Without a name: Kurt Drawert and the dislocated self

This essay places Kurt Drawert’s work (notably Haus ohne Menschen and Nacht. Fabriken) in the context of contemporary philosophical debates on uncertainty and impossible access to other minds. In an intensification of the experience of Lord Chandos, Drawert’s 2001 collection Nacht. Fabriken offers us suspicions of simulating voices, bodies of simulation, and understanding which simulates memory – ‘the wound inflicted upon me is a self-inflicted wound, a wound without a name’. It is argued here that the dislocated self of Drawert’s literary texts significantly intersects with radical accounts of the communicating subject in a post-transcendental world. The essay is also an autobiographical trace of my transition from work on literary theory and practice in the GDR to the theory of communication.

L’unité avec autrui est donc, en fait, irréalisable.
(Jean-Paul Sartre, L’Etre et le néant)

1 Without memory or word
The discourse of ideological authority in the GDR doggedly proclaimed a brave new socialist world which would ultimately usher in a communist world … once the potato harvest plan target had again been exceeded. Leipzig, more of an odour than a city in the 1980s, clouded such evocations of a socialist paradise: the sulphurous setting sun, time arrested amidst clouds of toxic waste, land lacerated by lignite excavations, Honecker’s works to be found under ‘Philosophy’ in VEB-Buchhandlungen. The gap between the words that proclaimed a paradisiacal future and an almost (not quite) wordless infernal present had reached its widest point. The works of Kurt Drawert, but also Gert Neumann and Wolfgang Hilbig, gave particular expression to this rupture, and the bankrupt idea of a rational utopia achieved via industrial progress was revealed by the shrill, operatic tautology of ‘real existing socialism’. Drawert’s Haus ohne Menschen is, predictably, not a place of refuge but a dehumanised shell populated by insane voyeurs luxuriating in the detritus and damp of post-socialist Leipzig:

I am quite without feeling at the thought that everything will be dissolved and incinerated, everything that caused its own dissolution and incineration and that was and is substance and now sticking to my skin and clinging to my memory only to rise again in long, lonely nights as a barren, ripped picture without people.
And here, not even memory can be taken for granted: the past itself is an almost suspect value amidst the crepuscular clandestinity of Leipzig/Laaibtsisch. Even the materiality of the building yields to decay with walls, doors and windows described as an appearance; putrefying effluent dissolves the distinction between house and road. This house is a place in oblivion, nameless and never remembered – a city of the ‘expropriation of memory and biography’ (Peter Geist). The greyish-yellow film that lines the rooms narrates history in silence: the clandestine, mute history of a simulation that broke the link between word and reality. The bodies of the people who lived in such conditions are so riven with lies that memory is nothing but a ‘barren, incinerated and idea-less landscape that will provide the blueprint and construction site for a coming pitiless, destructive utopia’.

Whereas in 1905 Hofmannsthal’s scion of the nobility expressed the crisis of language, in the rather less salubrious clandestine mine of Drawert’s Nacht. Fabriken, connected to the surface by a tiny lift, the forced labourers of the lumpen-lumpenproletariat use words ever more sparingly and the well-read narrator runs the risk of being understood by none of his fellow workers (‘There are sentences that push us into greater loneliness than is the case anyway’), desperately seeking to control memory, and sensing that his voice can decompose into syllables, sounds, words and sentences:

The suspicion that the voice is a simulating voice, that this body is only a body of simulation, that this understanding of the past is only an understanding which simulates memory, that the wound inflicted upon me is a self-inflicted wound, a wound without a name.

When, in this reality of ‘substantives’ and not ‘thoughts’, the operator Hauser is introduced to ‘Nummer 27’ he falls silent, apparently without adequate words for the situation and ‘naturally’ little aware that he would no longer need any …

2 Impossible unity and the myth of socialist identity

Let us leave Hauser in his underground factory and consider some unexpected intertexts with social theory and philosophy. In Social Structure and Semantics, Niklas Luhmann argued that Enlightenment thinkers had extrapolated a general theory of society from idealised, face-to-face encounters in which reason would take shape and influence power. And yet, at the same time, the reciprocity implied in