

## To experiment and critique with Kleist's *Käthchen*

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### 1. Critique without the critic

In his dissertation of 1919 on the concept of art criticism in German Romanticism, Walter Benjamin examined a mode of criticism that would allow him to sketch critique differently from its contemporary practice. Unlike the focus of critics on the life of the author, or the then dominant interpretation of works of art, Benjamin wanted to develop a mode of criticism that departed not only from such a psychological focus, but also – even more importantly – from the critical practice as a judgment of the work of art. By returning to Jena Romanticism and especially Friedrich Schlegel's and Novalis' conception of art criticism, Benjamin sketched critique not as judgment, but as a productive unfolding of an art-work's potential. As Carol Jacobs has noted, this amounted to claiming a 'critique without the critic' (cited in Hirsch 1997: 174, translation mine), a critique in which neither authorial intention is the focal point nor the critic the agent of critique (as judgment), but in which the work itself is the focal point and its 'criticisability' to be proven by the critical activity of art itself (by the individual work's reception or rejection). The Romantics' notion of criticism considered works of art to contain the criteria for their criticism, permitting an 'immanent criticism' by and in the medium of art, possible due to the criticisability of the work and not to be found in the subjective verdict of the critic.<sup>1</sup>

Critique, which in today's understanding is most subjective, for the Romantics was the regulation of all subjectivity, chance and arbitrariness. While critique according to our contemporary understanding consists in [...] the evaluation of a work, the romantic concept of critique distinguishes itself by the fact that it does not contain any subjective evaluation of the work of art as a judgment of taste.<sup>2</sup>

Critique thus understood is performed by and in art itself – and, in a way, is another name for the afterlife of works of art, which are either taken up and intertextually made fruitful, or rejected and forgotten by art. Benjamin himself notes that the concept of such an immanent criticism is based on 'romantic

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin's 1923 essay on the task of the translator, in a sense commenting on his own practice of translating Baudelaire, to whose translated *Tableaux Parisiens* this essay formed the introduction, makes a comparable point when claiming that translatability is an 'essential feature of certain works' (1968: 71) and that in such a work 'a specific significance *inherent in the original* manifests itself in its translatability' (1968: 71, emphasis added).

<sup>2</sup> 'Kritik, welche für die heutige Auffassung das Subjektivste ist, war für die Romantiker das Regulativ aller Subjektivität, Zufälligkeit und Willkür im Entstehen des Werkes. Während sie [die Kritik] sich nach heutigen Begriffen aus der sachlichen Erkenntnis und der Wertung des Werkes zusammensetzt, ist es das Auszeichnende des romantischen Kritikbegriffs, eine besondere subjektive Einschätzung des Werkes im Geschmacksurteil nicht zu kennen.' (Benjamin 1973: 74) The quote continues: 'Die Wertung ist der sachlichen Untersuchung und Erkenntnis des Werkes *immanent*. Nicht der Kritiker fällt über dieses das Urteil, sondern die Kunst selbst, indem sie entweder im Medium der Kritik das Werk in sich aufnimmt oder es von sich abweist und eben dadurch unter aller Kritik schätzt. Die Kritik sollte mit dem, was sie behandelt, die Auslese unter den Werken herstellen.' (Benjamin 1973: 74–5; emphasis added)

theories, which in their pure form can certainly not satisfy any contemporary thinker' (1973: 66) – neither in 1919, nor today. Placing the agency of critique in an ideal of art and an impersonal self-reflection of art on art not only ignores all relations of power crucial to the field of 'art', but also goes to the other extreme in removing all critical agency from the equation.

And Benjamin himself can be said to already perform something slightly different. His 'translation' of Baudelaire, for example, and his reading of some of Baudelaire's motifs was not merely setting free the self-reflection inherent in 'Baudelaire', but was rather a 'constructive' reading – diffracted through Proustian memory and Freudian analyses of shock in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in order to assess the transformations of modern city life and the challenges for aesthetic (re)presentations these entailed; very much Benjamin's own question. Much in the same way, Benjamin's return to Jena Romanticism was not a disinterested instance in an absolute unfolding of ideas of criticism, but rather the production of a Benjaminian mode of criticism: it intervened productively into then contemporary forms of criticism, combatting these by thinking with the Jena Romantics. Somewhere between the *criticisability* of Jena Romanticism and a *problem* of Benjamin's (re)emerged not so much an idea of immanent criticism, but was that idea explored and supplanted at the same time by a practice of 'constructive' or 'experimental' criticism, as we might call it to eschew the focus of critique on the judgment and interpretation of art works – heeding Deleuze's advice to '[e]xperiment, never interpret' (Deleuze 2006: 36) – but also to avoid the pure self-reflexivity of art in 'immanent criticism'.

## 2. The constructions of critique

Benjamin engages with the texts he reads via a *problem* and thus seems to practice a sort of critical agency that is neither the judging critic (and in that sense a 'critique without the critic', as Jacobs noted), nor the absolute unfolding of art (Romantics), or the inevitable inscription of traces (Derrida). It seems to me that this kind of semi-agency that lies in such an engagement with works of art is something that might be fruitful in we want to consider modes of critique today and that we do not quite know how to imagine.

In order to think about this semi-agency, and in order to consider the extent to which such a strange disposition (neither critical (judging, reasoning) Subject nor its full absence) might be productive when it comes to rethinking critique, one text comes to my mind: Kleist's *Käthchen von Heilbronn*. Reading this text from the perspective of the problem of such semi-agency, we might be able to approach an idea of what a different critical agency could look like. That is, we would then, on the one hand, consider Käthchen as a performance of such a different critical practice, and, on the other hand, see how a thinking with a literary text – rather than a critical judgment of it – could provide us with less judgmental, more experimental or constructive modes or critique.

In view of the question of a different critical practice and a different agency (or subjectivity) implied by such a practice, Käthchen seems a fitting case. At the opening of Kleist's play from 1807/08, we see Käthchen before a tribunal – a medieval 'Vehmgericht' collocated by her father to judge if she has been bewitched by Count Wetter vom Strahl, to whom she has been mysteriously attached ever since she lay eyes on him in her father's smithy. Having trailed the count persistently over the past months, clearly due to a strong loving affection that she is taken by, she has to now – at the opening of the play – answer to the court's cross-examination as to the count's treatment of her and her reasons for pursuing him. Given that the verdict of a 'Vehmgericht' ususally meant acquittal or death, and given her loving affection for the count,

it is all the more surprising that she does not answer the court's questions, and only states that she does not know why she pursues him. Throughout the play, she remains silent about (and seemingly truly unaware of) these reasons and thwarts everyone's attempts to assess them, only responding 'I don't know' whenever she is asked. Nevertheless, she is not to be dissuaded of sticking closely to the count, even if he never permits her into his castle, making her sleep in the stables, and even after he gets engaged to another woman, Kunigunde. After various turns in the plot – after manipulative Kunigunde turns out to merely count on the count's wealth and Käthchen turns out to be more royal than originally thought and thus a fitting wife for the equally calculating count – the situation is transformed in such a way that Käthchen's attachment to the count is returned by him and they marry. Käthchen herself thwarts this seemingly romantic resolution to the play by fainting instead of answering the count's vow; and Kleist's point is not, I would suggest, the happy solution to a marriage plot, but an examination of the forces of semi-agency. He does that through a character that is, on the one hand, the least 'judging' and calculating of all characters in the play, unaware of her own motives and rather passively reacting to the others; but, on the other hand, so stubborn in her pursuit of the count that this produces an outcome of which she herself never says that it was intended, but which she also does not seem to regret. She modifies the circumstances without ever confronting anyone or anything, and does so rather by moving laterally, next to the count, alongside and with him. In a sense, her strong affects (in all the senses of affection, affecting and being affected by) in regard to the count and her refusal of giving reasons upon which a judgment could be reached (nor ever uttering any judgment or reason for her behaviour herself) produce an outcome, of which it is not clear that it was intended, but which is also not undesirable. It produces something unforeseen (Käthchen being declared royal by imperial decree) and hence the way out for the (reasonable) count to return her feelings. Käthchen is certainly not critical of the count or of the situation in a traditional way, but her insistence on something that concerns her (the count, for unknown reasons) produces an outcome that seems enjoyable to everyone (except scheming Kunigunde), without having been calculated beforehand. We might call such an open-endedness of the undertaking, which navigates the circumstances in view of their molding and transformation, constructive or experimental. And in that sense, also an engagement with Kleist's play might be done in a mode of construction or experiment: not a critique as judgment of its aesthetic or literary value, but an engagement with it from the point of view of a problem – in my case here the question of semi-agency in order to reimagine critical practice.

### 3. To have done with judgment

The crucial intervention that Benjamin made into criticism was to sever critique from judgment – and he was thinking with the Romantics for that purpose. Only on the condition that critique does not imply judgment can it become an experimental and constructive engagement with a problem, to whose exposition one draws on other works. As Deleuze notes when thinking with Artaud in 'To have done with judgment', the trick might lie in the effort 'to bring into existence and not to judge' (Deleuze 1997: 135). To the extent in which judgment orients itself along existent forms and categories, prior scales of good and bad, a point of view of judgment does not bring transformations into existence, but classifies what is given. Judgment is (according to the OED) the 'action of trying in a court of justice' – a trial that settles accounts, not an experiment that negotiates within a web of circumstances and molds these. In

that light, Kleist seems to play on judgment and experiment and have Käthchen (and most of his other characters) defy judgment and embark upon experiments.

Critique understood as experimental transformation rather than judgment would then have to call upon slightly different registers than reason, intentionality and the prior definition of a desired outcome, something that we could trace not only in Käthchen, but also in other texts by Kleist such as Michael Kohlhaas, the Marquise of O..., the Prince of Homburg or others. But to return to our practice of reading, the question seems to be: How to avert judgment without giving up on critique as a transformative intervention (which 'immanent criticism' might push out of sight too far)? How to think the sort of critical agency that is exercised in more constructive or experimental modes of critique?

'What expert judgment, in art, could ever bear on the work to come? It is not a question of judging other existing beings, but of sensing whether they agree or disagree with us, that is, whether they bring forces to us, or whether they return us to the miseries of war [...], to the rigors of organization. As Spinoza had said, it is a problem of love and hate and not judgment.' (Deleuze 1997: 135)

Likening the image of critique (although that term is not used) to 'love and hate', as Deleuze notes with Spinoza, evokes affective responses between viewer/reader and artwork, between interlocutors or opponents. Yet such 'agreement' is certainly not the result of a compromise or dialogue, but the inclination to certain works because they 'agree with us'. For the literary 'constructive' critic, for example, these works 'agree with her' because they facilitate the treatment of a problem. The perspective is shifted, from 'expert judgment' to 'reading of a problem'.

Judgment, even more than negation, then seems the important performance or disposition to avert, if we want to consider the powers of critique within the humanities under contemporary conditions of a world understood and lived as relational, entangled, material and in permanent differentiation, yet one in which intervention seems nevertheless desirable. Intervention via negation would not affirm but stop entanglements. Thus, averting judgment and learning to critically affirm entanglements seems to be the crux, learning to respond to the question as François Jullien poses it:

'Mais sur quoi dès lors se guider pour apprendre à suivre ces transformations silencieuses conduisant au renversement, puisqu'elles ne se laissent pas réduire en formules ou modèles arrêtables, qu'on puisse fixer et pérenniser, et qu'à travers chaque transformation engagée se reconfigure le jeu des facteurs de façon telle qu'il ouvre la transformation en cours sur de nouveaux infléchissements? Aucun énoncé ne peut saisir, et définir, ce jeu constamment renouvelé des mutations.' (2009: 71)

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