The Art of Distances

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Part II

“The World in Me”

The Distantiality of Everyday Life
The great subject of the arts and philosophies of the twentieth century—the discovery of the ordinary—draws its energy from the dawn of the acrobats, which ensues in parallel with it.

—Peter Sloterdijk, You Must Change Your Life

“I’m not sure,” writes Fredric Jameson in a review of Günter Grass’s novel Ein weites Feld (Too Far Afield), “that we can have a direct intuition of our own daily life: it is par excellence what others have, and what we acknowledge in a kind of productive and generous envy.” Jameson echoes here a thought of Heidegger’s, who speaks of the common experience of a paradoxical closeness that makes one oblivious to the singular presence of all-too-familiar things: the glasses sitting on one’s nose, the telephone receiver in one’s hand, or the street one walks on. “One feels the touch of it at every step as one walks; it is seemingly the closest and realest of all that is ready-to-hand, and it slides itself, as it were, along certain portions of one’s body—the soles of one’s feet.” And yet, Heidegger adds, “it is farther remote than the acquaintance whom one encounters ‘on the street’ at a ‘remoteness’ of twenty paces when one is taking such a walk.” The street is experienced in the circumspection characteristic of our involvements with objects we take for granted, which only become conspicuous, obtrusive, or obstinate when they are not working properly, when they are missing, or when they are in the way. Socially, we exist alongside others, without usually questioning the origin or logic of what we know, what we do, what we live for.

However, the acknowledgment of the everyday that Jameson describes as “a kind of productive and generous envy” is in Heidegger’s view less dignified, since he sees everyday life as the realm of inauthenticity par excellence. Its subject is the public das Man (they), characterized in terms of publicness (Offentlichkeit), levelling down, irresponsibility and unaccountability (or in Heidegger’s words, the disburdening of one’s Being [“it was not me”]), and accommodation (“everyone is the other, and no one is himself,” the ‘who’ of the everyday is the ‘nobody’”). Sein und Zeit describes everyday sociability in terms of a nagging care as to the way one differs from Others, “whether that difference is merely one that is to be evened out, whether one’s own Dasein has lagged behind the Others and wants to catch up in relationship to them, or whether one’s Dasein already has some priority over them and sets out to keep them suppressed.” And such measuring up to other people, this “envy,” not necessarily generous, is detrimental to community: “The care about this distance between them is disturbing to Being-with-one-another, though this disturbance is one that is hidden from it. If we may express this existentially, such Being-with-one-another has the character of distantiability [Abständigkeit]. The more inconspicuous this kind of Being is to everyday
Dasein itself, all the more stubbornly and primordially does it work itself out.” Heidegger insists on several occasions that his account of Dasein’s everyday existence is part of a project concerned with the ontology of Being, and therefore that “it is far removed from any moralizing critique of everyday Dasein”; and yet, it would be hard to characterize as neutral passages like the following, shot through with the suspicion that everyday sociability conceals an unacknowledged antagonism:

Everyone keeps his eye on the Other first and next, watching how he will comport himself and what he will say in reply. Being-with-one-another in the “they” is by no means an indifferent side-by-side-ness in which everything has been settled, but rather an intent, ambiguous watching of one another, a secret and reciprocal listening-in. Under the mask of “for-one-another,” an “against-one-another” is in play.

It is equally difficult to dispute that his dismissal of everyday practices—talking and conversing are described as gossiping and simply passing along baseless information, curiosity as distraction and entertainment, writing as scribbling, moving through life as groundlessness—paints a view of the everyday experiences of most people as superficial and meaningless. Dasein, he writes, “lets itself be carried along [mitnehmen] solely by the looks of the world; in this kind of Being, it concerns itself with becoming rid of itself as Being-in-the-world and rid of its Being alongside that which, in the closest everyday manner, is ready-to-hand.” Lived in a passive mode, everyday life not only fails to disclose anything essential about Being, it actually closes off the very possibility of such disclosure, lacking the awareness that it does so: “Everything looks as if it were genuinely understood, genuinely taken hold of, genuinely spoken, though at bottom it is not.” It would be difficult to imagine such an understanding of the everyday as the premise of an ethical life, all the more so when it remains, as both Jameson and Heidegger suggest, hidden from consciousness. No wonder that the “representation of a daily life is itself a complicated task, to be achieved only by indirection, as it were out of the corner of the eye.”

Heidegger concedes that “the extent to which [the dominion of das Man] becomes compelling and explicit may change in the course of history.” Indeed, Henri Lefebvre’s claim, in 1947, that “l’homme sera quotidien ou ne sera pas” (man will have an everyday life or will not exist), corroborated with Maurice Blanchot’s musings on the impersonal “parole quotidienne” bespeak Heidegger’s point; where the latter speaks of das Man, Blanchot listens for the one (one). Who is this one? In the second half of the twentieth century, the everyday became an object of interest for sociologists, ethnographers, critical theorists who have variously identified the impersonal workings of this one. For some, like Lefebvre, the everyday was the site of oppression and bureaucratically controlled consumption; for others—Michel de Certeau,
Guy Debord, Raoul Vaneighem—speaking in the wake of May 1968 and keen to retrieve the revolutionary potential of quotidian practices, the everyday invented itself with “thousands way of poaching” of public systems, undermining them from the inside. The 1980s saw the ethnographic turn in anthropology, which meant a shift of attention to the proximity of local neighborhoods and their modes of life. As Michael Sheringham compellingly shows in his compendium of everyday life theories, the interest in everyday life is not the exclusive privilege of theorists; writers such as Baudelaire and the surrealists have captured the contradictory experiences of the modern metropolis, which exposes one to the lives of other people. The others can remain, of course, an undifferentiated, anonymous crowd; but for the flâneur, as Benjamin shows, they are wonderfully singular and endlessly fascinating. These theorists suggest that the everyday has become something to be reckoned with, to be apprehended not “out of the corner of the eye,” as Jameson puts it, but as a self-conscious experience that consists not only of the ways we use economic, social and cultural systems, but also of our complex involvements with other people.

In this second part of the book, I want to turn my attention to autobiography, which over the course of the twentieth century has constituted a subjective counterpoint to theories of everyday life, and in so doing registered a process of “unselfing” in the very sense proposed by Iris Murdoch: under the normative imperative of the reality of other people, encountered in the experience of quotidian events, it seems to have yielded to “a nostalgia for the particular.” Annie Ernaux, author of an unusual diary in which she focuses almost exclusively on “the outside,” and Günter Grass, who penned a chronicle of the twentieth century told in the first person by almost one hundred different narrators, have radicalized experiments in self-writing that, roughly from midcentury onward, unsettled the centrality of the self characteristic of traditional autobiography in favor of an inclusion of other people, often, though not exclusively, family members, as part of a project to understand the formation of identity as shaped by larger factors, such as major historical events (world wars, displacement, exile) or class mobility. I have in mind, in France, Ernaux’s own “family ethnography” (La place, Une femme), in Germany, family chronicles grappling with the Nazi past (Vergangenheitsbewältigung), such as Christa Wolf’s Kindheitsmuster (Childhood Patterns) and Monika Maron’s Pawels Briefe (Pawel’s Letters), or even to some degree Peter Weiss’s Abschied von den Eltern (Leavetaking) and Fluchtpunkt (Vanishing Point), and in Britain, autobiographies by writers of working-class origin like Carolyn Steedman’s Landscape for a Good Woman and George Osborne’s A Better Class of Person. In Journal du dehors (Diary of the Outside, published as Exteriors) and its sequel La vie extérieure (Exterior Life), Ernaux no longer focuses on her family but on the anonymous individuals she encounters in public places, who are thus part of her everyday experiences; and in Mein Jahrhundert (My Century), Grass lends his autobiographical “I” to various
narrators, the so-called “little people” whose stories shed light on various aspects of lived experience in twentieth-century East and West Germany. Although not formulated in ethical terms, the interest in the lives of others shared by Grass and Ernaux can be situated in the ethical sphere of the examined life—especially as they write, formally at least, in the framework of the autobiographical genre: the term proposed by Michael Sheringham to characterize Ernaux’s writing, “project of attention,” describes equally well Grass’s tome. The authenticity of the self appears here as a function of the least personal aspects of their authors’ personalities, pertaining to the social or the historical self.

By differentiating the anonymous subject of the everyday, the public das Man of averageness, irresponsibility and leveling down (to return briefly to Heidegger), and by making of it the singular-plural subject of autobiographical writing, Ernaux and Grass redefine the self in relation to other people. Jean-Luc Nancy’s critique of Heidegger resonates here, with its insistence on “the differentiated singularity that the everyday already is by itself: each day, each time, day to day.” The passage that follows is crucial and deserves quoting in extenso:

One cannot affirm that the meaning of Being must express itself starting from everydayness and then begin by neglecting the general differentiation of the everyday, its constantly renewed rupture, its intimate discord, its polymorphy and its polyphony, its relief and its variety. A “day” is not simply a unit for counting; it is the turning of the world—each time singular. And days, indeed every day, could not be similar if they were not first different, difference itself.

Nancy’s ontology of spacing (dis-position) at the heart of his rethinking of the everyday as “the mode of a constantly renewed singularity” bears on the nature of the relationship with other people: the “others” are not in a relation of opposition or antagonism, as in Heidegger’s distantiality, but in a rapport of nonclosure (an inclusion that remains open to different others). Incidentally, this corresponds to Heidegger’s ontology of the self-other relationship, where the Others are not “everyone else but me—those over against whom the ‘I’ stands out. They are rather those from whom, for the most part, one does not distinguish oneself—those among whom one is too.” Heidegger is right, but his ontology of the mit (with), Nancy points out, is no more than a sketch; Being Singular Plural rewrites this insight as its premise: the lowercase other, he says, with an explicit allusion to Lacan and an unacknowledged reference to Levinas, “is ‘one’ among many insofar as they are many; it is each one, and it is each time one, one among them, one among all and one among us all.” Where Heidegger, critical of the philosophical tradition he inherited, claims that one cannot sever the subject from the Others and then glue it back, Ernaux aims to connect with other people by cultivating the very habits
of tarrying, observing, examining that Heidegger sees as lacking in das Man’s mode of distracted existence. In his account, “curiosity is characterized by a specific way of not tarrying alongside what is closest,” seeking “restlessness and the excitement of continual novelty and changing encounters”—that is, a “never dwelling anywhere [Aufenthaltslosigkeit].” It is precisely the inconsistency of das Man’s curiosity [Neugier] that bothers Nancy as well: “For [Heidegger], curiosity is the frantic activity of passing from being to being in an insatiable sort of way, without ever being able to stop and think.” Discovering in “the other”—whether a newborn child, a face encountered on the street, an insect, a pebble—an access to the origin of the world, Nancy describes curiosity in terms of “being intrigued by the ever-renewed alterity of the origin and, if I may say so, in the sense of having an affair with it.” As a flâneuse, Ernaux does exactly that: she tarryes, genuinely curious. She is intrigued. She has an affair with the world. She starts by removing her subjectivity from her writing, intent on capturing objectively the reality of other people’s lives; she looks at them from a distance, they are entfernt, to use Heidegger’s word, but she pursues, one might say, a kind of deseverance (Entfernung) that casts in a meaningful light the connection with them. Their experiences bring into focus episodes from her own life, thus revealing “the world in [her]” as shared vulnerability. In My Century, the author’s autobiographical voice is indistinguishable from the other narrators that speak in the first person; they are “those among whom one is too.”

The presiding figure of the second half of the book is Walter Benjamin: I read Ernaux’s diaries and Grass’s chronicles as apt responses from the end of the twentieth century to Benjamin’s portrayal of his own century, the nineteenth, in the Arcades, and to his farewell to it in Berlin Childhood around 1900. This small book provides the model for the autobiographical portrait, from which the self emerges as from a cocoon protected by the family house, by the city itself, while The Arcades project offers the theoretical and imaginative tools for leaving behind the purely autobiographical diary or autobiography, making possible such hybrid, we might even say oxymoronic, genres as a diary of the outside, or a collective portrait of one’s century. Ernaux and Grass inherit Benjamin’s paradoxical legacy: Ernaux is a flâneuse who expands the autobiographical space to include the outside; Grass takes the portrait and multiplies it indefinitely, giving temporal amplitude to the autobiography by covering the whole of the twentieth century. Benjamin, as we know, stepped into the past century looking back, nostalgic for increasingly obsolete forms of life and experience and therefore left behind. But his texts are invaluable compendiums of modernity, as well as, especially Berlin Childhood, illustrations of Adorno’s aphorism on the morality of not feeling at home: written in exile while no longer having “a proper abode,” this small book of miniatures is underwritten by a condition of displacement that the protagonists of Ernaux and Grass take as given. By focusing on stories of other lives, real or
imagined, at the expense of the authorial self, Ernaux and Grass disrupt the autobiographical pact, speaking alongside a philosophical reflection of recent decades that has sought to rethink community not as something secondary to the self, but as constitutive of the self.

Damon Galgut’s novel *In a Strange Room*, which will be the focus of the final chapter, is a most eloquent illustration of the “community of those without community” that thinkers like Jean-Luc Nancy, Giorgio Agamben, Roberto Esposito, and others derived, through critical engagement, from Heidegger’s *Mitsein*. Alternating between the first and the third person, and thus straddling the boundary between memoir and fiction, Galgut’s novel makes a compelling case for moving away from the notion of an autonomous subject toward singularity, finitude, exposure, and relationality. Whereas Ernaux’s unusual diaries offer reminders of the full reality of other people’s lives, which she tries to imagine, and Grass’s collective portrait of the last century moves freely between autobiography and fiction, Galgut’s novel blurs the self/others divide through a seamless shift from first, to third (impersonal), and back to first (singular plural) person. The importance that Ernaux, Grass, and Galgut attach to individual stories raises the question of representation, of relating to, and speaking in the name of others, which will be one of the threads woven throughout this second half of the book. Ultimately, the *distantiality* of the everyday turns into an ethical principle of willing exposure and receptivity to the singularity of other people. Echoes from the previous chapters come together here: Orwell’s commitment to the ordinary man, Canetti’s acerbic critique of individualism and his sympathy for the crowd, and, finally, Murdoch’s attention to the endless difference of countless others. All these are crucial aspects to the rethinking of community under the auspices of an art of distances.