

H. G. Adler's 'Grenzgängertum'

Trans-Border Travel between Enlightenment Epistemology and Modernist Representation

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With the belated critical recognition that H. G. Adler's work has been receiving has come a fuller appreciation of the encyclopaedic reach into different disciplines and across genre boundaries that characterizes the ambition and achievement of his 'Gesamtkunstwerk'.¹ This fuller appreciation has been accompanied by a heightened awareness of the importance of responding comprehensively to such a comprehensive enterprise. Thomas Krämer, in his perceptive study of Adler's novels, for instance, speaks of a 'komplementäre Beziehung', a complementary relationship, between in particular the *Theresienstadt* study and the trilogy of Holocaust novels, arguing for an overarching reception that treats them as two facets of a single 'autobiographisches Projekt'² [autobiographical project].

Yet while now being regarded as related, and considered side by side, the academic and the literary in Adler's undertaking continue to be thought of as very much quantitatively and qualitatively distinct. As Lawrence Langer has said in respect of Adler's 'dual vocation as a chronicler of Theresienstadt and as a poet and fiction writer', Adler was 'keenly aware from the start of the differences between the scholarly and the literary approach to what we now call the Holocaust experience', with the former reflecting, according to Langer, 'his determination

¹ The much-cited term 'Gesamtkunstwerk' to emphasize the complexity of Adler's oeuvre was introduced by his first biographer, Jürgen Serke, in Serke, *Böhmische Dörfer: Wanderungen durch eine verlassene literarische Landschaft* (Vienna: Zsolnay, 1987), p. 327. See also Jeremy Adler, 'The World of My Father's Memory Writing: The *Gesamtkunstwerk* of H. G. Adler', in *H. G. Adler: Life, Literature, Legacy*, ed. by Julia Creet, Sara R. Horowitz, and Amira Bojadzija-Dan (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2016), pp. 23-46.

² *Die Poetik des Gedenkens: Zu den autobiographischen Romanen H. G. Adlers* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2012), p. 10.

to capture the objective reality' and the latter 'his equally firm resolve to explore the personal dimensions of German oppression'.³

Thus the distinction between the literary and the non-literary in Adler's work continues to be assumed to be fairly clearly demarcated and predominantly one of degrees of objectivity. And this is felt to manifest itself at every level of the texts: conceptually, thematically and stylistically. As Krämer has argued, the two approaches draw on a 'bipolare Methodik' (bipolar methodology) to reflect their two different 'Modi der Erinnerung' (modes of recollection / remembrance). In the academic mode, where Adler 'describes how individuals become part of the phenomenon called "mass men" (*Massenmenschen*)', the historian's 'main task', as Langer puts it, 'is not to enter the consciousness of individual victims condemned to death'.⁴ It is 'in the guise of novelist', Langer suggests, that Adler gains access here and is able to 'rescue individual identity from the stifling intrusion of the depersonalized mass that threatens to efface it'.⁵ Krämer sums up this 'bi-polar' reading of Adler's work by proposing that only the academic writing should be read as testimony ('unter dem Aspekt des Zeugnisses') while the novels should primarily be understood as the subjective products of personal trauma processing, bearing 'den Charakter therapeutischer Identitätsarbeit, die der Neuverortung des Selbst dient' (the characteristics of therapeutic identity work aimed at repositioning the self).⁶ In stylistic terms, each approach, according to Langer, sees Adler 'inhabit a different world of discourse', and in each, his 'prose rhythm is totally different', with the distinction coming down 'to the way the author uses language in each kind of writing'.⁷

Though it is in many contexts valid and useful to distinguish between Adler's modes of recollection and representation in this way, there are certain risks inherent in assessing his

³ 'Holocaust Fact and Holocaust Fiction: The Dual Vision of H. G. Adler', in *H. G. Adler: Life, Literature, Legacy*, ed. by Creet, Horowitz, and Bojadzija-Dan, pp. 139-59 (pp. 142, 146, 147).

⁴ Langer, pp. 145, 144.

⁵ Langer, pp. 144, 146.

⁶ Krämer, p. 257.

⁷ Langer, pp. 147, 145, 146.

work exclusively in such polarizing terms. On the one hand, we risk reducing his literary oeuvre to the product of a purely personal attempt to come to terms with his traumatic past, or even to a conciliatory counterpoint to what Jeremy Adler has aptly called the ‘unbearable objectivity’ of his scientific project.⁸ On the other hand, we risk underestimating the self-consciousness of his scholarly work, which, on closer inspection, seems to stand in a more nuanced relationship to its epistemological origins and testimonial objective than one might suspect. And finally, we also risk overlooking broader questions raised precisely by the points of contact, and entanglement, between Adler’s scholarly and his literary testimony, questions that suggest that far from them representing two methodologically and formally distinct poles, their ‘bi-polar’ approach in fact exists on a sliding scale, and a closer-range investigation of them as a ‘unified whole’ reveals the boundary between them to be more fluid and permeable than we may have been assuming.⁹

The aim of this chapter will be to foreground the fluidity of this boundary by reading some of Adler’s non-literary writing not simply alongside but against, and through the lens of, his literary work. To aid me in outlining the parameters of my non-polar reading, I am gratefully drawing and building on a term originally employed by Richard Sheppard to describe Adler’s position, in a literary review in which Sheppard, too, apparently situates Adler between two poles – between the ‘classical idealism’ of his training, mind-set, and scholarly objectives, and the formal ‘modernism’ characteristic of some of his non-academic style – and so, in Sheppard’s words, in a state of ‘Grenzgängertum’.¹⁰ However, Sheppard seems not to be stressing polarity here so much as the point that any modernist features in Adler’s literary work

⁸ ‘Good against Evil? H. G. Adler, T. W. Adorno and the Representation of the Holocaust’, in *The German-Jewish Dilemma: From the Enlightenment to the Shoah*, ed. by Edward Timms and Andrea Hammel (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1999), pp. 255-89 (p. 263).

⁹ Jeremy Adler, ‘Afterword’, in H. G. Adler, *Theresienstadt 1941-1945: The Face of a Coerced Community*, trans. by Belinda Cooper (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 803-28 (p. 806).

¹⁰ Richard Sheppard, ‘Book Review: Helen Finch and Lynn L. Wolff (eds), *Witnessing, Memory, Poetics: H. G. Adler and W. G. Sebald*’, *Journal of European Studies*, 45 (2015), 275-77 (p. 277).

must be understood to ‘exist in tension with’ what Sheppard calls his ‘rootedness in the mind-set and epistemology of the Enlightenment’, with the words tension and ‘Grenzgängertum’ both suggesting less a rigid and static and more a mobile, even negotiatory position between conflicting modes.¹¹ ‘Grenzgängertum’ is a difficult term to translate into English, as a ‘Grenzgänger’ can be someone who criss-crosses a border or someone who follows along it, but also someone who pushes at boundaries, with the suffix ‘-tum’, more or less equivalent to the English ‘-dom’, denoting a state or condition, as well as a domain. Though Sheppard himself does not spell this out, it is therefore a term that beautifully captures a reading in which Adler the author and scholar is operating in a border zone and stress field, rather than traversing a line of demarcation, constantly negotiating, rather than abruptly switching, between different modes in his writing. It is on this reading of Sheppard’s ‘Grenzgängertum’, in contradistinction to a dichotomizing ‘bi-polar’ assessment of Adler’s oeuvre, that the following points will be based. Within this framework, I shall examine a select number of passages drawn from the *Theresienstadt* monograph on the one hand, and from the three Holocaust novels on the other, with the contention that such close reading will bring to light the extent to which Adler’s fiction and his non-fiction are not just complementary but can be read as entwined strands, rather than separate poles, of a single encompassing effort. And I shall suggest that reading them in this way shows how not the least of Adler’s achievements was the way in which he managed to problematize and render productive the tensions inherent in his ‘Grenzgängertum’.

I shall start with, and at the end return to, *Theresienstadt*, in order to show how these tensions – between objective and subjective, academic and literary, Enlightenment epistemology and modernist representation – play out not just across the ‘boundary’ between Adler’s fiction and non-fiction but within the scholarly text itself, informing and, occasionally, unsettling Adler’s study at both a thematic and a formal level, in a way that makes it appear in

¹¹ Sheppard, p. 277.

certain respects less as a counter-point to, and more as a proto-text for, the fictional works, and which therefore serves to highlight the limitations of drawing any overly rigid distinctions between Adler's Enlightenment epistemology and his modernist forms, or indeed between his scholarly and his literary practice.¹²

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The *Theresienstadt* monograph faces a fundamental challenge: by its author's own assertion, and by the nature of its undertaking, it is conceptually and methodologically 'rooted', as Sheppard has said, in an Enlightenment 'mind-set and epistemology'.¹³ Yet at a thematic level it also reflects on the failure of the Enlightenment project, a failure that saw the very individual the Enlightenment meant to emancipate and liberate disempowered and extinguished. In his original foreword, as well as the further preface written for the second edition, Adler stresses the breadth, depth, and comprehensiveness to which his 'weit ausholende Monographie' (almost all-encompassing monograph) aspires (XIV, xv). On the first page of the second preface alone, Adler's use of terms such as 'Materialsammlung', 'Übersicht', 'Darstellung', 'geklärt', 'beleuchtet', or 'Dokumentation' (list of resources, overview, account, clarify, shed light, documentation) (XI, xiii) clearly gestures towards the potential ideal of an encyclopaedic account in which the 'innere Geschichte des Lagers' will become 'noch viel lückenloser in fast mikroskopischer Betrachtung vieler Einzelheiten darstellbar' (an account which will 'depict the camp's internal history much more [literally: even more – KG] comprehensively and in near microscopic detail') (XIII, xiv). His goal, as Jeremy Adler has summarized it in his afterword to the English translation, is 'the precise depiction of historical reality' (812), and it

¹² H. G. Adler, *Theresienstadt 1941-1945: Das Antlitz einer Zwangsgemeinschaft* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2005); *Theresienstadt 1941-1945: The Face of a Coerced Community*, trans. by Belinda Cooper (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017). Further references to both editions will be included in parentheses in the text. On the few occasions where I have included a paraphrase or more literal rendering alongside Cooper's excellent translation, this serves purely to clarify my argument.

¹³ Sheppard, p. 277.

is a depiction geared towards ‘Durchleuchtung’ (XIV, xv): towards scrutinizing, intellectually penetrating, shedding light on – and shining a light in – this darkest of periods in human history. The volume in its entirety is dedicated to ‘Menschenwürde’, to human dignity, and it concludes with a call to ‘Humanität’ (humanity) as our most important value, even if we have lost sight of it (685, 601).

Yet the text’s final chapter also presents us with Adler’s theory of mechanical materialism, in the context of which the camps, as the terrible culmination of an ‘ungezügelter Rationalismus’ (unbridled rationalism) (643, 569), embody the ‘Tragödie des Zeitalters’, the tragedy of the modern age (658, 580). Moreover, Adler is quite clear that the demise of the Hitler regime does not spell the end of the tragedy. On the contrary, Theresienstadt should be understood as a ‘Menetekel’, as the writing on the wall (684, 600), leaving Adler to conclude, only at first glance contradictorily, as his account of his time in the camps draws to a close: ‘Wir haben eine Welt durchwandert [...]. Wir stehen mitten in dieser Welt darin [...].’ (We have explored [literally: traversed – KG] a world [...]. We stand in the midst of this world [...]) (682, 599).

Where these two aspects – his rational ‘Durchleuchtung’ and the irrational darkness it is up against – collide for Adler, in the present time of reflecting and in the reflected past, is also where the ‘distanzierte Objektivität seiner Darstellung’ (the detached objectivity of his account), as the back-cover blurb of the German edition terms it, gives way, and the scholarly and the literary, the objective and the personal, converge in his writing.

Where this seems to occur most strikingly in the study is whenever Adler’s account attempts to convey existence inside the ‘unwirkliche Wirklichkeit’ (unreal reality) of Theresienstadt – as the experience of the loss of autonomous subjectivity and all its attendant points of reference – not just as an individual psychological but as a comprehensive epistemological breakdown (667, 587).

Adler proposes that when immersed in the ‘Wahnwelt’ (illusory world) of the concentrationary universe, the individual is likely to display trauma symptoms or even quasi-psychotic behaviour, not because they are experiencing a break *with* reality but as a reaction to a break *in* reality (666, 586):

Im wahren Wortsinn war die Wirklichkeit ver-rückt. Nichts deckte sich in ihr mit dem, was gemeinhin Wirklichkeit gewesen war [...]. [...] So erfuhr man sie als Trug, Schein, Traum, Ausgeburt kranker Phantasie. [...]

Utitz spricht mit gutem Grund von der Schizophrenisierung der Menschen, aber überdies muß erkannt werden, daß sich die Psychose nicht bloß subjektiv im Bewußtsein abgespielt hat, wie es auch keine echte klinische Psychose war, sondern ein das Bewußtsein aufspaltender Reizzustand im Bereich der unentrinnbaren psychischen Affektion, wo der Mensch, verwirrt und zerworfen, sich gleichsam schizoid betragen mußte, um die elementaren Zerwürfnisse im angeborenen und anerzogenen Weltbild mit dem unablässigen Flackern irritierender Erscheinungen mühsam auszugleichen. Es ist gewagt, trifft aber besser die Verhältnisse, wenn wir sagen, daß die Psychose in der Außenwelt feststand, denn die Wirklichkeit selbst war schizophren gespalten und zerfallen. [...] Jeder Wert, jedes Merkmal, jede Eigenschaft hat seine ursprünglich gültigen Bedeutungen eingebüßt oder verändert. (665-66)

[Reality was dis-placed (*ver-rückt*, a play on the words *verrückt* [crazy] and *ver-rückt* [displaced]) in the truest sense. There was nothing in it that conformed to what was commonly seen as reality [...]. [...] Thus it was experienced as deceptive, bogus, a dream, the spawn of sick fantasies. [...]

Dr Emil Utitz [author of *Psychology of Life in the Terezín Concentration Camp* (Prague, 1947) – KG] speaks, with good reason, of people's schizophrenization, but in addition it must be recognized that this psychosis did not just play out subjectively in people's consciousness, and that it was not a genuine clinical psychosis but an irritable condition that split consciousness in the area of inescapable psychological disorder, where the human being, confused and divided, had to behave in a schizoid manner, as it were, in order painfully to balance the elementary discords in his innate and learned worldview with the ceaseless flicker of irritating phenomena. It may seem bold but it better reflects the circumstances to say that the psychosis was established in the outside world, for reality itself was schizophrenically divided and decayed. [...] Every value, every characteristic, and every trait had lost or changed its original meaning.] (586-87)

In his effort to capture aspects of this 'Ver-rücktheit' of reality and collapse of a 'Weltbild' (worldview), Adler establishes a complex network of imagery in *Theresienstadt*. Drawn from philosophy, psychology, religion, sociology, and natural science, these images include 'das Nichts' (nothing), which appears more than a dozen times over the course of the text, the abyss, chaos, and *tohu va bohu*, centripetal versus centrifugal forces, the 'verwaltete Masse' (administered mass), or the uncanny. What all of these have in common is their association with a state of pre- or deindividuation: a state before or beyond individuality and autonomous subjectivity. A further such image, and perhaps the most revealing among them for our purposes, is that of 'das Apeiron'.

As a concept, *apeiron* originates in ancient Greek philosophy, with Anaximander identifying it as the origin or principle of all things. *Apeiron*, meaning that which has no *perata*, or boundaries, denotes an indeterminate state of pre-differentiation. As that which is before and beyond all distinctions, *apeiron* is unbounded in both space and time. It is neither perceptible

nor intelligible, for, in preceding individuation, it precludes objectivizing consciousness. As philosopher Steven Rosen has said, it was the ‘drive toward differentiated being or individuality, toward individuation’ that allowed Western culture to be ‘forged from the struggle of human reason with the irrational forces of nature’, vanquishing ‘*apeiron*’s chaos in favour of perfected order and unadulterated rationality’.¹⁴ By thus ‘stabilizing his position in relation to a stabilized world, “man”, the detached subject’ put himself in a position to ‘exert his influence over nature; [...] treat it as an object; [...] measure it with ever greater precision’.¹⁵

In denoting a state in which subject and object are indistinguishable, *apeiron* in Adler’s use of the term evokes the abrogation of individuality to which the interned were subjected in the concentration camps. At the same time, this more personal association is embedded in a bigger Enlightenment critique. In the broader context of an ‘allgemeine abendländische Kulturkrise’ (general Occidental crisis of culture), the ‘concentrationary universe’, as the negative apex of Enlightenment modernity, marks the return of *apeiron* (634, 562). As Adler puts it:

Man hat die Welt vergeblich um einen nicht mehr ersetzbaren Preis aufgeklärt, indem man das Unheimliche, das Abgründige, das Apeiron aus der Welt geschafft hat – nun ist es wieder erschienen. (667)

[The world had been enlightened, in vain, at a no-longer-recoverable cost, by eliminating the uncanny, the unfathomable, and the *apeiron*; now this uncanniness had reappeared.] (587)

¹⁴ Steven M. Rosen, *Dimensions of Apeiron: A Topological Phenomenology of Space, Time, and Individuation* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), p. 3.

¹⁵ Rosen, p. 3.

The conjunction of the subjective and objective, the personally experienced and the abstract, is underscored by Adler's equation of *apeiron* with the uncanny, 'das Unheimliche', as a mark of both traumatic re-experience at an individual level and of the elimination of *apeiron* by the Enlightenment as a process of repression. 'Objective reality' and the 'personal dimensions' are more inextricably intertwined across Adler's oeuvre than a conception of it as relying on a strictly 'bi-polar' methodology is likely to reveal. Moreover, as we shall see, this is true not just at a thematic but above all also at a formal level.

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It has become a fairly well-established argument that the attempt to convey the 'concentrationary universe' saw Adler draw on a modernist aesthetic in his works of fiction, that the recourse to modernist techniques of representation in his novels seems to have arisen almost organically out of their subject matter.¹⁶ The experience of being immersed in, and the concomitant impossibility of conceptualizing, the *apeiron* of the camps – regarded as both a lived reality and as evidence of the ultimate distortion of Enlightenment ideals – has given rise, in the Holocaust novel trilogy, to three texts that, each in its own way, problematize autonomous subjectivity and stable perspective, as well as all of modernity's founding assumptions regarding time, space and the self related to these. This is expressed not just

¹⁶ See especially *Witnessing, Memory, Poetics: H. G. Adler and W. G. Sebald*, ed. by Helen Finch and Lynn Wolff (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2014), and *H. G. Adler: Life, Literature, Legacy*, ed. by Creet, Horowitz, and Bojadzija-Dan, where the contributors addressing themselves to Adler's prose fiction between them have foregrounded a number of different ways in which Adler's experiments with narrative voice and perspective, language, structure, and tense speak to his 'dedication to [a] modernist aesthetic' in his novels (Creet, Horowitz, Bojadzija-Dan, 'Introduction: Encountering H. G. Adler', in *H. G. Adler: Life, Literature, Legacy*, p. 16). Here, as in the chapter on Adler's fiction writing in Gwyer, *Encrypting the Past: The German-Jewish Holocaust Novel of the First Generation* (Oxford: OUP, 2014), there appears to be a broad consensus with Lawrence Langer that these features and strategies arose out of the effort of finding 'a language that might convey [...] the unconveyable, [...] to help readers imagine the unimaginable' (Langer, 'Holocaust Fact and Holocaust Fiction: The Dual Vision of H. G. Adler', in *H. G. Adler: Life, Literature, Legacy*, ed. by Creet, Horowitz, and Bojadzija-Dan, p. 141).

thematically but above all by means of the disruption of linear, chronological structure and an unsettling of narrative perspective.

Indeed, if we read the three novels purely with a view to what happens to narrative perspective in them, it becomes possible to identify a logical progression from one work to the next. *Panorama* begins the process by destabilizing the notion of a detached, autonomous subject observing a distinct panorama from a stable viewing position. This is especially notable in the ‘Lager Langenstein’ chapter, where the dehumanizing treatment to which the prisoners are subjected in the camp, the erosion of their individuality, and the abrogation of their right to a point of view are expressed formally through personal pronouns, by means of a second-person address that objectivizes the prisoners and illustrates their loss of selfhood:

Du sollst nicht entrinnen, geh nur hinein, geh mit den anderen, wie Tausende und Tausende gegangen sind und nachfolgen werden, geh, es ist so leicht zu gehen; [...] geh und warte, bis der Schrein gefüllt ist, daß man ihn sicher schließen kann; dann verlöschen die Lichter, dann wird dein Sterbliches erstickt, es dauert nicht lange, bald ist die Läuterung gewonnen, man lüftet den Schrein, dann kommt ein Sonderkommando von Verlorenen [...], sie holen das Sterbliche aus dem Schrein, das mit blutigen Augen und Nasen und Mündern seinen Boden bedeckt, verschmutzt in dicke Klumpen geballt [...].

[You shouldn't run away [Thou shalt not escape – KG], just go on in, go with the others, just as thousands and thousands have gone before you and will follow you, go, it's so easy, just go. [...] go and wait until the shrine is full so that one can seal it for good. Then the lights will go out, then your mortal being will be consumed, it won't take long, soon salvation [salvation / purification – KG] will follow, the shrine is opened, then a

special command of lost ones [...] haul the mortals [the mortal remains – KG] from the shrine who cover its ground with their bloody eyes and noses and mouths, filthy and piled up in clumps so thick that the bodies often cannot be separated [...].¹⁷

Here, in an extraordinary replication and subversion of biblical language and religious imagery that distorts the ten commandments and sees the gas chamber referred to as the holy shrine, an unspecified ‘du’ is exhorted to enter into the shrine to achieve ‘Läuterung’ and be ‘purged’ into the *apeironic* ‘Klumpen’ of mortal remains of the final line. From this, as the ‘du’ is told at the outset, ‘Thou shalt not escape’. It is technically ambiguous who is focalizing whom in this direct address, if it is the camp guards addressing the prisoners or the prisoners reminding themselves or one another. What is more, the absence of a stable perspective and detached vantage point is extended beyond the text to the reader. The ability to tell these perspectives apart would allow us to remain detached observers. Because of the sentence’s direct address, we feel personally implicated. If we assume an exoperceptive focus on events, it is aligned with the perspective of the perpetrators, which forces us into an uncomfortable complicity with them. But if we identify with the ‘du’ of the address, we become part of the collective object of their destructive gaze, part of the de-individuated ‘Klumpen’, in a narrative move that succeeds in gesturing towards the otherwise (for us) inconceivable horror of being denied a sense of selfhood, autonomy, or consciousness. The text manoeuvres us into a position where we are, impossibly and *apeironically*, at once complicit subjects and implicated objects.

An extended and more complex version of this kind of pronominal play also lies at the heart of *Eine Reise*, as Julia Creet has compellingly explored.¹⁸ More extensively than in

¹⁷ H. G. Adler, *Panorama: Roman in zehn Bildern* (Munich: Piper, 1988), pp. 482-83; H. G. Adler, *Panorama: A Novel*, trans. by Peter Filkins (New York: Modern Library, 2012), p. 365. Where, on occasion, I have added to Filkins’s translations, or supplied a clumsier, more literal version in place of his elegant one, this was done purely in the interest of clarifying my argument.

¹⁸ ‘A Dialectic of the Deictic: Pronouns and Persons in H. G. Adler’s *The Journey*’, in *H. G. Adler: Life, Literature, Legacy*, ed. by Creet, Horowitz, and Bojadzija-Dan, pp. 205-27.

Panorama, the loss of autonomous subjectivity and self-determination, expressed as the absence of a detached perspective on the unquantifiable abyss of *apeiron*, here also goes hand in hand with the undermining of associated other conventions and constructs vital to modern Western culture. This becomes apparent in the following quotations, excerpted from a passage that sees Paul trying to reflect on his situation while he is being marched through Leitenberg with his fellow prisoners. Paul wonders what it would be like if the procession of which he is a part were forced to walk blindfolded, shuffling along as a single, senseless unit:

Es *würde* genügen, die Augen der ersten Reihe unverbunden zu lassen, die dann nichts anderes zu tun *hätte*, als auf den Weg zu achten und vorsichtig die Füße auf den Boden zu setzen. Die anderen *schlichen* hintendrein, die Hände auf den Schultern ihrer Vordermänner, die stumme Geisterbahn, die keine Geleise *braucht*, immer vorwärts durch den unbestimmten Hauch, mag es Tag sein oder Nacht, jedes Glied des Zuges nichts als unverwandtes Schreiten [...], durch die Entfernung aller freundschaftlichen Nachbarschaft ins unmitteilbar Abgründige vertieft [...].

[It would be sufficient to leave the eyes of the front row uncovered, who would then simply have to watch the path and place their feet carefully on the ground. The others would just shuffle along behind, their hands on the shoulders of those in front of them, a mute ghost train [...] that just keeps plodding along through the indeterminate haze, unaware of whether it is day or night, each member of the train nothing but an unrelenting / unrelated ['unverwandt' plays untranslatably on both meanings]

marching, with the withdrawal of all friendly relations plunging them into the incommunicable abyss [...]. [my paraphrase – KG]]¹⁹

Paul is attempting here to speculate on what it would be like to be ‘ins unmitteilbar Abgründige vertieft’, but though he and his fellow ghosts are not literally blindfolded, they have in fact already been deprived of a sense of individuality and autonomy, of an awareness of their surroundings and the passing of time, and of a sense of direction and emotional connection. Paul’s attempt fails as soon as it turns out that he is already immersed in the very thing on which he is trying to reflect, an immersion that precludes him from gaining the kind of detached vantage point that would make such reflection even conceivable. The slide from the perspectival to the aperspectival is signalled by a shift in tense and mood, from the conditional of hypothesis in the ‘würde’ and ‘hätte’ of the first sentence, to the ambiguous ‘schlichen’, which can be read as either subjunctive or indicative, to the present-tense indicative of ‘braucht’ when it is revealed that *apeiron* is already and inescapably all around.

As in the passage from *Panorama*, cited above, the only way in which Paul is theoretically able to achieve a vantage point is exoperceptively, by sharing the perpetrators’ perspective. As soon as he attempts to focalize isoperceptively, he finds himself already in the abyss, and the adoption of a perspective is revealed to be impossible:

Dann könnte die Zeit auslöschen; nur eine Richtung hätte die Reise, aber kein Ziel; sie würde währen und ginge doch nicht weiter. Unsinnig würde die Frage werden, wann einer geboren ist, weil sein Tod viel weiter zurückliegen könnte als der Tag seiner Erschaffung. Habt ihr es noch nie empfunden, wie in einer ausgestochenen Zeit alles

¹⁹ H. G. Adler, *Eine Reise* (Vienna: Zsolnay, 1999), p. 107-08, my emphasis; H. G. Adler, *The Journey*, trans. by Peter Filkins (New York: Modern Library, 2009), p. 99. Further references to both editions will be included in parentheses in the text.

durcheinandergeriet? Was ihr heute zu halten vermeint, wäre entfernt, euer verlogener Traum von Sicherheit würde sich endlich von euch abwenden, denn Ersparnisse werden müßig, es gäbe keine Zinsen und Zinseszinsen, weil man auch nichts von einem Kalender wüßte, nichts von einem Datum, nur trübe rollte man durch trübe Masse hin, alles wäre gleichzeitig und in eins verbacken [...], aufgehoben der Grund, aufgehoben die Wirkung. [...]

Von jetzt an also ist keine Zeit. Doch von jetzt an? Sinnlose Rede. Wenn keine Zeit ist, war sie auch nicht und wird nicht sein, die Sprache zertrümmert ohne das Zeitwort, alles huscht durcheinander, verdorbene Reise. (108)

[Were this to happen, time would be erased. The journey would have only a direction, but no destination. It would continue and yet lead nowhere. Senseless would be the question about when you were born, for the day of your death could come long before the day of your conception. Have you never noticed how in a turbulent time everything falls apart [how in an excised chunk of time everything turns topsy-turvy – KG]? What you take for granted today can suddenly disappear, each of your false dreams no longer a certainty, savings now being a necessity [now otiose – KG] since there would be no interest or compounded interest, since you would know nothing of calendars, nothing of dates, yourself having to roll along among the dreary masses, everything the same and fitting a single mold [rolling along in a turbid mass, everything simultaneous, everything clumped together as one – KG] [...], both cause and effect made meaningless.

From this point onward there is no such thing as time. And yet what exists from this point onward? [But what does that even mean, from now on? – KG] Senseless talk. When there is no time, there can be no talk nor will there be, for without verbs [‘tense-

words' – KG] language is destroyed, everything scurrying along higgledy-piggledy on the wretched journey.] (99-100)

Beyond the disruption of individual life stories, the text suggests that the entire way in which Enlightenment modernity views and thinks about the world has been dealt a blow: being denied the privilege of perspective – of a stable, detached vantage point from which to survey, and make oneself the measure of, what one beholds – calls into question the very possibility of existing as an autonomous, self-determined subject, and in the absence of being able to individuate and situate ourselves in relation to the world, both our faith in the possibility of reliably quantifying and negotiating time or space, and our reliance on common transactional media such as language or money to help us do so, are also undermined. The faltering of these touchstones suggests the return of the original uncanny repressed by the Enlightenment project: the return of *apeiron*.

Apeiron, here invoked in the image of a 'trübe Masse', a turbid mass, appears as a spatialized conception of time without direction and delineation, origin or aim, cause and effect. In this indistinct mass, the conventional view of chronological time as a line or arrow is superseded, and notions of life as a journey, with a clear beginning and end, are supplanted by images of eternal aimless wandering. This unmappable chronotope can no longer be travelled in any straightforward sense. As the passage concludes: it is a 'verdorbene Reise', a corrupted, tainted, perverted journey.

Finally, in *Die unsichtbare Wand*, Artur Landau has emerged from the camps able to say 'ich', I, again. In a sense, he therefore picks up where Paul in *Eine Reise* left off.²⁰ There is a sense of the future again, even if it is a future for others and hard to imagine with himself

²⁰ H. G. Adler, *Die unsichtbare Wand* (Vienna: Zsolnay, 1989); H. G. Adler, *The Wall: A Novel*, trans. by Peter Filkins (New York: Random House, 2015). Further references to both editions will be made in parentheses in the text.

in it. However, the novel suggests that while Landau has survived, *apeiron* has not been fully overcome, and the description of his ‘post’-Holocaust existence, especially in the famous snowstorm passage, reads not unlike Paul’s failed attempt to conceptualize *apeiron* from within it: as a chaotic chronotope without the possibility of signification, and without hope of orientation or true escape:

Ein überlebter Mensch, an einer Wegmarke in tödlichem Schneesturm vom Unheil verschmährt; als der Sturm verzogen war, lagen alle Gefährten erfroren, die Wegmarke ist zersplittert, auf ihren Spänen sind keine Ziele mehr zu entziffern [...]. [...] jeder Wandel eines Vergessenen führt überall in die Irre. Keine Richtung verheißt einen verlässlichen Sinn, auch die Strecken der Zeit werden in stockender Verwirrung immer undeutlicher [...]. Schon gibt es keine Stunde mehr, die Reiche der Vergangenheit und der Zukunft sind zerschellt [...]. Aller Ablauf ist zerschüttelt und verbogen [...]. (640-41)

[A survivor [a man survived – KG], condemned to cling to a signpost in the deadly snowstorm of misery [spurned by disaster at a signpost in the deadly snowstorm – KG], and when the snowstorm had cleared all the others were frozen, the signpost split [in splinters – KG]. On the post [on its fragments – KG], no destinations were legible any longer [...]. [...] every transformation of the forgotten leads to error [reading ‘der Wandel’ as ‘das Wandeln’]: any progression by a man forgotten is doomed to lead him astray – KG]. No direction provides a reliable sense of things to come, and the roads of time continue to become lost in confusion [...]. Then there are no more hours, the realms of past and future are shattered [...]. The run of things is twisted and destroyed [...].] (615)

The main consequence of this approach for the form of the texts is that content and discourse in them converge. The novels come as close to reflecting the abyss from within as is possible, by evoking the experience of *apeiron* through the enactment of a failure to gain epistemological purchase. In an important sense, their subject matter becomes the breakdown of their own structures. This approach results in a great deal of the imagery we encounter in the text doubling up as a blueprint of its form, with the structures of the outside world after the return of *apeiron* mirroring those of the traumatized mind attempting in vain to navigate that world, and the two between them providing a model for and of the textual structures.

*

On this evidence, we could be forgiven for thinking that the academic and the literary in Adler's work do indeed adopt polar-opposite methodologies, inhabit different discourses, and use language in clearly distinct ways. Pursuing a challenge to metanarratives to its conclusion by enacting their breakdown both formally and structurally, and denying the reader an observer's vantage point, is not generally an option available to academic studies, which by their nature tend towards the encompassing, explanatory, and descriptive, and especially not to a study with the scope and express objectives of the *Theresienstadt* monograph.

And yet, there are sections of *Theresienstadt* that are in fact strikingly close in both intention and effect to what we encounter in Adler's literary writing.

Stylistically, as has already become apparent above from Adler's choice of imagery to evoke the *apeironic*, the passages communicating what happens 'wenn eine Welt aus den Fugen gerät' (when a world is turned upside down [comes out of joint – KG]) mark a departure from the neutral, matter-of-fact tone that characterizes the greater part of the study, and they see Adler resort to a more literary idiom (674, 593). However, the sense of an out-of-joint reality causing not only individuals but an entire world view to founder apparently cannot be

captured through straightforward description alone. This becomes especially evident where Adler speaks of the final weeks of Theresienstadt in April of 1945. As he discusses in the last chapter of the section detailing the camp's history, a chapter titled 'Verfall und Auflösung' (Decline and Dissolution), the influx of survivors being marched from extermination camps all over Europe, and a raging typhoid epidemic, dissolved any semblance of order in the ghetto. As Adler attempts to convey the dissolution of all structures and points of reference that ensues when the 'Weltbild', the worldview, and the reality experienced are hopelessly beyond reconciliation, his account slides, over the space of two paragraphs, from scholarly report to literary evocation:

Am 24. April wurde unter den Neulingen zum ersten Male Flecktyphus festgestellt. Bald wurden hunderte Fälle erkannt, schließlich weit über zweitausend, und die Einheimischen wurden nicht verschont. Etwa 400 Tote haben die Elendstransporte bereits ins Lager mitgebracht, wo sich das Sterben an Erschöpfung und Krankheit fortsetzte, vor allem an Flecktyphus, obwohl es gelang, die Sterblichkeit bei dieser Infektion unter 25% hinunterzudrücken. Viele freiwillige Helfer steckten sich an, manche konnten nicht gerettet werden (s. 16. Kap.).

Jetzt galt keine Ordnung mehr, nicht einmal eine Lagerordnung; dazu waren die Entwürdigten nicht mehr bereit. [...] Wo der Mensch an jenem Ende steht, das ihn als ein unversöhnlicher Abgrund umringt [...] – wer will da noch ein Mindestmaß von Zucht und Ordnung beschwören [...]? Wie kindisch und aussichtslos mußte sich dieses Unterfangen ausnehmen! Diese Menschen glaubten nicht mehr, sie glaubten nichts und niemandem. Sie glaubten nicht mehr an sich selbst. Alles war ausgelöscht, alles entwertet. [...] Es war das Ende – Ende als Untergang, als Weltgericht – als *Nichts*. Und es gab keinen Bestand mehr. Wer diese Vernichtung nicht an sich selbst erfahren

hat, weiß es nicht, wird es nie wissen. Er hat zu schweigen. Er hat anzuhören [...]. Wer aber durch diese letzte Verzweiflung, durch die Nacht der Nächte, durch den namenlosen Untergang geschritten ist, ihn überdauert hat [...], der soll seine Stimme erheben und sagen, wie es wirklich war. Er soll die Wirklichkeit verkünden [...], jenseits von allem theatralischen Grauen noch lebender Verwesung und toter Knochenberge, die nichts von der inneren Wahrheit enthüllen, da sie nur Schandmäler sind, aber nicht die Wahrheit selbst. Nein, die Wirklichkeit gilt es zu nennen [...], die Wirklichkeit des *Nichts*, die weder denkbar noch nachfühlbar ist, denn nicht zu denken und nicht zu fühlen ist das Nichts, nur ungeschaffen ist es [...] zu leiden [...]. [...]

Wie man in jenen wüsten Tagen die Verlorenen in Theresienstadt ansah, verdeutlichen die Worte einer Augenzeugin: [...]. (212-13, original emphasis)

[On April 24, typhoid fever was found for the first time among the newcomers. Soon hundreds of cases were diagnosed; the number ultimately grew to well over two thousand, and the natives were not spared. The transports of misery had already brought 400 dead to the camp, where death from exhaustion and disease continued, above all from typhoid fever, although it was possible to keep the death rate from this infection under 25%. Many volunteer helpers were infected, and some could not be saved (see Chapter 16).

No regime mattered now, not even a camp regime; the degraded ones were no longer willing to accept it. [...] When a human being stands at an end that surrounds him like an implacable abyss [...] – who would still conjure there a minimum of discipline and order [...]? How childish and futile must this endeavor have seemed! These people no longer believed; they believed nothing and no one. They no longer believed in themselves. Everything was obliterated, everything devalued. [...] It was

the end: the end as doom, as Armageddon – as *nothing*. And there was no more substance. If one did not experience this annihilation oneself, one cannot know, will never know, what it was like. One must be silent. One must listen [...]. But anyone who went through this final despair, this night of nights, this nameless doom [...] he should raise his voice and say what it was really like. He should proclaim the reality, [...] beyond all the theatrical horror of living decay and dead mountains of bones, which reveal none of the inner truth, for they are merely stigmas, not the truth itself. No, it is necessary to name the reality [...] – the reality of *nothingness*, which is neither imaginable nor comprehensible, for not thinking and not feeling is nothingness [for nothingness cannot be thought or felt empathetically, it can only be experienced as raw, uncrafted suffering – KG] [...]. [...]

How the lost ones in Theresienstadt were seen in those desolate days is made clear by the words of an eyewitness: [...].] (172, original emphasis)

The passage is marked by a contention between narrative voices.²¹ There is the voice of the historian, who arranges events into a sequential, chronological narrative, observing and quantifying them from the detached vantage point of the present time of narration. Vying with this voice, however, is a second one, which, resorting to more literary language, undermines chronology by suggesting that the past will never be past. Between them, the vying voices give the impression of inhabiting two worlds at once: a life *after* the abyss, and one in which the ‘Abgrund’ is still all around. The net result of their contention is a calling-into-question of any

²¹ I am gratefully borrowing the concept of contending or vying narrative voices from Lawrence Langer, who has identified the contention between a voice of continuity – which seeks to embed what has happened in a sequence of cause and effect – and a voice of disruption – which undermines any chronology and causality and disputes all rhyme or reason – as an important recurring characteristic of oral Holocaust witness testimonies, but which is a feature that may affect any attempt in any genre to give a chronological, factual account of the events and effects of the Holocaust. See for instance Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

certainty regarding the coherence and stability of time, space, and autonomous subjectivity, expressed at the level of structure.

The first paragraph is still largely anchored in the scholarly mode and apparently born of the conviction of being able to document objectively and quantitatively. This narrator is detached and strives for objectivity. He favours impersonal constructions and separates himself both from the ‘Neulinge’ arriving in the camps and from the ‘Einheimische’ already present there. He cites dates, figures, percentages. And he imposes order and structure: on the text’s subject matter, and on its form, for example through intratextual cross-referencing to other chapters as in the final sentence of the first paragraph. We do note one interesting slippage – in the sentence beginning ‘Etwa 400 Tote’ – in the use of the perfect tense, rather than, as perhaps expected, the pluperfect, a slippage which, through its blurring of diegetic levels, with the past seemingly enduring into the present of narration, may hint at a brief loss of objective distance and detachment. This remains relatively unobtrusive though and at most momentarily unsettles the narrative’s measured tone and chronological current.

However, as the narrator goes on to evoke the disruption and dissolution of all structures, culminating in ‘Unbestand’, in the abyss of *apeiron* or, here, of the ‘Nichts’, the voice of the historian is supplemented with, and increasingly supplanted by, that of the poet, and a breakdown of narrative chronology, structure, and perspective ensues to mirror the ‘Verrücktheit’ of the world that is being evoked.

The slight temporal slippage from the first paragraph carries over into the second one, which is introduced with ‘Jetzt’, rather than, say, ‘Von da an’. At the same time, the bird’s-eye view of the objective chronicler gives way to a position of empathetic involvement with the ‘Entwürdigten’ and ‘Unglücklichen’, as well as, increasingly, to suggestions of personal familiarity with ‘jenem Ende’. Formally speaking, this initiates a sequence of perspectival oscillation. Empathetic but still exoperceptive statements such as ‘Wie kindisch und

aussichtslos mußte sich dieses Unterfangen ausnehmen!’ alternate with statements that are formally indistinguishable from isoperception, for instance in: ‘Alles war ausgelöscht, alles entwertet’, and ‘Es war das Ende – Ende als Untergang, als Weltgericht – als *Nichts*. Und es gab keinen Bestand mehr’.

The introduction of the term ‘Nichts’ marks the complete suspension of narrative flow and disruption of its structures. The past tense of historical documentary cedes to a present tense of address and exhortation and finally culminates in the timeless insurmountable persistence of the ‘Nichts’. The impersonal ‘wer’, which up to this point had afforded the narrator a vantage point of non-involvement, from which to separate himself both from the ‘Entwürdigten’ and from those with no personal experience of ‘Vernichtung’, now subsumes him in the collective of those who have known the abyss. And it is from this experience that the narrative voice emerges split: with one part testifying to the possibility of traversing the ‘Untergang’ and coming out the other side to give an account of its ‘Wirklichkeit’, and the other, still and always inside the abyss, dismissing this as a possibility by invoking the essentially unknowable formless void of the ‘Nichts’ whose ‘innere Wahrheit’ cannot be communicated, conceptualized, or empathetically accessed for ‘nicht zu denken und nicht zu fühlen ist das Nichts, nur ungeschaffen ist es [...] zu leiden’.

Because of this vying of voices, what started out as an apparently linear, chronological account breaks down as the narrator, in a *mise en abyme* perhaps of the thought processes and tensions informing the work as a whole, impossibly, both calls for, and so projects into the future, the creation of the very enterprise in which he himself already appears, and at the same time rejects, and places under erasure, the very existence of that self-same enterprise.

In this process of narrative self-deconstruction, the narrating subject itself breaks down as well. The stable perspective and posture of detached analysis from a transcendent vantage

point maintained by the seemingly autonomous and indivisible narrator from the beginning of the passage is called into question. The subject first splits, with the narrator-as-chronicler observing, and addressing, possibly himself in the third person, possibly a third party in an analogous position, possibly an impersonal collective, as someone who is subject to an ethical imperative, starting from the sentence: 'Er soll die Wirklichkeit verkünden'. However, as the narrative founders on the ambiguity inherent in the term 'Wirklichkeit', between communicable factual accuracy and incommunicable 'innere Wahrheit', the focalization appears to be reversed, and in the process breaks down completely. In the sentence starting with 'Nein, die Wirklichkeit gilt es zu nennen', which reads like a rebuttal to 'Er soll die Wirklichkeit verkünden', the objectivizing subject appears itself objectivized, as the voice that does not have the distance from the 'Nichts' to conceptualize it but can only suffer it 'ungeschaffen' seems to turn the tables on the first speaker. However, with no more personal pronouns to guide us and no clear clues as to the point of origin of any focalization, the boundary between narrating subject and narrated object appears to have dissolved, leaving us, too, for just a moment, with no perspective at all: immersed in the 'Nichts', right along with the text, as it briefly hovers on the brink of disappearing down its own abyss. It does not do this, of course, but draws back. After the end of the passage just cited, the narrator extracts himself (though in the process temporarily eclipsing himself) by handing over the narrative, in the form of citation, to a third-party eye-witness account, before then resuming the neutral, detached third-person stance from the beginning of the passage.

This destructuring mode of writing that testifies to the experience of *apeiron* and the challenge it poses to attempts to come to epistemological terms with the Holocaust is undeniably more familiar to us from Adler's novels. However, though on balance subdued, it has evidently also informed, and left traces on, his academic writing. While this does of course bring to light a tension between an Enlightenment mind-set and a modernist style, or perhaps

between an all-encompassing project and an anti-totalizing approach, the tension is a productive one. It seems born of the (almost proto-*postmodern*?) realization that bearing witness to the *experience* as well as the facts of *apeiron* would have to involve a rethinking of reference and problematizing of metanarratives, and that the shortfalls of linear, chronological, descriptive writing when it comes to evoking the ‘inner truth’ of the abyss, might be compensated for (though never completely overcome) by drawing attention to them and enacting their collapse at a structural level. In other words, it is a tension that, in reintroducing an element of split consciousness and self-reflexivity into an Enlightenment mind-set, has allowed Adler to recuperate his epistemology, to draw it back from the brink, while at the same time using it to shed some light on – and shine a light into – the abyss. Not just in a thematic, but also in a formal sense, this suggests that, as Lynn Wolff has already persuasively argued in a different context, we might constructively think of him as an “enlightener” of the modern age’.²² And it is this ‘Grenzgängertum’, on the edge of the abyss, using the breakdown of forms to give shape, and the (temporary) collapse of language to signify, to acknowledge meaninglessness and wrest back meaning from it, that has made it possible for Adler to give us a remarkably encompassing, encyclopaedic, detailed, factually accurate report of the ‘Wirklichkeit’ of the ‘concentrationary universe’ while at the same time staying true to the inconceivable, incommunicable ‘innere Wahrheit’ of the ‘Nichts’ that is ‘nur ungeschaffen [...] zu leiden’.

²² “‘Die Grenze des Sagbaren’”: Toward a Political Philology in H. G. Adler’s Reflections on Language’, in *H. G. Adler: Life, Literature, Legacy*, ed. by Creet, Horowitz, and Bojadzija-Dan, pp. 273-301 (p. 292).