

## § 5 Kommerell, or On Gesture

### I

Criticism has three levels: philologico-hermeneutic, physiognomic, and gestic. Of these three levels, which can be described as three concentric spheres, the first is dedicated to the work's interpretation; the second situates the work (in both historical and natural orders); the third resolves the work's intention into a gesture (or into a constellation of gestures). It can be said that every authentic critic moves through all three fields, pausing in each of them according to his own temperament. The work of Max Kommerell—certainly the greatest German critic of the twentieth century after Benjamin, and perhaps the last great personality between the wars who still remains to be discovered—is almost wholly inscribed in the third field, where supreme talents are rarest (among the critics of the twentieth century, other than Benjamin, only Jacques Rivière, Félix Fénéon, and Gianfranco Contini truly belong to this category).

What is a gesture? It suffices to glance through Kommerell's essay on Heinrich von Kleist to register the centrality and complexity of the subject of gesture in Kommerell's thought, as well as the decisiveness with which he always leads the author's intention back to this sphere. Gesture is not an absolutely nonlinguistic element but, rather, something closely tied to language. It is first of all a forceful presence in language itself, one that is older and more originary than conceptual expression. Kommerell defines linguistic gesture (*Sprachgebärde*) as the stratum of language that is not exhausted in communication and that captures language, so to speak, in its solitary moments. "The sense of these gestures," he writes with reference to lyric poetry,

is not exhausted in communication. However compelling it may be for an Other, gesture never exists only for him; indeed, only insofar as it also exists for itself can it be compelling for the Other. Even a face that is never witnessed has its mimicry; and it is very much a question as to which gestures leave an imprint on its physical appearance, those through which he makes himself understood with others or, instead, those imposed on him by solitude and inner dialogue. A face often seems to tell us the history of solitary moments.<sup>1</sup>

Thus Kommerell can write that “speech is originary gesture [*Urbärde*], from which all individual gestures derive,” and that poetic verse is essentially gesture: “Language is both conceptual and mimetic. The first element dominates in prose, the second in verse. Prose is above all the understanding of a concept; beyond prose and more decisively than prose, verse is expressive gesture.”<sup>2</sup> If this is true, if speech is originary gesture, then what is at issue in gesture is not so much a prelinguistic content as, so to speak, the other side of language, the muteness inherent in humankind’s very capacity for language, its *speechless* dwelling in language. And the more human beings have language, the stronger the unsayable weighs them down, to the point that in the poet, the speaking being with the most words, “the making of references and signs is worn out, and something harsh is born—violence toward speech.”<sup>3</sup>

In Kommerell’s essay on Kleist, this state of speechlessness in language appears on three levels: the enigma (*Rätsel*), in which the more the speaker tries to express himself in words, the more he makes himself incomprehensible (as happens to the characters of Kleist’s drama); the secret (*Geheimnis*), which remains unsaid in the enigma and is nothing other than the Being of human beings insofar as they live in the truth of language; and the mystery (*Mysterium*), which is the mimed performance of the secret. And in the end the poet appears as him who “remained without words in speech, dying for the truth of the sign.”<sup>4</sup>

Precisely for this reason—insofar, that is, as gesture, having to express Being in language itself, strictly speaking has nothing to express and nothing to say other than what is said in language—gesture is always the gesture of being at a loss in language; it is always a “gag” in the literal sense of the word, which indicates first of all something put in someone’s mouth to keep him from speaking and, then, the actor’s improvisation to make up for an impossibility of speaking. But there is a gesture that felicitously establishes itself in this emptiness of language and, without filling it,

makes it into humankind's most proper dwelling. Confusion turns to dance, and "gag" to mystery.

In his book on Jean Paul, which for some readers is his masterpiece, Kommerell delineates this dialectic of gesture in his own terms:

The beginning is a feeling of the "I" that, in every possible gesture and especially in each of its own gestures, experiences something false, a deformation of the inside with respect to which all faithful presentation seems a curse against the spirit. It is a feeling in which the "I," looking at itself in the mirror, discerns a pamphlet stuck to it, even incorporated into it, and, looking outside, laments himself, amazed to see in the face of his fellow men the fullness of comical masks. . . . The disjunction between appearance and essence lies at the basis of both the sublime and the comical; the small sign of the corporeal points to the indescribable.<sup>5</sup>

Kommerell opposes Jean Paul's gesture to Goethe's gesture, which shelters the enigma of his characters in a symbol:

Very rarely and in fact only for the enchanting excess of his two girlish demons, Goethe allows himself the exception of a gesture that belongs to them alone. It is a gesture that is repeated and that somehow contains the person; it is the person's symbol. The assistant describes the manner in which Ottilie refuses to do something that is demanded of her and that she cannot do: "Her hands held up in the air, she presses her palms together and lowers them to her breast, leaning forward only a little bit and looking at whoever is demanding something of her in such a way that he gladly renounces anything he might have wanted of her." In a similar way, it is said that Mignon puts her left hand on her chest and her right hand on her forehead, bowing deeply. With such simple means, Goethe masters a nature that lies at the edge of the human. But his gestures, unlike Jean Paul's, are not obtrusive; they are restrained, and they shelter in themselves the enigma of the figure.<sup>6</sup>

Beyond this order of gestures, which Kommerell defines as "gestures of the soul," lies a higher sphere, which he calls pure gesture:

Beyond the gestures of the soul and the gestures of nature there is a third sphere, which one may call pure gestures. Its temporality is the eternity of Jean Paul's dreams. These dreams, dreamt in a superhuman sleep of the brightest wakefulness, are fragments of an other world in the soul of Jean Paul. Worldly wisdom, piety and art are indistinguishable in this world, and their essence is not relation, as in the Romantic dream, but the soul itself, which burns in its own adventure without any earthly fuel. The sonorous and

luminous vibrations of these dreams refer to the biography of the poet, just as physiological colors, which the eye produces on its own, refer to externally perceived colors. The linguistic forms in which the soul expresses itself . . . are the pure possibility of speaking itself, and, when placed together with the gestures of the soul and the gestures of nature, they show their supernatural origin. These "pure gestures" have given up all claim to reality. . . . Consumed in themselves, the soul paints itself with its own luminous shades.<sup>7</sup>

These are the gestures of which Kommerell writes at the end of his essay on Kleist, stating that "a new beauty begins, one that is similar to the beauty of the gestures of an animal, to soft and threatening gestures."<sup>8</sup> They call to mind the redeemed world, whose uncertain gestures Benjamin, in the same years, discerned in Kafka's "Oklahoma Nature Theater":

One of the most significant functions of this theater is to dissolve happenings into their gestic components. . . . Kafka's entire work constitutes a code of gestures which surely had no definite symbolic meaning for the author from the outset; rather, the author tried to derive such a meaning from them in ever-changing contexts and experimental groupings. The theater is the logical place for such groupings.<sup>9</sup>

Criticism is the reduction of works to the sphere of pure gesture. This sphere lies beyond psychology and, in a certain sense, beyond all interpretation. It opens not onto literary history or a theory of genres but onto a stage such as the Oklahoma theater or Calderón's *Great Theater of the World* (Kommerell dedicated his last critical works to Calderón in *Beiträge zu einem deutschen Calderón*). Consigned to their supreme gesture, works live on, like creatures bathed in the light of the Last Day, surviving the ruin of their formal garment and their conceptual meaning. They find themselves in the situation of those *Commedia dell'arte* figures Kommerell loved so dearly; Harlequin, Pantaloon, Columbine, and the Captain, emancipated from written texts and fully defined roles, oscillate forever between reality and virtuality, life and art, the singular and the generic. In the comedy that criticism substitutes for literary history, the *Recherche* or the *Commedia* ceases to be the established text that the critic must investigate and then consign, intact and inalterable, to tradition. They are instead the gestures that, in those wondrous texts, exhibit only a gigantic lack of memory, only a "gag" destined to hide an incurable speechlessness.

## II

"In San Gimignano my hands were flayed by the thorns of a rose bush in George's garden that was in surprisingly beautiful, partial bloom."<sup>10</sup> The book to which Benjamin cryptically refers in this letter of July 27, 1929, to his friend Scholem is *Der Dichter als Führer in der deutschen Klassik*, the first work of the twenty-six-year-old Max Kommerell. I do not have the first edition (1928) before me, but in accordance with the characteristic typography of Bondi, the publishing house of the Stefan George circle, it should have borne the seal of the swastika, a hooked cross, slightly different from the one that was to become the symbol of Hitler's Germany a few years later. That early swastika marked the *Werke der Wissenschaft aus dem Kreise der Blätter für die Kunst*, a publishing house that had already brought out, among other works, Gundolf's essays on Goethe and George, Bertram's book on Nietzsche, and *Herrschaft und Dienst* by Wolters, who had been Kommerell's teacher in Marburg. Kommerell's intimate participation in George's circle and subsequent break with it (which is something similar to Benjamin's early break with Gustav Wyneken) mark Kommerell's youth in a decisive fashion.

If one wanted to characterize the physiognomy of the George circle in one salient trait, one could say that it sought to exorcise its own inner anguish through a ritual. What is decisive in George is the contrast between the prophetic lucidity of his diagnosis of his own time and the esoteric bearing that he derived from it. Perhaps nowhere else is this diagnosis expressed so radically as in the verse with which George summarizes the precept to which the poet must adhere: "There can be no thing where the word is lacking."<sup>11</sup> The extent to which George could not bear the experience of this emptiness can be clearly seen in one of the dreams that the poet transcribed in *Works and Days*. Here George is confronted by a head hanging in his room, and he desperately tries to make it speak, forcibly moving its lips with his fingers.<sup>12</sup> It can be said that the entire work of the George circle consists in the anguished attempt to speak at the point at which a word (and hence a thing) is no longer possible. Where the word and the thing are lacking, the George circle establishes a ritual of imminence.

The sense of George's "secret Germany" is precisely that of preparing the way for what, nevertheless, was bound to happen: the regeneration of the German people. In this way, George betrays his own precept and—if

only in the form of expectation—posits a thing where a name is no longer possible. At times Heidegger also engages in this evocation of an imminence, though he understood perfectly that the thing for which the word is lacking is nothing other than the word itself. But prophecy can never establish itself in the form of expectation, even and above all if the former refers to language; prophecy is legitimate only as an interruption of existing words (and things). This is why history has taken revenge on George's secret Germany, condemning it, in Benjamin's words, to being in the final analysis only the "arsenal of the official Germany, in which the helmet hangs beside the magic hood."<sup>13</sup> And a second time, in the failure of the heroic assassination attempt on Hitler with which Claus von Stauffenberg, together with one of Kommerell's closest friends in the George circle, tried to buy back German honor.

With his acute sensitivity to false gestures, Kommerell broke with George at the end of 1930, on the occasion of the publication of Wolters's book *Stefan George und die Blätter für die Kunst*, which inaugurates the hagiography of George. Kommerell severely denounced the "liturgical pathos" that here intruded into poetry, together with a lack of rigor in "the spiritual sphere." "Between simple magic—be it ecclesiastical or theatrical—and Philistinism dressed up as spirit," he stated, "there are some profound differences as to means, but none as to quality."<sup>14</sup> In response to Kommerell's objection that Wolters's book did not answer to the truth, the master wrote, "what is at issue there is not the truth, but the State" ("the State" was, not by chance, the term with which the adepts referred to the George circle). The only remaining possibility was rupture. But the association had been too close for the break not to produce a victim; unable to decide between friend and master, on February 25, 1931, Hans Anton, a George disciple involved in a passionate relationship with Kommerell, took his own life.

The pall that this suicide cast upon Kommerell's youth perhaps explains the omission that marks the limit of his work: this great critic never wrote about any of his contemporaries. For Kommerell (who was unfamiliar with none of the great European cultural traditions), not only do Kafka, Proust, and Robert Walser seem never to have existed, but even the slightest reference to contemporaneity is lacking in his writings. In this ascesis, which is surely not accidental, one can discern the final reflection of the blindness to the present for which Benjamin reproved the George circle when he wrote, "Today is the bull whose blood must fill the ditch, so that the spirits of the dead may appear at its edge."<sup>15</sup>

## III

At the end of his book on Jean Paul, Kommerell speaks of modern man as a man who has lost his gestures. The age of Jean Paul is the age in which the bourgeoisie, which in Goethe still seemed to possess its symbols, fell victim to interiority:

Both Jean Paul's humor and the philosophy of German Idealism derive from this situation of the bourgeoisie, in which forms of life have lost their intimacy and simplicity, and the inane pettiness of all exteriority isolates interiority. Goethe and Jean Paul are both writers of the bourgeoisie . . . , but in Goethe the bourgeoisie is still a class [*Stand*]; in Jean Paul it is only in disorder [*Mißstand*]. As long as "external" life can still be seen as beautiful or, to the degree that it has a melody, can still be heard as beautiful, the spirit is not unconditionally free to reject it. . . . Fully liberated spirit is a consequence of the bourgeoisie that has lost its gestures.<sup>16</sup>

But an epoch that has lost its gestures is, by the same token, obsessed by them; for men from whom all authenticity has been taken, gesture becomes destiny. And the more gestures lost their ease under the pressure of unknown powers, the more life became indecipherable. And once the simplest and most everyday gestures had become as foreign as the gesticulations of marionettes, humanity—whose very bodily existence had already become sacred to the degree that it had made itself impenetrable—was ready for the massacre.

In modern culture, Nietzsche marks the apex of this polar tension toward the effacement of gestures and transfiguration into destiny. For the eternal return is intelligible only as a gesture (and hence solely as theater) in which potentiality and actuality, authenticity and mannerism, contingency and necessity have become indistinguishable. *Thus Spake Zarathustra* is the ballet of a humanity that has lost its gestures. And when the age became aware of its loss (too late!) it began its hasty attempt to recuperate its lost gestures *in extremis*. Isadora and Diaghilev's ballets, Proust's novel, Rilke and Pascoli's great *Jugendstil* poetry, and, finally, in the most exemplary fashion, silent film—all these trace the magic circle in which humanity tried to evoke for the last time what it was soon to lose irretrievably. And in the same years, Aby Warburg began his research, which truly had gesture at its center (and which only the myopia of psychologizing art history could define as a "science of the image"), gesture as the crystal of historical memory and gesture in its petrification as destiny, which

artists strenuously (and, according to Warburg, almost madly) attempted to grasp through dynamic polarities.

Kommerell may well be the thinker who best knew how to read this impulse of the epoch toward a liberation and absolutization of gesture. In his essay "Poetry in Free Verse and the God of Poets," he looks to poetry to consider what modern poets, from Hölderlin to Rilke, search for in the angel, the half-god, the marionette, and the animal. And he finds that what is at issue is not a namable substance but, rather, a figure of annihilated human existence, its "negative outline" and, at the same time, its self-transcendence not toward a beyond but in "the intimacy of living here and now," in a profane mystery whose sole object is existence itself. And perhaps nowhere else does he succeed so clearly in expressing the final intention of his writing as in his essay on *Wilhelm Meister*, in which, as has been noted,<sup>17</sup> he makes the most explicit confession of which he is capable:

Indeed, the path that Wilhelm Meister follows is, in its worldliness, a path of initiation. He is initiated into life itself. . . . Initiation must be distinguished from both teaching and doctrine. It is both less and more. . . . And if it is life that initiates, it does not do so thanks to holy institutions but, precisely, outside them. If the state could still teach, if society could still educate and the Church could still sanctify . . . then life would not be able to initiate. This is life, purely worldly, purely earthly, purely contingent—and precisely this life initiates. For life has been given a power that is otherwise exercised only in sacred domains. Now life is the sacred domain, the only one that remains. And into what does it initiate? Not into its meaning, only into itself. Into something that, in its incarnation in beauty, pain, and enigmas, constantly borders on meaning without ever uttering it and while remaining unnamable. Life thus has a secret; indeed, life is a secret. After every single realization, however compelling, after every single disenchantment, however terrible, life returns to its secret. And if in the old novels of Christian Baroque, the series of individual disillusionments ended with the irrevocable, irreparable disillusionment of man about the world and about himself, here all disillusionments lead only to this point, where life itself remains secret and where its charm grows on account of its having kept not its promise but, instead, far more than it promised. Perhaps one should not call life holy, for we are accustomed to tie the concept of holiness to a determinate religious or, more recently, ethical domain. No: the fact that life is assigned this force of initiation gives rise to something new, a mystery of the everyday and the worldly that is this poet's possession.<sup>18</sup>

In this text, the man who in the George circle had known the sacred pathos of the sect and who, through that circle, had been initiated into



the myth of the poet as “guide” and “model of a community of creative people”<sup>19</sup> frees himself of his youthful initiation, seeing in poetry only the self-initiation of life to itself. But precisely in this idea of a wholly profane mystery in which human beings, liberating themselves from all sacredness, communicate to each other their lack of secrets as their most proper gesture, Kommerell’s criticism reaches the political dimension that seems obstinately lacking from his work. For politics is the sphere of the full, absolute gesturality of human beings, and it has no name other than its Greek pseudonym, which is barely uttered here: philosophy.