

Aus dem Berliner Journal

M.Frisch

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'Journal' or 'Tagebuch' ? The distinction is fine, in fact its existence may even be imaginary. The editor nevertheless attempts one. While a 'Journal' is more or less a factual account, a kind of log-book, confining itself to a running documentary, the 'Tagebuch' addresses a wider palette of issues, and the format rather provides an excuse to write than imposes an obligation to do so. In fact not unlike a travel account, where the actual path of subsequent displacements gives a coherency to what otherwise may just be a disconnected set of reflections. In other words we are talking about a trunk, out of which digressions may sprout as so much foliage. In that sense, the excerpts presented are those of a diary rather than a journal. As the editor rightly remarks, one may discern a number of recurrent themes (he lists four), the most interesting being accounts of conversations with fellow writers, and the encounters with the cautious relations between intellectuals and the DDR-regime.

One of the paradoxes of a diary day-by-day account is how deficient it usually is to evoke the prosaic nature of day-to-day living. One would naively think that by systematically listing the events of the day, the major as well as the minor, one would almost get a photographic account. The authenticity of a photograph rests to a large extent on the presence of unintentional detail. How fascinating would it not be to have access to unfiltered photos of the past that antedates the invention of photography (i.e. the mechanical fixation of the image, the camera obscura itself dates from antiquity, and in fact far beyond in terms of the natural evolution of the eye). What we would look for in such images would be the inconsequential details, the concrete objects of the debris of history, which unlike abstract ideas, are anchored in time, and in spite of their physical nature (or maybe rather because of it), tend to be more ephemeral than communicated thought. History is essentially, as Collingwood well understood, a forensic exercise. To recreate the past out of the subtle traces it leaves in the present (and never to forget that it is a mere re-creation).

In the same way we approach a diary in order to go behind the scene, to really get a feeling for what it means to live a life different from our own (and thus enrich our own existence by stuffing into it additional lives). But if that is our primary goal, we are bound to become disappointed. Narratives unlike pictures, cannot be represented pixel by pixel. Rather than to mechanically show, they have to evoke. A picture evokes as well of course, the actual canvas with its pigments and charred lines, is just a basis for a subsequent experience. With words, there is no canvas, only evocation. But if the evocation is skillful enough it may create the illusion that there is an underlying canvas. One of the problems of a written account is that it has to paint on different times-scales. Thus many essential features vanish if the presentation is given in shorter chunks of time. The atmosphere of a memory is global, it cannot be localized, pin-pointed in time. It is not in the nature of a so called episodic memory. And a diary (or at least a journal, if the distinction should

be maintained) is if anything a set of chronologically arranged episodes. Thus a literary retroactive condensation can give a much more truthful and vivid image than a systematic blow-by-blow account, especially if it is not always literally faithful. (In particular Frisch's imaginary account of a divided Zürich, is more evocative than any factual reference to the divided Berlin in which he actually lived.) The reason is of course Platonic, the form having more endurance and truth, than the accidental manifestation. Yet of course, one should not underestimate the power of the accidental manifestation to evoke and illuminate (as well as falsify), yet it will never be enough.

What particularly struck me when I first read 'Homo faber' and thus came into my first contact with Frisch, was his masterly evocation of locality. How he could in a few words sketch how it felt to be in the steamy jungles of Guatemala, or on the dry hillsides of Greece. In particular the phrase 'Vollgas im Leerlauf' imprinted itself indelibly in my memory as a succinct summary how it may feel to spend a night in a down-town hotel in Rome. Of this there is nothing in the journal, in particular there is no evocation of the different atmosphere of West and East Berlin, never an account of how it feels crossing a check-point, which he must have done many a time. In DDR there was subtle political pressure and you could feel it in the walls¹, none of that emerges in the diary. On the other hand had Frisch at some later date tried to evoke his time in Berlin I am sure he would have rendered it, because it is something that only becomes apparent upon reflection, and even if there is reflection in his 'Tagebuch' it cannot cover everything. Yet, admittedly, in the beginning there is conveyed a sense of what it means to move into a new apartment, to make it your home, and the potentials such a move entails in getting to know and live in a new urban universe. And naturally one envies a 'freie Schriftsteller' especially a successful one, for the freedom he or she enjoys in not having the income coupled to a particular place, but to be free to move around in the world, wherever your fancy takes you, not just as a tourist but as a bona fide resident. (And residency, like marriage, need not be permanent.)

The literary reader may most of all be interested in gossip. What was Uwe Johnson really like? Are we going to catch Grass in a compromising situation? (Or maybe more innocently: What did Frisch think of Thomas Mann?) This is standard fare in a writers diary, but too often it reduces to mere name-dropping. 'Lunch today with X.' without giving any particulars, nor any resume of the conversation. And as Eckermann already remarked, a conversation can be delightful and engaging, yet at the end of it you cannot recall anything of what was really said. Too often, at least for the readers of diaries, the main point of a conversation is not what is being said, but that things are said in the first place. Frisch does try, at least intermittently, to convey the essence of his relations with literary friends, by recalling the main features in encounters, his most ambitious attempts being with Johnson, with whom (one learns from the appendix) he carried on an extensive correspondence². However the most revealing features of those encounters

¹ I visited DDR a few times between 1979 and 1984, and that feeling was very palpable, much more so than in other Eastern-Bloc states such as Rumania and Bulgaria, whose obvious cultural exoticism would render the subtler forms invisible. The setting of the latter is more or less like Turkey, while the DDR-setting is almost Scandinavian.

² Johnson whose 'Zwei Ansichten' my maternal aunt once presented my parents with for Christmas

are those connecting to the presence of the DDR-regime. The DDR was in many ways an anomaly. Brandt said famously that it was 'weder demokratisch noch deutsch'. A large chunk of traditional German lands were cleansed of its ethnicity and transferred to different suzerainties, another smaller chunk, remained German at least in name and population, its population of 17 millions dwarfed by its western counterpart, towards which it would remain in a more or less permanent state of inferiority. It was subjugated by the Soviet Union, its regime but a puppet, yet out of the impossible situation it still tried to carve out of position of decency. A population chastened by defeat and guilt, it could only justify itself by political servility. The intellectual had to step cautiously. On one hand he may very well see through the pretense of the regime, yet he must also be loyal to it, to make the best of the situation. Thus when encountering a westerner, speaking the same language, sharing the same culture, what could he do with this balancing act? Irony was the obvious solution, not too obvious, yet not too subtle either as to be mistaken for the literal truth. Occasionally Frisch pressures some of his eastern interlocutors, partly out of spite, but maybe mostly out of genuine curiosity, to find out what makes it tick, in what sense it was democratic, and what to make of its revolutionary pretensions. Such inquiries would inevitably lead to confusion and embarrassed silences. And then there was the spectacle of some people being allowed to travel to the capitalistic west, others permanently barred from such excursions, trapped in a small regional country. Material deprivations I found merely charming, but the impossibility for the vast majority to travel, I found terrible. But of course what would have been left of DDR without the wall? Frisch reflects on this inequality. How would people deal with it? Would those who were given parole, be seen as undeservedly lucky, or being tainted by some unsavory collaborations? None of that would emerge in the polite encounters he had. And one detail. He refers to a party involving the Johnsons and the Wolfs. Where did it take place? And how come it was able to have them meet at the same location. Johnsons as refugees from the DDR, would hardly be allowed back again, and if so, surely would think of it as an unnecessary risk. While the Wolfs as DDR citizens would have difficulty going to the West, in particular to West-Berlin³. To this there is no explanation, probably because there was no need for him to formulate one. Frisch remarks that while the DDR-bürger can refer to the capitalist West out there, westerners can hardly refer to DDR as the Socialist country on the other side. The DDR-citizen can hardly ignore the west, but the westerner can of course fully ignore the easterners. Still more than twenty-five years after the fall of the wall once can sense the different atmosphere in eastern Germany, one can almost pinpoint the former border without the aid of a map. Ironically, while in existence I deplored the DDR, now when it is gone, I prefer its former lands as somehow being more genuine and having more

present and thereby made me acquainted with his name long before I was aware of Frisch, I accidentally came across recently as I last year bicycled through the small town of Klütz, in vain looking for accommodation, instead chancing upon the Uwe Johnson Haus, having no idea that there would be a connection.

³ For some one growing up in the 60's and a young adult in the 70's it was hard to fathom that DDR-citizens could actually take trips outside in the late 40's and early 50's, the state itself not coming into existence until 1949. Angela Merker was born in Hamburg in 1954, but her father, a Lutheran pastor, moved to DDR later. In fact to Templin, another city which I have happened to bicycle through recently.

character, almost regretting that it is now an integral part of Germany, although at the time I welcomed the reunion. Of this Frisch would never have any experience, each of us have our allotted time, and if too extended, it only becomes confusing.

Finally to what extent is a diary a treasure trove for a writer, something similar to the artists sketch-book, from which he may reuse formulations or inspiration for new projects. The editor points out the many connections between the Berlin journal and the subsequent book 'Montauk' written shortly afterwards. One connection he misses, or may find insignificant, but that was one that startled me. I read that book during a Christmas excursion when I was spending a year at Ann Arbor in 98-99. You may enjoy a book (just as you may enjoy a conversation) without being able to remember anything particular. But in that book one particular struck me, and that was the narrator remarking that getting on in years had the same feeling as looking at the watch early in the morning and to your dismay discovering how late it already was. The exact quote you seldom remember, only the sense and meaning. Seeing this repeated on page 56 (a reference to the *Gesammelte Werke*, may indicate that the editor too is aware of it after all) I was immediately struck, not being aware that the two sources were so close in time. Has Frisch plagiarized himself (which are the point of writers diaries?) or had that metaphor etched himself into his mind by virtue of having once been formulated? Had he forgotten that it was included in his diary? I am tempted to believe so. The point of a diary is to give vent to the constant need to formulate yourself and is thus free from any ostensible purpose. Just as the artist mostly sketches, not necessarily as preliminary studies, but just in order to submit to the irresistible impulse to trace what you see on paper.

July 6, 2015 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden ulfp@chalmers.se*