FOREWORD

INFERNAL UNITY

Alexander Kluge

In spitzen Klammern
die verbrannten Wörter

In pointed brackets
The burned words

—Heiner Müller, “Mommsen’s Block”

In a letter from August 2, 1935, written in Hornberg, in the Black Forest, and sent to Walter Benjamin, then living in Paris, Theodor W. Adorno makes a series of remarks on a line by Michelet, “Every epoch dreams the one that follows it.” These remarks are part of a complex designated by the keywords: prehistory of the nineteenth century; dialectical image; myth and modernity.

The fetish character of merchandise is not a fact of consciousness, writes Adorno. Rather, it is dialectical, in the crucial sense of producing consciousness. That is, consciousness or the unconscious cannot simply reproduce this fetish character as a dream. On the contrary, consciousness or the unconscious disintegrates vis-à-vis commodity fetishism into desire and anxiety—without, however, ever becoming a new whole. In this sense, Adorno argues, immanent consciousness is itself “a constellation of the real,” “just as if it were the astronomical phase in which hell moves among mankind. Only the star-chart of such wanderings could, it seems to me, open a perspective on history as prehistory.” Not only
can entire epochs not dream those that follow them, since epochs as a whole probably cannot dream, but individual consciousness or the individual unconscious, which is perfectly capable of dreaming, cannot, through such dreaming, realize or animate dialectical constructions. The dream, then, to the degree that consciousness is capable of catching it, does not extend into the lurid current of history’s flow, where it too would be torn and destroyed.

Adorno speaks also in this context of the dialectical image’s “objective power of the keys,” instead of a subjective-objective power. He moreover stresses the obverse of the utopian dialectical image of the nineteenth century as hell. There is nothing that possesses the “power of the keys” to access utopia that is not at the same time capable of unlocking hell...

It is this Adornian conception that comes through in *Matches*—a title evoking the conflict between ideas and the intensity of their confrontation. But such a book is not, for all that, a battlefield delivered over to chaos; the troops remain in formation at their post: aphorisms, *pensées*, epigrams, fictional dialogues, apologues, short essays, ordered in six parts: aesthetics and literature; philosophy, science, and technology; politics; society; history, ethics, and religion; literary culture, the writer’s vocation, and method.

Undergirding the project is an encyclopedic ambition—a subjective encyclopedia, to be sure, pretending in no way to be exhaustive. It is more a question of highlighting elements essential for understanding our historical moment, which are grasped in their contradictory, conflictual, differential, as well as complementary relationships. The result is a complex that wears its solid erudition lightly, one that puts particular emphasis on thinkers exemplifying the genre of the aphorism, such as Gracián, Chamfort, Lichtenberg, Nietzsche, or Jünger. Despite sorting its fragments into several books, *Matches* is an idiosyncratic universe, open and multiform, without an overarching principle. A “constellation of the

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* Theological notion expressing the apostolic power to bind or loose sins.—Trans.
real,” to borrow Adorno’s expression, and pervaded by its “infernal unity.”

Among the book’s thematic nuclei one can mention the relationships between humans, animals, and machines; work, class relations and inequalities; truth and survival; the vagaries of creativity; the uncanny encounters between art and barbarism. Most important, however, is the idea of history understood not as progress but as a narrative thread kept taut by nostalgic longing and utopian expectations — stretched between, on the one hand, the resources of freedom and happiness lived in the past, and, on the other hand, the dream of building a better world, upon the ashes of mounting catastrophe.

To take up the words of Miguel Abensour, “Man is a utopian animal,” and, as Ernst Bloch wrote in The Principle of Hope, “There is the spirit of utopia in the final predicate of every great statement.” This implicit aspiration to something that has not yet come is everywhere joined in Matches to an explicit exercise of the critical faculty. One way to read the collection is as a kind of humanist manifesto calling on us to transform raw information into knowledge and communicable experience. The content here corresponds completely to the form: contemporary subjectivity, on account of its incredible fragmentation, can only be criticized and gathered up in fragmentary form.

Far from being dogmatic and prescriptive, Matches asks us not to renounce the commitment to thinking in a reality that threatens to overwhelm reason at any moment and to radically reduce the range of human feeling and sensation. Every page offers the reader an opportunity to interrogate and bring to light their own personal experience. In a style that is at once dense and incisive yet not without humour and irony, the author’s observations describe the contours of the world not just as it is, but above all as it should not be. It is thinking that resists the disjointedness of the world; thinking that tries to establish internal resonances where being and things continually fall apart and drift away from one another, despite their confinement on the same earthly vessel. This
thinking is itself necessarily composed of fragments of protest and resistance sharp like the shards of glass.

It is owing to these aspects that the French translation of Matches took its place alongside other fragmentary philosophical works—for example, The Heritage of Our Times by Ernst Bloch and Dämmerung: Notizen in Deutschland (Twilight: Notes from Germany) by Max Horkheimer—in the series “Critique de la politique.”* Since 1974, the series has prized unconventional voices and positions, and its editor, the late Miguel Abensour (1939–2017), went out of his way to include prose transcending academic specialization. This was prose from elsewhere, offered in translation, that could count on the hospitality of French intellectuals. In this respect, Chrostowska’s book is situated on the margins of contemporary theoretical and critical writing in the Anglophone world, both inside and outside of the academy. The negative dialectics of Adorno—to always advance toward the limits of knowledge—is here coupled with the negative capability described by John Keats, which consists in letting go of the persistent search for the reason of things. When exercising the power of a critic as well as that of a creator, we are bound for uncertainty and destined to fail in taming truth. If we nonetheless pursue it beyond the established order and our own theoretical capacities and into the wilderness of art, in its ever-renewed world, it is thanks to a daimon that does not tell us what to do, or what to say, but that preserves us from error. The periodic renewal of fragmentary forms—like utopias—belongs to epochs in search of a higher unity beyond apparent complexities; to times of agitation apt to scramble the moral and political compass and to focalize critical commentary on crisis.

The publication of a 500-page book of fragments in the United States has every right to baffle some. After all, are there not already enough fragments all around us: in books

* Reference is to the book series formerly at Payot-Rivages, now at Klincksieck, edited until 2017 by Miguel Abensour. This preface first appeared in the French translation of Matches. —Trans.
that will never be read again cover to cover or in mildly amusing messages posted on social media in seemingly limitless quantities? Settling for the dispersal that affects digital archives, which are increasingly accessed at random and without any context, or for the ephemerality of what is written on the spur of the moment and on the fly, inevitably severs the ties to the critical mind in action, distinguished by its demanding nature, passion, and imagination—qualities without which the intellectual world threatens to disintegrate.

The imagination is a skittish animal. But just as a skittish horse can be brought to attack, to rush ahead, and charges forward so spontaneously that no rider can hold back the animal’s mass (and, a-squat atop the horse, he has to work hard not to get bucked off), so the imagination flies towards all the mountains of reality and storms its walls with its ladders and bundles of fire, as Theodor Fontane described it. No, the imagination is not fit for a system like Wikipedia. It does not care much for coherence, context, and facts. It is a political animal and falls upon the world like a swarm.

It also possesses innumerable sources, including subterranean ones, sparse and barren; its fountains spring forth destroying everything in their vicinity. According to Adorno, the most important factory of the imagination is sorrow. The imagination is born of an injury denied by fantasies. I have to disagree with him. I know of fantasies set in motion by luxury and elation. They compete with those that serve self-defence. The main thing is to pass through the “infernal unity” of the world, through this bad totality, to arrive at the threshold from which the horizon of the future can be glimpsed.
I suppose, Sirs, that you are so glutted with this banquet of various literary dishes that the food you eat continues to rise. Indeed ye sit crammed with dainties, for many have served up to you a mixed feast of precious and varied discourse and persuade you to look with contempt on ordinary fare. What shall I do now? Shall I allow what I had prepared to lie uneaten and spoil, or shall I expose it in the middle of the market for sale to retail dealers at any price it will fetch? Who in that case will want any part of my wares or who would give twopence for my writings, unless his ears were stopped up?

—Agathias, 6th century C.E.

Why offer them a whole? They’ll just fragment it anyway, the public always do.

—Director to Poet, Goethe, Faust, Part 1, 1798

I have seen it with my own eyes: natures that are gifted, rich, and disposed to be free, already “ruined by reading” in their thirties, just matches that have to be struck to emit sparks — “thoughts.”

—Nietzsche, Ecce Homo, 1888