

Fragments of Modernity

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The whole is the false.

—T. W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*

The humanist, Erwin Panofsky wrote in 1940, “is, fundamentally, an historian.” A person glancing at the centenary list of Princeton University Press publications, or rereading certain of the listed books, might be forgiven for thinking the humanist is fundamentally a German historian. Even the very Spanish Ortega y Gasset sounds German enough in *The Dehumanization of Art*, evoking a Nietzschean “high noon” of aesthetic clarity and declaring his faith in the “unity every historical epoch presents throughout its various manifestations.” But of course these remarkable historians are German only in a particular sense and represent a particular Germany, notably a Germany of exile.

The humanist is a historian for Panofsky because he or she studies “signs and structures” that “have . . . the quality of emerging from the stream of time.” The phrasing is cautious and underplays the role of the scholars who fish in that stream. Emerging or nonemerging is no doubt less a quality in itself than an intricate historical process whereby qualities (of signs and structures) meet passions and interests (of cultures and persons). But Panofsky knows about this kind of argument and does not wish to engage with it at this point. It is precisely the sense of historical process that invites the idea of Germany, and Panofsky himself, in a later essay, quotes an American colleague as saying that the “native tongue” of art history is German. He is not being parochial about the matter; he insists that the discipline has also come to speak French, Dutch, and American very well. He is less sure about the English of England and notes that he has learned in June 1955 that a chair in art history has just been established at Oxford. “Hosanna in excelsis,” Panofsky laconically writes. He identifies the “native tongue” as a tradition of inquiry stretching from Winckelmann to Burckhardt, Wölfflin, Warburg, and beyond, and it comes as no surprise to see Erich Auerbach appealing to a very similar legacy for the discipline of philology. “It is a German book,” he says of *Mimesis*, “not only on account of its language”—it was first published in Bern in 1946. And Edward Said, in an introduction to a recent new edition, spells out the lineage: “Romance philology . . .

derived its main procedural ideas from a principally German tradition of interpretation that begins with the Homeric criticism of Friedrich August Wolf, continues through Hermann Schleiermacher's biblical criticism, includes some of the most important works of Nietzsche . . . and culminates in the . . . philosophy of Wilhelm Dilthey." The names are different but the roots in romanticism are the same, and so are the implications of intense and capacious learning. And Siegfried Kracauer, to call up another name on the centenary list, explicitly connects his own practice in writing about film to the art historian's attention to the particularities of signs and structures. "The true interpretation of documents is elicited only by the analysis of its smallest details," he wrote in a letter to Panofsky. "The 'whole' is not simply established at the beginning but is revealed at the end, as an outcome."

I can't describe much of this large tradition here, and for reasons of ignorance as much as for reasons of space. But I do want to look at a specific aspect of it in the three Princeton authors I have just mentioned. It is not an accident that Panofsky, Auerbach, and Kracauer were not living in Germany when they wrote their major works, nor is it an accident that their interest in the "whole" of a period or a place or a work was tempered by a fear of the totalizing gesture. None of them, I think, quite got to the stage of Adorno's peremptory refusal, but then Adorno wouldn't have got there either if he had not felt, belatedly, how right the apparently scattered and dilatory Walter Benjamin had been about so many things. "The whole is the false" is a modernist revision of Hegel's "The true is the whole," but it is also Adorno's way of recognizing the disorder of Benjamin's method as a more than intellectual virtue.

The content of a work of art, Panofsky says, as distinct from its subject matter, "is the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion—all this unconsciously qualified by one personality, and condensed into one work." The emphasis on what Panofsky also calls "involuntary revelation" is telling. Presumably the artist has conscious intentions but is not in pursuit of "the basic attitude" of anything. Certainly the notion of a basic attitude is strongly simplifying and potentially reductive. Kracauer, for example, simplifies wildly in *From Caligari to Hitler*. Again and again he sees German films as showing a country, indeed a "German collective soul," "wavering between tyranny and chaos," "wavering between . . . anarchy and authority." I'm sure the soul was wavering, but not always between the same two abstractions, and I'm pretty sure the soul was not all there was. But

even as he is generalizing, Kracauer is also inviting us to look at something else in a film: “casual configurations of human bodies and inanimate objects, and an endless succession of unobtrusive phenomena.” “As a matter of fact,” he adds, “the screen shows itself particularly concerned with the unobtrusive, the normally neglected.” In an early essay Kracauer wrote that “the position that an epoch occupies in the historical process can be determined more strikingly from an analysis of its inconspicuous surface-level expressions than from that epoch’s judgments about itself.” Agreeing with Kracauer about their shared interest in such details, Panofsky wrote in a letter, “It derives from the fact that we have both learned something from the movies.” “Films are able,” Kracauer writes in a grand phrase, “to scan the whole visible world.” But then the whole includes, precisely, the “casual configurations” and “unobtrusive phenomena” that resist simplification. Well, more than resist it; they make it ultimately impossible. In his later *Theory of Film*, Kracauer evokes a series of images from the movies of Fellini, De Sica, and Rossellini, and suggests not so much that they defy interpretation as that we should refuse the interpretative temptation the images seem so poignantly to present:

Any attempt at an allegorical interpretation would drain these ideograms of their substance. They are propositions rather than rebuses. Snatched from transient life, they not only challenge the spectator to penetrate their secret but, perhaps even more insistently, request him to preserve them as the irreplaceable images they are.

This vision of a whole that contains the means of its own undoing receives its clearest, but still rather elusive, formulation toward the end of Auerbach’s *Mimesis*, which Kracauer cites on this very subject. There are “certain modern philologists,” Auerbach writes, “who hold that the interpretation of a few passages from *Hamlet*, *Phèdre*, or *Faust* can be made to yield more, and more decisive information about Shakespeare, Racine, or Goethe and their times than would a systematic and chronological treatment of their lives and works.” What’s more, Auerbach himself is such a philologist, and “the present book may be cited as an illustration.” We see from the words “decisive information” and “their times” that this proposition is not a refusal of Panofsky’s idea of content, only a refinement in the method of displaying it. If there were no whole, the scattered parts couldn’t be got to imply it. But in practice, divining whole works and cultures from particular

passages is quite different from assertions about souls and nations, because the detail is always in the foreground. There is something shaky about Auerbach's argument that factionalism leads to fascism—an old European unity breaks into pieces and the pieces are enemies of each other.

The temptation to entrust oneself to a sect which solved all problems with a single formula, whose power of suggestion imposed solidarity, and which ostracized everything which would not fit in and submit—this temptation was so great that, with many people, fascism hardly had to employ force when the time came for it to spread through the countries of old European culture, absorbing the smaller sects.

But what's shaky is the idea of the old unity, along with the ambiguity of the fragmentation. The diagnosis of the lure of the simple formula is impeccable. Auerbach, a Jewish exile from the Nazi regime, is writing his book in Istanbul during World War II, and as Said suggests, he is trying "to rescue sense and meanings from the fragments of modernity." Those fragments include both the parts that allow us to see the whole, and the parts that imagine they are the whole, and there is a genuine pathos in the sight of Auerbach's closely working through this dilemma, sentence by sentence. The writings of Proust and Woolf and others, Auerbach says, represent "a transfer of confidence" from the whole to the parts, and ultimately to the parts in their own right: "nothing less than the wealth of reality and depth of life in every moment to which we surrender ourselves without prejudice." But Auerbach is in the best sense too German—too devoted to a holistic tradition of scholarship—to let himself go all the way to this radical atomism; he defines the literary confidence of modern writers as, certainly, an underplaying of "the great exterior turning points and blows of fate" but not a refusal of totality, properly understood.

There is a confidence that in any random fragment plucked from the course of life at any time the totality of its fate is contained and can be portrayed. There is a greater confidence in syntheses gained through full exploration of an everyday occurrence than in a chronologically well-ordered total treatment which . . . emphasizes the great turning points of destiny.

This passage is heroic even in its inconsistencies. Everyday occurrences can't defeat fate, but they can defeat the idea that fate is a totality.

Panofsky of course is not opposed to a “chronologically well-ordered total treatment”—neither is Auerbach, except in his polemical moments—and his *Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer* is one of the most distinguished examples there is of such a thing. But Panofsky also believes that we arrive at the whole through the parts, and only through the parts—the whole is not something given in advance. When we read his masterly pages on Dürer’s *Melancholia*, we are constantly picking up distinctions rather than simplifications. “It is not so much a dark as a darkened face, made all the more impressive by its contrast with the startling white of the eyes.” The figure has a “fixed stare” that suggests “intent though fruitless searching.” “She is inactive not because she is too lazy to work but because work has become meaningless to her; her energy is paralyzed not by sleep but by thought.” In the following quotation, the close of Panofsky’s chapter on this great engraving, we can see the poise and sanity of a great German tradition, the generous subsumption of whatever can be known into a historical unity.

Thus Dürer’s most perplexing engraving is, at the same time, the objective statement of a general philosophy and the subjective confession of an individual man. It fuses, and transforms, two great representational and literary traditions, that of Melancholy as one of the four humors and that of Geometry as one of the Seven Liberal Arts. It typifies the artist of the Renaissance who respects practical skill, but longs all the more fervently for mathematical theory—who feels “inspired” by celestial influences and eternal ideas, but suffers all the more deeply from his human frailty and intellectual finiteness. . . . But in doing all this it is in a sense a spiritual self-portrait of Albrecht Dürer.

But it may be that we can also see something else in this paragraph: the tensions within the very unity being invoked, and the half-buried thought that unity may be the humanist’s name for contradiction, a brave hope in good times and a desperate fiction in bad ones. Auerbach wrote that “*Mimesis* is quite consciously a book that a particular person, in a particular situation, wrote at the beginning of the 1940s.” We might say the same for Panofsky’s *Dürer* and, with a change of date to accommodate a larger time frame, for Kracauer’s *From Caligari to Hitler*. And if we said this, we would be stressing, beyond the often forgotten commonplace that all books are written by particular persons in particular

situations at particular times, the fact that these men all left Germany (Kracauer in 1933, Panofsky in 1934, and Auerbach in 1935) and yet continued to represent, with enormous distinction, a long German tradition rapidly becoming extinct in Germany itself. The humanist, in such a context, is not only a historian but a piece of history, and one of the means by which we survive it.

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