

Aporia Katze Problem

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“Existence (Das Dasein) – in an epical sense – is the sea. Nothing is more epical than the sea. Naturally one can approach the sea in many different ways. One can lie on the beach, listen to the surf and collect the shells it washes ashore. This is what the epicist does. Or one can cruise it. For many reasons, or without any. One can ship the sea and cruise out there, no swath of land, sea and sky”, Walter Benjamin writes in his essay on the crisis of the novel and continues: “The epicist is at rest, he rests within history, he dreams and collects. The basis of the novel on the other hand is the individual, alone and mute, not able anymore to speak in an exemplary way about his most urgent concerns, he is himself unadvised and not able to give advice. To write a novel means to push the incommensurable of human existence to its extremes.”¹

¹
Walter Benjamin, *Die Krise des
Romans*, in *Angelus Novus*, suhrkamp,
1988

This is a try in writing an open story. In the way Benjamin describes open stories. It is also a try in a method. Collecting and dreaming. So this a try in the epical. At its best.

Some weeks ago I met a shipping cargo dealer who had just come back from Singapore. The Singapore harbor is one of the sea’s big shipping emporiums. He told me how there are not enough anchoring places anymore for all the ships that are at the moment being pulled back inland by their companies. This was a strange image of the economic crisis. The wheelwork of ships cruising ‘round and ‘round the world, the base of global economy, had come to a halt. A halt of a movement that knew nothing but moving for-

ward, and which caused the ships, having incessantly cruised for the last decades, to have to be brought in for them to await the moment for this movement to resume.

At the same time, the movement of the sea continued, undisturbed. It was still washing ashore flotsam, illegally deposited oil residues, cargo that had been dropped in the open sea, and barrels of poisonous waste. I wanted to write messages in bottles, but they are rare, perhaps a myth. The rest is sad truth. Contemporary material for the epicist. Ha!

When Benjamin wrote the crisis of the novel, in the twenties of the last century, the epical was experiencing a renaissance (Brecht, Döblin, Dadaism – his examples). He places this new interest in the epical in a promise film has been opening up (in its best moments, he writes). Consequently (but also out of a technical misunderstanding, I was told just now) assembling, montage had become the main method of this new epical tendency in art. Voices were added. They were not unspecific material. “Assemblage is based on the document.” And, “sometimes this assemblage is so dense that the author is hardly audible.” But the titles and the chapters’ headings became important.

In a very cursory note Benjamin describes another form of epical artistic subjectivity: “There is something that Proust has in common with Kafka, and who knows whether this can be found anywhere else. It is a matter of how they use ‘I’. When Proust in his *recherche du temps perdu*, and Kafka in his diaries, use I, then for both of them it is equally transparent, glassy. Its chambers have no local coloring; every reader can dwell in them today and move out tomorrow. One can watch them and get to know them without having to be in the least attached to them. These authors let the subject take on the protective coloring of the entire planet, a coloring that will turn gray with the coming catastrophes.”²

²
Walter Benjamins Archive, Bilder,
Texte und Zeichen, suhrkamp, 2006

Perhaps the way this I is described, makes it one exemplary artistic 'I' of modernity. It is somewhere between the figure of the epic artist and the novelist. It is epic, because it doesn't call for identification, it unfolds before the eye of the betrayer, doesn't ask for his or her consent, moreover it makes itself a little obscure, hinders a quick consent. It can act in this ambivalence because it is embedded in what Benjamin calls the protective coloring of the planet, an Ipse of art, a more general story (I am literature, Kafka writes). But it is also the I of the novel, unadvised, not able to give advice.

To take on the protective coloring of the entire planet.

What a delusion, and yet not. Also a desire about an 'I', an artistic 'I', that doesn't have to position itself, but gets positioned by a protective environment, perhaps a negligent environment, but it wouldn't exist in a hostile environment. By a gray you'd better not be positioned without positioning yourself. Swallowed into a gray. But he says, this I historically ceased to exist. Then.

What else can one say about this I?

This I speaks and expresses itself without forcing an opinion, it is not distinctive, but exemplary. It is an I that is strongly connected to its sources, its society, it is not threatened by likenesses, but finds allies in them. It is an artistic subjectivity, created in an artwork, an exterritorial I, an artificial I. There must be a subject behind this I.

Maurice Blanchot describes the subjects (also pre-catastrophic selves) that form his unavowable community³ as those, whose self-consciousness emerges out of being denied or contested by others, not agreed with, and this loss of the others makes clear to them that insisting on the Ipse (as he

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Maurice Blanchot describes his concept of the unavowable community as the community of those without communities, a *communauté desoeuvré*, a workless community, which is not connected by the communal work. A community "where all thoughts that can only be thought together jostle at the threshold while their multiplicity blocks the passage".

The unavowable community, Maurice Blanchot, Station Hill Press 1988.

says, and adds, or if one prefers, on the separate individual) makes no sense, is not livable, these 'I's exist as always preceeding exteriority to themselves, as exteriorities to be dealt with.

Then – Maurice Blanchot has always been denounced a right-wing dandy. German philosophy especially has put him in the corner of neo-romantic aestheticism (says his translator Gerd Bergfleth). Which he wasn't, and – especially in his book about the community – he did not propel. But also he was – as far as the Dandy is on the right in his necessity to not take a stance and in emulating a society he is shaped by and to which he is the traitor.

Dandies.

It is a dandyish self.⁴

Then – Adorno writes about Benjamin. “Having been formed to express the general through the extremes of the specific – his very own self–, he was to such an extent suffering from this, that he was – certainly in vain – desperately looking for collectives, still in his late times.”⁵ Adorno – one can hear it in this sentence – denounces this endeavor. No big surprise here, this was written in the 60s, when Adorno was fighting for the bourgeois self, his self, a true author's self, which he felt torn into post-rupture for-against politicality. The political desire of (Benjamin's) modernity was to become epic.

But one has to add: within the bourgeois protective coloring of the planet. This doesn't mean an individual shelter, but somehow a belief in cultural techniques, writing, painting,..

They didn't know much about the planet. They were writing on typewriters with their names on. Not Chinese computers.

4

“Each of them created his existence from the non-existence of the others, wrenching out of them their consent to their own non-existence.”

This is what Oswald Wiener choses as the motto for his book *Eine Art Einzige* – a sort of singularity. It is a quote of Paul Valéry, *Monsieur Teste*. Blanchot meets Oswald Wiener's Dandy. Or more precise, Oswald Wiener says, “There is only one point that interests me about the Dandy” then the book follows, but in short, “it is his artificiality”.

Oswald Wiener, *Eine Art Einzige*, Starship, 2007

5

Theodor Adorno, *Prescript to Walter Benjamin*, *Briefe 1*, suhrkamp 1978

Cruising out there, no land, only sea and sky, has come to a halt, I was told.
Its adventurous aspects having become a routine anyway. And too well
known the routes on which the trips were taken.
Collecting what the drift washes in, rearranging, dreaming, this can be done
by hand, this does not need a ship. The epical.

But also: Was there wind, I would set a sail, had I a ship.⁶

6

Oskar Negt/Alexander Kluge; the
motto for *Geschichte und Eigensinn*
(History and Obstinacy, not translated
into English), *Zweitausendeins*, 1980