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Excerpt

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PART I

Representations of the self

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Representations of the self, singular and collective, from Kleist to Ernst Jünger

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I

David Hume's elegant refutation of the metaphysical claims on behalf of the identity of the self is well known as the fiction of the Bundleman.¹ Since 'I never can catch *myself* without a perception', and there are no perceptions of a constant and invariable nature of which the self might be a constant and stable bearer, only 'successive perceptions' can constitute the mind. And so, 'setting aside some speculative metaphysicians ... who claim existence and continuance in existence for what we call our SELF', Hume affirms 'of the rest of mankind' that we are 'nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in perpetual flux and movement'. All such arguments belong to what he calls 'the *intense* view of reason's manifold contradictions', which (thus he reassuringly concludes Book I of *A Treatise on Human Nature*, 1793), needn't worry us too much while we pursue 'the common affairs of life'.²

The argument is taken up by his admirer, Immanuel Kant, in his refutation of 'problematical idealism'. The Cartesian *cogito* (Kant argues in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, 1787, B 455–6) can never prove the existence of a thinking self independent of the actual experience of thinking about something; existence is thus merely implied as a logical premise, but can never be the object of our deductive reasoning. The Cartesian *cogito* proves, not that 'every thinking being exists', but only that 'I exist as a thinking being', and (we may add) as a being with other attributes, too. This disjunction between thought and being will, in German literature and thought, have more radical consequences than were dreamed of in Hume's or indeed Kant's philosophies.

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In his reflections on Kant's *Critique* Georg Christoph Lichtenberg too takes up the Cartesian argument, and he may well be the first writer to do this in linguistic terms. Observing that 'our entire philosophy is a correcting of language usage', Lichtenberg questions the Cartesian *cogito* by focusing on the way language obliges us to express ourselves:

We become conscious of certain ideas which are not dependent on us. Some believe *we* at least depend on ourselves. Where is the boundary? The only thing we know is the existence of our sensations, ideas, and thoughts. We should say, *it thinks*, just as we say, *it thunders*. To say *cogito* is already too much as soon as I translate it by *I think*. The assumption, the postulation of the *I*, the *Self*, is a practical need.³

My concern in this paper is with the various kinds of fragmented self which follow on Hume's reduction of the metaphysical identity of the self to 'a bundle of different perceptions', on Kant's reduction of the thinking self to a logical or formal relationship, and on Lichtenberg's undermining of the boundaries of a self by presenting it as our grammatically sanctioned way of satisfying a merely contingent 'practical need'. In saying that these fragmentations of the self follow on these philosophical remarks, I don't mean that they are anticipated in, let alone entailed by, these remarks, but that the remarks are read – their authors would undoubtedly say that they are misread – as if they entailed such fragmentation. I shall consider, first, a few literary records of the fragmented self and some of the fictional causes that bring it about, and then some literary representations of collectivity as alternatives or responses to it. I will attempt no history, but must content myself with a few portraits of the modern fragmented self from a family album.

An obvious starting-point in German literature is Heinrich von Kleist, writing in the throes of his disastrous reading (or rather misreading) of Kant's 'sad philosophy'. The doubt that overwhelms Kleist is first and foremost the epistemological doubt that imputes to the Kantian forms of perception a radical subjectivism: 'We cannot decide whether what we call truth is really truth, or whether it only seems so. If the latter, then the truth that we acquire here *is* no longer truth after we die – and all our efforts to possess ourselves of something which will follow us to the grave are in vain.' These words (from Kleist's letter to his fiancée, 22 March 1801) have often been quoted as a motto of modern German (occasionally European) existential doubt, but that last phrase, 'something that will follow us to the grave', radicalizes his uncertainty to include literary survival. In Kleist's famous essay 'On the Gradual Formation of Thoughts While Speaking' (1805), his scepticism is

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expressed in terms similar to Lichtenberg's, via a critique not of reason but of grammar: 'It is not we who know, it is first and foremost a certain condition *we are in* that knows.' In other words, however radical the epistemological question, it is inseparable from the circumstances in which it is asked. This is the insight Ludwig Wittgenstein elaborates in his last notes.⁴ The question, 'What can I know with certainty?' is an unreal, artificial question (Wittgenstein argues), since we are always constrained to ask it from our position within a given social and experiential context, a context which provides part of the answer; while asking the question from a wholly unknown context (Wittgenstein implies) is a chimera, a fiction. Well, what if the context *is* a chimera, a fiction made of the self-constituting elements of a myth? My Germanist colleagues, who may have grown impatient with my trotting out commonplaces of literary history, will know the direction in which my argument is going, to wit, to Kleist's version of *Amphitryon* (1807) – the first play in which the unity of the represented self is radically, perhaps irreparably, undermined.

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When Nietzsche characterized Kleist's art as tragic,⁵ in the sense of leading to an unredeemable, incurable conclusion, I wonder whether he had Kleist's Alkmene in mind. Seeking to resolve the dilemma between the human and the divine, between the faithful husband and the wanton god, Alkmene follows that 'practical need' Lichtenberg spoke of: 'Ich brauche Züge nun, um ihn zu denken': seeking the certainty of an embodied god, she demands 'a form and features I can see / if I'm to think him ...' (II. iv). The solution she is offered after her night with Jupiter is a self divided – a self torn between Amphitryon as the faithful husband and Jupiter as the divine lover (divine in both senses); and this solution has at least the semblance of a bearing on the everyday legal context she is familiar with. The solution is offered to her by way of a grammatical trick – the famous ethic dative, 'Wenn ich nun dieser Gott dir wär'?' (But now suppose *I* were, for you, the god?) as she is enjoined by Jupiter in the role of Amphitryon to accept Amphitryon as her god, her Jupiter. But since all this is offered by Jupiter, and therefore in the context of circumstances that are wholly alien to her, where even the time of day has been delayed so as to prolong Jupiter's night of love, and her house itself has ceased to be the familiar *oikos* whose mistress she has been, none of this provides her with the least

degree of certitude. On the contrary: everything that is happening to her clashes with the rules of the world in which she has lived so far and in which alone she *can* live, and from this conflict between the habitual known and the wholly unknown deep bewilderment ensues. And the sheer arbitrariness of all that is happening to her is not diminished but increased by Jupiter's own uncertainty where the erotic adventure is leading him, and where it will end. But this is not the bewilderment that would lead her to the total clarity we call tragedy. This bewilderment doesn't lead anywhere. Alkmene has, in the end, nothing to go by. Her imagination has deceived her when she gave herself to Jupiter in love as though he were not simply Amphitryon but a fiction or (as she says) 'a portrait of himself, a painting by a master's / hand showing him exactly as he is, and yet transfigured, like a god!' (II. iv). And even her 'unfailing feeling' fails her when, faced with having to choose between Jupiter and the real Amphitryon, she makes the wrong choice. Yet she has not lost her self-knowledge, she knows herself to be the victim of a divine game, and she will have to live with the consequence of that knowledge. Hers is a potentially tragic self, but a self nevertheless; instead of that going through with the theme all the way to the end, drawing the full consequences of her wrong choice, which is the hallmark of tragedy, her loving self survives the wrong choice, though choked by anguish and bewilderment.

Not so Amphitryon (and on a more purely comic level his servant, Sosias). He has gone through a process of existential self-doubt made more devastating when even his comrades-in-arms and the people of Thebes bear witness against him and deny his identity. Amphitryon is husband, warrior, master of his house, and nothing else. Unlike Alkmene, he has no private self to assert against public obloquy: his public self gone, he really does not know who he is. Unlike Alkmene, he never guesses the complex and ambiguous truth. Jupiter himself has to appear in his own person to tell him and to salvage his, Amphitryon's, disrupted self, not through disclosure of the truth, but through a bribe. Yet Amphitryon's self-doubt is even further removed from tragedy than Alkmene's uncertainty, his self-doubt is indeed comic because, having been brought about by divine arbitrariness, it is not resolved but merely cut short by the same arbitrary means. In the end, her recognition of him as a husband (III. xi) and Jupiter's bribe in the form of Hercules, the son that will be born to Alkmene, are enough – needing no other explanation, Amphitryon receives none. Myth, the paramythology of the old story handed down from Plautus through Molière, has two functions. It is Kleist's literary means of embodying the disembodied

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self. But myth, in Kleist's comedy, is more than that. It also provides a full and adequate motivation; given that the plot is miraculous, myth here links the events of the play with an unbroken causality.

III

The situation of the fragmented self is in many ways different in our second example, Georg Büchner's fragmentary 'Lenz' (1835). The Novelle is a medical student's montage of material from the diary notes of Pastor Oberlin recording the visit of the poet Jakob Michael Reinhold Lenz to Oberlin's vicarage in the Vosges mountains in the winter of 1777/78. Oberlin's notes trace the progress of Lenz's alienation to the point of total dissociation and collapse; Büchner has complemented and re-fashioned these notes by various narrative means, of which the most astonishing and effective are contained in the opening paragraph (which Büchner's first posthumous editor, Karl Emil Franzos, prints in an uninterrupted sequence of four and a half pages). Büchner's task is to convey a mental and spiritual state of the utmost disturbance, the inscape of clinical disjunction; and he does this without a word of clinical terminology, through an unbroken fiction. The result is a supremely clear poetic image of mental chaos. This luminous clarity is achieved by a purposeful alternation of two narrative points of view, the inner and the outer, in such a way that the inner view is conveyed by a lexis steeped in the physicality of the landscape, while the outer, the natural landscape, is steeped in the equally physical lexis of inner states. He presents a man, a mind in total solitude in a mountainous landscape – yet the landscape breaks into the insecure and insecurely bounded mind, it enters the self through the self's pathological fissures.

'On the 20th of January Lenz went across the mountains', the Novelle begins (I slightly adapt Michael Hamburger's excellent translation).⁶ The German sentence ends, memorably, in the elided 'Gebirg', signalling dramatic tension. The next sentence,

The summits and high slopes covered with snow, grey scree all the way down the valleys, green plains, rocks and pine trees

in German has no verbs, only a bare enumeration of the features of the mountainous landscape.

The opening of the next sentence gives you *the feel* of the place – 'It was damp and cold' – but then instantly returns to the outer view,

the water trickled down the rocks...and gushed [the German moves towards the anthropomorphic: *das Wasser sprang*] across the path.

And again the mixture of inner and outer –

The branches of the pine trees drooped heavily [*hingen schwer herab*] in the humid air.

Now our attention is directed upward – ‘Grey clouds travelled in the sky’ – but the gaze is instantly interrupted by a phrase – ‘aber alles so dicht’ – which again has no verb – ‘but all [was] so dense’ – and which, more directly than before, conveys, not the neutral data of the landscape, but its impression on the solitary mind. And then –

And then the mist rose like steam, slow and clammy, climbing through the bushes, so sluggish, so awkward [*so träg, so plump*]

– now at last we enter the mind directly:

indifferently he moved on, the way did not matter to him, up or down. He felt no tiredness, only [*Müdigkeit fühlte er keine, nur ...*]

and after this brief warning in the single, inconspicuous word, ‘only’, as though what is to come were the most obvious reaction in the world, we are given the first crystal-clear sign of mental disjunction,

only sometimes it struck him as unpleasant that he could not walk on his head.

Each glimpse that follows – of the stones, the forest, the mist – is introduced by a brief description of Lenz’s inner state around the verb expressing an inner urge of crowding – ‘es drängte’ – not, you notice, ‘he’ but ‘it’: ‘At first there was an urge, a movement inside him’, and again

there was an urge inside him, he looked for something, as though for lost dreams, but he found nothing ...

and these descriptions of inner states, achieved by the entirely concrete verbs of the outer life, alternate with features of the landscape, and once again this is a landscape drawn into and permeated by the sick mind, indeed usurped and ravaged by it. The stones in Lenz’s path ‘bounded away from him’, ‘the grey forest shook itself beneath him’ like a huge animal, and the mist envelops and blurs yet also discloses and unveils the outlines of gigantic limbs – ‘wenn ... der Nebel die Formen bald verschlang, bald die gewaltigen Glieder halb enthüllte’ – the image evokes the erotic impulse that briefly dominates the sick mind. And once more, now without mediation or warning, the pathology of the mind is disclosed, but empathy and narrative identification are achieved in the most sensate, the most physical way possible. What Lenz is now

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disposing of is no longer just the mountainous landscape but the whole earth itself, which the sick mind is experiencing on a solipsistic scale:

All seemed so small to him, so close, so wet; he would have liked to put the whole earth behind the stove...

and later:

He could not understand why he needed so much time to climb down the steep slope, to reach a distant point; he thought that a few steps would be enough to cover any distance...

And then, again introduced by an inconspicuous ‘Only from time to time’, comes that most astounding, syntactically fully structured, fully ordered sentence covering twenty-six lines of text, which I shall not look at more closely: a giant sentence in which poetic images – metaphors and ellipses, synaesthetic turns and mythological allusions – alternate with sensate evocations of Lenz’s inner states; a sentence which serves the purpose I have already outlined – the purpose of presenting in the most precise and the most luminous way a mental disjunction. The narrative does this by strictly alternating inner and outer points of view, both linked not by scientific abstraction but by the sensate lexis of the physical world. We are at the beginning of a story of alienation. That immense sentence, in the course of which a whole landscape comes to be usurped by a mind that in turn has no unity, can hold on to nothing – that sentence is followed by the brief recognition that still, at this stage of Lenz’s journey,

these were only moments; then, soberly, he would rise, resolute, calm, as though a play of shadows had passed before his eyes – he remembered nothing.

And Büchner’s story ends some twenty-five pages later, with a repetition of ‘the urge that was in him [*es drängte in ihm*]’ mentioned in the beginning, though now that urge which was the only impulse that grappled him to our world is spent: ‘Keine Ahnung, kein Drang’, we read on the last page of Büchner’s story,

No glimmer of an idea, no urge, only a dull fear [*eine dumpfe Angst*] grew in him as the objects [*die Gegenstände*] lost themselves from his view in darkness.

Here is that notion of *Angst*, defined by Kierkegaard and after him by Freud, Jaspers, and Heidegger, as ‘fear related to no specific object, fear of Nothing in particular’ and thus (according to Heidegger) fear of Being itself; and Büchner uses this word (*Angst*) in conjunction with the word *Gegenstand* at the very time when the modern use of *Gegenstand*,

‘object’, comes into its own. For just as, for Lenz, the things that ‘stand against’ the inner world and, as in so many German literary contexts, are invoked as the only safeguards against the lure of the usurping self – just as this outer world recedes and is lost, so the inner world recedes and is lost, too; for both inner and outer, as the poet says, ‘with the self-same ring are wed’, and one language only, the language of the outer, sensate world, provides for both, for there is, apart from the abstractions of science, no other.

In what sense is Büchner’s ‘Lenz’ a fragment? The break-up of the mind, the journey of the self towards fragmentation is complete, a coherent account of ultimate incoherence; except that (unlike what happens in Kleist’s *Amphitryon*) no causality, or at least no sufficient cause beyond half an episode from Lenz’s past, and no myth, is offered as an explanation. No wonder it took seventy years before Büchner’s *Novelle* came into its own, before its enigmatic causality was recognized as being similar to that of Kafka’s stories. Description intimates, or rather replaces, explanation.

IV

If causality is in doubt, what about evaluation? That, one would think, is self-evident? Our first two examples bore an obvious family resemblance: the course of both ran from wholeness to fragmentation, from good to bad, from value to void, from health (or, as Freud might say, from relative health) to sickness. But another course is possible.

In most of its aspects, including its autobiographically tinted self-presentation as a family chronicle, Thomas Mann’s *Buddenbrooks* is one of German literature’s finest contributions to the tradition of European realism. The furniture, china, and family silver, the love affairs and bankruptcies, illnesses and violations of the *bürgerlich* code of family and business conduct – all these are the common ground of narratives from Dickens to Stendhal, Tolstoy and Pérez Galdós, to Čapek-Chod’s *The Turbine* to Joyce’s *Dubliners* and George Moore’s *Esther Waters*. However, some of these fictions include scenarios which challenge the fully accommodated social self, the self that lives in the world of our common indication. One of these scenarios, it won’t surprise you to hear, is the dream.

The scene I have in mind⁷ portrays the hero, Senator Thomas Buddenbrook, a man of business and Ibsenite or Galsworthian respectability, as he succumbs to the enticement of the vision of a life

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wholly different from the successful *bürgerlich* life he has led, a vision that is hostile to the values he has believed in and tried his strenuous best to practise. Physically and morally, socially and financially, Thomas Buddenbrook has come to the end of his tether. In his exhausted condition (which provides no more than the suggestion of a causal nexus), guided by the sort of preordained chance used in realistic novels to enhance narrative necessity by giving significance to contingency, he stumbles upon a book, which ‘happens to be’ the second volume of Schopenhauer’s *magnum opus*, *The World as Will and Idea*. With the avidness of a pietist encountering scriptural revelation he, a man of affairs, anything but bookish, let alone philosophically minded, reads one of its chapters, ‘On Death and the Indestructibility of our Being as such’, the chapter (41 of book 4) which contains the promise of a life beyond the individual self. Thomas Buddenbrook hardly understands what he is reading, the meaning of the Schopenhauer chapter he has read doesn’t come to him until the following night:

And behold, it was as though the darkness were rent before his eyes, as if the whole wall of the night parted wide and disclosed an immeasurable, boundless prospect of light. ‘I shall live!’ said Thomas Buddenbrook, almost aloud, and felt his breast shaken with inward sobs. ‘This is the revelation: that I shall live! For *it* will live, and that this *it* is not I is only an illusion, an error which death shall make plain. This is it, this is it! Why?’ But at this question the night closed in again upon him. He saw, he knew, he understood no least particle any more; he let himself sink deep in the pillows, quite blinded and exhausted by the morsel of truth which had been vouchsafed.

And then:

What *was* death? ... Death was a joy, so great, so deep that it could be dreamed of only in moments of revelation like the present. It was the return from an unspeakably embarrassing journey of wrong turns, the correction of a grave error, a freeing from the most repugnant of bonds – it put right again a lamentable mischance.

But what of that promise of the indestructibility of our being?

Have I hoped to live on in my son? In a personality yet more feeble, flickering, and timorous than my own? What can my son do for me when I am dead? Ah, but it is so brilliantly clear, so overwhelmingly simple! I shall be in all those who have ever, do ever, or ever shall say ‘I’ – *especially, however, in all those who say it more richly, more forcefully, and gladly!*

(‘Ich war immer Ich: nämlich Alle, die jene Zeit hindurch Ich sagten, die waren eben Ich’, is Schopenhauer’s wording,⁸ while the sequence of adverbs comes from Nietzsche.)

This vision with its speculative commentary is the undoing of the empirical self, but by the same token it strains the realistic mode of the