

On composing the individual out of his own collapse

Borges, in one of his lectures at Harvard delivered in the academic year 1967-68 (under the title "The telling of the tale"), attempts to determine the intellectual distinctions between the epic and the novel. He compares the two genres in terms of pace and their difference with regard to the poetic element, and persists more on comparing their heroes; the heroes of epics and novels are different.

The epic hero is a model, a pattern. He is the one who attempts to conquer a city while aware that he is going to die, or the one who returns home after a long journey. His adventures are sung, and the man himself is exalted. This is not what happens with the heroes of novels, who are defeated. Borges cites writers like Conrad or Melville to demonstrate the construction of the novel's defeated heroes. The epic of the model hero is associated with singing, while the defeat of the novel hero is associated with a stop in the song: defeat is associated with a break in the rhythm—with a prosaic element.

In Walter Benjamin's "Some reflexions on Kafka" (in *Illuminations, Essays and Reflections*, 1985, (1968), pp. 141-145, ed. Hannah Arendt) the concept of the epic appears from another path. Here we find a different denial of the epic, which Benjamin invokes to describe the traits in the style of a specific writer—Kafka. The refutation of the epic as introduced by Benjamin is not about the rhythm of the writing or the kind of hero. Yet if we follow closely and extend Benjamin's thought we shall return to some kind of thought about the hero, and in a special way this hero will be vanquished or victor, passive or active: in a special way we can go back from Benjamin's thought to a thought about the hero.

Benjamin invokes the definition of wisdom as the "epic side of truth". He introduces wisdom in his text about Kafka in order to see it negated. He disputes wisdom and truth in the prospects opened up in Kafka's writing. Wisdom, the epic of truth or the epic side of truth (writes Benjamin) appears in Kafka as something discredited or obsolete. We can no longer speak of wisdom: in Kafka, what remains from wisdom is only the products of the decay of truth. And in a more general scrutiny of the human condition, what remains through Kafka is only products of the decay of truth.

Benjamin goes on to classify what he calls "remainders from the decay of wisdom" into two categories. The first of these is the rumour about true things. Spreading an unfounded rumour about things may serve as a substitute for reality. The strengthening of a persistent whisper about things may be sufficient in itself to render things "real"; reality is constructed from the absurd strengthening of the whisper. Benjamin's second category is folly. Folly or its effect, the unfounded hypothesis which can grow until it constructs something, whatever that is, may also be the ultimate remnant of the lost wisdom. Thus under Benjamin's 'stage direction' the decay of truth (of wisdom) leaves behind some substitutes of truth, namely the "rumour about true things" and a sort of folly which regulates things after wisdom. These two elements, rumour and folly, take the place of the epic truth that wisdom used to be.

Benjamin's findings as a result of his examination of Kafka's texts lead to a general approach to things. The unfounded rumour that truth circulates as gossip or as some absurd proposition may construct the latent description of some community. And the case of folly? In this particular reference by Benjamin, folly does not foreshadow the depth the concept would acquire later in 20th-century Western thought. In Kafka we find a more optimistic and sad description of the collapse of wisdom. "Folly," as he describes it, comes from the failure to arrive at some definite "conclusion" about everything personal. His reference to wisdom does not denunciate what we had hitherto seen as wisdom. The power of truth retains considerable prestige in Kafka, even if this prestige occurs negatively through its absence. While truth is absent, we recognise a kind of mourning for something which would make absolute sense. The meaning of any truth is violated by the perception of the many—the way in which most of us understand things. The folly that Benjamin finds here is not one which reigns at the core of the propositions of rationality; it is

not the folly described by Foucault or, more forcefully, by Derrida in their debate about folly ("Cogito et histoire de la folie", *L'Écriture et la différence*, Paris, 1967). The folly that Benjamin reads in Kafka arises perhaps as a mere opposition to rationality: mainly as a solipsistic confirmation of its own solitary admission. The diagnosis of the end of epic truth is then associated with a kind of nostalgia for wisdom, for the lost world, the lost father or God: if we read Benjamin in this way, truth is not problematic in itself. It has the traits of a negative theology. It is not annulled from within, as is the programmatic case in subsequent Western thought.

(Remember, for instance, the subsequent contention of Deleuze: "The task of contemporary philosophy has been defined: the reversal of Platonism"—*Difference and Repetition*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994—by means of eradicating the reference to the metaphysics of thing, cancelling out the stable makeup of the world of ideas, legitimising idols and reflections against any original, i.e. any 'true' pattern).

The truth as a remainder of wisdom about things that Benjamin reads in Kafka (the truth of rumour and folly) does not necessarily need to be supported. It is defined negatively in relation to the grand narrative of the world; the lost grand narrative which becomes a new grand narrative. The truth as a remainder of wisdom has no interior, no grammar, no syntax. It seems to stand without difficulty. It stands casually, without crutches, merely as a rumour or else as a 'genuine' fit of folly. It needs nothing more to be 'complete'. This description by Benjamin shows no sign of the philosophical ambition which might come from the prospect of another world that would function without truth. No playful move towards the present, no idol, no reflection and no shadow manages to debase the image of some sure and stable (always distant) force which could control the world or which would become evident by its failure to control it. The distance from the stable force comes to confirm this force in a peculiar way. (Kafka provides yet another corroboration of the power of distance when he writes "what is Talmud if not a message from a distance?" to Robert Klopstock on December 19, 1923; quoted in Harold Bloom's preface to *Franz Kafka*, ed. Bloom). Shadow and reflection are not lauded by Kafka as values. The degraded truth of things, even in its vestigial form as rumour and folly, still points to some moral force. While it is mourned, it still shines thanks to the very power of this mourning. The rumour becomes a weak perception of the truth inasmuch as it determines the mourning for the epic stability: the habit about things, i.e. the truth as rumour, keeps things at the commonplace habit. Folly, in the unpredictable aspect of things, carries any unusual truth. The former sends things to sleep in their un-syntactical place; the latter "stimulates" things without awakening them. In the "crazy" description of things, no answer provides a syntax. The constructional element common in both rumour and folly builds the new world: the decayed truth of things is left without an epic dimension, prosaic and unsung. The very structure of things is identified, in the manner of the original sin, with the defeat of perception (in the case of folly) and of communication (in the case of rumour).

The move of the art of speech away from the song already points to a defeat constructed as loss of rhythm—as derangement. The derangement of the song, the disturbance that prose inflicts on poetry, the halt of breath, a shortness of breath, a wrong step, an error in movement that throws the body out of coordination (as in the peculiar choreographies of Kafka's heroes): all these shape the negation of the epic as devastation resulting from the loss of the regulatory force which governed them. The move away from the regulated world of the truth of things sets the tone of the hero's defeat. The hero's crushing due to derangement also brings about the cataclysmic collapse of the hero's world: the loss of wisdom and truth constructs a dumb, uncoordinated world made of the nostalgia for the prior regulation, but is unable to form any reflection of that latent nostalgia. Nostalgia becomes a focus on zero, yet this zero is organised as something, as a shapeless shape and as a force which opposes decay and preserves 'intact' the mourning for some wisdom and the lack of any possible origin. So the helpless hero is then a reflection of the helplessness he is in as he tries to see clearly. The defeated hero is defined by his difficulty in acting as he should, and is shaken because his representations are shaken. His

world, as a defeat of verity, stands before him and defines him, at the same time when his own resignation from the world turns the world into such a pattern of defeat. The hero of prose is shaken at the same time when everything that stands before him is shaken as well.

Neither Borges nor Benjamin speak with satisfaction about the move away from the epic. Benjamin keeps referring mournfully to the negation of truth and the folly of reason. Both of them mourn in a special, not naïve way for the lost power of the epic. They suggest—in a more or less obvious way—the existence of a hidden promising space which will host the epic element, with references to the fallen idol instead of the exalted one.

Thus Kafka's text continues to stand after the collapse of the relationship with some father who never appears yet is present in his absence. Some figure must have controlled the world of texts, and is absent or is presented as an absence; as loss or defeat. Borges, at the end of the same Harvard lecture, makes a statement about the kind of epic we can expect in the future. Man craves epics.

In Benjamin's excerpt, if we delve into the substitutes of the epic dimension of truth (which he provides as remainders of wisdom), we observe a refusal to promise any future. The remnants from the loss of the epic truth are permanently problematic. No way out can be discerned from a system governed by these two constants. The system of "rumour and folly" leads to man's exclusion from the world; there seems to be no possibility for one to interact with the other.

So, on the one hand rumour, for what is not truth (but appears as such simply because it is whispered by many) cannot develop any communal characteristics beyond those which oppose any notion of being founded on something. The power of rumour constructs a communality in the air. Rumour is a closed system which continues to be active without any criteria.

Folly, on the other hand—the madness which can substitute truth as an unfounded urge or a "desert within the desert"—cannot look forward to a next stage. It seeks no vindication, nor can it be heard as a bell which would shake up the community. It is called a folly before it is even uttered; it has no possibility to exert any influence. In its best version, folly would be a message from some dead God; it can shake up the foundations of the communal structure, not with what it says but with its tone. To restless, disturbed people folly can function like an open parable, as is the case in Kafka's texts. But while they are read as allegories or parables, the products of folly have renounced from the outset their ability to mean anything more than that. They were not written to build something, but only to drown the cries of despair. Their primary meaning is that they refute meaning. If they were buildings they would have windows towards meanings, but these windows would be boarded up. The products of folly will always be windows condemned to remain forever closed.

The dipole of rumour and folly described by Benjamin corresponds to the dipole of collective and individual element. If we accept this analogy, we can see something that Benjamin hints at but leaves unsaid; his definitions in his description of Kafka point to a destruction of the relations between community and the individual. As long as the analogy remains active, the individual and the community appear as two different, isolated worlds.

Through this prism the individual or the hero claims less and less autonomy, is less and less defined by his relation to the collective element. He is defined as a single entity by the obscure and problematic elements he develops in his quest for something real. Folly thus describes the person in a state of permanent isolation from the community.

The community increasingly loses the traits of a deliberate set of laws devised by itself. The community's self-formation seems not to be based on joint decisions; it derives from a plurality of human groups without structural characteristics. It appears (through its description as a basis for rumour) to be one-dimensional. Only the thread which confirms a rumour renders the

community active, existent. Thus the community is at once active and dead. It only appears as a community for as long as it does not question its own framework or the information it sends out.

Rumour about true things equals a refusal to reflect. To Benjamin's Kafka, this refusal seems to be a constituent element of the community. The rumoured existence of some "collective truth" defines the community, while folly presents the absurd truth which can only be valid for one person. This pattern lacks the ability for communal understanding as well as the ability for a single person's efforts to awaken the community. Community and individual are defined by their very exclusion. The community is necessarily stupid, and the hero is mad.

The inane, dormant community does not appear in Kafka for the first time; it is a typical model that runs through human thought. The concept of the dormant community inaugurates philosophy. Yet the original philosophical purpose of reason was to awaken the sleeping collectivity of the inert community. From Heraclitus and Plato to Rousseau, Nietzsche, Marx or even Heidegger or Derrida (to quote only some indicative and quite different examples), thinking is targeted towards alertness: it strives to awaken with its new discourse something dormant, with new descriptions that a community is called upon to examine and adopt. Active reason awakens dormant consciences: this is the principle behind reason-based investigations. In Kafka, this model of active, community-awakening thought is defective. The individual appears unable to stand up and fight the collective element which has grown to a gigantic communal monster. The two aspects of degraded truth appear more disappointing than the classic philosophical model of alerting the dormant community. The concept of alertness is no longer part of the degraded truth. Even the position of a thinking person who stands outside the community and examines it critically, being at once within and outside the community, seems untenable in this description. Thus rumour about true things and folly underline the inability to construct an individual within the whole.

Rumour keeps things stable at some position, with a multiple unthinking confirmation as the sole foundation. Confirmation of the rumour does not come after any enquiry or attempt at answering, but by a descent into certainty and the inability to resist what is momentarily presented as obvious. Moreover, the hero outside the community is mad. Within the community he can only continue to convey rumours or (at best) refuse to undertake this task. He can also attempt to construct his own rumour about something, provided he does not interfere with the communal hypnosis: if he does that, he will only prove to be mad. The two substitutes of wisdom in Benjamin introduce the hypnotic element, each in its own way. Truth is not something proven or something which can be reduced into an obvious statement (as would be the case in some Husserlian "era").

Truth in its declined communal form looks like a kind of hypnosis. Anything that travels from mouth to mouth can be true. Benjamin puts it even more clearly: "Kafka's real genius was that he tried something entirely new: he sacrificed truth for the sake of clinging to its transmissibility" (*op. cit.*, p. 144).

From the outset we move in circles around the concept of sleeping and awakening. Poetry and prose, rhythmic and prosaic, the dormant community and the galvanising speech: the dipole of sleeping and awakening accompanies all these pairs of concepts. We take the notions of sleeping and awakening in Kafka as determining the makeup of the community but also the destruction of the individual's relation with the community. A thinking, awakened person like Kafka's hero is defined by his inability to be anything other than a crazy, sleepless user of inexplicable grammars.

Yet within the communal hypnos the epic appears in other forms. What new does tradition bring into the new somnambulism of the rumouring community after the substitution of wisdom for the spoiled truth, as described by Benjamin? When the epic element is destroyed, truth loses its epic character. We arrive at some sort of end for the epic aspect of wisdom. What happens then to the hypnotic element which characterises the community in any case? The community seems destined to sleep. How does a deregulated community differ from the one that was

regulated by the epic dimension of truth? How can there be community without wisdom? What kind of sleep is that of the new community? If the epic has somnambulant traits, what happens when the epic truth is lost, which, according to Benjamin would be wisdom? Do we go from the hypnotic power of the epic to some kind of alertness?

On the contrary, in Benjamin's description the loss of the epic truth seems to be followed by a deeper hypnosis. In his description about the collapse of wisdom, the query which would trigger alertness is annulled: there is no hope for awakening, interaction, reflection. The waking power of the query is lost in rumour and folly. What discourse can control rumour, since its growth is based on the absence of control? What can stop folly, since its growth requires discrepancy and the absence of query?

The hypnosis which characterised the epic of truth as confirmation of certainty, as reliance on wisdom, and the alert quest for the truth of things give way to a renamed dipole: the hypnosis of rumour (of the uncontrolled dissemination of information) is linked here with the sleeplessness of folly. The community is made up of another hypnosis. The individual may remain nonexistent if he merely conveys a given piece of information, or exist through a special sleeplessness that renders him mad.

Alertness as an attitude outside the community could be called a sleepless one even before Kafka. An intellectual always cultivated his own rupture with the community, but could remain a voice of the community—a voice uttered from within the community. How is a hero severed from the community? To me, this remains the most crucial political issue in Kafka: crucial then, and crucial now, in a special way. If we tried to define a "hero of our time" (a latter-day Lermontov), we might well arrive at a similar description.

A simplistic solution would seek a return to the old epic element, to a new heroism of today, as Badiou demanded in a lecture at the French Institute in Athens a few years back. Can a hero-philosopher and strayed father resume the task of guiding the community? After all, the hypnotic element continues to thrive in another kind of epic; it links to song and rhythm, and we can see its naïve side flourishing in the super-heroes of today's films or comics: the heroic defeat of the adversaries has a rhythm which fascinates the onlooker; its pace is able to destroy the opponent while also keeping the viewers mesmerised. The "epic-thirsty" community pulses to the beat of songs: this and the coordinated hypnosis appear as prerequisites of the communal element.

However, the hero described by Kafka is nothing like the hero of Badiou or the American super-hero. Expelled from the community, he seeks, in a clear way and using reason as the tool of communication, to influence situations in which his discourse proves to be inadequate. Although the hero is rational, he often seems to be in error. Specifically, the situations he faces reflect his loss of contact with the community, to which he cannot belong since he is rational. Reason now becomes a weapon of suicide, a mechanism which confirms his exit from the group, an impasse: he is still mourning for his lost roots in the epic dimension of truth, for the loss of understanding.

What does the loss of the epic element mean, as mourned by Borges and Benjamin in their own different ways? The prospect of a regulated epic poetry and a regulatory epic truth seems to point towards the end of the hero: the end of its self, of the special rhythmic element of poetry, of the stability of reality and also a tendency towards the end of the individual.

Under a hasty generalisation, the political element and the apolitical limitation can be seen as the relation of one towards the many; as the individual's responsibility towards the many to take action. This special condition of the political element relates to some unfeasible regulation of the individual.

We could say that in its epic form the communal scheme was regulated by the power of a hero and the corresponding power of a common representation of the community. The community could sleepwalk regulated by one-track perceptions of reality.

Yet communal sleepwalking and the community pattern in the case of constitutional rumour (if we were to generalise Benjamin's reading of Kafka in this way) introduce deregulation among the characteristics of the community. If we approach rumour as a function that organises things and the community around them, then rumour supports an unfounded universe. Moreover, the world of consensus it proposes is the world of a sleepy, a priori acceptance of anything. The loss of rhythm in the case of the rumouring community (instead of a structured group) equals an acceptance of the failure to form a community; the same failure characterises the sleeplessness of the unregulated post-epic hero who is presented in prose, cut off from the community and with his heroic attributes distorted.

In this sense, the investigations of a dog and most of Kafka's works are sleepless texts.

When Sloterdijk reads the concept of sleeplessness in, he hastens to describe its fate as "deconstruction without deconstructors" (Peter Sloterdijk, *Essai d'intoxication volontaire suivi de l'heure du crime et le temps de l'œuvre d'art*, (2000) French ed. Hachette 2001, p. 342). Deconstruction without a hero, without a signature, surrender to some dissolving process taking place sleeplessly, without anyone in charge. The sleepless hero of Benjamin and Kafka, would guarantee some morality behind the collapse; he could manage the heroic element, assume the responsibility for some morality. Yes to deconstruction: no to Cioran's sleeplessness according to Sloterdijk. At once we start wondering about the dynamic of this absence of signature, of responsibility, of morality. This "without" reaffirms the power of morality in its absence; it is a last call for morality. Some kind of resignation within alertness, already evident in Kafka, is repeated in the literary dynamic of subsequent literature. Cioran is a good example of this, as he describes 'literally' the framework of resignation and the terms it imposes on any action. Resignation within a state of alertness.

We remember also Zizek talking about the reverse: about today's (or is it already yesterday's?) need to give up or distance oneself from things. He writes: "Do you mean we should do nothing? Just sit and wait? One should gather the courage to answer: 'YES, precisely that!' There are situations when the only truly 'practical' thing to do is to resist the temptation to engage immediately and to 'wait and see' by means of a patient, critical analysis. Engagement seems to exert its pressure on us from all directions". And in his description of such a distanced person, he continues: "...while, in reality, withdrawing to a secluded place and studying... There is more than cheap cynicism in this advice". (Slavoj Zizek, *Violence. Six sideways reflections*. Picador, 2008, p. 15).

"Waking up outside the community" is an intellectual's dream, the political import of a balance between sleeping and awakening: to be able to look on from outside while living within the community. The dream of a sleepless divine gaze haunts the thinking man who surveys what the others never thought, since the thinker stands outside the space which others experience as internal. It is in this context that we can justify Zizek's urging to come out of the community in order to assume a better stance towards it.

Benjamin's observation about Kafka and the way he carries the argument into a special solitary point outside the community looks graver than Zizek's strategic resignation. The resignation from the community in Kafka's case is charged with some insurmountable silence. His intellectual dog hero thinks, in the one poetic turn in the story: "we survive all questions, even our own, bulwarks of silence that we are". (Franz Kafka, "Investigations of a Dog", trans W & E Muir, in *The Penguin Complete Short Stories of Franz Kafka*, Penguin, 1983, p. 292).

Silence has descended deep down into the sleepless questions; mere silence remains deep within each query and each sleeplessness. Therein we may find the secret of the folly that Benjamin talks about; the secret of the meaning of distancing oneself from things. The enquiry into the world seeks no answer, nor is there a prospect of an investigation associated with meaning: research is undertaken only when it is a priori doomed to fail. We can only investigate when folly governs the investigation. The other and reason are what Kafka mourns for; they are present with the power of their absence.

Borges portrays the epic hero as a father figure that guides the reader. The hero is worth imitating. Hypnotised we follow his steps; the rhythm of his stride mesmerises us. Unthinkingly we are already singing behind him. Seen under Benjamin's twisted reading, Kafka constructs the hero out of his inability to stand before the community. Some epic lies hidden in the destruction of the relation between the individual and the community: some voice recites the epic of the destroyed person: the epic of the abolished hero. Could this be another human epic? Could the hero be determined by the problem or by his very inability to emerge? Can such a shortcoming in a hero become a determinant? This is not merely a technical question pertaining to Kafka's literature. On the contrary, such a defeated epic seems to be like a permanently "last" epic of humanity. An epic that seeks humiliation and is organised by defeat. Something like a mental destruction (an inner revelation) cuts off the hero's voice from the community and the world. The voice's failure to attain meaning is its power. The epic of the individual's loss sees also the animal in an advanced position in the human world, as the depth of human folly.

Is this twisted genre anything like the epic that Borges expects to find? A text which would demonstrate (in an increasingly brilliant or decadent way) the hero's destruction? Can we inhabit the rhythm of such a loss? When the axis is a person who cannot stand before the community unless he is steeped in folly, how can there emerge such a post-hero or knight of infinite resignation (to remember Kierkegaard), such an athlete of mourning or despair (to remember Hugo Ball), such an anchorite cut off from the world (to remember Cioran)? What kind of syntax or rhythm would be required for the text in which this hero would breathe? And can the epic of the loss of an individual made of folly ever question the community while it staggers off-pace, stumbles out of all syntax as evidence of monastic ethics (even if it concerns each of us individually)? And also: What community can be formed by people moulded out of their own collapse, their severance from the community? Can the refutation of the community that reigns in Kafka's universe look forward to some future resolution, within or after such a destruction? Community out of the refusal of community: if we wanted such a community, would we be seeking it as a way out of the self and the dreary coexistence with others?

The presentation of truth and its forfeit opens the prospect for some radical change which yearns for wisdom and for the lost bond of the individual with the community. The inability for speech to compose the individual and communication to compose the community are not merely a despairing conclusion; they point to a haste for some idealised restitution which is hinted at rather than described, like a negative force in Kafka's works. Do the individual and the community become two separate worlds then? Shall we convey this rumour again?