experienced in these roles, as well as about the contemporary political situation. Teschner described her as a politically aware and critical person with an eye for the specific role of women in post-war Germany and keen powers of discernment. Teschner suggested she served as supervisor of sorts, frequently visiting the students in their offices to see how things were going. Her characteristic "What's new?" applied to both personal and official business. "She loved to talk to us," recalls Becker-Schmidt, "sometimes for hours, about everything. She had a tremendous desire to learn about others" (Interview). While Gretel's "curiosity" was endearing to some, it was resented by others as interfering. To be sure, her personality was very strong and evoked a correspondingly strong response of either like or dislike, there seems to have been little in between.

Perhaps for this reason, what began as an affectionate pet-name between Gretel and Teddie, "Trachodon," has been handed down to successive generations as the more derogatory "Drachodont".[50] As Reinhard Pabst explains, Gretel and Theodor Adorno referred to each other as "Trachodon" and "Mastodon" respectively. The names likely derive from Teddie's fascination with dinosaurs developed as a young boy on one of his school visits to Frankfurt's Senckenberg Museum, which since 1907 featured the skeletons of several of these prehistoric animals, including Mastodon, Triceratops, Trachodon and

[50] She is referred to a "Drachodont" in two publications: In the essay "Teddy und sein Drachodont" in Hessen: Wo die Liebe Hinfällt and in a short story by Otto A. Böhmer "Die Stille Wut der Gretel A." published in the Viennese newspaper Extra 23/24 November 2001. Because literature regarding Gretel Adorno is so scarce, these seemingly benign references take on a disproportionate significance in conveying her character to subsequent generations.

Diplodocus longus, among its collection (Pabst 94). Trachodon, one of several animal names exchanged between the couple, loses its affectionate connotation with the transmogrification to "Drachodont." The former is a bona fide name applied to one of the duckbilled dinosaurs living in the late Cretaceous period, some 75 million years ago. The duckbills, or hadrosaurs, were herbivores with broad, flat, toothless beaks, behind which was a bank, or battery, of hundreds of teeth used for crushing and grinding plant material. The name Trachodon, or "Rough Tooth," derives from the Greek *trachys* = rough + *odon* = tooth, referring to the rough surface formed by dozens of tiny denticles on the tooth crown.[51] By contrast, "Drachodont" has no real-world equivalent. Constructing a meaning from root words, then, the name comes to stand for something like "dragon tooth," or, in reference to a woman (and wife), perhaps even "dragon lady." The ramifications of this misunderstanding for Gretel Adorno's legacy are fairly obvious. At once, she falls into the trap of the stereotype, written off as the "nagging wife" of a fairly lethal variety.

Indeed, her involvement with Teddie and his work was quite extensive and she was seen, for better or for worse, as a driving force for his production. Though her position as head of the publications department involved her with the Institute's broader project spectrum, Gretel's chief responsibility remained as Teddie's sounding board, reading and responding to every text he wrote, and as his forward guard and "manager," controlling the outside world so that he could pursue his philosophical work largely undisturbed. The two decades after their

[51] See the following websites: www.4to40.com (Earth/Geography/Prehistoric animals) and www.members.tripod.com (Dinosauria/Trachodon). Visited April 2004.

return to Germany represent those of Theodor Adorno's greatest productivity, not merely in regard to the publication of books, but to other media such as radio programs, essays, reviews, newspaper contributions, not to mention his lectures and his administrative duties at the Institute. As Müller-Doohm suggests, Teddie could never have managed all of these activities without the unfailing support of his wife (680).

By 1956, Theodor Adorno had become the "nerve center" of the Institute. Yet, as Habermas recalls, he "could not handle administrative power" ("Dual"). Instead, he constituted "the passive center of a complex field of tension" between Max Horkheimer, Gretel Adorno and Ludwig von Friedeburg, defined by symmetrical differences in their respective expectations of him (ibid). While Friedeburg was interested in working with Theodor Adorno to enhance the theoretical aspects of the Institute's empirical work, Horkheimer sought to promote the Institute's reputation through its impressive, politically relevant studies without compromising his and Adorno's mutual philosphical goals or the non-conformist stance for which the Institute was known and which attracted students. "Gretel wanted the personal success of the philosopher both as a scientist and writer, which Adorno actually gained only posthumously" (ibid).

To be sure, Gretel's role as Teddie's manager, confidant and assistant made her unpopular among some of the Institute's staff and even some members of its inner circle. In 1954, Maidon Horkheimer writes to her husband, who was at the time in New York, attempting to give him as clear a picture as possible of the situation at the Institute so that he could reach a decision about

whether to return to Frankfurt or remain in the United States.[52] In addition to voicing her concerns about the amount of time Teddie was spending on his own work rather than on Institute business, she writes, "[Teddie] is making himself terribly important and does everything possible to put himself in the limelight in articles, radio and newspapers having to do with sociology, the university and music. I think the driving force behind it all, which nevertheless fulfills his own secret desires, is Gret[e]l" (unpublished letter, Maidon to Max Horkheimer, Sept. 2, 1954, Horkheimer Archive). Maidon Horkheimer frequently refers to Gretel and Theodor Adorno in her correspondence with her husband as "the Teddies", reflecting her animosity, perhaps even jealousy, regarding Gretel's involvement at the Institute. She reports that the Adornos are not well-liked: "Once [Teddie] has given instructions in his narcissistic manner, Gret[e]l comes in 5 minutes later and turns everything on its head" (unpublished letter, Maidon to Max Horkheimer, August 26, 1954, Horkheimer Archive), and later, "Gretel is a very stern dictator not only of the Institute, but of Teddie himself" (unpublished letter, Maidon to Max Horkheimer, Sept. 11, 1954, Horkheimer Archive). Maidon Horkheimer's account of the early days at the Institute in the 1950s offers a unique perspective on the Adornos' relationship. Her depiction makes clear that Gretel and Teddie operated as a unit. As Habermas implies, however, Gretel's administrative skills, developed during her career as factory owner and manager, came to play an important role in directing Teddie's own career as an administrator and philosopher, putting into action his own "secret desires."

[52] Horkheimer had been offered a position at the University of Chicago.

Some of Teddie's former students have proposed that "Philemon and Baucis", aphorism 111 from Minima Moralia, in which Hegel's dialectic of master and servant is examined within "the archaic order of the household," offers insight into Gretel's role in the Adornos' relationship. They describe how this "determined" woman often led Teddie around by the hand, like a couple in the funny pages, and how she tyrannized him through her selflessness.[53] Yet, there is something unsettling about this image. To suggest that Gretel Adorno came into her own by inverting the patriarchal binary and playing the master within the domestic sphere (acquiring female power through weakness) somehow misses the mark, reducing her contribution to her husband's life and work to little more than manipulation. Perhaps, instead, the truth of their relationship best expressed in aphorism 111 is the awareness of marriage as a political institution, a microcosm of social relations itself pervaded by power. "Every marriage," writes Phyllis Rose, "is based upon some understanding, articulated or not, about the relative importance, the priority of desires, between its two partners" (15). What ultimately holds a couple together, Rose maintains, is not love – that most ideologically loaded of all concepts – but their ability to sustain this understanding about the balance of power between them, about the nature of equality within the relationship. Gretel and Theodor Adorno defined their marital relationship at a moment of unprecedented personal and political upheaval. While it is impossible to say how their relationship might have been different had they not been forced into exile, it is clear that once in exile Gretel and Teddie both shared the

[53] See radio program "Geliebter Teddie: Hommage an Theodor W. Adorno" von Rosvita Krausz, eine Sendung des Deutschlandfunks, Köln, Freitag den 5. September 2003.

understanding that his work would be the force defining their life together. Her willingness to take on responsibility for and identify herself with the life and work of Theodor Adorno after their marriage reflects not merely a personal commitment, but, I would like to suggest, a commitment to a philosophical project which represented for her, as it did for her husband and Horkheimer, active opposition to contemporary political circumstances.

Until death do us part . . .

> *And since we have ever lived in harmony*
> *Grant at one hour that death to both may come*
> *And that I never see my dear wife's tomb,*
> *Nor that it be her lot to build me mine.*
>
> Ovid, *Metamorphoses,* "Philemon and Baucis"

On his birthday in 1968, Teddie received a congratulatory letter from Horkheimer, who wrote, "I cannot speak of intelligence and devotion without thinking about Gretel, your wife. Without her everything would have very likely been quite different. That you, with her help, may long continue to offer earnest people what no one else can is my wish for your 65th birthday." But Horkheimer's wish for Teddie's long life and continued productivity with Gretel would remain

unfulfilled. Theodor Adorno died less than a year later on Wednesday, August 6, 1969, in Visp, Switzerland, a month before his 66th birthday. Detlev Claussen describes the shock and sadness among the cultural public following his death: "Adorno left behind an emptiness. Something had come irrevocably to an end, yet there were no words to express this feeling" (13). The following Saturday a death announcement under Gretel's name appeared in the *Frankfurter Rundschau*. It read simply, "Theodor W. Adorno, born on 11 September 1903, passed away peacefully on 6 August 1969" (reprinted in Müller-Doohm 728). Gretel, who signed "in deepest mourning," expressly requested not to have visitors.

After Teddie's death, Gretel continued to go to the Institute to take care of his papers, reading through his correspondence, filtering out and destroying those documents she felt it better not to leave to posterity and, of course, replying to condolence letters from friends and mourners. Gretel sustained her sovereign nature to the outside world, yet the bareness of her existence without her husband did not go unnoticed by those closest to her. Teddie had been the middle point of her life, her connection to the world they had built in Frankfurt. "Her status at the Institute was closely tied to the fact that she edited and corrected Adorno's work," explains Becker-Schmidt (Interview). For her to maintain that status in his absence was difficult. In addition to his papers, journals, and letters, Teddie had left behind the unfinished manuscript of *Aesthetic Theory* as well.

Gretel's final contribution to her husband's work would be to consult on the completion of this manuscript. In response to a condolence letter from one of Teddie's students, Elisabeth Lenk, she writes, "Dear Elisabeth, perhaps the time will come when I need your help on the *Aesthetic*. I will certainly turn to you then" (ALBW 166). Ultimately, it was not Lenk but another of Teddie's students, Rolf Tiedemann, who assisted Gretel in the completion of *Aesthetic Theory* and whom she would entrust with the administration of her husband's work, which now finds its home in the Theodor W. Adorno Archive she had founded. Once this difficult work was finished, however, Gretel was left to carry on alone, something perhaps even Teddie would have been unable to do. As he wrote in his travel journal from 30 October 1949, "My observation that I no longer live happily alone, without Gretel. Not a bit of pleasure from so-called freedom. Without knowing it, I have realized marriage" (*Bildmonographie* 208).

Manfred Teschner portrayed the Adornos' marriage as "a moment of dialectical transcendence," characterizing the bond between them with the word "zusammengewachsen" [grown together] (Interview). In this sense, then, the story of Philemon and Baucis from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* seems to capture the spirit of their relationship. The old couple, wishing never to be apart, are transformed at death into two trees with a single trunk. Unlike the mythical figures, however, Gretel and Teddie were not granted the wish of passing away together. After Teddie's unexpected death, Gretel was left to face the world alone. If, as Detlev Claussen describes, Theodor Adorno's death created a void for the cultural public, then Gretel's emptiness must have been devastating.

In his fictional account of her “This Gleaming Head: The Silent Rage of Gretel A.,” Otto Böhmer depicts Gretel as the exploited, neglected wife, irritated by her husband’s endless philosophizing, his “addiction to deliberation.” On the contrary, however, the two had lived in such symbiosis that it was precisely the silence following Teddie’s death that proved unbearable for her – so much so, that she would rather die than have to face it. On November 29, 1970, a little over a year after her husband’s death, Gretel Adorno tried to take her own life. Tragically, her failed attempt left her incapacitated for the remaining 23 years of her life, which she spent chiefly in the Frankfurt home she once shared with Teddie, surrounded by their possessions and walls lined with the books that represented the combined labor of their lives. She died on 16 July 1993 at the age of 91.

Conclusion

With little doubt, the circumstances in which Gretel Adorno spent the final 23 years of her life, in relative anonymity and seclusion, contributed to the image of her as “poor Gretel” which I encountered early in my research. Her inability to represent herself in these final years left a great deal of room for speculation about her life and her motives for attempting suicide: Did she fear being questioned for the rest of her life about her husband’s life and work? Did she worry that she would be expected to somehow continue his work? Had she lived in such symbiosis with her husband that she could simply no longer function as an individual? Had she lost sight of a life of “her own”? Certainly, the lack of historical record regarding her specific contributions to the life and work of her husband, have led to the common conclusion that she had been “merely Teddie’s secretary” and domestic companion, taking care of the practical concerns of everyday life and little more. It is my hope that my work here has gone some way toward supplementing the historical record by offering more specific details regarding Gretel’s contribution to the lives and work of her husband and Walter Benjamin. Moreover, I have attempted to create a fuller picture of Gretel Adorno herself and of her accomplishments and abilities, ranging from managerial to intellectual, which she brought into her relationship with Theodor Adorno and which she combined with his own to create an unstoppable intellectual force.

Cheryl Glenn once referred to the achievements of Aspasia as “rhetorical activity located along the fault line of gender” (295). This characterization can also be used to describe the productivity of Gretel Adorno after her marriage to Teddie. Once her matrix of possibilities had changed from those offered by an independent life in Berlin, as a factory owner and manager, to life as an exile in a foreign country and as the wife of a major philosophical figure, Gretel managed to carve a space for herself in this predominantly male world in which she was respected as an intellectual and collaborator in her own right. In this sense, to borrow another of Glenn’s terms, she was also a “trespasser,” a chemist amongst philosophers. Gretel’s “rhetorical activity” can only be acknowledged, however, if we move away from a product-centered view of the history of her husband’s and Benjamin’s production. Only by taking the inventive process into account in its fullest sense as a social act involving a broad spectrum of influences and agents, as Karen Burke LeFevre argues, do her roles as “collaborator,” “hidden enabler,” and “dialogue partner” come into view. Such a perspective amends our view, as well, of the writing processes of the figures T. W. Adorno, Benjamin and Horkheimer, whose own dialogues with one another constitute a central component of our understanding of Critical Theory. To broaden the view of this process in such a way as to acknowledge Gretel Adorno’s participation enhances our understanding of this collaboration and paves the way to additional work which might acknowledge the contributions of other female figures in the margins of the history of the Frankfurt School.

Linda Wagner-Martin writes that “biography all too often works to link

women with male patrons, as if responding to the unasked question, What man has been responsible for this woman's accomplishment?" (23). My dissertation, while it has clearly discussed Gretel Adorno's life as an element of the lives of Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, has nevertheless turned this question on its head to ask instead, For what man's accomplishment has this woman been responsible? The value of Gretel Adorno's achievement must not be diminished because it did not become a product in its own right. Her contribution to the life and work of these major philosophers is unquantifiable because it takes place "in the shadows" of these figures. What is clear, however, is that she managed to create a space for herself outside the domestic sphere, that her life story need not be limited to an examination of Theodor Adorno's "private life": on the contrary she was involved in every aspect of his life as a public figure. Carolyn Heilbrun's contention bears repeating: "Power is the ability to take one's place in whatever discourse is essential to action and the right to have one's part matter. This is true in the Pentagon, in marriage, in friendship, and in politics" (18). For Gretel Adorno, this discourse was philosophy, social theory, historiography, aesthetic theory – the interdisciplinary theoretical discourse of critical theory in which she became an active participant. By making her part matter in this public discourse she crossed the boundaries of the domestic sphere into which life as a philosopher's wife could have secluded her.

Feminist historiography and theory of biography have made great strides in breaking down the public/private binary in an effort to make visible the achievements of women. One of the most significant changes in biography, in

general, but especially in women's biography, has been the move away from quest and adventure plots to embrace the multiplicity that so often defines women's lives. Constructing narratives of the lives of such "protean subjects," as Mary Catherine Bateson calls them, demands a different understanding of accomplishment, which does not follow a linear path from a dream to its realization – the stuff of traditional biography. Wagner-Martin writes that "few women have had the kind of success that attracts notice" (7) because their lives are focused both inward and outward. Though perhaps less spectacular, the achievements of women like Gretel Adorno are no less historically valuable.

Biography serves as recognition that one's part mattered. As Horkheimer said of Gretel Adorno in his letter to Theodor on his 65th birthday, "Without her everything would have very likely been quite different." Benjamin's repeated declarations about how much her presence would have facilitated and enriched his work, suggest as well what an integral part of her husband's work process Gretel Adorno had been. I have attempted to dig beneath the surface of the available historical record to offer a more thorough picture of Gretel Adorno's specific productivity. To be sure, there is much that remains unsaid and unknown about this shadowy figure. It is my hope that my work is only a beginning, that myself and others will supplement and amend this narrative of her life as more information becomes available. There is more digging to be done in Berlin in regard to her early life, while archives containing materials of those in the German exile community of which she was a part in California may also offer other sources to supplement her story. Too, perhaps my work will make some of

those who knew her more willing to talk, to recognize that to speak of Gretel is not to gossip.

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