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Men of Doubt: Fortini, Benjamin, Brecht

I will present my ideas as theses, in recognition of the fragmented and poetic modes of the men I discuss. And, too, as reflection of the central idea here, that of *doubt* – aiming at a certain non-definitive articulation, the wish to leave something uncompleted, unsealed, possible but yet to be made actual, if it can. I begin with a translation of a 1975 poem by Fortini.

‘Sonnet of the Seven Chinese’

The Augsburg poet once said he had tacked
an image of the Man of Doubt
to the wall of his room. A Chinese print.
The image asked: how ought one to act?

I have a photo on my wall. Twenty years ago
seven Chinese workers looked into my lens.
They look wary or ironic or tense.
They know I do not write for them. I know

they didn't live for me. Yet sometimes I feel
I'm being asked for more candid words,
more credible deeds, by their doubtfulness.

In turn I ask their help in making visible
the contradictions and identities among us.
If there's a point, it's this.

This poem emulates the style of Brecht, a calm but serious questioning, a personal expression of a social agony that seeks termination, an explication of a contradiction that seeks resolution somewhere else, a learning model. Here the gulf between worker and intellectual is invoked and also negated: as a demand from each side meets the other, the contradictions promise at least to seek the overcoming of contradiction, by laying it bare. Specifically the poem is about doubt. It speaks of the doubt on the part of the workers when faced with intellectual good wishes – it asks for more credible acts, more commitment, more proof of a common cause. Tasks yet to be done. The poem mentions the Augsburg poet who tacked an image of the Man of Doubt to his wall. This is Brecht. There are testimonies to the fact that he carried two Chinese wall scrolls with him in the years of exile. On one was a stern figure – possibly Confucius – who admonished Brecht to question everything. The other showed a Chinese sage, an elderly man, seated, hunched forward in deep thought and bearing a stern look. Brecht called the figure ‘The Doubter’. He wrote a poem about him in 1937:

Whenever we seemed
To have found the answer to a question
One of us untied the string of the old rolled-up
Chinese scroll on the wall, so that it fell down and
Revealed to us the man on the bench who
Doubted so much.

I, he said to us
Am the doubter. I am doubtful whether

The work was well done that devoured your days.
Whether what you said would still have value for anyone if it
were less well said.
Whether you said it well but perhaps
Were not convinced of the truth of what you said.
Whether it is not equivocal; each possible misunderstanding
Is your responsibility. Or it can be unequivocal
And take the contradictions out of things; is it too unequivocal?
If so, what you say is useless. Your thing has no life in it.
Are you truly in the stream of happening? Do you accept
All that develops? Are YOU developing? Who are you? To whom
Do you speak? Who finds what you say useful? And, by the way:
Is it sobering? Can it be read in the morning?
Is it also linked to what is already there? Are the sentences that
were
Spoken before you made use of, or at least refuted? Is every-
thing verifiable?
By experience? By which one? But above all
Always above all else: how does one act
If one believes what you say? Above all: how does one act?

Reflectively, curiously, we studied the doubting
Blue man on the scroll, looked at each other and
Made a fresh start.

Contradiction is life. Change is what is valued. Fixity of positions, certitude has no political, or living, efficacy. Dialogue is what matters – to be heard and to hear. Contradiction is in the world. Contradiction is in our minds. Contradiction is between us. That is political. Beginning again, because of all these contradictions, because contradicting is political, because the last effort did not work, did not find its audience, or found one but could not speak to it, only at it, or because there was a level of doubt that it was the right moment, and it remains doubtful that it was the right way. At least that question needs to be posed of what one does. Otherwise there is only assertion, versus belief, and all the sins of political

activism from voluntarism to tailism to hectoring to the seeding of confusion to determinism to being stranded between theory and practice. We might call it being non-dogmatic.



Angels

Walter Benjamin had a picture tacked above his desk wherever he went. The new angel, *Angelus Novus*, purchased in 1921, for 1000 marks. It fluttered through Benjamin's life. It provided the name for a critical journal he wished to found. He wrote about it as an example of the childlike but critical aesthetic at the core of the modernism he prized. The image is an emblem of an impulse to repair the damage wrought by history, by machine and men. The lines of drawing, the lines of vivid writing, the lines in Benjamin that comprise vignettes so vivid they transpose into image – as in his late writing about *Angelus Novus* as image of history in 1939, Klee's *Angelus Novus*, a few lines of sketchy ink, oil pastel, washed in watercolour, written about in a few lines by Benjamin – so intensely they remodel the image. Benjamin writes out of experience and forms his experience into magical, tiny forms, strange wonders of analysis and emotion, dubious sometimes, in the old and in the modern sense, both enigmatic and off-beam. He is drawn to the scene, the gag, the image – history breaks down into images and not stories. Benjamin breaks down into images that tell stories, lines of flight, lines that lead into an imaginative image-world, life lines of a sort.

But we should not forget the other angels that Paul Klee sketched, one in particular. Gillian Rose, for one, put in a bid for this angel, not *Angelus Novus*, but *Angelus Dubiosus*, from 1939, the year Benjamin wrote his *Angelus Novus* vignette. For these reasons:

I prefer another angel of Klee's, *Angelus Dubiosus*. With voluminous, blue, billowing and enfolding wings in which square eyeholes are cut for the expanse of rotund, taupe flesh to gaze through, this molelike angel appears unguarded rather than intent, grounded and

slack rather than backing up and away in rigid horror.
To me, this dubious angel suggests the humorous
witness who must endure.

For Rose, *Angelus Novus* is an angel who endlessly defers, is stuck in what she calls 'aberrated mourning'; and is impotent, static, frozen in horror, pushing hope off into an impossible distance. *Angelus Dubiosus* stands for a 'facetious reason' that learns and grows. It is an angel who tries to act for the good, but comes up against 'the actuality of others and the unanticipated meanings between them'. From this it learns. It makes mistakes. Things go wrong. It discovers its faults and failings, yet still risks going on, takes on new ventures. It appears, she says, in what could be a description of some of Brecht's characters, or even his prose, 'commonplace, pedestrian, bulky and grounded'. Doubt, from self-doubt to doubting the relevance of actions in the world is a motor of attempted change, and we know what we know: that we are hungry and that we can love, and that is the basis of a programme. Or as Brecht famously wrote into song, 'Erst kommt das Fressen, Dann die Moral' – 'Grub first, then ethics', Auden translated it. Fortini observed, in 'The Writers' Mandate and the End of Anti-Fascism', that Brecht was oriented to those who constructed the Age of Science – be they peasants or the ascendant bourgeois – who enjoyed their roast goose – unlike Lukács, whose failing was to be certain that the functionaries of the Soviet Union communicated with a working class, or his imputation of it, which could be led back and forwards along the narrow track of Lenin to Hegel, and when the vistas open, it is only onto the perspective of what Fortini calls the most insipid social-radical humanism.



Hunger and Certitude

Brecht's 'Grub first' line from 'Denn wovon lebt der Mensch?', 'What Keeps Mankind Alive?', goes on to clarify: 'So first make sure that those who are now starving get proper helpings, when we all start

carving'. Walter Benjamin's reflection on this line amplifies and politicises this phrase, while developing a set of 'fine and spiritual' values that, for him, form the basis of a substitute proletarian morality. He writes in his *Theses on the Concept of History*, negating any sense of the impotent and fragile New Angel, of another historical force and attitude, for attitude is what is key here.

The class struggle, which always remains in view for a historian schooled in Marx, is a struggle for the rough and material things, without which there is nothing fine and spiritual. Nevertheless these latter are present in the class struggle as something other than mere booty, which falls to the victor. They are present as confidence, as courage, as humour, as cunning, as steadfastness in this struggle, and they reach far back into the mists of time. They will, ever and anon, call every victory which has ever been won by the rulers into question.

The historical materialist is tasked to pay heed to the immaterial set of qualities – confidence, cunning, courage, humour, steadfastness – which has always existed, and which is a source of energy in history, but one not acknowledged by those attuned only to the tales of the victors. Now, hopes Benjamin, this old moral might, perhaps, enter onto the world stage in a more determined or more desperate way. Benjamin allegorises it with his panoply of modern anti-heroes, such as prostitutes and gamblers and suicides. The reigning set of fine and spiritual things had proven themselves class-bound and anachronistic. In the 1930s, Benjamin tabulates the decline and exhaustion of numerous stances and values, including aesthetic ones (as in the art of great masters) and political ones (as in the failures and compromises of Social Democracy, as well as Stalinism). But there is no certain role for the intellectual in this new arrangement. Only an uncertain one, and those uncertainties are what gives it life and purpose, for it needs again and again to justify itself in front of other tribunals, other audiences who come not enmired in tradition and the privileges of heritage. It must start

again. And sometimes it might name the enemy as itself, while not obliterating the material context in which some are allowed to be intellectuals or artists and some are condemned to be something else, and, in not obliterating that, try to find routes around and out of this inequality.



Flow and Stasis

Walter Benjamin conceptualised his method in the notions of 'dialectical imagery' or 'dialectics at a standstill'. The dialectical aspect relates to movement, history, the flow of time and change. The other moment, be it image or standstill, arrests what is to be analysed. There are two routes out of dialectics at a standstill. Benjamin's theory of dialectics at a standstill leans on ideas from Brecht. Brecht's dramatics demonstrate for him both the valuing of flux and ceaseless change, and also epic theatre's idea of breaking up the flow, of interruption, slicing the narrative into scenes and the scenes into *Gestus*, or critical moments, turning points. A standstill is historical stasis, petrification, in that which should be mobile, in flux, or should be dialectically conceived of as potentially so. In Brecht's work, the immobilising spell is broken in presenting in one image or in a montage of images, both the forces of oppression – the flaw of the world – and the possibility of error's supersession – the redemption of reality. There is contradiction in the play, and between play and world and between play and audience. Indeed, Benjamin notes in 'What is Epic Theatre',

[e]pic theatre casts doubts upon the notion that theatre is entertainment. It shakes the social validity of theatre-as-entertainment by robbing it of its function within the capitalist system.

Epic theatre is a contradiction to theatre. And the moment of analysis is a contradiction. Analysis has its shattering aspect, for it means to 'break up'. In splintering representations – by analysis

– the possibility springs up of worldly reconstitution under new laws. Constellations jell. Historical stasis is melted.



Friendship and Minimum Programmes

The dialectical image or ‘dialectics at a standstill’ strive for political resolution, for capitalism’s supersession, through the arrest of that which flows by – perhaps unnoticed and so unanalysed – and the flowing again of that which has ossified – become myth or a new nature, prevalent and unseen. Brecht and Benjamin seek out the stasis and find ways to show the breaks in that stasis, the moments of movement, of potential unblockage. In his commentaries on Brecht’s Chinese poems, Benjamin notes how Brecht shows that hardness can be overcome, ‘the hard thing gives way’ – in nature even granite and porphyry yield to the constant motion of water.

Benjamin writes in commentary on Brecht on the ‘the minimum programme of humanity’.

It recurs in the Lao Tzu poem in the form of the maxim:

‘You get me: the hard thing gives way,

The poem comes to us at a time when such words ring in the ears of men like a promise which has nothing to concede to the promises of a Messiah. For the contemporary reader, however, they contain not only a promise but also a lesson.

‘... That yielding water in motion

Gets the better in the end of granite and porphyry.’

The lesson or advice here is never to forget about the inconstancy and changeability of things, and to align oneself with those things which are inconspicuous

and sober and inexhaustible, like water. The materialist dialectician will be reminded of the cause of the oppressed. (It is an inconspicuous thing for the rulers, a sober one for the oppressed and, in its consequences, the most inexhaustible of all.) Lastly, apart from the promise and the theory, there is a moral in the poem. Whoever wants to make the hard thing give way should miss no opportunity for friendliness.

Friendliness, a meeting together; a melting of hearts, a melding of minds, orient us – but we never forget who are our enemies.



Doubt is Doubled

There are two routes out of dialectics at a standstill. There are also two elements within dialectics, a conflict or contradiction of forces. *Zweifel*, the German word for doubt, means two-fold. Doubt exists whenever there is some sort of choice, some sort of forking – indeed the German word for twig, *Zweig*, comes from the same root, and is just such a branching. Doubt means twofold or double, too. Benjamin and Brecht discussed doubt frequently, as Benjamin's report of conversations from 1934 attest. In July, they discussed artistic doubts:

Brecht, in the course of yesterday's conversation: 'I often imagine being interrogated by a tribunal. "Now tell us, Mr Brecht, are you really in earnest?" I would have to admit that no, I'm not completely in earnest. I think too much about artistic problems, you know, about what is good for the theatre, to be completely in earnest. But having said "no" to that important question, I would add something still more important: namely, that my attitude is, permissible.' I must admit he said this after the conversation had been going on for some little time. He started by expressing doubt,

not as to whether his attitude was permissible, but whether it was effective.

Brecht acts as he can only act – and there is no tribunal that can judge his aesthetic, but the doubts pertain to how and whether this material meets its audience, whether it can do what it wishes to do.

Benjamin wrote again in September of Brecht's doubts, again regarding effectivity:

This doubt is made up of two distinct strands of thought. Whilst becoming more closely concerned with the problems and methods of the proletarian class struggle, he has increasingly doubted the satirical and especially the ironic attitude as such. But to confuse these doubts, which are mostly of a practical nature, with other, more profound ones would be to misunderstand them. The doubts at a deeper level concern the artistic and playful element in art, and above all those elements which, partially and occasionally, make art refractory to reason. Brecht's heroic efforts to legitimise art vis-à-vis reason have again and again referred him to the parable in which artistic mastery is proved by the fact that, in the end, all the artistic elements of a work cancel each other out. And it is precisely these efforts, connected with this parable, which are at present coming out in a more radical form in the idea of the didactic poem. In the course of the conversation I tried to explain to Brecht that such a poem would not have to seek approval from a bourgeois public but from a proletarian one, which, presumably, would find its criteria less in Brecht's earlier, partly bourgeois-oriented work than in the dogmatic and theoretical content of the didactic poem itself. 'If this didactic poem succeeds in enlisting the authority of Marxism on its behalf,' I told him, 'then your earlier work is not likely to weaken that authority.'

Benjamin's own work in this period was written on the fly, as scraps, quotations copied out of books, short reviews for newspapers, small stories, aphorisms, theses. He was continuing a practice he promoted in the middle of the 1920s, when – for political-aesthetic reasons – he turned his own ear to the ground. *One-way Street*, with its subheadings retrieved from street signage and advertisements, has a programmatic opening clause asserting that the languages of mass communication provide the model for modern articulation.

The construction of life is at present in the power of facts far more than of convictions, and of such facts as have scarcely ever become the basis of convictions. Under these circumstances true literary activity cannot aspire to take place within a literary framework – this is, rather, the habitual expression of its sterility. Significant literary work can only come into being in a strict alternation between action and writing; it must nurture the inconspicuous forms that better fit its influence in active communities than does the pretentious universal gesture of the book – in leaflets, brochures, articles and placards. Only this prompt language shows itself actively equal to the moment.

Benjamin proposed the urgent communication of the telegram, postcard, leaflet or the economically articulate photomontage as politically and aesthetically communicative. There is no universality here – no universal gesture of the book, but articulations, like the articulations of lorries, flexible, bending, angled. *To articulate is to utter distinctly or to put into words, to express, to convey the meaning of. And articulation is the construction or composition of meaning by way of segments – that is, syllables and words – synthesised by grammar and syntax – or of engine and trucks or carriages, connected by drawbars.* Articulation is from the Latin *articulus*, a small connecting part, *articulare*, to divide into joints, and *articulatus*, distinct, intelligible. It is connected and divided, bifurcated. And these articulations in their connections and separations may

be intelligible, but they are also often provisional or dubious, blasted out of the chain of meaning for a moment to see what holds. And such a mode of working may lead in different directions – for as Benjamin notes of the scraps that comprise his *Arcades Project*:

We can speak of two directions in this work: one which goes from the past into the present and shows the arcades, and all the rest, as precursors, and one which goes from the present into the past so as to have the revolutionary potential of these ‘precursors’ explode in the present.

The arcades, and the culture of consumerism these ushered in, is identified here as prerequisite of fascism, which cannot be understood without reference to capitalism, both in terms of its economic basis and in the way in which people are encouraged to conceive themselves, against all reality, as consumers and national masses, not workers and internationalists. At the same time, the arcades and other similar Nineteenth-Century forms, such as railway stations, museums, exhibition halls, fizz with utopian promise, the promise of luxuries, of mobility, of knowledge. Benjamin is always alert to a dialectical switch in which the contemporary ‘hell’ of commodity production and capitalist society can be probed to reveal traces of hope, prefigurations of a communist society, but this is also the forging ground of a consumerist mentality that feeds fascism and an aestheticisation that amplifies the cultivation of myth. This is the ground on which fascism thrives. It goes both ways. Choices are to be made.



In Praise of

In 1939, Brecht wrote a poem titled ‘In Praise of Doubt’.

Praised be doubt! I advise you to greet
Cheerfully and with respect the man

Who tests your word like a bad penny.
I'd like you to be wise and not to give
Your word with too much assurance.

It speaks of the wearing away and down of historical oppressors and of the 'most beautiful of all doubts ... when the downtrodden and despondent raise their heads and / Stop believing in the strength / Of their oppressors.' And '[t]he thoughtless who never doubt / Meet the thoughtful who never act.' It is then not enough to praise doubt, but rather to split doubt, to be doubtful about doubt. Brecht's stanza states:

Therefore, if you praise doubt
Do not praise
The doubt which is a form of despair.

Here is play on words. The word for despair is *Verzweifeln*, to doubt extensively, wrongly, too far. The prefix is tricky, as is attaining the right amount of doubt, let alone in the face of the rigidity of Communist dogma, which is unable meaningfully to countenance the idea of Brecht's mentor, Karl Korsch, that 'Marxism is not positive, but rather critical'. What does it mean to be critical? The critical moment is, precisely, that of the splinter, the shattering. 'Critical' is derived from crisis. It is defined as a turning point, an interruption, a change in quality. The critical moment proposes a before and after, or a wavering on the borderland of those two. It might be phrased as aiming for just the right calibration of doubting and acting.

Where there is doubt there is choice. Fortini relates Paul Nizan's address to the 1934 Congress in Defence of Culture. Nizan rejects humanist mythology, in favour of a limited humanism that recognises hate and death, as does Fortini, who phrases it as 'a limitless capacity of self-determination of life and its limitless infirmity'. Nizan observes '[o]ur attitude is neither a continuation nor a break: it is a set of choices.' Which route and when?



Communist Doubts, Doubts on Poetry

Franco Fortini wrote a poem titled 'Communism' in 1958, in which he explored doubts of the self and of others.

I was a communist throughout.
Justly though, the other communists
looked askance at me. I was a communist
despite their certainties, despite my doubts.
Justly they did not see themselves in me.

There was no meeting, only distrust, but both found their ways of being communist, while seeing and not seeing the other, hating the other and regarding them as misguided.

Despite their certainties, despite my doubts
I always wanted this world ended.
Myself ended too. And it was that exactly
which estranged us. My hopes had no point for them.
My centralism seemed anarchy to them.

No recognition, and yet an identity of experience, for they, like him, would become broken by the world, by precisely those truths that trample over doubt and over possibility, brute facts, the temporary defeats in other words. .

I have survived enough to see
comrades who bruised me broken by intolerable truths.
Now tell me: you knew very well I was with you?
Was that why you hated me? My truth is truly needed,
breathed in through space and time, heard patiently.

Poetry remains a certain, if doubtful, resource, a place of private reflection and public address, of composing and unravelling ideology, of fudging words and angling thoughts. Or was. Might be still. But I doubt it.

